



NIGHT SHROUD

BLUE MOON BOSTON - BOOK 3

JUSTIN HERZOG
STEVE HIGGS

Night Shroud

Blue Moon Boston

Book 3

Justin Herzog & Steve Higgs

OceanofPDF.com

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A Wordless Sacrifice. April 14th 2349hrs

Walter Crosier had never felt so close to death.

Not the year a bellyful of whiskey had carried his Bentley over the side of Mount Washington and forced him to remain abed for months, besieged by doctors shuffling in and out of his hospital room, clutching x-rays and downcast eyes.

Not the year before that, when some penniless fool who'd gambled away his entire life-savings had broken into his home in search of vengeance.

Not even when the Avant-Garde board of directors decided they'd grown tired of his antics and hired a sex worker to orchestrate his demise. The memory of that last one brought a smile to his face. He'd had his fun, then held her down and forced her to drink the very scotch she'd laced before making his escape.

The company had nearly imploded once news of his survival leaked out, but he'd held it together by sheer force of will. A matching bottle had been delivered to each board member's home, along with a handwritten note inviting them to attend an emergency meeting the following day to discuss the company's new direction going forward.

Even last month, when that backstabbing Gerome and his lickspittle associate had kidnapped him from his office and paraded him naked through the city on that ridiculous float, he'd known somehow that he would escape. He could feel it, deep in his guts.

But he didn't feel that way now.

The lights of Beacon Hill gleamed low, and the historic brownstones and red-brick apartments that enfolded the city's wealthy elite loomed over him, peering down with thoughtless, uncaring eyes. Church bells rang out from across

the city, their echo singing softly through the street, wiping the smile from his face as he shivered inside his peacoat.

He rounded the corner, and the silk-cashmere scarf around his neck tightened involuntarily as the wind, the damnable wind that he both loved and hated, whispered warnings in his ears. He cursed and dug his fingers beneath the fabric, tearing it loose from his neck and hurtling it down to the street.

“Let it rot,” he thought as he hurried away.

It was a fine scarf, a gift from his third ex-wife, and had she passed on from this world, he might have suspected her spirit of attempting to use it to choke the life from him. Alas, she was alive and well, living high off their divorce settlement in upstate New York.

Damnably woman.

Now that he thought about it, he had met quite a few damnably women in his lifetime. Faithless harlots who sought only to adorn themselves in jewels and furs. Who viewed him merely as a means of avoiding an honest day’s work. Granted, there had been one or two that made him pause, those who claimed to not care about his wealth, who professed only to love him for the man he was, but he’d been burned too many times, and had never allowed himself to fully believe their declarations. As a result, each had left him in time, disappearing through the door with moist eyes and whispered warnings that he would miss them.

But he never did.

Even now, when the end drew near, he could scarcely recall what they looked like, much less their names. Walter Crosier was not a man to wallow in regret. He was a builder, a creator of wealth, a drug dealer, he supposed, although not in the traditional sense. Money was his drug of choice, wealth his greatest love, and he had been supplying the citizens of Boston, many of whom lived on these very streets, with their fixes for the better part of four decades. And had they ever

thanked him? Ever paid him more than the barest of lip-service? He snorted and shook his head. Of course not. They avoided looking his way when they passed him on the street and told themselves that they were the masters of their own fate. That their wealth, sitting safely in his accounts, was multiplying by their own merit, instead of his shrewd financial acumen.

Ungrateful nitwits.

He was better off without their company, although he might have accepted their invitation to walk beside him this night. Alas, no lights shone from behind the row house doors, and no faces peered out through the box windows. It was almost as if the residents of Beacon Hill could sense that something was near, and had chosen to offer him up as a wordless sacrifice.

Cowards.

The wind kicked up again and jabbed at his exposed neck, its echo carrying faint hints of metal touching down upon the cobblestones. He cursed and turned right, his path taking him up onto the brick sidewalk and down Acorn Street.

Regarded as the most photographed street in the United States, Acorn Street was the jewel of Beacon Hill, renowned for its gas lamps and cobblestone street. It consisted of a small stretch of less than two dozen homes, none of which came up for sale often and were immediately snatched up when they did. Walter had bought a duplex midway down the street, claiming both units for himself, keeping one for his living quarters and the other to move into in case he should be beset upon by unruly neighbors. Neither had been for sale at the time of purchase, but he'd used his contacts within the real estate industry to make a private offer that had seen the current owners become wealthy beyond their wildest dreams.

Neither of whom had bothered to thank him.

Walter snarled and increased his pace, forcing each step over the cobblestones. His house stood at the end of the row.

Perhaps, if he could make it there, then he might find some safety. Might be this feeling, this horrible, grinding sense of his own impending demise, would subside. He might even, in time, discover that it was merely a flight of fancy, or a result of too many medications, some of which were legal, combined with too much scotch. Come morning, he would realize it could all be explained, and life would continue as it had been. If only he could reach his home.

His teeth chattered in a way that had nothing to do with the wind, and he reached his hand down, digging through his pockets before fishing out his keys. He could see his doorway, still half a street away, even though no lights burned in the windows. Another few steps, and then...

The words died in his mind as a lone figure appeared from the opposite end of the street. It was little more than a shapeless outline mounted atop a midnight horse, but Walter recognized death when he saw it.

He'd never been a religious man. The church had always seemed like foolishness, a decrepit business model dependent on the persuasiveness of dried-up old priests to milk their congregation out of every penny in exchange for a fleeting moment of emotional euphoria and moral superiority. He'd never felt awed by the power of the cross or visions of pearly gates, and he'd never felt fear at the notion of eternal damnation or a soul trapped in purgatory.

But he was afraid now

And he believed, vehemently, for the first time in his life, that demons existed.

The figure stared at him for a long moment, steam rising from the horse's nostrils as its hooves clattered down atop the brick sidewalk. Walter drew to a halt, glaring back at the figure for several long seconds before he upended his palm and tossed his keys onto the street.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” he snarled. “Get to it, you rotting bastard.”

He'd never been a patient man.

The demon complied, kicking his heels into the horse's flank and spurring the beast forward. Its gait carried it across the cobblestones, its hooves striking sparks from the rocks as the demon drew its sword, the long blade banishing what little light the gas lamps provided.

The demon closed the distance and drew back its arm. In the moment when its sword began to descend, there came a brief instant of clarity in Walter's mind, followed by the realization that there would be no last-minute reprieve. It was a dour thought, but one that surprised him a moment later when a woman's face flashed across his mind's eye.

How strange that, of all the women who had professed to love him, it was the escort, the nameless sex worker who'd tried to poison him years before, that appeared to him now at the end. Her face looked whole, far better than he'd left it, and her eyes, no longer bloodshot and broken, gleamed hungrily, welcoming him to a secret place she had long kept waiting, just for him.

Rule Number One. April 15th 0030hrs

Nothing sells the “I’m a trans-dimensional demonic entity here to chew your face off while wearing a clown guise” quite like a good nickname.

Pennywise had the right idea, combining the playful with the ominous. Twisty the Clown was a breed all on his own, and Clown from Spawn and Batman’s Joker made up for their simplistic monikers with an overabundance of personality. Heck, even Deadface, whose name I’d come across in the Blue Moon Investigations files, had his own twisted charisma about him.

When compared against such lofty fiends of chaos and mayhem, I got the feeling that Bloodcuddles wasn’t going to measure up.

The clown’s real name was Woodrow Miller, and his personality was that of an overly sheltered, overfed, socially inept man-child who’d jumped on the Juggalo bandwagon as soon as mommy kicked the bucket.

His brief foray into the world of green hairspray and Harley Quinn wannabes hadn’t lasted long. Even Juggalos have their standards, and in virtually no time at all, Bloodcuddles had been relegated to a Juggaflop.

Not that he let their lack of acceptance discourage him.

If anything, he’d doubled down, burying his personality beneath his painted idols and spending countless hours trying to adopt their mannerisms, including their iconic laughs. You’d think, for all the time he’d invested, his cackle would be something to behold, but his voice was screeching, grating, rising and falling in a broken cadence that came out sounding more like something a cat would make if it were to wake up midway through a neutering procedure.

I was hearing it now.

“I’m coming for you, Officer,” he said, his high-pitched voice echoing through the darkness. “You can’t run from Bloodcuddles.”

Point of fact, I could and fully intended to keep doing so.

The tunnels beneath the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Chapel weren’t actually part of the city sewer system. They were an offshoot of the original subway line built back in 1897, that had since been abandoned in favor of the more convenient T-Line. Twisted hills of rusted metal and debris lined the old tracks, and cords and wires spilled from between old bricks, weaving their way around TSA signs warning trespassers of the dangers of being electrocuted.

I shifted the gerbil cage in my hand, checked my belt and cursed. I’d lost my spare magazine back in the tunnels, and expended all of my pistol’s ammunition trying to keep Bloodcuddles at bay. If I was going to make a habit of these sorts of things, I was going to need to learn how to conserve my ammunition, which is harder than it sounds, especially when facing off against perceived supernatural threats, like a homicidal clown wielding homemade knives.

I chambered my slide forward, giving the pistol the appearance of being loaded, but didn’t holster it. I needed the flashlight attached to the under-barrel to navigate the tunnels. Unfortunately, between the cage and the light, I didn’t have an extra hand to defend myself. I tried telling myself not to panic, that Tempest and his crew did this sort of thing bare-knuckled all the time, but the more cynical part of my brain pointed out that they were ex-military, and usually had help. I was alone, with a deranged clown chasing after me.

Is it any wonder that no one has come along to try to steal my job yet?

Blue Moon Division was Boston’s answer to the sudden rise in public interest surrounding the paranormal. When our

dispatch operators received calls regarding alleged vampires and boogeymen going door-to-door, we were the ones sent out to investigate. The list of our battles had grown to include sea-monster cultists, leprechauns, and now, killer clowns.

Although, that last one might not be entirely accurate.

As near as I could tell, Bloodcuddles hadn't done any actual face chewing. His primary activity seemed to involve lingering around the MIT campus, peering into people's windows late at night and leaping out of the bushes to scare sophomore girls. Then, two weeks ago, he'd broken into Waverly Elementary School and ransacked the cafeteria, stealing a year's supply of frozen chicken nuggets and crinkly fries. He'd also made off with their 2nd grade class pet, a gerbil who went by the name of Princess Pickles.

The security cameras had caught the theft on tape, but the gloves Bloodcuddles wore had prevented me from identifying him through fingerprints. I'd spent the past thirteen nights running down leads and investigating clues, the culmination of which had led me to the discovery of his identity and down into the abandoned subway tunnels, where I'd staged a one-woman rescue operation, retrieving both Princess Pickles and the aforementioned nuggets, which were stuffed in my backpack, the semi-frozen processed meat chilling my shoulder blades through the nylon material.

It might seem silly, risking one's life for a gerbil and some nuggets, but believe me when I say it was the principle of the thing rather than the value of the items at hand.

You see, despite some appearances to the contrary, there aren't many hard and fast rules when it comes to law enforcement. There are so many different agencies, each with their own jurisdictions, policies and procedures, that trying to get them to work together can feel a lot like trying to herd geese down a freeway. Officer discretion plays a bigger part than most people realize, but there are a few ironclad laws that bind us, and the first and most important of them is this.

Rule number one: You don't mess with kids.

And that includes stealing their lunch nuggets and kidnapping their gerbil.

That last part hit me harder than I would have expected, on account that I'd recently acquired a roommate in the form of a hamster named Yosemite. I'd found him nearly frozen to death at the tail end of a blizzard and nursed him back to health using chicken noodle soup fresh from Chinatown. Neither of us had felt much like being alone in the wake of the attempted bombing of the St. Patrick's Day Parade the previous month, so he'd decided to stay around, and we'd settled into a nice routine of cohabitation. Standing here, in the cold and the dark, it was all too easy to imagine him in Princess Pickles' place, and the idea of someone, clown or not, hurting a defenseless little animal made my blood boil.

I took off at a fast jog, angling the gerbil cage on my hip and trying to keep my footsteps from echoing across the rotted tracks. There was too much debris to avoid making any noise, too many bits of broken wood and metal bouncing against one another, and I gave up after a few paces, settling into a steady rhythm. I tried to keep my gait smooth, so as not to disturb Princess Pickles anymore than I already had, but the gerbil cage was heavy, the thick plastic walls designed to keep her majesty protected from overeager 2nd graders, and in no time at all my shoulders began to burn, the muscles in my forearm cramping from the effort.

A sound came from behind me, and I jerked right, stumbling as a heavy-duty mechanic's wrench came sailing out of the darkness. It cut through the space where my head had been and struck a dusty mound of old aluminum cans. The sound of impact echoed through the tunnels, punctuated by Bloodcuddles' obnoxious laugh.

"Little creep," I muttered, and kept running.

I have it on good authority from my contacts at the TSA that the tunnels stretched for miles beneath the city of Cambridge. Lucky for me, I'd marked my way in, casting bold pink chalk lines along the wall that I followed like a bloodhound. It was almost as if it had occurred to me ahead of time that diving into underground tunnels to take on a demonic clown and rescue a gerbil might end badly.

Go figure, right?

I rounded the corner and caught sight of a golden light in the distance. A flashlight, coming from the access hole I'd used to descend into the dark. I was maybe fifty yards away, and if I pushed it, then I should be able to—

Bloodcuddles appeared directly in front of me.

The creep had plenty of time to get to know the tunnels over the past few weeks, and he'd evidently worked out a shortcut or two. He stepped out directly into my path, and I couldn't stop in time. I crashed into him, and the pair of us went down in a tangle. I lost my pistol in the fall, but didn't have time to grasp for it, because I was too busy trying to angle my body to ensure Princess Pickles didn't end up splattered against the floor. I came down hard, and a breathless cry tore past my lips as the cage slipped from my fingers. It bounced end over end, knocking the grated roof free and casting her food bowl and cage lining into the air as she tumbled about, squeaking in distress before grinding to a graceless halt.

Bloodcuddles had anticipated the fall, and found his feet quicker. He threw himself onto me, sliding his body over my form until we ended up face-to-face. My pistol had rolled to a halt in the corner, and the flashlight illuminated his face as he jammed his elbow up underneath my chin.

“Going so soon?” he asked. “But you've only just arrived. We haven't even begun to play yet.”

He'd painted his skin in shades of red and black, even going so far as to draw little red polka-dotted tears dripping from his eyes. The old MIT college yearbook photos I'd found in the Mechanical Science and Engineering Department revealed that his hair had begun falling out freshman year, and he'd replaced it with a dirty wig spray painted black. He smelled as if he'd been living in a hole, no surprise there, and his breath reeked of frozen nuggets, making me think he hadn't even bothered to thaw them before he started eating. He shifted his weight atop me, and reached down, his hand disappearing into his oversized pants for a moment before it reemerged gripping a long-handled, fixed blade knife.

"Have I ever told you about my old mechanics professor?" Bloodcuddles asked, his voice wavering unsteadily. "He failed me my sophomore year. Said I was too distracted. He was right, but what he never understood was that it wasn't my fault. The laboratory was just across from the kitchen, you see, and I used to sit there and watch the sushi chefs prepare their fare." He dropped his hand, and I felt the cold touch of the blade as he traced it across my stomach.

"I couldn't pull my eyes away as they sliced and diced the day's deliveries, severing the flesh and serving it just so. They did it with such precision, such finesse. All the other students only cared about oceanic drilling equipment, but all I could think about was making knives as sharp as the ones those chefs used." He swept his arm up, pressing the blade against the side of my face. "I used to dream of walking over and introducing myself to them. I wanted to tell them how much I enjoyed their work. How much I wanted to be one of them. But there was a problem. I *couldn't stand* the smell of the fish. Anytime I got close, I would feel myself start to gag. Then, one day, I mustered up the courage to do it anyway. I walked right out in the middle of class, made my way up to the counter, and opened my mouth. Well, you already know what happened next, don't you?"

“Can’t say that I do,” I said, struggling to shift my hips beneath him.

“I opened my mouth to tell them how much I thought of them, but all that came out was a yellow stream of putrid, *stinking* vomit. It sprayed over the counter, splashing down onto the day’s rice, and all over their tools. Those precious, wonderful knives, covered in my own filth. You can imagine how well that went over with the rest of the class. Never mind my crotchety old professor.”

I snapped my hip free and jerked my arm up, slamming my open palm down into the crook of his arm. His balance wavered, and I sent him spilling over onto his side. It wasn’t my best sweep, but it allowed me to slip out from beneath him. I spun around and leaped toward my pistol, sliding across the ground and grabbing it by the grip just as Bloodcuddles recovered and came down atop me.

He hit hard, throwing his weight into it, and my back popped, as all the air evaporated from my lungs. It hurt, and I gasped for breath, failing twice before managing to suck in a ragged lungful.

“That’s good,” Bloodcuddles said. He seized my jacket and roughly twisted me over onto my back. “That’s very good. So delicious. I can taste your fear. It tastes like... tastes like...”

He never got to tell me what my fear tasted like, because I shot my arm forward and slammed the barrel of my pistol into his mouth. As melee weaponry goes, an unloaded pistol isn’t usually considered very formidable, but it’s surprisingly effective when you use it to punch someone’s teeth out.

Bloodcuddles’s head snapped back, and I heard, rather than saw, his teeth land atop the rusted old tracks. His head hung there for a moment like a broken flower stem. Then it snapped forward, and he smiled, giggling wide-eyed as blood spewed down his chin.

“Well, that wasn’t very nice, now was it?”

A cold shiver went through me, and this time it had nothing to do with his voice. I'd spent the past several months researching the paranormal, and while I was nowhere near knowledgeable enough to be considered an expert, it surprised me how much of it was intertwined with human psychology. Specifically, the things that cause an otherwise sane and balanced individual to believe in beings beyond what their senses can readily identify. Some of it got kind of dark, and scary. Like now. It suddenly dawned on me that Bloodcuddles was having a psychotic break. Having your teeth punched out is enough to rattle most people, but the fact that he was just laughing told me that he'd bought into his own persona, that of a relentless, unkillable psychopathic demon, who existed only to torment and inflict suffering.

Woodrow Miller might have been a pudgy, socially awkward man-child, but Bloodcuddles was an unstoppable force. And it didn't actually matter if I agreed with him. What mattered was that *he* believed it.

I snapped my hand forward again, but this time, he was ready for it. He caught my wrist and slammed it back to the floor, holding it pinned. I struggled, but couldn't match him in raw strength.

"Oh, how pretty you're going to bleed," he whispered, blood spilling from the corners of his mouth to stain his cheeks. "How sweet your flesh will tear, when I—"

We'd all had enough of Bloodcuddles by this point. And by we, I mean Princess Pickles and me. When the cage had fallen, it had knocked the grate roof free, allowing her access to the outside. I like to think she'd planned to make her escape, but then turned around when she saw me in trouble. Wishful thinking, maybe, but just because I don't believe in the supernatural doesn't mean there's not still some magic in this world.

Princess Pickles appeared from underneath a broken section of the track, scampered up the length of my shoulder in

less time than it takes to describe and hurtled herself upward. She twisted her body in mid-air, bringing her claws to bear a split second before she struck. Bloodcuddles let out a surprised gasp, followed by a horrific scream as Pickles went to work, clawing and biting with savage fury.

Say what you will about the disconnect between man and animals, but we still recognize danger when it comes to our doorstep, and Pickles more than made up for her small stature with sheer bravery. Unfortunately, Bloodcuddles was no ordinary foe, and he had a fury all his own. He snapped his head to the side, and Pickles came loose, scraps of his face still in her claws as she was flung to the ground.

Bloodcuddles screamed and snapped his arm up, preparing to plunge his knife down and skewer Pickles. Panic seized me, and I jerked up, throwing myself into his path as the blade began to descend. I caught his arm at the wrist, and slid my other hand behind his forearm, grasping onto my own wrist and twisting with all my might. Anyone who knows anything about ground fighting will tell you that it's all a game of space and leverage, and I wasn't giving an inch. I pointedly ignored the cold, creepy feel of his body against my own as I applied pressure. There was a moment's resistance, then his shoulder snapped, tendons and ligaments tearing away as his arm came apart.

Broken teeth, it appeared, can be ignored. Broken limbs, however, are another matter. He screamed and kicked up with his hips, bucking me off before crawling backward, his arm flopping uselessly as he skittered into the dark. Unfortunately, I'd made a stupid mistake and forgot about the knife. Shock kept his now useless fingers clenched tight, and he peeled them away, transferring the knife into his other hand, his pained cries ending in maddened giggles.

“Going to bleed,” he wheezed. “Oh, you're going to bleed.”

He rose from the darkness, hunched and damaged, but also still firmly caught up in the web of his own psychosis. He quirked his head to the side and ran his tongue over his lips, staring at me for a long moment before glancing down. I followed his gaze to where Princess Pickles stood, her shoulder pressed against my foot. She was trembling, but her little gerbil face was resolute, her posture refusing to give way to fear. It's entirely possible that I was rationalizing and giving human attributes to a gerbil as a way of dealing with my own fear, but you'll have to trust me on this one. Princess Pickles had the heart of a lion. Unfortunately, she had the body of a gerbil, and I bent down and scooped her up into my palm, holding her close as Bloodcuddles lumbered toward us.

“Over my dead body,” I said.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Bloodcuddles said. “But first, you're going to watch as I eat that little—”

A gunshot rang out, its report echoing through the tunnels, deafening in the dark enclosure. Bloodcuddles' knee burst apart, bone and cartilage erupting across my flashlight's vision a split second before he crashed to the ground.

“Police department! Get your hands in the air!”

“Police?” Bloodcuddles whispered, his voice hazy. “No, no no. Not yet. It's not time for that yet. They shouldn't be here.”

He growled and started to rise, but a uniformed officer appeared and smashed his fist across the clown's jaw, knocking the knife free from his hand and sending him back to the ground. I stayed where I was as another officer joined him, and the two of them twisted Bloodcuddles onto his stomach, handcuffing him as they informed him of his Miranda Rights.

I waited until they had him secured, then retrieved Princess Pickles' cage, scooping some of her lining and righting her food bowl before setting her back inside. She immediately scurried low, digging into the lining and shielding herself. I waited to make sure she was settled, then scooped up my

backpack, the cold nuggets sharp against my back as I heard someone step up behind me.

“Thought you were working late,” I said.

FBI Special Agent Alexander Gordan cleared his throat. “I was, but when I didn’t hear from you, I figured it couldn’t hurt to head this way.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “And you just happened to bring two uniformed officers with you?”

Agent Gordan shrugged and the corner of his mouth twitched, revealing a ghost of that boyish smile I’d come to enjoy. “They owed me a favor after I helped them with their taxes. Besides, there were special circumstances.”

“Special like you were afraid your girlfriend was going to end up being devoured by a joker-wannabe in the cold dark subterranean underground?”

“The thought did occur to me.”

“Is that why you fired first, then announced yourself?”

“Partially,” he said. “Although, if I’m being honest, there was a little more to it than that.”

“Like what?”

Agent Gordan glanced past me, and I followed his gaze to where Bloodcuddles lay, gibbering and bleeding and quivering on the floor.

“Rule number one,” Agent Gordan said.

I drew in a long breath, then nodded after a moment and let it out in a huff. “Right,” I said. “Rule number one.”

Return to Blue Moon. April 15th 0830hrs

Things got downright orderly from that point forward.

The uniformed officers called for an ambulance to take Bloodcuddles to the hospital. He would be surrounded by round-the-clock security until he was healthy enough to be transported to the Suffolk County Jail. From there, he'd be facing a bevy of charges, everything from breaking and entering and theft to attempted murder. Barring an act of God or the complete and total breakdown of our justice system, he would be going away for a long time.

It was too late for me to return Princess Pickles to Waverly Elementary, so I decided to just bring her home with me. Agent Gordan followed me in his own car and walked me to my front door. He offered to come inside, but I refused. The night was growing long, and I barely had enough time to shower and sleep before I needed to be at the station, so I bid him goodnight on the front steps, the lingering memory of his lips on mine strongly suggesting that I was being foolish.

I'd met Agent Gordan last month, when we'd been paired together to uncover the truth behind a group of leprechaun thieves who'd robbed the Federal Reserve. I'd thought he was an arrogant government lackey, and he'd thought I was a puffed-up patrol officer with a chip on her shoulder. We'd both been right, and we'd both been wrong. In the wake of stopping a mass bombing, he'd asked me out to dinner, and the weeks since had been... nice.

Not like wedding bells nice or anything. Our relationship was still too new, still untested, to really know if there might be a future in it, but I'd grown to adore his boyish smile and slight clumsiness. He was a numbers guy, a financial crimes expert who could cripple criminal networks with a few mouse clicks and a phone call. And me? Well, I was a paranormal

investigator with a badge and not too many friends left. We made quite the pair.

I walked into my apartment and tossed my keys down onto the end table. Yosemite's cage sat atop the kitchen counter, and he emerged from beneath his hamster wheel, glaring at me accusingly as he picked up on Agent Gordan's cologne. He and Alex have a relationship based on mutual disdain, but he got over my perceived betrayal quickly once he caught sight of Princess Pickles.

I set her cage down beside his, and Yosemite scurried over, squeaking with interest. I considered joining them, thinking that Pickles might enjoy the company, but she made it clear she had little interest in socializing, and promptly settled down beneath her cage lining and went to sleep, utterly ignoring Yosemite. Such is life, little buddy.

I made my way into the bathroom, where I disrobed and stumbled into the shower, scrubbing the muck and memory of Bloodcuddles from my skin. It took a while, and somewhere along the way, my hands started trembling, and I had to grip the rod, holding tight to the curtain until the feeling passed.

Things like that had been happening more and more lately, including a few unexpected crying sessions beneath the shower's caress. The few online forums I'd consulted had said it was a perfectly natural response to having multiple brushes with death within a short time period and assured me it would get easier with time, but I was still waiting. At least I hadn't started hallucinating. They warned me that could happen, but so far, so good.

I exited the shower and used my towel to wipe the mirrors clear before retrieving my first-aid kit and seeing to the various scrapes along my arms and back. Nothing looked in need of medical attention, and I settled for Neosporin and waterproof bandages before donning loose sweatpants and an old t-shirt and heading to bed. I set my alarm, fell asleep quickly and didn't dream, which was a welcome relief.

The sun was still down when my alarm went off, and I groaned and fumbled with my phone before dismissing it. Despite only being assigned to Blue Moon Division for a little over four months, I was, technically, the highest-ranking officer in the unit, minus Lieutenant Kermit, of course. Such seniority meant that I was largely left to my own devices. Granted, I still received the occasional assignment, but for the most part, I was free to pick and choose which cases I wanted to investigate. The downside of such freedom meant that I was still expected to observe normal business hours, which meant that I spent a lot of time off-the-clock, since paranormal occurrences don't typically occur during the workday. As such, sleep was becoming harder and harder to come by.

I stumbled out of bed and did some light stretching, more so to alleviate the cramped muscles that had tightened during the night than to uphold my physical fitness regimen. Once that was done, I got dressed in my usual attire, which consisted of dress pants and a dark button-up shirt overtop my Kevlar vest. I attached my duty belt, containing my pistol, badge, handcuffs, and pepper spray, and retrieved some extra magazines from the portable gun safe I keep hidden beneath my bed to replace those I'd lost the previous night. I loaded them and stashed them in my belt. Then I checked my tactical patrol bag, which contained all my necessities, including my Massachusetts State Law book, my laminated map of the city, recently expanded to include known subway tunnels both in and out of service, my flashlight, multi-tool kit, evidence bags and report forms. I'd also upgraded my first aid kit, attaching an additional tourniquet after last month, as well as multiple packages of QuikClot.

The sun was just starting to crest the horizon when I made my way out into the kitchen. For the first time in a while, my fridge was filled, albeit with baked goods, none of which appealed to me this morning. I considered making some oatmeal, but my stomach hadn't quite recovered from the memory of those chicken nuggets between Bloodcuddles'

teeth, and I settled for tea instead, placing it in a to-go cup before removing the nuggets from my freezer and placing them back into my backpack.

Yosemite stirred as I retrieved Princess Pickle's cage, but he didn't complain as I lifted her from the kitchen counter. I whispered some soothing words about how timing was everything, then dropped a couple of food pellets into his bowl and made my way out the door.

My Ford Crown Victoria had become something of an eyesore on my street, with some of the neighbors even suspecting the vehicle of having been stolen or abandoned and attempting to have it towed. I couldn't really blame them. Back when I'd been in the department's good graces, I'd had a proper vehicle. Alas, times had changed, and I was forced to make do. The Ford's bumper was smashed and dented, literally held together by duct tape since I'd driven it through a wall, and the inside smelled of moldy seat cushions and wet cardboard.

I set Princess Pickles down atop the passenger's seat, then dropped into the driver's seat and brought the engine to life. I drove to Waverly Elementary School and parked in the visitor's lot, waiting by the gates until the first teacher arrived.

Luke Hubbard was in his early-thirties, with wavy blonde hair that curled at the ends and a classically handsome face. Dressed in jeans and a shirt-tie combo, he struck me as the type of professor I would have enjoyed meeting in college. The type to teach creative writing or philosophy. Something brainy, but also with an altruistic sense to it. He showed up half an hour before the first student was set to arrive and found me already waiting outside his classroom. He walked in with a satchel bag over one shoulder, leading a little girl by the hand. I pegged her as seven or eight, with blonde curls that were a picturesque match for her father. She was dressed in a Disney Princess sweater and sea-green pants with little white unicorns on them. She had a little backpack on across her shoulders, and she squealed at the sight of Princess Pickles in my hand.

“You found her!” she cried, and raced over, bringing her face to the glass. “Pickles, it’s me. I was so worried about you.”

“Oh, wow,” Luke said as he opened the door and motioned me inside.

I walked in and placed Princess Pickles’ cage down in her usual spot beside the window ledge. Luke set his bag down atop his desk and made his way over. I caught a touch of his scent as he came up beside me. He smelled good, fresh, like a combination of children’s laundry detergent and cinnamon.

“You really found her?”

“Did you doubt I would?”

“No, of course not.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Er, well, maybe a bit,” he said. “It’s just, the school’s been vandalized before. We’ve always called, but usually all we ever receive is a report.”

“Well, now you know who to call first.” I withdrew a business card and handed it over.

He accepted it and glanced down at it before slipping it into his shirt pocket. “I’ll do that. I hope it wasn’t too much trouble?”

A shiver swept through me as Bloodcuddles peeked around the corner of my mind, but I shook it away and disguised the gesture by readjusting my jacket. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“I’m so glad to hear it. The children will be overjoyed to have her back.” He glanced down. “They’d love to thank you themselves, if you have the time.”

“Thanks, but I need to be getting back to the station.”

“Of course,” he said. “Avery, what do we say?”

Avery turned and cast me a shy smile. “Thank you, Officer, for finding Pickles and bringing her home safely. Oh, and for painting her toenails.”

I hesitated. “Her toenails?”

“Uh-huh,” Avery said, and pointed. “You see? They’re all red. You must have painted them. Daddy says when I’m older I can paint my nails, but not yet.”

“That...sounds like a fair deal.” I cleared my throat and waved goodbye to Avery and Pickles, the latter of which ignored me entirely.

“Thank you again, Officer,” Luke said as he walked me to the door.

“You can call me Chloe,” I said. “And you’re welcome,”

He smiled and held the door for me. “Chloe then. You’ve made some special children very happy. You’re a real-life superhero in my book.”

I nodded my thanks and avoided telling him that Pickles was the real hero. And apparently, she had the trophy nails to show for it.

The cafeteria workers were less enthused by the return of their frozen nuggets. I couldn’t really blame them. It wasn’t like they could serve them to the kids now. Maybe they could get a credit from their supplier or something. Either way, I preferred they go to waste rather than continue to fuel Bloodcuddles’ delusional rampage.

I walked back out to my car and drove away from the school, taking Longfellow Bridge south into downtown before pulling into the Government Parking Garage.

I have it on good authority that the original Blue Moon Investigations began as a result of a newspaper misprint. Not the most auspicious launch, although Blue Moon Boston wasn’t much better.

Our division had started as something of a joke, or more accurately, a dumping ground for misfit officers who were deemed too incompetent to continue on but, for one reason or another, couldn't be fired without fear of legal repercussions. Tasked with investigating the world of the paranormal and disproving all manner of supernatural entities that everyone knew didn't actually exist, it was our job to uncover the truth and to ensure it fit neatly onto the department's incident report forms.

The work itself was interesting enough, but didn't carry much respect within the department. The upper brass had even gone so far as to evict us from police headquarters, assigning us to a hobbit-hole basement dwelling inside the adjacent Government Parking Garage. We had no funding, no budget, and no hope of receiving any recompense beyond the minimum pay afforded by our rank.

I parked my car and took the stairs down two-stories to the subbasement, suppressing a groan at the sight of two cardboard delivery boxes sitting by the doorway. Muttering to myself, I scooped them into my arms and pushed through the door into our office.

When I'd first been assigned to Blue Moon, we'd been a team of three. Lieutenant Kermit ran the show, Topher worked behind the scenes, and I handled the fieldwork. Lieutenant Kermit was still there, and Topher... wasn't.

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. The building had been in a state of advanced decay for some time, besieged by mold, water damage, and a general lack of cleanliness. Luckily, our unit had been grounded for the past several weeks while the upper brass worked through the ramifications of the leprechaun's attempted bombing, and I'd taken advantage of the time to make our living conditions a touch less deplorable.

I'd started by peeling away the rotting plaster and slapping a fresh coat of paint along the walls. I'd also gotten rid of the old carpet, tearing it away to reveal hundreds of old cigarette butts buried beneath. The Division had no budget for a new carpet, but I pulled some strings with a nearby thrift store being plagued by mutant rats (spoiler, they turned out to just be regular rats who'd been living large off a nearby Chinese restaurant that was really a front for an electronics money laundering operation) and they'd agreed to seal the floors and provide several carpets free of charge.

The water damage turned out to be a bigger problem than I'd hoped, and it had taken several of us pooling our coffee money to pay a plumber to come out and look at it. His recommendation was that the building be abandoned immediately, but once we made it clear that wasn't an option, we'd bartered Lieutenant Kermit's nephew into creating him a new website in return for him making sure we weren't going to accidentally electrocute ourselves. The plumber couldn't do anything about the random sink sticking out of the wall. All indications suggested that as soon as he removed it, the area would immediately flood, and we made the joint decision to leave it where it was. Not like it was hurting anyone. Provided they didn't drink from it, of course.

There were two people already inside the front, and I nodded good morning as I made my way through the office and into the kitchen, depositing the two delivery boxes down atop the counter. I didn't bother opening the fridge, which, much like my one at home, was filled to bursting. The plethora of food inside should have been a welcome change, but there were special circumstances beyond first glance that made the fare unwelcome, and I exited the kitchen and made my way over to my desk, laying my tactical bag down and dropping into my chair.

"They're still coming?" a voice asked from behind me.

I nodded without turning around. "Still."

Chortling sounds erupted from the second figure and I turned in my chair and caught sight of Robbie Rutledge as he beat his palm against his chest. In his mid-teens, Robbie was thin, with curly red hair and two black studs in either ear. He maintained a splattering of facial scruff along his face that couldn't truly be classified as a beard, and was dressed in his usual attire of a plain t-shirt with khaki pants.

Technically, Robbie wasn't a member of Blue Moon. He worked here part time as punishment for casting his high school back into the dark ages by building a cell phone jammer and hiding it in the gymnasium rafters. He claimed he'd been trying to make it easier for the students to focus, but I suspected he'd just enjoyed watching the ensuing chaos. School officials had evidently agreed with me and moved to expel him, but his uncle, Lieutenant Kermit, intervened, and now Robbie was paying off his debt to the school district by serving as our receptionist-slash-IT guy. He might have been a computer whiz, but he was still only sixteen, and working with a teenager did come with certain drawbacks. Although, in this case, I couldn't really blame him.

"Something to add?" I asked.

Robbie snorted and shook his head, biting the back of his fist to muffle his laughter. It took him several more seconds to get himself under control, and he eventually wiped his eyes and lifted a scrap of paper from his desk.

"Here are your messages. Mrs. Frankenburg called again. She says her neighbor's cat is still casting spells outside her window."

"You're kidding? I closed that case last week."

"Apparently not."

"It's a stupid cat," I said. "She insists on keeping her fish tank near the window. Claims they need the vitamin D. What does she think is going to happen?"

"Should I tell her you're not coming?"

I drew in a breath and pinched my nose. Mrs. Frankenburg might have been a pain, but she was the most dangerous kind. The one who had nothing better to do than complain and no compunctions about calling every number in the police directory to do so. If I blew her off, I would hear about it from ten different sources before lunch.

“Call her back and tell her I’ll swing by and take another look toward the end of my shift,” I said.

“Will do,” Robbie said. “Also, Uncle John wants to see you in his office.”

“Is it about the...”

Robbie shrugged without glancing my way, his attention already reverting to whatever was displayed across his computer screen. I frowned at him, then rose out of my chair and made my way down the hall, knocking twice on Lieutenant Kermit’s door before peeking my head inside.

Seated behind the desk, Lieutenant John Kermit was in his mid-sixties, with silver hair trimmed into a short-clipped executive style. He was the head of Blue Moon Division, as well as one of the most experienced officers in the department, having begun his career as a British naval officer before retiring and becoming a Bobbie in East London. A few years after that, he’d come to Boston as part of an officer exchange program, met his wife, and never left.

He was known as something of an anomaly within the department’s hierarchy. Most of the deputy superintendents went out of their way to avoid him, and as a result, Lieutenant Kermit had been free to investigate and assist on whichever cases he chose. That was until last year, when Deputy Bulwark decided to assign him his own division. Lieutenant Kermit named it Blue Moon, in honor of his goddaughter, Jane, who was an investigator at the original Blue Moon Investigations office. In doing so, he’d recognized a need for those services

here within the city, and designed our mission statement around it.

I'd worked with a couple of halfway decent bosses before, but Lieutenant Kermit was a cut above the rest. He spoke with a cockney accent and had a proper air about him that always made me think of an aging James Bond. He was also, as far as I knew, the only officer in the entire department who refused to carry a gun, preferring to rely on his wits rather than brute force.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" I asked.

He motioned me inside. "Close the door, please."

I swallowed back a gulp and did as he bade, shutting the door and dropping down into the chair opposite his own. "If this is about the you-know-whats, I've already made some calls."

Some calls involved ringing every bakery within the city limits and requesting a stop on all incoming orders. A few had been amendable, but most had informed me that, so long as the orders were paid for, they would do their utmost to fulfill them, regardless of whether we actually wanted to receive them or not.

"This isn't about that," Lieutenant Kermit said. He lifted the day's issue of the Boston Globe newspaper and turned several pages back before sliding it across the desk toward me. "And for what it's worth, you've been relegated to page four."

I reached out, lifted the paper, and tried not to sigh.

In the wake of last month's leprechaun terrorist attack, the FBI had released their official report and findings. Agent Gordan had remained light on Blue Moon Division's mission, the public already thought we were nuts, no reason to give them any extra ammunition, but he'd mentioned Lieutenant Kermit and I by name, citing our assistance in both discovering the identity of the perpetrators and bringing them to justice.

In the days that followed the report, we'd both received inquiries from the Boston Globe Newspaper. They'd wanted to do a profile piece on us, what I assumed to be a feel-good story highlighting our dedication and service to the city. Part of the profile included a brief questionnaire designed to allow the readers to get to know us on a more personal level.

It had all seemed fairly standard at a glance. Where we went to school, our hobbies, musical tastes and favorite foods. I'd answered that last one with a classic Boston treat, thinking it would make me sound more relatable to the Globe readers by identifying me as a New England native, which I was, and as a homer, also true.

I should have kept my stupid mouth shut.

When the article went to print a few days later, the headline read: **Creampie Loving Cop Stuffs Terrorist Massacre Plot.**

I won't even discuss the comments section of the online page. I didn't have to, since someone had been kind enough to print and post them around the police station as well as the Government Parking Garage.

If it had stopped there, I probably could have walked it off, but the pies had been rolling in ever since. Hundreds of them, arriving multiple times each day, most containing lewd or innuendo-filled notes sent by men, and a few women, who were old enough to know better. Granted, the local bakeries were grateful for the increased business, and I hadn't needed to pay for my own coffee in weeks, but we all have our limits, and I was fast approaching mine.

"Give it time, Sergeant," Lieutenant Kermit said, evidently reading my face. "This too will pass. And in the meantime, I've got an assignment for you."

I gave myself a shake and discarded the paper. "Okay, let's hear it."

"A man was murdered last evening."

“Hopefully not by another clown?”

“It doesn’t appear to be circus related.”

He raised a post-it-note covered in his writing and extended it toward me. I accepted it and glanced down at the address. It was a street up in Beacon Hill, not too far from here.

“What makes it of interest to Blue Moon? Did he have a stake driven through his heart, or a pentagram carved into his forehead?”

“On the contrary, I don’t believe they’ve recovered the head yet.”

My eyes snapped up. “The victim’s *head* is missing?”

Lieutenant Kermit nodded. “I want you out there as soon as possible. And take Pongo with you.”

“Aw, come on, sir. Pongo?”

Lieutenant Kermit cocked his head to the side. “Is there something wrong with Officer Dwyer that would prevent you from working together?”

“No, not really. He’s just so...”

Lieutenant Kermit stared at me, and I sighed and lowered my hands in defeat. “Alright, you win. I’ll take him.”

“So glad to hear it,” Lieutenant Kermit said with a smile. “Happy hunting, Sergeant.”

Professional Ethics. April 15th

0900hrs

I exited Lieutenant Kermit's office and made my way back to our cubicles, catching sight of Pongo sitting at what used to be Topher's desk. Something about that struck me as being wrong. Something that had much more to do with me than Pongo.

On some level, I always knew Blue Moon couldn't remain a two-person division indefinitely, but I'd assumed, foolishly, that I'd have some say who joined. That proved not to be the case, and, as Deputy Bulwark tactlessly explained, being the dumping ground for the department meant being dumped on occasionally.

Hence Pongo's presence here.

His real name was Elmore Dwyer, and he was relatively new to the force, having just completed probation when "the incident" that saw him reassigned here occurred. There are several conflicting accounts of what actually transpired that night, but the facts, as near as I could tell, were as follows.

On a crisp March evening, Officer Dwyer and Officer Garcia, a six-year veteran of the department, were dispatched to a home in South Boston to investigate a domestic dispute. The home-owners, a husband-and-wife duo, were three sheets to the wind by the time the officers arrived, and seemed utterly confused as to the officers' presence, or even the source of their argument, beyond the fact that both were adamant that they were in the right. The officers made the decision to separate the parties, with Dwyer speaking to the man in the driveway and Garcia taking the wife into the house.

As the wife retreated inside, she inadvertently allowed their dog, an adult dalmatian named Smoochies, who volunteered at the local children's hospital, to escape from its pen.

Immediately, the dog raced down the steps and into the driveway, bounding forward with reckless abandon.

Officer Dwyer, believing the dog's intentions to be that of a violent nature, rather than gleeful enthusiasm at the prospect of meeting new people, immediately drew his weapon and fired three times. Body camera footage revealed that the first two bullets struck the driveway, blasting little holes in the concrete. The third bullet, however, struck the wheel rim of the homeowner's pickup truck, ricocheted off the sidewalk and embedded itself into Dwyer's own foot. Meaning that not only had he failed to strike the dog, but he'd managed to shoot himself in the process. Dwyer's body camera, which had since gone viral on the internet and accumulated several million views, captured the homeowner's dumbfounded expression as Dwyer crashed to the ground screaming, as well as the moment Smoochies came forward and began licking his face. The audio portion of Officer Dwyer's body camera cut out at that point, a small mercy, but there was enough for the entire department to assign him his new nickname, Pongo.

He was a smaller guy, and probably only managed to tip the scales at a hundred pounds if he wore combat boots. He kept his hair clipped short, and black-rimmed glasses balanced precariously atop his bold, pronounced nose. He had his head down and the Massachusetts State Law Handbook open in front of him, and was reading quietly, mouthing the words to himself as he made his way down the page.

"Elmore," I said, "Look alive. You're riding with me today. We've got a case."

Pongo glanced up at the sound of his name, surprise flickering across his face before his features turned pensive. "Uh, with you, Sergeant?"

I nodded. "Grab your gear and let's get moving."

He hesitated and licked his lips. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

“What’s the problem?”

“Well, uh... it’s just that I’m not sure we should be working together,” he said. “It’s a matter of professional ethics.”

“You’re ethically opposed to investigating a murder?”

“Not exactly.”

At the opposite desk, Robbie halted his typing, pretending to stare at the screen but clearly listening in.

“If you’ve got something to say, then spit it out,” I said.

Pongo glanced away, then cleared his throat. “Well, it has to do with the department’s policies regarding accepting gratuities.”

“What about it?”

He drew in a long breath, and then he spoke as if quoting from a book. *“No officer or employee shall solicit, accept, or agree to accept any direct or indirect favor, gift, loan, free service, gratuity, entertainment, or other item of economic value if acceptance of such item could affect the employee’s impartiality, or give that appearance while discharging their sworn duties.”*

“So?”

“I’ve seen you eating those cream pies.”

Robbie snorted and covered his face with his hands. I glared at him for a long moment, then turned back to Pongo. “You’re serious?”

Pongo nodded, his face grave. “I hope you can understand the precariousness of my position,” he said. “I want to do right by the division, but if there’s an internal affairs investigation, I’ll have no choice but to testify truthfully as to what I’ve observed.”

“Kid, if there’s an internal affairs investigation into our cream pies, you have my blessing to tell them whatever the

heck you like.”

Pongo frowned, not entirely convinced. “And there won’t be any hard feelings?”

“Not a one.”

That part was true. I wouldn’t normally hold with someone who couldn’t be trusted, but in this case, I wasn’t worried. The majority of the cream pies delivered in the early days had found their way into the police station, where they’d been devoured by our patrol division, as well as criminal investigations, including internal affairs. They couldn’t investigate Blue Moon without implicating the entire department, and honestly, what would be the point?

“Oh, thank goodness,” Pongo said. “That’s a huge relief. I’ve been worried about it for weeks.”

“Worry no more. You’re in the clear. Now, if it’s not too much trouble, we have a murder to solve. Get your stuff and meet me in the parking lot.”

Pongo flushed and glanced down, his face reddening. “Right, uh, my stuff. About that...”

“What now?”

“My former division commander sort of took everything back after I got transferred.”

I stared at him. “Do you have a gun?”

A look of relief flashed across his face. “Yes. He told me he would have taken that too, but I was required to hold on to it.”

“What about a notepad?”

“Er...”

“You can borrow one,” I said. “In the meantime—”

I cut off as Lieutenant Kermit appeared from behind me. He had a manilla folder in one hand, and a slice of cream pie

in the other. It was fresh from the freezer, tiny icicles glistening on the custard filling.

“Robbie, I need you to take these to the courthouse,” he said, extending the files toward him. “Deliver them to Carol in the law library. She’ll give you a receipt.”

“Oh, come on Uncle Kermit,” Robbie said. “Can’t you just have one of them do it? I don’t have time for that today.”

“Young man, you are a sixteen-year-old virgin with no car, no girlfriend, and, according to your mother, no social life. Add that to your suspension from school, and I can assure you that you have time for this.”

“Oh, man,” I said and shook my hand. “You can feel that burn from all the way over here.”

“Oh, ha ha,” Robbie said. “Nobody asked you, Sergeant Creampie.”

“At least I’ve got some offers,” I said. “All you’ve got is a hacked subscription to Mommy Loves Me Best dot com.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lieutenant Kermit asked.

“Nothing, Uncle Kermit,” Robbie said, and bounded out of his chair. He crossed the room in two steps and seized the manilla envelope. “You’re absolutely right. I’ll take these over right now.”

He turned and mouthed the word “witch” as he passed me, and I smiled and began humming the first few notes to a tune any mother would have recognized as *Rock-a-bye Baby*.

Lieutenant Kermit frowned at the pair of us and shook his head as Robbie disappeared through the door. “Why are you still here? Don’t you have a murder to solve?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “But we might have a slight staffing issue.”

“Really?” Lieutenant Kermit turned his head and took a large bite of his pie, chewing for several seconds before he

swallowed. “What’s the problem, Officer Dwyer?”

“Er, uh, no problem, sir,” Pongo stammered. “We were just leaving.”

“Excellent,” Lieutenant Kermit said. He winked at me, then turned and made his way back down the hall, muttering something about sending children to play outside. I waited for his door to close, then turned back to Pongo and raised an eyebrow.

“Shall we?”

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The Hunt Begins. April 15th

0917hrs

We loaded up in my car and followed the address to a duplex located on Acorn Street, in the heart of Beacon Hill. The neighborhood was one of the oldest communities in the city, and was home to the Massachusetts State House, as well as many of the city's sports stars and wealthy affluent.

The picturesque street stood flanked by historic colonial brick apartments, most with little gardens or festive decorations in their front entryway. I drove up the cobblestone streets and parked behind a handful of forensic and emergency vehicles.

Two squad cars had blocked off the street, and yellow tape hung across the sidewalks, warding off casual passersby. I exited the vehicle, and started that way, but stopped after half a dozen steps, peering back to find Pongo crouched down beside one of the forensic vans.

“Something wrong, Pongo?”

At first, I thought he was inspecting their tire, but when he glanced up, I saw he had a pocket-sized yellow tape measurer out and was measuring the distance to the curb. He stared at it for a moment, then looked up, his expression grave.

“We might have a problem. I think this van is in violation of department policy.”

“How so?”

“The official Massachusetts law enforcement code handbook states that *‘any officers in the pursuit of their duty should park their designated vehicles no more than six inches away from the curb.’*” He frowned. “It’s close, but I’m not convinced. I’d need a laser measurer to know for sure.”

“Afraid we’re all out of laser measurers,” I said.

“In that case, do you think I should report them?” he asked. “Or maybe I should talk to them directly and ask them to move it?”

“I think we should probably stay focused on why we’re here,” I said. “A man’s been murdered, Pongo. That takes precedence over a perceived parking infraction.”

“You think so? I don’t know. I would hate for them to get a citation.”

I glanced at the van, noting the large Forensics sign stenciled on the side. “Something tells me they’ll be okay.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Pongo said. He rose and brushed off his pants. “I’d offer to move it myself, but there’s still some question on whether I’m covered under the department’s insurance policy. Since my wound was... you know.”

“Self-inflicted?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to have to put that out of your mind, at least for now. We’ve got a murder to solve.”

I turned and motioned him to follow, the pair of us making our way along the sidewalk to the edge of the yellow tape where a familiar figure stood dressed in a blue patrol uniform complete with hat.

“Oh, heck no,” I said. “Is that you, Rick?”

Omar Rickson smiled and tipped the brim of his hat. In his early forties, he was in good shape, with dark hair and matching eyes. A veteran officer, he was something of a celebrity in the world of law enforcement, having been wounded three years prior when he intentionally ran his patrol car into a drunk driver traveling triple digit speeds down the wrong lane of the freeway. The papers described it as one of the bravest, most selfless acts of courage they’d ever seen. It was one of the rare times they’d gotten it right. He had his

duty belt on, his radio attached to his shoulder, and held a clipboard in his hand.

“As I live and breathe, Sergeant Mayfield,” Rickson said. “What’s happening, Chloe?”

“Same old,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“Overtime shift.”

“I see that. And back in your blues, no less.”

Rickson nodded and flicked an imaginary speck of dust off the shoulder of his uniform. “Actually, that’s par for the course these days.”

I frowned. “What happened to neighborhood watch?”

He shrugged and didn’t quite meet my eye. “Guess they figured I was due for a change.”

My chest tightened, and a heavy knot took form in my guts. I wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but I could read between the lines well enough to see that something wasn’t right. And that something, I feared, was Rickson being punished for his role in assisting me a few months back.

I’d called him to help me extract a high-profile target through downtown. We’d been trying to protect a book seller named Frank Decaux, as well as a historical manuscript which was said to contain the only recorded conversation between a person and a demon. Some witches had wanted that manuscript, and they’d come for us. Rickson and I had gone head-to-head with three of them inside a subway car. We put up a good fight, but we would have lost if not for Big Ben and his uncanny powers of seduction. In the end, the witches had all gotten arrested, and Frank and Big Ben had flown back to England. I’d gotten off with little more than a slap on the wrist, and I’d assumed Rickson had gotten the same.

Clearly, that wasn’t the case.

“Don’t sweat it, Chloe,” Rickson said, reading my thoughts. “I’ve worked worse jobs than this. Besides, I’d do it again if given the chance.”

I tried to speak, failed, and swallowed before trying again. “It meant a lot, knowing you had my back that day.”

“Careful now,” he said. “You’re going to make me blush.”

“Right. We wouldn’t want that.”

“No, we wouldn’t,” he said. “Now, what brings you here?”

“Heard you got a stiff. Thought I might take a look.”

“Mackleroy know you’re coming?”

I shook my head. Everett Mackleroy was the lead homicide detective for the city. He was old school muscle, a thug with a badge. I’d worked with him before, but we’d had something of a falling out recently, all stemming from the fact that I’d accused him of murder and inadvertently gotten him shot. If that wasn’t bad enough, I’d also stumbled upon his involvement with the leprechaun thieves the previous month. I couldn’t prove anything, but it was enough that I knew, and I’d leveraged that information into forcing him to back off. I hadn’t seen or heard from him in weeks and was in no hurry to break the streak.

“Is he here?”

Rickson shook his head. “He’s working a triple homicide up in Charleston. You might want to hurry, though. No guarantee how much longer until he gets back.”

“Thanks, Rick.”

He nodded, and motioned me on by. I ducked under the yellow tape and walked half a dozen steps before realizing that Pongo wasn’t following.

“You coming?” I asked.

Pongo hesitated, then pointed toward Rickson. “Isn’t he supposed to sign us in?”

I stared at him.

Pongo licked his lips, then cleared his throat. “Department policy mandates that any officers entering into a crime scene have to be recorded so as to preserve the chain of evidence. If word comes out that we were here and there’s no written record, we could get into a lot of trouble.”

Several seconds passed before I said, “Rick, would you please sign us in?”

“Sure thing,” Rickson said. He dutifully wrote our names down atop the clipboard, then turned it around so Pongo could see it.

Pongo took a moment to ensure his name was spelled correctly, then nodded and ducked underneath the yellow tape. He fell into step beside me, failing to notice the meaningful look Rick cast my way as we resumed our trek.

Technically, what Pongo said was in line with the letter of the law. In reality, though, things were a little less black and white. Department policy *did* require the crime scene officer to keep a log of all personnel who entered into a scene, but the rise in frivolous lawsuits and defense stalling tactics over the past few years had turned that rule into more of a guideline. No officer wanted to spend months in a courtroom because their name happened to show up on a crime scene log, especially if they weren’t even involved in the case. Not only could it open you up to civil lawsuits, but you could find yourself spending days, if not weeks, being repeatedly questioned by defense attorneys who had no compunctions about wasting everyone’s time in the hopes of finding any inconsistency they could exploit. That was why it had become something of a common practice for those of us who weren’t directly involved in the homicide investigation to keep our names off any official logs. That went doubly so in my case. Having to explain the nature of Blue Moon’s work to my fellow officers was challenging enough. Having to explain it to a judge, much less a jury, was more than I was ready for.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, reminding myself that I'd been a rookie too once. It was likely that Pongo hadn't even considered the possible implications, or if he had, then he still felt it was necessary to uphold his sworn duty. He wasn't wrong, precisely. He was just... a rules guy.

Which, if I was being honest, wasn't the worst thing in the world.

Working in law enforcement, you come to realize that officers come from all walks of life. You had your overgrown frat-boys who'd come to the end of their college career and realized they had no idea what the next step was. They valued their freedom too much to join the military and figured law enforcement was a close second. Then you had your ex-military personnel, drawn to the work because they couldn't envision a world where they weren't of service.

There were the dreamers, those who truly wanted to make a difference in people's lives but couldn't quite muster the physical skills necessary to be truly effective. They were offset by the junkies, like Mackleroy, who got their fix off of tracking dangerous criminals and were always looking for a bigger bust to feed their own ego. The power-seekers thought putting on a badge was the surest way of achieving their peers respect, and the rules-lawyers thrived on the structure of law. They were the ones who'd seen every episode of Cops, who knew the state law book inside and out and who could quote long passages of case law verbatim, yet had somehow missed the boat when it came time to apply for law school.

Pongo was one of those. Put him on the stand and he could give any lawyer fits. Put him out in the field, and he was easily flustered and, as experience had shown, likely to injure someone. I'd met a few others like him during my time. They made great union reps, victims advocates and bureaucratic administrators. Provided, of course, that they didn't screw up too early in their career, which Pongo evidently had.

I exhaled and rubbed my eyes, pushing the thought from my mind and forcing myself to focus on the problem at hand. I'd deal with Pongo later. For now, I had more important things to worry about.

The address Lieutenant Kermit had given me belonged to a duplex only a few yards away. A four-story red-brick colonial with blacked-out curtains blocking the view from the street, there was no garden in the front yard, and no decorations lining either of the doors. Someone had installed high hedges around the entryway fence, blocking the view of the neighbors, and the doorway looked to have been replaced with one of those heavy-duty models, designed to withstand blunt force trauma.

The body of Walter Crosier lay twenty yards down the street.

Two forensic technicians had set up a waist-high canopy tent to shield his form from casual view, and were busily snapping photographs and taking measurements. The one closest saw me coming and whispered something to the other tech. A moment later, they both turned and walked away in the opposite direction without so much as a glance back. I could have pretended that they were just being considerate and giving me room to work, but I knew there was more to it than that. Last month, after the leprechauns had stolen twenty-five million dollars' worth of gold, a couple of Boston PD officers had gone rogue and started hunting for the money. One of them, Jerry Gantenbein, had been our lead forensics investigator. He'd tried to kill me, but Alex got him first. The department had done their best to downplay his involvement, but everyone knew what had happened, and a few of them, or maybe more than a few, blamed me for it.

It wasn't the first time I'd been at odds with my department, that had been happening with a certain regularity for some time, but this was the first time I'd wandered into forensics' crosshairs. Something told me I needed to be careful

about leaving any loose strands of hair or fingernail clippings where they could be found.

I drew up beside the canopy and glanced down at Walter Crozier's fallen form. Much as I'd been warned, the corpse in question was missing its upper extremity. The absence of the head made the entire thing look fake, almost tawdry, like a cheap Halloween decoration purchased from a strip mall.

There was nothing fake or cheap about the blood, though. Dressed in dark slacks with a button-up shirt and a peacoat that probably cost more than I made in a year, the space above the neck ended abruptly, revealing a cleanly sliced stump with runoffs of red staining the white shirt as far down as the stomach. More blood had spilled down onto the cobblestones near where he'd fallen, dripping down into the grout and coalescing into little pools. I peered around and noted a lone scarlet ribbon, a curving splatter of red that extended up the sidewalk, marking where the cut had happened. The forensic techs had already noted it, setting a small yellow card nearby to ensure further examination.

"Oh, God," Pongo said, and covered his mouth.

"Easy," I said. "Just breathe."

For emphasis, I drew in a long breath and let it out slowly, forcing myself to focus on the little details. It was a gruesome death, there was no denying that, but at least it had been quick. I'd only met Walter Crosier once, not nearly enough to make a positive identification, but the hands fit what I remembered of the man, as well as the style of dress. A second breath revealed the presence of cologne along the corpse, the spirited, spicy scent muffled by the smell of the roadway and the metallic scent of his own blood. It smelled like something he would have worn, and I rubbed my arms and tried not to shiver.

"Sergeant," Pongo said, his voice strained. "I think maybe I
—"

“Go,” I said, and motioned him off. “Clear your head, then find out who’s canvassing the neighborhood and give them a hand. These houses are so close that someone must have heard something.”

I left out the obvious, that just because someone might have heard something doesn’t mean they’d be willing to come forward. Walter Crosier, from what I remembered, was a powerful, but not beloved, figure within the city. I watched Pongo as he hurried away, one hand clamped down over his mouth. I didn’t fault him for his reaction. First bodies affect everyone differently, and I’d seen plenty of tough guys toss their cookies when confronted by the realities of death. Heck, I might be more concerned if it didn’t bother him. Corpses were supposed to be unsettling, and I didn’t know anyone who ever felt completely at ease in their presence. Myself included, although I’d learned a few tricks along the way to cope. Talking helped. Mack had taught me that one. There was something about having a conversation with the remains that somehow humanized the entire affair and gave strength to purpose.

“Guess you won’t be getting that blow-job after all, huh?” I told Walter Crosier’s remains.

“Don’t hold back on my account,” Rickson said. “I mean, they say we all grieve differently. You do whatever you have to do to find peace.”

I hadn’t heard him approach and cast a wry look over my shoulder. “Oh, ha, ha. Very funny.”

“I thought so,” Rickson said. “Although I’m not sure his wife would agree.”

“I doubt you’ll find a wife, or even very much in the way of family,” I said, thinking back to last month’s victim report.

Rickson narrowed his eyes. “You knew him?”

“Not really,” I said. “I met him once.”

“For financial advice?”

I snorted and shook my head. “He offered to make me a millionaire if I went away with him.”

Rickson raised an eyebrow. “Went away where?”

“I got the impression that the location wasn’t really important.”

“And you didn’t take him up on it?”

I glared at him, then pointedly looked back to where my car sat along the curb.

He shrugged and motioned toward the body. “I’m just saying. I’ve seen girls do a lot worse for a lot less. A million dollars is a lot of money.”

“It is,” I said. “But I’ve learned the hard way that not all that glitters is gold. And besides, what would I even spend it on? More pantsuits?”

“I could think of a few things.”

“Well, the next time I meet an eccentric old billionaire with a pharmaceutically induced hard-on and cash to burn, I’ll be sure to send them your way.”

“Billionaire?”

I considered it, thinking back to Avant-Garde headquarters. “Probably, give or take a few million.”

“Man, that’s unreal. Can you even imagine?”

“I try not to,” I said. “Something tells me there’s a law of diminishing returns that comes into play when you’re talking about that kind of wealth.”

“You think?”

I nodded. “Can you think back to a time where you ever met a truly happy rich person?”

“Guess not,” he said. “Still, it might be nice not to have to stretch so hard at the end of the month.”

“Stretching builds character,” I said. “And besides, look where all that money got him.”

“Fair point,” Rickson said.

I finished my visual examination of the body, but didn't see anything else of note. There were no cuts or bruises along his hands, no skinned knuckles or fractured bones that might suggest he'd gotten a few licks in on his killer. Likewise, there was no visible trauma to his extremities, save for the area north of the neck. As near as I could tell, it had been a quick, clean cut that took his life.

“You thinking the killer used a knife?” Rickson asked, motioning toward the bloody stump.

I considered it, then shook my head. “Not unless it was a really big one. More likely, they used a machete or a sword.”

“Like an actual sword?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Seriously?”

“I've seen it before.”

“Christ almighty,” Rickson said. “Is it just me, or are things getting weirder out here every year?”

“It's definitely not you,” I said and stood.

“Hold on a second,” he said and held up his hand. “I want to talk about your new partner.”

“Pongo? What about him?”

“He's going to be a problem,” Rickson said.

“He's just new. Still learning.”

“It's not a matter of knowledge,” Rickson said. “I've known a couple of guys like him. At best, they make lousy

team members, and at worst, they turn rat.”

“You don’t know that.”

He grunted and shook his head. “I’ve seen it before. Guys who turn against their own squads. It’s bad business.”

“Maybe he’ll surprise us.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But some people, they can’t quite gel with the idea of being on a team. They’re so used to being outcasts that it becomes ingrained in their DNA. You bring them in, make them part of a group, and they can’t handle the pressure of holding up their end. They get itchy, and the mind starts playing tricks. Some of them start feeling like the end is inevitable, so they’ll look for a way out, even if it means turning on their own.”

“Why are you telling me this, Rick?”

He looked at me. “I thought it obvious. You need to watch your back with him.”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“This is different,” he said. “It isn’t like the witches. When someone you work with turns on you, it cuts different. It’s more personal.”

I stared at him, and my voice dropped down to just above a whisper. “You think I don’t know that, Rick? Look who you’re talking to.”

He stared at me for a moment, then lowered his eyes and sighed. “Point made. I’m just looking out for you, Chloe.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. “But if I cut him loose now because it’s in my own best interest, then I’m no better than Deputy Bulwark. Not to mention that I’ll only be making it worse for him. Maybe he does feel like a bit of an outcast, but I don’t see how kicking him to the curb thirty minutes into his first assignment is going to help.”

Rickson shrugged. "It's your call, but be careful what you say around him. There are enough weird things happening around the city right now. No need to go piling on more."

"I hear you," I said, and then frowned. "Wait, what weird stuff?"

"Say again?"

"You said there's a lot of weird stuff happening. Like what?"

"Like that, for starters," he said and motioned toward the headless corpse. "Been seeing too much of that sort of thing lately."

My frown deepened. "Are you saying this isn't the first victim to lose their head?"

"I'm not saying anything," he said, giving me a meaningful look.

"Uh-huh," I said. "And this not saying anything bit. Would that be because someone told you not to? Someone like, oh, I don't know, Deputy Bulwark?"

Rickson didn't answer. In fact, he pointedly turned his head away from me and began to whistle.

"Got it," I said. "Thanks, Rick."

"Don't thank me," he said. "Just be safe out there. Watch your six."

He held out his arm, and I rapped my knuckles against his fist. Then I turned and made my way back to the edge of the scene, ducking beneath the yellow tape. I spotted Pongo lingering nearby a pair of patrol officers, both of whom were pointedly ignoring him, and called him over, motioning him toward the car.

"We're leaving?" he asked, as he lowered himself down into the seat.

"Sure are," I said.

I dropped into the driver's seat and inserted the key into the ignition, bringing the engine to life. I left it in park and let it idle there for a moment, debating.

When it came to Pongo, I had two choices. I could cast him out, let him sink on his own and hope he didn't take any of us down with him, or I could offer him a lifeline, maybe teach him enough to keep him from ending up as just another cautionary tale. No matter which way I chose, the simple fact was that he wasn't ready to play second to a murder investigation. Not until he got his head on right. Luckily, I thought I knew how I might be able to help him with that.

"You still got that law book handy?" I asked.

He blinked, then reached into his backpack, pulling out the Massachusetts State Law Handbook and setting it atop his lap. "Sure do. I never go anywhere without it."

"Good," I said. "I need you to find me the statute for necrophilia."

"Eww," Pongo said. "Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"Uh, Sergeant, I don't think—"

I turned in my chair and made my voice deliberately harsh. "Did I ask for your opinion, Pongo?"

"Uh, no."

"Darn right I didn't," I said and pointed out the window toward the crime scene. "Right now, Walter Crosier's head is MIA, and if he's face down in some sicko's lap, then we need to find that statute so our case is airtight when we bust them. This is priority one. Do you understand?"

Pongo swallowed. "Y-yes, ma'am."

"Good," I said. "Now get to work."

"No worries," he said. "It's just over..." He flipped the pages of his book open, and his voice trailed off. "Uh, that

is... I'm certain it must be over, wait, no. It must be... Hmm."

"Problem?"

"No, ma'am," he said. "I just need a moment."

"Take your time," I said.

I shifted into drive and pulled away from the curb, flipping a quick U-turn before angling west around the edge of the Commons and turning south.

"Where are we going?" Pongo asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked. "The morgue."

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Where the Silent Ones Lie.

April 15th 1012hrs

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner was located south of downtown, in the Boston Medical Center Hospital, within easy walking distance of the infamous Methadone Mile. Technically part of the South End, the area west of the hospital was comprised mostly of working-class neighborhoods with a few restaurants and night spots scattered throughout. I parked along the edge of the curb, and killed the engine before opening my door and stepping out onto the street. Pongo glanced up from his book and made to follow me out, but I held out my hand, halting him in place.

“You find that statute yet?”

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, and after a moment, he lowered himself back down and resumed reading. I nodded and closed the door, making my way up onto the red-brick sidewalk and through the front door.

From the outside, the office blended seamlessly with the rest of the hospital, soft ivory walls with maroon doors and accents. There was a small, three-person office to the left of the doorway, the windowpane identifying it as the Massachusetts State Police Crime Scene Services Division. I bypassed it and walked across the lobby to the receptionist’s desk.

“Morning, Sue,” I said by way of greeting.

Sue Jennings Clark glanced up from her computer screen and smiled at me. A New York native who’d briefly moved to Florida before returning to the New England area, I’d first met her back in college, prior to joining the police academy. Sue had gone into government administration, and in addition to working for the Chief Medical Examiner’s office, she volunteered at several local animal shelters, including one that

rehabilitated dogs by teaching them how to swim. I didn't understand how that worked, but the reviews online suggested a high success rate.

"Chloe, how lovely to see you."

"You as well. Mind buzzing me through?"

"Not a chance in hell."

"What? Why not?"

Sue gave me a flat look and peered at me over the rim of her glasses. "I think you know why."

I did know why. "He can't seriously still be angry about that?"

"He doesn't want to see you, Chloe. You're persona non-grata."

"I know, but this is serious."

"How serious?"

I placed my hands atop the counter and leaned forward. "Very serious."

"I see. Well, in that case..."

Sue stared at me for a moment, then pointedly glanced toward the box situated along the counter. It was one of those charity boxes, the plastic kind where you can slip a dollar bill down through the lid. The picture on the back display showed a pair of dogs standing knee deep in a swimming pool.

"Oh, come on. Seriously?"

Sue nodded. "Canine life vests don't come cheap."

I started to argue, but she cocked her head to the side and I let out a defeated sigh before reaching into my pocket and drawing out my wallet.

"I only have a ten."

"That will be fine."

A low growl escaped my throat but Sue ignored me, and I stuffed my ten-dollar bill through the opening into the box. “There. You happy now?”

Sue smiled and buzzed me through. “Giving is good for the soul, Chloe. Have a blessed day.”

I shook my head and made my way through the door, taking the elevator down one floor to the main medical examiner’s office.

City officials didn’t refer to it as a morgue anymore, but it amounted to roughly the same thing. Inside it was clean, cold, filled with stainless steel gurneys and smelling strongly of disinfectant spray. Fluorescent lights shone brightly overhead, and a large bank of metal refrigerators lined the wall opposite several examination tables. The office had gone high tech over the past year, and much of the equipment used for testing now sat within arm’s reach of the tables. There were heavy-duty microscopes, centrifuge machines, distillation equipment, fingerprint analysis machines, and a chemical testing station filled with beakers containing brightly colored liquids that I couldn’t even begin to identify. There was even a section in the far corner set up for ballistic analysis, as well as a kinetic and blunt force trauma testing station lined with plastic sheeting.

Despite the addition of new equipment, it was surprisingly quiet inside, and a part of me suspected the reason had to do with last month’s attempted leprechaun bombing.

Over the past few years, researchers had begun developing different theories regarding the rise or decline of crimes in the wake of a natural disaster. Technically, there was nothing natural about the leprechaun’s attempted bombing, but the effect, much like the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013, was essentially the same.

What they’d found was that, when disaster strikes, people have an uncanny ability to pull together. A sense of

community takes form, as people struggle to support one another and protect what remains. In the wake of these events, perceived victimless crimes such as looting and fraud tend to rise, while more violent crimes, such as murder, tend to diminish. That, coupled with the fact that most medical examiners and forensic technicians preferred not to work weekends if they didn't have to, meant there was only one other person inside.

“Oh my goodness,” I said, purposefully making my voice flighty. “Is that... Mickey Carter? Bless my soul, it is.”

The medical examiner glanced up from his computer at the sound of my voice, and a low groan escaped his mouth. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “I simply must have your autograph.”

“Not you,” he moaned. “Anyone but you.”

“I know you don't mean that.”

“What do you want, Chloe?”

“I already told you,” I said. “I want that autograph, made out to me by name. After all, I've seen *both* of your movies, not to mention all five of your commercials. The diaper rash one was my favorite.”

Mickey Carter was a cautionary tale against parents looking to profit off their children. Mr. and Mrs. Carter knew from the moment they saw their darling baby that he was destined to be a star, and they spared no expense, auditioning for every role under the sun with their newborn. Clothing, toys, and yes, even the aforementioned diaper rash commercial which showed a mustached man in a lab coat running his finger along Mickey's baby bottom, had aired on television.

If that had been the end of it, maybe he could have brushed it off, but at the age of seven, Mickey had landed a starring role in an early 90s style comedy movie about a whiz-kid who

uses an old rotary telephone to save his town from an invading army of alien frog-like beings during the holidays.

Despite the ridiculousness of the premise, *Ribbity Christmas* had actually garnered mostly positive reviews, with several critics highlighting Mickey's acting as the high point. It had also, according to multiple sources, garnered him his first seven-figure paycheck.

Whether that money, if carefully invested, would have been enough to last him a lifetime, we'll never know, but it was enough to bring his home life crashing down around him. Mickey's parents immediately pulled him from school and enrolled him in acting classes full time. The effects on Mickey were predictable. Isolated and unhappy, rumors began to leak out about him throwing auditions, engaging in temper tantrums, and even one suggesting he'd developed an eating disorder. As hard as he fought, though, his parents fought harder, and two years later, he received another starring role, only this time the critics weren't nearly as kind.

Won't You be My Ribbitine received largely unfavorable reviews, with those same critics who had praised him before now highlighting the forced and stiff nature of his role. Perhaps sensing that time was running out, Mickey's parents made a last-ditch cash grab, draining his accounts and spending lavishly in an attempt to buy their way into high society. I imagine they were hoping to develop connections that could later pay dividends, but it was a desperate, foolish scheme, and it saw the family bottom out roughly ten months later. Shortly after that, Mickey's parents divorced, and he and his mom ended up moving into Dorchester and living with friends while she worked part time as a substitute teacher.

Mickey's teen years were tabloid fodder consisting of underage drinking and social drug use, most of which no one outside of the actual tabloids themselves or a few die-hard fans cared about. He'd barely passed high school, and almost immediately flunked out of college his first time through.

From there, he'd spent the next several years working low-end jobs and drinking himself numb until the day he received word that his mother had been found dead along the side of the interstate. The coroner determined that she'd died of a heart attack while driving to work, and as her life ended, Mickey's took on a new form. I was never quite sure if his mother's death had awakened something in him, giving him a glimpse of his own mortality, or if her absence merely freed him to be the man he'd wanted to be. Either way, he'd taken action, re-enrolling in college and graduating pre-med before moving on to medical school and residency, after which he'd been accepted into a forensic pathology fellowship.

He was one of the junior medical examiners, hence the unfavorable hours, but he didn't complain and was, by all accounts, a respected professional. He also wasn't a bad-looking guy. In his early thirties, he had a strong jaw and matching cheekbones, with hazel eyes and a trim figure. Unfortunately, beneath his quasi-good looks, he was sporting some pretty heavy personal flaws that prevented me from respecting him.

I'd met him during my first month on the job, and he'd been quick to invite me out to dinner. He'd picked me up, even brought me flowers, and was a perfect gentleman. For a brief moment, it had all the makings of a lovely evening. Then, halfway through our appetizers, he'd received a phone call from his fiancé.

More specifically, his very pregnant fiancée, whose water had just broke and needed a ride to the hospital.

He tried explaining away the situation the following day, but I'd more or less put it together by that point, and there was nothing much he could say to convince me otherwise. In the end, he'd settled for outright asking me if I would like to be his "Side-girl." My answering slap had knocked the veneer off his front tooth, and he'd called me some unladylike names

before heading out the door, presumably to attend to his fiancée and newborn child.

I'd wrestled with whether to tell his fiancée, but ultimately didn't have the stomach for it. Besides, keeping silent meant that I had leverage to hang over him when I needed something. Like right now, for instance.

"What do you want, Chloe?" he repeated. "I'm busy."

"So I hear," I said. "Talk to me about headless corpses."

Mickey's eyes widened, and his mouth worked soundlessly for a second. "How did you..." He shook his head. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. I don't have anything to say to you."

"Remind me again which Saks Fifth Avenue she works at?"

Mickey's face reddened, but there was a defeated look in his eyes that made me think his fiancée already knew, or at least strongly suspected, what he was up to. All it would take was a single phone call, and his bright future would evaporate into child support and alimony payments.

"You can't do that."

I drew my cellphone from my pocket and held it out in one hand. "Try me."

"I've spoken to my lawyer. He says I can sue you for damages in civil court."

"Have you seen the car I'm driving around in?" I snorted. "Do your worst."

"Darn it, Chloe."

"Corpses, Mickey," I said. "Start talking."

He shook his head and mumbled some not-nice words to himself. Then he finished whatever he was typing and the adjacent printer came to life, spitting out several sheets, which he promptly picked up and stapled together. He slipped them into a manilla folder, then motioned me to follow him. We made our way down the hall and over to the metal refrigerator

bank. He typed something into the computer, then double checked the numbers and opened the fridge, donning a pair of gloves and sliding the shelf out of the cold. The corpse was covered under a heavy cloth, and Mickey seized one end, motioning me to do the same on the other. The two of us slid it back to reveal a female figure missing her head.

I've mentioned before that corpses make me feel uneasy. Death isn't inherently pretty, or particularly dignified, and working in law enforcement, you're bound to see some horrible things. I kept my breaths shallow, suppressing my inner voice and focusing only on what I could see and quantify.

She was young, or at least youngish. She was also in fairly good shape, which made me think she might have been into sports, or maybe even a college athlete. The absence of stretch marks around the abdomen made it unlikely, but not impossible, that she had any children, and there were several smaller tattoos along her arms.

"We've had two victims so far, although the forensic team already called and said there would be a third coming in this afternoon," Mickey said. "She was the first. We're still working to identify her."

"You couldn't get a match off the fingerprints?"

He shook his head. "Came back inconclusive. Right now, detectives are looking to see if anyone matching her description has been reported missing. If that doesn't pan out, she has a couple of tattoos. We'll start calling local shops and see if anyone can identify her that way."

He took her arm and turned it so that the palm was facing upwards, revealing a trio of moons, two crescent and one full, sitting back-to-back with a dotted line running the length of her wrist and ending with the date 1692. A flash of recognition shot through me, and I swallowed and tried not to let it show on my face.

“Where was she found?”

“Magazine Beach,” he said. “Couple of early morning boaters found her out near the dock. I know they say nothing wakes you up in the morning like the smell of sea air, but I bet they’ll think twice from now on.”

I ignored him. “And the second victim. What do we know about them?”

He motioned over to his left, where a second body lay atop a gurney. The body was sealed in translucent plastic and had been laid inside a thick maroon transport bag. “Dennis Pieheart. Twenty-one years old. He’s an exchange student attending MIT. He was found less than twenty-four hours after the girl.”

“You ran fingerprints on him?”

“Yes, but we also had concurring evidence. His roommate was able to identify him.”

“Without a head?”

“Actually, the killer left his head behind.”

“Wait, what?”

Mickey shrugged. “The severed head was found alongside the corpse in a parking lot up near Cambridge. Detectives took photos of the face, which was then positively identified by his roommate as belonging to Dennis Pieheart. Finger prints confirmed that it was him.”

I frowned, considering. “Why would the killer do that?”

“Who knows?” Mickey said. “I mean, you’re talking about someone who’s going around chopping people’s heads off. I’m not sure you’re going to find a logical explanation to appease you. Maybe he only wanted a woman?”

I shook my head. “He took Walter Crosier’s head with him. There must have been a reason why he left this one.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Maybe he got interrupted, or maybe he had to flee.” I was silent for a moment, thinking. “Or maybe Dennis wasn’t his real target. Maybe he killed him out of necessity rather than desire.” I drew in a long breath, then wished I hadn’t and let it out quick. “There’s no way to know for certain, not until I have more information.”

“Well, whatever information you want from Dennis Pieheart, you’d better get it quick. We did the embalming and sutured the head yesterday. I was actually just finishing up the paperwork to have his body released.”

“Already?” I asked. “Why the rush?”

Mickey shrugged. “No idea. I’m guessing someone higher up the food chain pulled some strings.”

“How do we un-pull them?”

“*We* don’t.”

“We’ll see about that,” I said. “Who’s the body being released to?”

Mickey opened his mouth, but the elevator let out a beep, cutting off whatever he’d been about to say. A split second later, the doors opened, and a woman stepped out.

She was a plus-sized woman, but she wore it well, with a heavy bust and curves that more than filled out her apparel. Dark-skinned with hair drawn into a tight braid, she wore a professional pants-suit, along with a tactical patrol bag not unlike my own slung across one shoulder.

“Well, speak of the devil,” Mickey said. “Patience Woods, I presume?”

“That’s me,” the woman said. “You got my paperwork ready?”

“Just finished it now,” Mickey said. “All your permits are in order, and you should have no trouble getting through Customs.”

Patience sniffed. “You’d best hope I don’t, else you and I will have some words.”

“Hold on a second,” I said. “Ms. Woods, I’m Sergeant Chloe Mayfield with the Boston Police Department. I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding.”

Patience’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of misunderstanding?”

“We’re not going to be able to release the body to you at this particular time.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“Chloe, what are you doing?” Mickey asked. “The chief medical examiner already signed all the paperwork. Legally speaking, she’s now the caretaker of this body.”

“And I’m on the five o’clock flight out of here,” Patience said.

“You’ll need to make other arrangements,” I said.

“Fat chance,” she said. “Do you have any idea how much paperwork is required to transport a body across international lines? I can’t just book another flight.”

“Chloe, she’s right,” Mickey said. “Unless you’ve got some concrete reason why the body can’t be released, my hands are tied.”

“Concrete like there’s someone out there chopping people’s heads off? This body may hold a clue to discovering whoever’s behind it.”

“That body has a name,” Patience said. “It’s Dennis. He was a good boy, a smart boy, and his momma’s waiting for him back home. Now, if you’ll kindly step aside, I have a plane to catch.”

She seized the edge of the gurney and started to push. She only made it two steps before I physically blocked her, seizing the opposite side and forcing her to a halt.

“I understand his mother’s desire to have her son returned to her, and she’ll have him,” I said. “When the time is right.”

“The time is right now,” Patience said. “So unless you want to get run over, I suggest you step aside.”

In a battle of pure brute strength, I suspected Patience would have flattened me without much trouble, but in this case, the body of Dennis Pieheart actually helped me. She couldn’t rightly push him along and battle against me at the same time.

“Girl, you’d best step off before I get angry,” Patience said, gritting her teeth and shoving.

I dug my feet in and shoved back just as hard. “No, you step off. Unless you want to find yourself sitting in a jail cell facing an obstruction of justice charge.”

“Is that so?” Patience asked. “You really want to go that route? Cause you ain’t the only one with a badge around here.” She swept aside her jacket and lifted a chain necklace out from between her considerable cleavage. Fastened along the end was a police badge. Or at least I thought it was. I’d not seen one like it before. A seven-pointed star with a monarchy crown on top, I could just make out the words Maidstone Police Force and Constable circling the center.

“What the hell is a constable?” I asked. “Is that like a meter maid?”

“You’d best hope so,” Patience said. “Cause I’m about to park this here gurney right on your skinny face.”

“Bring it on, you overblown buffalo.”

“Oh, girl. Now you done gone and brought out my temper. You’re about to find out just how—”

I never got to find out what she was going to do, because at that moment, an explosion detonated in the distance, causing the entire building to shake. A split second later, the lights went out, casting the room into darkness.

A cold, still silence settled over the medical office, which suddenly felt a whole heck of a lot more like a morgue than it had moments before. I couldn't ignore the fact that I was standing in the pitch-black dark with at least two bodies, one of whom was still missing her head, and no way to navigate out of here without risk of bumping up against them, which, I'm not ashamed to say, was a bit more than I'd bargained for.

"Uh, was that you?" I asked, just to break the silence.

"Heck no," Patience said as she released her grip on the gurney. "I'm not liking this at all."

"Yeah, me neither," I said and straightened. "Mickey?"

I heard him gulp from somewhere off to my left. "Not me."

"Perfect," I said. "Alright then. Who's got a flashlight?"

There was a long moment's hesitation, then a light appeared, revealing Mickey, still standing where I'd last seen him. Patience's phone came to life a moment later as she stepped around the side of the gurney.

"Ya'll don't have backup generators or something?" Patience asked.

"We do," Mickey said. "I guess it's not working."

"Maybe," I said, as the hairs along the back of my neck rose to attention. "Or maybe someone disabled them."

"You mean on purpose?" Mickey asked. "Who would want to do something like that?"

Patience snorted. "I could think of at least one person."

"Wait, you're talking about me?" I asked.

"Well, why not?" she said. "No power means the elevators won't work. It's not like I can push Dennis up the stairs."

"Easy, meter maid," I said. "I didn't even know you were coming until just a few minutes ago. I haven't touched the power."

“Well, if not you, then who?”

I opened my mouth to tell her that I didn't have the foggiest clue who might have wanted to cut the power, but at that moment, a figure emerged from around the corner.

He stood a shade over five feet tall, dressed in dark frontiersman leather and a high collared dress coat that extended down to just below the knees. His breeches were narrow and his dressage riding boots extended up to his calf, spurs clicking against the floor as he walked. Thick leather gloves clutched a curved cavalry saber with a raven-head pommel, and an ivory silk cravat neckcloth extended up to where his head should have sat.

I say *should have* because he didn't have one.

He strode forward, and my mind struggled to recognize what I was actually seeing. Try as I might to make sense of it, I couldn't come to any other conclusion than there was a headless man in front of me.

Or, more accurately judging from the footwear, a Headless Horseman.

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A Horseman Comes Calling.

April 15th 1025hrs

I'd be lying if I said this was the first time I'd ever been threatened by someone wielding a sword. Point of fact, I'd been front and center at a duel between a renowned vampire hunter and a couple of little ninja swans who wanted to carve me up like a Christmas goose just last month. But this was one of those times when experience didn't make the present moment any less terrifying, and I struggled to work some moisture back into my mouth as the Headless Horseman strode forward.

He walked with a smooth, deadly gait, not at all like the movies tended to depict him. There was no blind stumbling or bumbling around. Instead, he flowed forward like liquid shadow, crossing the distance and brandishing his saber with a twist of his wrist.

Mickey screamed.

It was a high-pitched scream, worthy of any 1980s horror classic, and the sudden force of it took us all by surprise, and was enough to startle me back into action.

I turned and drew my pistol from its holster, adopting a shooter's stance and aligning my sights on the Horseman's chest.

"Stop right there!" I snapped, my voice coming out steady despite the fact that my heart was beating a million miles per minute in my chest. "Drop the sword, turn around and place your hands on your..."

You can probably see why I didn't bother to finish that sentence. The Horseman had no head to place his hands on, or ears to hear my commands, for that matter. Regardless, it didn't matter much, because he kept coming, flowing across

the office like something born from a nightmare, gathering the shadows around him as he swept toward us.

I fired three times, the gun's report echoing through the room. My aim was true, and the bullets impacted against the Horseman's chest, blasting ragged holes in his clothing and not much else. A cold realization came over me as he closed the last few feet, disregarding my pistol as if it were a squirt gun and sweeping his blade around in a wide arc.

I had a moment's clarity to realize what was coming, followed by the sudden realization that I wasn't going to be fast enough to dodge it. Kevlar vests are useful for small arm's fire, but they're not so great against cavalry swords, and they do absolutely nothing to protect one's neck. Fear swept through me, and I took what I was pretty sure was going to be my last breath and braced myself for impact.

Patience seized the back of my collar and pulled me clear a split second before the Horseman's blade slashed through the space in front of my throat. Had she been a second slower, it would have been game over for me. I tried not to picture it, but my mind forced me to imagine a brief flash of fire before the world tilted and fell. Instead, the blade swept past my face as I stumbled back, catching my foot on the edge of the gurney and crashing down onto my backside.

Patience screamed, but unlike Mickey, hers was one of anger and challenge. She reached into her patrol bag and seized a nightstick, bringing it around and throwing herself forward. She and the Horseman came together with a heavy *crash*, sparks erupting as metal struck metal. The Horseman was faster, more skillful, with a longer reach and a longer weapon, but Patience had heart, and she came on like a pit-bull, slipping inside his guard and driving him back several steps before he caught his bearings.

The two traded blows, and then Patience faked low and came high, whipping the nightstick down towards the headsman's form. Unfortunately, fighting an enemy without a

head isn't as easy as it sounds. There are subtle clues, little tells like a brief flickering of the eye or a slipped gaze that can give hint to their intentions. Patience didn't have any of that, and the lack of it adversely affected her ability to judge the distance between them. As the blow came down, the Horseman slipped beneath her arm and bounced back up with serpentine grace. Her blow caught only air, and she stumbled forward as the Horseman brought his leg around in a sweeping kick. His leather boot caught her just below the calf and knocked her feet out from under her. She crashed down hard, striking the floor with a heavy *thump* and remained still.

The Horseman rotated around and came toward us. Mickey let out another ear-piercing scream, and turned to flee, but the Horseman was faster. As Mickey began to run, he struck the edge of the gurney and sent it crashing into the medical examiner's back. Mickey's scream cut off with a pained cry, and he went down in a heap, skidding across the floor as the gurney tilted and it crashed onto its side, spilling the plastic wrapped remains of Dennis Pieheart onto the floor.

The Horseman bounded over the gurney in a single leap and came up behind Mickey, hovering over him the way a lion would its prey. A low whimper escaped the medical examiner's mouth as he began crawling across the floor.

Something about the sound he made stirred something inside of me, reminding me of my oath to defend the citizens of Boston, no matter how crummy they might treat their fiancée. I struggled up to one knee and brought my pistol to bear, aligning my sights on the Horseman's back. I hesitated and then lowered my aim down toward the space behind his knee. The Horseman's sword arm came up, and he paused, wanting the medical examiner to see the blade and to know what was coming.

I fired, and the Horseman's leg buckled. His knee didn't burst the way Bloodcuddles had, but whatever magic or sorcery he'd employed to prevent the bullet from penetrating

evidently couldn't disperse the entirety of the kinetic force. He crashed to one knee, and I fired twice more. The next bullet hit him in the low back, and the one after that struck him right in the keister. The combined force sent him tumbling... I was going to say head over heels, but that wasn't really applicable in this case. Regardless, he careened forward, dropped his shoulder and came up into a low crouch before darting right. He passed out of the flashlight's beam and disappeared into the darkness.

"Up," I breathed, my voice coming out a mere whisper before I repeated myself, louder this time. "Get up!"

My inner drill sergeant forced me to my feet, and I stumbled three steps over to where Mickey lay. I seized his arm, and pulled him up to his feet, dragging him along behind me as I crossed the floor and repeated the same with Patience.

"Stupid headless creep," Patience muttered as she regained her feet. She was gripping her nightstick, but her hands were shaking.

"How do we get out of here?" I asked Mickey. With the power out, the elevators would be offline.

His mouth worked soundlessly for a moment before he was able to answer. "Stairs. West corner of the building."

I nodded and removed the magazine from my pistol, inserting a fresh one in its place. "I'm on point. Patience, rear guard. Mickey, you hold the flashlights. Keep us covered."

Mickey nodded and accepted Patience's cell phone before raising his arms and illuminating our path in front and behind. I took a deep breath, then I started forward, keeping my movements slow and steady as we passed by the first victim, as well as Dennis Pieheart's fallen form.

"You think he came back for Dennis?" Patience asked, her voice quavering. I knew how she felt. The initial surge of adrenaline was fading, slowly seeping away and being replaced by fear. "For his... you know."

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But whatever he’s here for, our best bet is to fall back and regroup.”

That part was true. Trying to fight the Horseman down here, in the dark, was a loser’s bet. We needed to regroup and come back, preferably with heavier weapons and men skilled in their use. Boston’s Special Tactical Operations Team was one of the best in the country, and I’d be interested to see if the Horseman’s perceived indestructibility applied to heavier caliber ammunition.

We crept through the darkness, the cell phone spotlights guiding our path as we came around the corner. Twice I thought I saw movement among the shadows and laboratory equipment, but by the time Mickey swung the phone in that direction, it was gone. I couldn’t be sure if the Horseman was just that fast or if I was imagining it. Either way, the sooner we were out of here, the better.

We reached the end of the hall and drew within sight of the stairway door. I felt something flutter in my chest and motioned us forward toward the doorway. Six steps later, I caught wind of a low, hissing noise coming from the darkness to my left, and a flash of movement flickered in the corner of my eye.

“Watch out!” I screamed and dropped.

Patience and Mickey followed my example as a heavy gurney came hurtling out of the darkness. It must have weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of seventy pounds, but the Horseman tossed it as if it were a frisbee. It swept through the space above our heads and crashed to the floor, hitting with a heavy racket as it spun and came to rest near the wall directly in front of the stairway door.

I snapped back up to my knees, the echo of the metal striking the cement still lingering in the air, along with something else. That same hissing noise I’d noted a moment before. I could hear it, just on the edge of perception, like an

insect buzzing near your head. I asked myself what could make a sound like that, and the answer sent tendrils of fear running through my chest.

“Back!” I screamed. “Fall back!”

Patience didn't hesitate. She turned and seized Mickey's arm, pulling him along with her. I followed in their footsteps, the three of us making it a handful of steps before a heavy cannister sailed out of the darkness. Its top had been unscrewed, and there was a soaked rag jammed into its opening. Orange chemicals dripped from its edge, leaving a trail that ended when it hit the wall and burst into flames. Fire erupted as chemicals blew through the breach in the cannister's side, blazing liquid bursting out like a volcano to coat the walls and floor.

The sudden eruption of heat and light washed over us, casting us back into a disorientated frenzy. I turned and struggled up to my feet, seizing Mickey and Patience. The three of us clung to one another as the smoke and heat herded us back around the corner toward where the elevators stood.

I don't know if it was luck, karma, or just good fortune, but the entire building suddenly shook, and the emergency lights flickered to life, the elevator awakening with a gentle hum as red emergency lights filled the office and revealed the Horseman.

He swept in from off to our right. Patience was closest to him, and the Horseman backhanded her across the face, snapping her head around and sending her crumpling to the floor. Mickey started to turn, intending to run, but the Horseman was faster, and he drove his boot into the medical examiner's chest, kicking him several feet back into the wall. Mickey rebounded and dropped to his knees, clutching his midsection and curling into a ball.

I turned and raised my pistol, but my reflexes got the best of me, and I made a stupid mistake, bringing the barrel up and

aiming right where the Horseman's head should have been. It only took me a split-second to realize my misstep, but it was enough.

The Horseman's sword flashed, and the flat of the blade struck the underside of my hand. Fire flashed up my arm, and a pained cry escaped my lips as my pistol was torn free of my suddenly numb fingers. It flew off into the darkness, clattering down somewhere to my left. I didn't have time to search for it, because the Horseman's other hand shot forward and seized me around the neck.

He jerked me forward and lifted me into the air, leaving my feet dangling off the floor. His grip was like an iron vice cutting off my airway, and I beat my fist against his arm, feeling my knuckles dig into the heavy muscles beneath but otherwise doing no damage. Seconds passed, and the lack of air began to take its toll. My arms weakened, and dark spots appeared along the edge of my vision, closing in rapidly as the world began to fade.

I thought the *pinging* sound of the elevator when it touched down was just my imagination, but a second later the doors slid open and fluorescent light spilled out, illuminating my struggling form as well as the five people standing inside the elevator.

Three of them were dressed like old world colonial soldiers. Blue jackets with tricorn hats, breeches and knee-high socks. They bore antiquated rifles appropriate to the late 1700s, and raised them to their shoulders as if they knew how to use them.

The fourth man stood no higher than my chest, dressed in a leather hunting shirt with matching socks and belted shoes. He wore a lopsided admiral's hat atop his head, brown curls spilling out from the bottom, and sea-blue eyes widened at the sight of us.

“Sons of Liberty!” he snapped, his voice carrying through the room. “Fire!”

Three blasts sounded in quick succession, trails of smoke rising from the barrels as a trio of musket balls slapped into the Horseman’s torso.

And did absolutely nothing.

Whatever magic the Horseman employed continued to hold, and he turned to face them, his form shimmering and causing the shadows near him to quiver. He peered at them, metaphorically speaking because... well, you know, and a tremor of uncertainty passed through the soldiers as they lowered their rifles.

“Hmm,” Titus Brogart said. “That’s unfortunate. Very well then. Sons of Liberty, mount bayonets!”

The Sons of Liberty drew up their weapons, sliding the bayonets onto their rifle’s end and securing them in place before stepping out of the elevator. They spread out into a half circle, rifles held low, and the Horseman remained still for a long moment before he tossed me gracelessly to the side. I hit hard and rolled twice, grinding to a halt just as the first soldier darted forward.

He jabbed with his bayonet, but the Horseman knocked it aside with contemptuous ease and slammed his pommel across the man’s jaw. The soldier stiffened and crashed to the floor, separated entirely from his senses.

The second soldier, upon seeing his comrade fall, screamed and raced forward, perhaps intending to bulldoze the Horseman, but he was having none of it.

The Horseman swept his sword around, and the blade flashed as it caught the second soldier’s face, shaving a finger digit’s worth of flesh from his nose. The soldier jerked back and tried to halt his charge, but it was too late. His momentum carried him forward into the Horseman’s waiting grasp. He seized the soldier by the neck, hauled him off his feet, and then

slammed him down onto the floor. The back of the soldier's head struck the floor, and his body went limp, his eyes rolling up into his skull as he joined his incapacitated comrade.

The third soldier attempted a more cautious attack, wielding his rifle and the attached bayonet like a spear, but that only delayed the inevitable by a handful of seconds. The Horseman was too fast, too skilled, and he slipped past the soldier's guard and drove his knee into the man's midsection, slamming the pommel against the side of his head and sending him unconscious to the floor.

"Hmm," Titus Broggart said from the elevator. "Well, this has certainly taken an unexpected turn. Very well then, let's have at it." He rolled his shoulders and drew out his weapon, a hand-carved hunting knife. He held it blade down and set his feet, adopting a fighting stance that, in other circumstances, might have been comical. Right now, though, it just made me scared for him. Luckily, my fears were misplaced.

The fifth figure in the elevator reached out and laid a gentle hand along his shoulder, softly ushering him aside before she stepped out. A quick glance would have placed her in her early eighties, dressed in a light blue gown with a sun-yellow shawl draped around her shoulders and a seashell necklace on her chest, its silver body seemingly absorbing the light and casting it back out in front of her. She moved gingerly, clutching a stainless-steel walker with leather-bound grips as she cleared the elevator and took an additional three steps before she twisted the walker's rightmost handle. It let out a metallic *click*, and she lifted the leather grip into the air, revealing the ornate pommel and slim-bladed rapier hidden inside.

"Well, come along then, young man," Ethel Le Fleur said to the Horseman. "I don't have all day."

The Horseman regarded her, but unlike the soldiers, his faceless gaze didn't seem to penetrate her calm. In fact, the corner of her mouth curled up a fraction of an inch into an impish grin.

It could have been my imagination, or the fact that I'd just been choked to the point of unconsciousness, but I swear I saw the shadows curl around the Horseman, tendrils of darkness dancing along the edges of his person, whispered midnight weaves extending out toward Ethel, who regarded them calmly, trusting to the silver light emanating from her amulet to hold them at bay. The sight of that light sent a tremor through me, and I suddenly felt very young, and very small.

Perhaps the Horseman felt it too, because he launched himself forward, swinging his blade at an upward angle and striking with savage fury. Ethel brought her blade around to meet him, and the swords came together with a clash of steel, their echo ringing through the air as they struck, retreated, and struck again.

The Horseman took the offensive, his footwork carrying him in and out of range, each movement coinciding perfectly with his strikes. Ethel, by comparison, hardly moved her feet at all. She held her ground and wielded her blade with a skill the likes of which I'd never seen. Her blade was a blur, parrying aside the Horseman's attacks, one after the other. It didn't matter from which angle he came, or how swiftly he closed the distance. Again and again, she cast his blade aside, her counterstrokes masterful and precise, sending the Horseman stumbling back. Despite his lack of a head, the Horseman realized what was happening, and he doubled-down on his strikes, putting more force into each blow, likely hoping to shatter Ethel's sword or, more likely, her arm.

Thankfully, whatever supernatural strength the Horseman possessed proved no match for Ethel Le Fleur. Rather than tiring, her strikes became even more precise, her movements sharper, crisper, and twice her blade snapped forward, the tip of her sword piercing the Horseman's jacket and disappearing into the flesh, or darkness as it seemed, beneath.

"Well, there's certainly no denying you've got talent," Ethel said. "But try it with less flash. Stick to the basics, young

man. Always the basics. Come now, with me. 1... 2... 3... 1... 2... 3..." Their swords fell into rhythm together, and Ethel let out a giddy laugh. "There now, see? Just lovely."

I'm not sure if the Horseman finally realized he was outmatched, or if he couldn't stand being referred to as lovely by a woman in her eighties, but he jerked back with a flourish of his coat and took off running in the opposite direction. He disappeared around the corner, and Ethel watched him go, clicking her tongue at his retreating form.

"Such a pity," she said. "Men and their fragile egos."

"You think that was a man?" Titus asked as he emerged from the elevator. "I'd put my money on a revenant myself."

"Perhaps," Ethel said.

"Uh, excuse me?" I asked. "What in the heck are the two of you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious, dear?" Ethel asked, flashing me a grandmotherly smile. "We came to rescue you."

"No doubt you'll wish to thank us by purchasing copious amounts of alcohol, once we return to the safety of The Oyster House," Titus added.

"Little early for drinking," I said. "Besides, I've got some questions, starting with who, or better said what, was that thing?"

"A revenant," Titus said quickly. "No doubt recently escaped from the depths of Hell in order to—"

"Perhaps we could shelve the explanations for now," Ethel said, lightly touching his shoulder. "It's best we leave this place."

"Oh, uh, yes, of course," Titus said.

He stepped forward and began to see to his men. Over the next few minutes, they all regained consciousness, even the one who'd lost half his nose. The five of them shuffled back

into the elevator, along with Mickey. Titus remained in the open doorway, running a quick headcount before letting out a satisfied grunt.

“All present and accounted for,” he said.

“Not all of us,” Patience said from inside the examiner’s office.

I glanced back and found her standing beside the upturned gurney; her face ashen, her eyes haunted.

“Who’s missing?” Titus asked.

Patience’s eyes met my own. “Dennis Pieheart. The Horseman took his body.”

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An Unexpected Pairing. April 15th 1045hrs

The chemical fire, for all its intensity, burned out quickly once Patience and I employed the nearby extinguishers, dousing the lingering embers and the surrounding area. Afterward, we discarded the extinguishers and joined the others in the elevator, taking it up to the ground floor and making our way out through the now-empty lobby. Once we reached the street, I was surprised to find the adjacent hospital was crawling like a kicked beehive.

Emergency services vehicles were everywhere, including half a dozen department squad cars, as well as two firetrucks, with approaching sirens suggesting there were more on the way. People were mingling about outside, a mixed crowd of civilians, hospital patients, and medical staff. Some of the nurses were moving along the rows, handing out blankets, while workers from the coffee shop across the street moved along distributing drinks.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

“Trouble,” Titus said. “Of the worst sort.”

I glanced at him. “Meaning what?”

He shook his head. “Not here.”

He motioned with his hand, and he, Ethel and the Sons of Liberty soldiers made their way to a van parked alongside the curb. They opened the side door to reveal an antique cannon in the back and piled inside, bringing their muskets in at an angle. One of the soldiers assisted Ethel into the passenger’s seat, then made his way around to the driver’s seat. Titus, for all his seniority, climbed into the backseat alongside the aforementioned cannon.

“Meet us at the Oyster House, and be quick!” Titus said before sliding the door shut.

I watched them pull away from the curb and head off down the street, noting my own vehicle in the process. Pongo stood beside the open passenger's door, watching the scene at the hospital unfold with a stunned look on his face. I made my way over and tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention.

"Holding down the fort?" I asked.

Pongo turned, and his eyes widened at the sight of me. "Sergeant, my gosh, what happened to you?"

"I got in a fight," I said and tried not to wince. Now that the adrenaline had faded, I was feeling the aches and pains, and was reasonably certain that I would soon be sporting heavy bruising along my throat. "What's all this?"

"You don't know?"

My look must have conveyed that I wouldn't be asking if I did, and Pongo flushed and cleared his throat. "Right, sorry. Someone set off a bomb inside the hospital."

"A *bomb*?"

"A little one," he clarified. "More of a smoke bomb, really. It detonated in the lobby and sent everyone panicking. No one was hurt in the initial explosion, but some people got trampled in the ensuing chaos. At least one police officer was taken out on a stretcher, and uniformed officers are still trying to evacuate the hospital. I think they're trying to get a head count or something, because I heard one of the officers mention that some of the patients are missing."

"Missing as in they might have been taken hostage?"

He shook his head. "I think they just weren't in their rooms."

"Did the bomb cause the power outage?"

Pongo blinked. "There was a power outage?"

"Yeah."

“I’m not sure about that,” he said. “I’ve been here by the car.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Alright then, let’s get moving.”

“Wait, uh, that is, shouldn’t we offer to help or something?”

I shook my head and made my way around to the driver’s side. “By now, dispatch has already called in the Emergency Response Division and the Bomb Squad. They’ll have their own procedures for how to coordinate the evacuation of the hospital. We’d only be in the way.”

Technically, that was true, but there was a little more to it than that. If we stayed, it was possible we could lend a hand, but more likely we’d be snatched up by one of the brass and assigned to a nearby intersection. I had nothing against directing traffic, but given what I’d just been through, I felt confident that we had more important things to do. Besides, I wanted to hear what Titus had to say about the Headless Horseman. A shiver went through me at the memory of the shadows coalescing around him, extending out like monstrous tendrils as he flowed across the floor. The more cynical part of me knew that I never would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it for myself, but now that I had, I desperately wanted answers.

Pongo nodded and dropped back into the passenger’s seat as I made my way around the vehicle. I dropped into the driver’s seat, and Pongo started to close the door, but Patience appeared and caught it with her hand.

“Move over, small fry,” she said. “Patience doesn’t do backseats. Not unless we’re doing something a heck of a lot more interesting than police work.”

Pongo gulped and slid over the center console and into the backseat, fastening his seatbelt as Patience lowered herself down into the chair beside me.

“Uh, excuse me. What do you think you’re doing?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asked. “I’m joining your little investigation. Consider me on loan from Maidstone.”

“Uh-uh,” I said. “No way.”

“Yes way.” She turned in her seat. “Listen, girl—”

“My name is Chloe. Not girl.”

“Chloe,” she said. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way, but one way or another, Patience is going to get what she wants.”

“Hard way,” I said. “Definitely the hard way.”

The corner of her mouth flicked up into a smile. “I thought you might say that. You’ve been on the job what, two or three years?”

“Coming up on five.”

“Five is good,” she said. “I’m going on seven myself, and a few more before that in Chatham. Point is, I’ve accrued some favors in my time, and I’m not above cashing every one of them in if need be to get to the bottom of this.”

“Go for it,” I said. “I’ve got a few favors of my own.”

That last part was pure bluff, but even if Patience believed me, she didn’t let it deter her. “There are favors and then there are *favors*,” she said. “Trust me, girl, I’ve been through things you can’t even imagine. A couple of phone calls from me and I’ll have the chief of police himself driving me around.”

“Try me,” I said. “In case you didn’t hear, I saved the city from a leprechaun bombing just last month.”

Patience snorted. “That’s small time. I once got kidnapped by a voodoo priest-slash-meth-dealer looking to harvest souls with his twisted cult.”

“Five months before that, I saved the city from an imaginary sea-monster and his bay-spurned cultists.”

“I was part of the team that confronted Lord Hale’s monster.”

“I went head-to-head with a trio of witches inside a subway car.”

“I recently infiltrated the Vampires of Nether Darkness in order to catch a group of vampire slayers and bring an end to a LARP war.”

“I... don’t know what any of that means.”

Patience shrugged. “Picture a bunch of vampire wannabe’s staking each other out.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I caught the mayor in bed with her teenage lover.”

Patience wrinkled her nose. “How did that earn you any favors?”

“It didn’t,” I said.

Patience smiled and held up her hand.

I stared at her for a long moment, then snorted and turned my face away. They say you can tell a lot about a person based on your first impression, and Patience might have been on the mouthy side, but she didn’t strike me as a liar. If she said she had enough pull to get in on my investigation, then she meant it. I could fight her offer to help simply for the sake of fighting, or I could save my strength and accept the inevitable. And heck, who knows? Maybe she could actually help.

Most of my cases can be explained by employing a dose of skepticism and some simple logic. This Horseman, though, he was like nothing I’d ever encountered before. If I went up against him again, an eventuality that seemed likely given the circumstances, then I might be grateful to have someone like Patience at my side.

Lord knows Pongo’s track record when it came to violence wasn’t doing anything to reassure me. I sighed and inserted

my key into the ignition before bringing the engine to life.

“Alright, you’re in,” I said. “Welcome to Blue Moon.”

Patience’s head snapped around so quickly that I thought she’d misheard me, but then something clicked in her head and she started to laugh, hysterical giggles spilling out of her as we pulled away from the curb.

“What,” I said, “is so darn funny?”

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Between the Blue Moons. April 15th 1057hrs

“And they’re just staring at one another, and hers was *so much bigger*,” Patience said. “Like three times the size. We’re talking full on German kielbasa versus a cocktail weenie. And I couldn’t help it. I just burst out laughing, right there, dressed in only my birthday suit, with everyone’s parts flapping in the wind.”

Patience punctuated her story with a howling roar. In the backseat, Pongo let out an unsure laugh, and even I felt the corner of my mouth rise up into a smile. I’d read the official *In the Doodoo with Voodoo* case file report a while back, but Amanda had evidently left out a few things, or maybe Jane had gone back later and edited it for modesty’s sake. Either way, reading about their cases was different from hearing about it firsthand. I suddenly got the feeling that there were a lot of happenstances that didn’t quite make it onto the official report.

“Oh Lordy, it’s been a wild ride these past two years,” Patience said, wiping at her eyes.

“Sounds like it,” I said. “Given all you’ve been through, I’m surprised you never joined up.”

“What, with Blue Moon?” she asked. “I thought about it a few times. Tempest is alright, for a stiff, and it would be good working with Amanda again, but the timing never felt quite right. Plus, I do better with some structure, and besides, I can do plenty of good right where I am.”

“Is that how you ended up here?”

“You mean bringing Dennis’s remains back across the pond?”

“Yeah.”

Patience's voice got quiet, and her face turned inward. "No, this is personal. I grew up with his momma. We've been through some hard times together, but we made it through. She went into government work, got herself a job clerking down at the courthouse right about the time I joined the police department. Couple years ago, her health started to slip. It was little things at first, but it got worse, and these days, well, she can't get around like she once did." She was silent for a long moment. "That woman gave everything she had to make sure Dennis had a chance to succeed, and she always believed that would start with proper schooling. So when this whole exchange program came up, she took out a second mortgage on her home and told him to pack his things. She was so proud of the man he was going to be."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Yeah," Patience said. "Me too. Reminds me of something my first captain said to me, just after I'd joined the force. He said, 'Patience, bad things happen to good people, and you can't afford to let it weigh you down.'"

"Seems I might have heard that a time or two myself. Doesn't always work though, does it?"

"No," Patience said. "It sure doesn't."

Things got quiet in the car after that, and no one said anything until we reached the Union Oyster House. I parked alongside the curb on the opposite side of the street and exited the vehicle, holding out my hand as Pongo went to follow me.

"Whoa there," I said. "How's that research coming?"

Pongo hesitated. "Actually, Sergeant, I wanted to talk to you about that. I've found the statutes for prostitution, polygamy, lewd and lascivious behavior, unnatural acts, indecent exposure, adultery, sodomy, blasphemy, and displaying an albino in public for the purposes of sex, but I can't find anything about necrophilia. I think there might be a misprint in my book."

“You want to borrow mine?” I asked, and motioned toward my patrol bag.

“Oh, uh, yeah, thanks,” Pongo said, his voice crestfallen as he lowered himself back down into the seat.

“Happy reading,” I said, and closed the door.

I made my way around the vehicle, falling into step beside Patience as we made our way across the street.

She glanced back over her shoulder, then turned to me. “Why are you doing him like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like that,” she said. “Leaving him in the car like an unwanted puppy.”

“Trust me,” I said. “It’s for his own good.”

“How so?”

“He’s not ready for the Horseman.”

She snorted. “Are any of us?”

“No,” I admitted. “But it goes deeper with Pongo. He still thinks every problem can be solved with a book.”

“Ah,” Patience said, nodding. “I’ve seen a few of those during my time.”

“How did it work out?”

“Those that figured it out quick enough did okay. Those that couldn’t washed out, or ended up back in law school.” She made a face. “A few managed to slip through the cracks. One of them ended up as my boss.”

“That can’t be fun.”

Patience shook her head and exhaled. “Who are these people we’re going to see?”

“Titus Broggart and the Sons of Liberty,” I said. “Titus is... well, he’s a drunk quite frankly, or at least seems to be, most

of the time. But he has his finger on the pulse of the supernatural community, and somehow, he's managed to convince a bunch of other people to go along with him."

"And they call themselves the Sons of Liberty?"

I nodded. "Best I can tell, they started out as a militia force looking to advance colonist's legal rights back in the mid-1700s. Rumor is they led a desperate, last-ditch defense of the city in 1776, when a leviathan appeared and attacked from the harbor."

"A what now?"

"A big sea monster," I said. "And some drowned sailors it had mentally enslaved."

"Chloe, I think that Horseman may have hit you harder than we thought."

I waved my hand. "I'm not saying I believe it. I'm saying *they* believe it. According to them, the whole Boston Tea Party was just a front for the sea battle that ensued."

"That was a long time ago. What about now?"

I shrugged. "Their present-day incarnation started out as a group of re-enactors, but they stepped up last year when a group of bay-spurned cultists went on a murderous rampage. Ever since then, they've made it their personal mission to protect the city from supernatural threats."

"How's it going?"

"About as well as can be expected," I said. "They've got a lot to learn, but they're enthusiastic, and their disguises allow them to traverse the city with relative ease. It never even occurs to most of the people who see them that their weapons could actually be used."

"Huh," Patience said.

"It's not perfect," I admitted. "But allies have been few and far between, and right now, they're the best I have."

“Alright then,” Patience said. “What about the lady?”

“Huh?”

“You know,” Patience said. She waved her arms, mimicking a sword-fight. “Lady Lancelot.”

“Oh, Ethel,” I said. “She, uh, well, she claims to be a time-traveling fencer from the eighteenth century who was sucked into a time warp while slaying the leviathan. Oh, and her sword was blessed by the Pope.”

Patience stared at me and blinked, once, very slowly.

“She’s sweet enough,” I said. “And she has a whole grandmotherly vibe about her.”

“Well, okay then,” Patience said and gave herself a shake. “Let’s go see what they have to say.”

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Ye Olde Union Oyster House.

April 15th 1115hrs

Located across from City Hall, the Union Oyster House was the oldest restaurant in Boston. Four stories tall, with a red-brick exterior and delicate awnings shadowing the sidewalks running along its foundation, there were no municipal records detailing when the restaurant had first been erected, but historians all agreed that it had served as the headquarters for Ebenezer Hancock, the first paymaster of the Continental Army, in 1775, and was a well-frequented establishment of many high-ranking continental army and political figures during the time, including George Washington, John Adams, and King Louis Phillippe I of France during the time he'd been deposed.

Its affinity for notable figures had continued through the years, and the present-day location was known to regularly cater to Boston's elite, including celebrities, athletes, politicians, visiting dignitaries and heads of state.

I flashed my badge to the doorman, who nodded and held the door open to allow us entry. Inside, the ground floor was already catering to the early lunch crowd, a mixture of locals and out-of-town visitors gathered around the U-shaped bar. The sounds of oysters being shucked punctuated every conversation, and the air smelled strongly of butter, lemon, horseradish and salt. Waitresses in black t-shirts moved swiftly about the narrow corridors, ducking the low ceilings and ferrying large bowls of chowder to their respective patrons.

Patience and I made our way through the throng and up the stairs to the second floor. There was a wooden sign hanging along the door with an old-fashioned nail and hemp rope. The last time I'd seen it, it said merely that they were **Temporarily Closed**. Now it read:

“If ye love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude than the animating contest of freedom—go from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you.” – Samuel Adams

I grunted and pushed through the doorway into the Sons of Liberty’s headquarters. The last time I’d been here, it had felt like something out of a nightmare. Costumed drunkards filled every corner, pedaling their wares and carnival tricks while wearing outfits that were only distantly recognizable as having belonged to the American Revolution time period. Half-eaten plates of food lay strewn about, and booze lined every available surface, spilling down the tables and coalescing into large puddles along the floor. The sheer force of the depravity had nearly overwhelmed me, the stink of spilled wine and sour breath leaving me nauseous.

Things had changed over the past five months. It was still crowded inside. I counted better than three dozen people, most of them dressed in historical regalia that included blue jackets and tricorne hats for the men, and long skirts and linen bonnets for the women. Those men who didn’t readily identify as soldiers had donned the attire of cobblers, blacksmiths, and workmen with their sleeves rolled halfway up their forearms. Gone were the carnival aspects of their attire, along with the soothsayers, tarot card readers, fraudsters and dice cheats.

There was food, but it was lined against the far wall, situated atop a long table in a buffet style setting. There were fried fish and shrimp, oysters of course, as well as chowder, biscuits and ears of corn simmering in red broth. A lone waitress weaved among the tables, her face familiar, although I didn’t know her name. She balanced a large serving tray in one hand, clearing mugs and delivering new ones with well-practiced fluidity.

Peering around, I doubted anyone would ever mistake the Sons of Liberty headquarters as an upscale establishment, but there was an order to the chaos now, suggesting that the

patrons had only needed a thread of common purpose to drag them up from their cesspool of debauchery into something resembling a cohesive faction.

Speaking of the patrons, most of them were gathered in a loose circle around a trio of round tables which had been pushed haphazardly together and were currently supporting a trio of familiar looking soldiers in the midst of addressing their peers.

“And the Horseman leaped down from his demon steed and he thrust his sword, as black a blade as you’ve ever seen, straight toward my heart,” the lead soldier said, projecting his voice. “I knew in that moment that death had come for us, but I looked to my brothers on either side and I said ‘Not today, lads.’ And I swung my rifle around and caught the Horseman’s blade on the edge of my bayonet, casting it aside.”

A low gasp echoed from the crowd as the front rows instinctively leaned forward.

“The Horseman was crafty, though,” the lead soldier said. “And he came back right quick, attempting to take my head for himself. I was too quick for him, though, and ducked beneath his swing. ‘Not today!’ I declared again and drove my fist forward right into his kisser!”

His voice reached its peak at the end, and he hesitated, waiting for cheers that never came. Instead, a confused silence settled over the crowd.

“What do you mean?” a man from the front row asked. “You hit the Headless Horseman in the kisser? How’s that work?”

“He’s right,” a man behind him said. “The Headless Horseman don’t have no jaw and no mouth. Else he wouldn’t be headless.”

“He could have half a head,” another voice called. “Maybe just from the nose up?”

“Well, if he had half a head, then he couldn’t rightly be called headless, now could he?”

“Uh,” the soldier atop the table said. “Well, that is—”

“It was a blow to the sternum!” the second soldier standing atop the table announced. “Right where his black heart sat. I saw it with my own eyes. As mighty a punch as has ever been dealt, and it sent the Horseman crashing back into the wall!”

A cry rose up, cheers and cat-calls urging the story forward.

The first soldier flashed a grateful glance, then turned back to the crowd. “The Horseman knew our mettle boys, and we’d have had him right then and there, but the demon steed saw its master was about to be dispatched and launched itself forward with a beastly cry!”

“Wait a minute,” the same man from the front said. “You mean to tell me that a horse got the best of the three of you?”

“This was no ordinary horse!” the lead soldier proclaimed. “As it leaped forward, long tendrils, black as night, shot out from its back, three dozen strong, each one barbed like the tip of a scorpion’s tail and just as fast. It came on like a living nightmare, spewing venom as it struck.”

“Wait, the scorpion’s tail shot venom?” a woman asked.

“Bet your eyes it did,” the lead soldier said. “And where the venom struck, unholy fire erupted, burning as high as a man stands!”

“I did hear reports about a fire,” a voice said from the back of the crowd.

“A demon’s fire,” the lead soldier said. “Mark my words, without that beast’s interference, we’d have won the day. But no sooner had we cornered the demon steed than it came forward, claws eager to rip into our flesh.”

“Since when do horses have claws?” a voice asked from the back.

“This one did!” the lead soldier said. “And fangs the size of my arm protruding from its mouth.”

“Wait a minute,” the man from the front row said. “You’re telling us that this horse had scorpion tendrils, claws, and fangs, and all the three of you had were your muskets?”

“Aye that’s what I said. Have you gone deaf now?”

“Well, no, it’s just—”

“Listen well, my brothers and sisters!” the third soldier, the one with the bandage across his nose said. “Every word is true. It was the demon steed that bit off the tip of my nose!” He grabbed the bandage and ripped it aside, showing the missing flesh.

A gasp went through the crowd, shock and fear making those closest to the tables cringe back.

“He got me good,” Bandage-nose said. “A scar I’ll carry from this day forward. But fear not my friends. As the steed’s teeth sank into my face, my own blade swept low, slipping beneath his forelegs. The beast may have gotten a piece of me, but make no mistake. We got a piece of him too!”

And the third soldier standing atop the table raised his arm up into the air, displaying a potato sack in his grip. There were dark, reddish stains near the bottom, but through the translucent fabric you could just make out two round bulges. A soft gasp went through the crowd, swiftly replaced by wild cheering. The applause rose as the three men bowed and took their fare, emerging from the table to whistles and “atta-boys” along with more than one mug of beer being shoved into their hands.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Patience whispered from beside me.

“Apparently not,” I said and shook my head. “Let’s go find Titus and get the—”

“Sergeant Mayfield!” As if his name had been a summons, Titus appeared from off to my left. He’d removed his jacket and admiral’s hat, and now wore only his hunting shirt, the sleeves rolled up, with leather breeches and knee-length socks. “It’s good that you’re here. We have much to discuss.”

“Are you hearing this?” I asked, hooking my thumb towards the soldiers.

“Of course,” he said. “A spirited retelling, I’ll admit, but not so far off the truth as to be labeled a complete falsehood.”

“Spirited, huh?”

He shrugged and flashed me that smile that suggested boys will be boys. “This way, please.”

He led us back down the hall to a private dining room that had since been converted into the Sons of Liberty’s war room. A large table sat in the room’s center, surrounded by half a dozen wingback chairs. There was a red-brick fireplace along the western wall, the kind that makes you want to find a good book and curl up beside it. Opposite that stood an antique China hutch containing porcelain plates and accompanying dishware. The hutch was flanked by a pair of bookcases loaded down with leather bound novels, most of which I suspected had been printed before the turn of the previous century.

There were two people already inside. The first was Ethel, seated on the chair closest to the fire, a blue cloth spread across her lap. She was working a needlepoint, using actual needles as opposed to her sword, thank God, and was humming softly as her fingers patiently worked through the cross-stitch design.

The second figure was in his late fifties, with silver hair and a solid frame to him. He wore a mutton-chop beard across his face and kept his khaki pants held in place by navy blue

suspenders. He glanced up at the sound of our entry, and his bushy eyebrows rose, lifting his black-framed glasses as he smiled and stood up to shake my hand.

“Afternoon, Amos,” I said by way of greeting.

The proprietor of Blind Owl Books, Amos Stoddard’s shop had been a fixture in the city for over two-hundred and fifty years, and once served as a meeting ground for the Loyal Nine, a pro-patriot political organization that predated the Sons of Liberty. His grip was firm, and the smell coming from his clothes reminded me of old manuscript pages and fresh-burned tobacco, the real kind, smoked in a pipe. In addition to running his shop, he also dabbled in blacksmithing, and I was almost positive he was responsible for the Sons of Liberty’s artillery cannons.

“Hello, Chloe,” he said. “How are things?”

“Never a dull moment, apparently.”

“And Officer Rickson? I’ve been meaning to reach out to him.”

I felt a phantom pain in my chest. “I’m sure he’d tell you that he was doing just fine.”

Amos missed my underlying meaning, or maybe he was just too distracted to catch it. He nodded and then motioned us toward the table in the center of the room. As we drew up beside it, I noted the hexagonal map spread out across the table’s surface.

It was modeled after the city of Boston, and I recognized the Downtown District, North End, Chinatown, the Financial District and, finally, the Waterfront. Dozens of little figurines were spread across the map’s surface, most of which measured no higher than my little finger. Toy continental soldiers, the kind that could be purchased at any of the nearby tourist shops, wielded muskets and bayonets alongside their little toy cannons. I spotted Titus’s figure, as well as Amos, Ethel, the waitress and my own. I also couldn’t help but to note the

riderless horse figurine, painted all black, near the MIT campus, along with another in Beacon Hill, and a third near the Hospital.

“You’ve been busy,” I noted.

Amos shook his head. “This was all Titus and his people. I only got wind of it last night.”

I nodded and glanced toward the fire. “You okay, Ethel?”

Ethel Le Fleur glanced up and cast me an impish smile. “Of course, dear. It’s lovely to see you again.”

“You too,” I said and sighed. “Alright then, Titus, let’s hear it.”

Titus had taken up position near the head of the table, and he cleared his throat and motioned toward Patience. “Perhaps some introductions are in order first?”

I glanced over at Patience and gave a reluctant nod. “Patience Woods, meet Titus Broggart, Ethel Le Fleur, and Amos Stoddard.”

A round of polite greetings passed before I turned back to Titus. “She’s clued in, and we can speak freely. Now, what have we got?”

“Trouble,” Titus said bluntly. “Perhaps more than we can handle.”

“I assume we’re talking about the Horseman?”

“What else?” Titus asked. “We first caught wind of something amiss some days back. We’d been investigating some unusual activity, but didn’t have anything definitive. Then, when we heard about Walter Crosier’s death, we knew we were dealing with something serious. We sought to meet you at the crime scene, but according to Officer Rickson, we missed you by only a few minutes.”

“And you tracked me to the morgue?”

Titus nodded. “Prior to our rescue efforts, I reached out to our friends across the pond. My first call was to Frank, but he was unavailable. According to his assistant, they’ve got quite the firestorm brewing out that way. My second call was to Benjamin Winters.”

“You talking about Big Ben?” Patience asked.

Titus blinked and paused. “You know Big Ben?”

“*Pfft*, know him? That boy loves me in all kinds of ways that he’s not ready to admit to himself.”

“Really?” Titus asked. “And here I thought he and Sergeant Mayfield had been having quite the dalliance.”

Patience’s eyes narrowed. “The what now?”

“Nothing,” I said, maybe a bit too quickly, and shot a glare toward Titus.

The diminutive leader raised his hands in a pacifying gesture. “My apologies if I was mistaken, Sergeant. It’s just, he spent all that time in your apartment.”

Patience turned to me. “My Ben was in your apartment?”

“And then, of course, there were the rumors regarding your sister,” Titus said.

Patience’s nostrils flared. “What about your sister?”

“Can we *please* just stay focused on why we’re here?” I asked, slicing my hands through the air.

Patience sniffed. “For now, maybe, but you’d best believe we’re going to talk about this later.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Uh-huh,” Patience said. “We’ll see about that.”

“Titus,” Ethel said from her chair by the fire. She spoke without looking up, seemingly focused on her needles.

Titus cleared his throat. “Of course. Let us return to the problem at hand. Ben was able to carry word to Frank.”

“Frank Decaux?” Patience asked.

Titus blinked. “You know Frank Decaux?”

“Oh, not this again,” I said.

Patience side-eyed me, and muttered something I suspected might have implied that I was having a dalliance with Frank as well.

“Err, yes, Frank Decaux,” Titus said. “And he seemed quite certain that he knew what we were dealing with.” He walked over to the bookcase, selected a manuscript and returned to the table, laying it down atop the table. Its cover was soft cream, with faded red roses along the front and inlaid script revealing the title. **The Legend of Sleepy Hollow** by Washington Irving, published in 1820.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Titus said. “We have a problem unlike any we’ve encountered before. The Headless Horseman, one of the most ruthless, most dangerous, undead beings to ever walk the Earth, has risen from Sleepy Hollow and committed murder in our fair city. The question we must therefore ask ourselves, is what are we going to do about it?”

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Plan for War. April 15th

1253hrs

“Okay, let’s go through it again,” I said.

Close to two hours had passed since we’d arrived, and we’d spent the better part of it brainstorming, gradually spreading out around the war room to allow our ideas room to breathe. The waitress, whose name I still didn’t know, had delivered food at some point. Fried fish fillets, grilled shrimp with cocktail sauce and large bread bowls of clam chowder. I’d ordered a brief pause on our discussion to allow for time to eat, the adrenaline and fear having given way to hunger some time back. “What do we know about this Horseman?”

“We know he’s not here to pass out Halloween candy,” Patience said. She’d claimed the chair closest to Ethel and had removed her shoes and set her feet up on the accompanying ottoman.

“Granted,” I said. “Definitely not playful. What else?”

“Determined,” Amos said. He’d eaten sparsely, and was currently nursing a black coffee, alternating sips between long drags on his pipe. It was a delicate piece, handcrafted from brass and briar, and it fit him neatly, giving off a delicate aromatic cloud with every exhale.

“Also true,” I said. “You don’t go around collecting heads if you’re not committed. The Horseman’s got a purpose in mind, and if we can figure out what it is, we might be able to discover his real identity and put a stop to it.”

“I’m sorry,” Titus said from his seat near the front of the table. “Did I hear you right? His *real* identity?”

Unlike the rest of us, Titus had forgone the food, especially the bread, shoving it away with the base of his wineglass and declaring it a vile thing that would sop up the perfectly good spirit currently sloshing around in his belly. I’d lost track of

the number of refills he'd consumed, but there was a definite sway to his posture that hadn't been there when we'd started.

"Of course," I said. "You don't really expect me to buy into the idea that he's the *actual* Headless Horseman, did you?"

Titus's expression said he did. "Unbelievable. After all you've been through, I honestly thought you would have moved past the denial stage by this point."

"Afraid not," I said. "The Horseman who attacked us might have been deadly, but he wasn't undead."

"How can you be sure?"

"Rule number two," I said. "Blue Moon specific. There are no ghosts, ghouls, demons or dragons. The paranormal doesn't exist, and everything has a logical explanation. We just have to find it."

"Oh, really?" Titus said. "Alright then. Enlighten me. How would you explain him?"

"The same way I would any other case," I said. "The Horseman was fast, I'll grant you, and strong, but his strength wasn't superhuman."

"What about his perceived invulnerability?" Titus asked. "Three shots at close proximity with no visible damage? I'd be willing to bet that your own weapon was rendered largely ineffective as well."

It was a good point, and one I'd been thinking about on the way over. Luckily, I was pretty sure I had an answer. I reached up and tapped the vest beneath my shirt. "Kevlar. He must have had some sort of vest or bodysuit beneath his clothes."

"Preposterous," Titus said.

"We've seen it before," I argued. "The north Hollywood shootout, for example. Two bank robbers wore homemade suits that prevented smaller caliber rounds from penetrating."

“And what about the distinctive lack of a head?” Titus asked. “Did your bank robbers have those?”

“I’m still working on that one,” I admitted. “But rest assured, I’m going to find out, and when I do, I’ll prove to you that he’s not a ghost.”

“Foolishness,” Titus muttered into his cup.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“I do, actually,” he said. “We should seek aid from The Kent League of Demonologists. They’re still rebuilding, but they should be able to spare someone with experience in these matters.”

“That could take weeks,” I said.

“More like months the way they work,” Patience muttered.

“Even so, it’s the surest course of action with the most likely chance of success,” Titus said.

“And what do we do in the meantime?” I asked. “I’m not about to lay low and let the Horseman run roughshod over this city.”

“Showing restraint now could save lives down the line,” Titus argued. “It’s certainly more impactful than rushing out half-cocked and getting ourselves killed.”

“Better us than some innocent bystander,” I said.

“It seems to me,” Ethel said, rising from her chair, “That it should matter less whether he is truly a ghost and more so what he’s after.”

She made her way over to the table, leaning on her walker with one hand and clutching her needles with the other. Reaching over the base, she laid her needles down beside the first horse figurine, using the yarn to trace a line to Beacon Hill, and then to the hospital. I stared down for a moment before realizing what she was saying.

“These attacks aren’t random,” I said. “They’re targeted.”

“Meaning what?” Patience asked.

“Meaning if we can figure out the connection, then we can figure out who the next victim might be and put a stop to it.”

“Precisely,” Ethel said.

“Okay then,” Patience said. “How do we do that?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. “On paper, the victims don’t seem to have anything in common. We’ve got an unknown woman, a foreign exchange student, and a wealthy old cantankerous bastard. It’s unlikely they knew each other socially.”

“Dennis was a good boy,” Patience said. “He’d know better than to get mixed up in anything shady.”

“Murder is not a vice reserved only for the wicked,” Titus said. “Perhaps the unknown female could prove to be the connecting link? Wealthy men are known to pay for the company of beautiful women, and young men are prone to jealousy and rash action.”

I shook my head. “There’s more to this than a simple lover’s quarrel, and even if things were as you say, it wouldn’t explain the Horseman’s presence.”

“Perhaps the boy Dennis summoned him, and was made to answer for his violation of the natural order?”

“Excuse me?” Patience said. “What part of ‘he’s a good boy’ did you not understand?”

Titus held up his hands in a half-shrug. “I’m just saying we should at least be open to the possibility.”

“You keep dragging his name through the mud and there’s a strong *possibility* of me coming over there and sticking my foot up your little dwarf butt.”

“Easy you two,” I said. “There’s more to this that we’re not seeing. Whoever’s behind these murders has gone to a heck of a lot of trouble to adopt the Horseman motif.”

“Meaning what?” Patience asked.

“Think about it,” I said. “There are lots of ways to kill someone, and cutting off someone’s head is nowhere near the easiest.”

“It is effective, though,” Titus said.

“Granted, but this goes beyond simple murder. Why the Horseman? Why not Bigfoot, or Dracula, or any of a thousand other myths or legends?” I shook my head. “There’s more to this than we know, and until we figure out what it is, then we’re not going to be able to discover who’s behind this, or more importantly, who their next victim might be.”

“So what do we do?” Patience asked.

I considered it for several seconds before I turned to Titus. “What can you tell me about the Horseman legend?”

“Well, it’s hard to know exactly where to begin,” Titus said. “The myths surrounding the Horseman are not as cut and dry as you might think. There have been various adaptations throughout history, most of which date back to the Middle Ages. Dullahan, from Irish lore, for example, in which the unnamed Horseman is cast as a demonic fairy who wields a whip made of a human spine.”

“Eww,” Patience said. “Gross.”

Titus shrugged. “Then, of course, there is the antagonist from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. I believe there are also some German tales out of Rhineland.”

“Let’s stick to something closer to home for now,” I said.

“In that case, the most famous American tale would surely be Washington Irving’s *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, set around the Dutch settlement of Tarry Town.” He motioned toward the antique book sitting atop the table. “The Horseman was believed to be a Hessian trooper killed during a revolutionary battle. There are several schools of thought debating in which battle he met his end, but the most likely

would be the Battle of White Plains in 1776. His manner of death was said to be decapitation courtesy of a cannon blast and his remains, those that could be recovered, were buried in the Old Dutch Church of Sleepy Hollow, the very place from which his ghost was said to later rise.”

“Sleepy Hollow is a long way from here.”

“Almost two-hundred miles,” Titus agreed. “But not so far if traveling by horse.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “But I doubt he’s going to be riding a horse through downtown Boston anytime soon. Regardless of what that trio outside may proclaim.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Titus said.

“Well, if I’m wrong, we’ll deal with it later. In the meantime, we need to come up with a plan.” I turned to consider Titus. “Do you have friends in the police department?”

He scoffed. “I have friends everywhere. People find me quite likable, present company excluded.”

“Perfect,” I said. “In that case, I want you and your soldiers to keep your ears open. The upper brass is trying to keep news of the Horseman under wraps, so if there are any more murders, I need to know about it right away. Ethel, do you think you could give the Sons of Liberty a crash course in group combat tactics? The Horseman might be deadly, but he’s only one man. If they can pin him down, might be we can get to the bottom of this without any more bloodshed.”

“I can try, but it’s a tricky affair,” Ethel said. “The Horseman is easily as skilled as any of the modern-day Olympians I’ve known. I can teach our men some of the basics, but I’ll not have them sacrifice themselves in vain.”

“Fair enough.”

“It seems to me that we’re overlooking a rather important point,” Titus said. “What good is it to track the Horseman if

we've no way of inflicting harm upon him?"

He had a point. Bullets had been shown to be largely ineffective so far. Might be we'd need to try something larger. I turned to Amos. "A cannon worked the first time. Think you could come up with something a little more portable?"

Amos frowned, considering for a long moment before answering. "I'll have to see. Might be I could come up with something."

"Appreciate it," I said.

"Madness," Titus said. "Even if Amos is successful, the Horseman is an extremely powerful revenant. His corporeal form cannot be undone by mere lead or iron."

"Maybe not," I said. "But I'm not about to give him free rein over my city. If he wants to come after the citizens of Boston, then we're going to make him work for it. And who knows, we might get lucky along the way."

"Luck is a poor deity in which to place one's faith," Titus said. "There's a reason gambler is synonymous with fool."

"He has a point," Ethel said. "Men are far more dangerous than ghosts, and this one more than most. You need to be careful, Chloe."

"Don't worry about us," Patience said, rising from her chair. "I'll watch her back."

"And what exactly will the two of you be doing, while the rest of us so diligently prepare for war?" Titus asked.

"We're going back out into the field," I said. "There's something that connects these victims, something the Horseman was afraid we would find. It's why he absconded with Dennis Pieheart's body. We're going to find out what that something is, and we're going to use it to bring him down."

"How very optimistic," Titus said. "Tell me, will you begin with Mr. Pieheart, or our own Walter Crosier?"

“Neither,” I said. “We’ll start with the girl.”

“Really?” Titus asked. “And how do you intend to do that, given that you don’t even have so much as a name?”

“Well, that’s the real trick,” I said. “I might not have a name, but I’m pretty sure I know who she is.”

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The Unknown Sister. April 15th 1430hrs

We'd exited the Oyster House the same way we'd entered and made our way back out to the car. Pongo was still seated in the back, and he didn't even bother looking up as we entered. His face was drawn into a tight mask of concentration as he stared down at the pages of the Massachusetts State Law Handbook, and the sheen of sweat along his brow suggested that he was mentally willing the book to surrender its secrets, but was having little success. I had to call his name twice before he noticed us, and even then, all he did was grunt and extend his hand to accept the clam chowder bowl I'd snagged for him on our way out.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Egh," Pongo said, and didn't elaborate.

I nodded and figured that was about what I'd expected.

"So where exactly are we headed?" Patience asked as she lowered herself down into the passenger's seat beside me.

I inserted the key and brought the engine to life, checking my mirrors before pulling away from the curb. "Like I told you, we're going to find out about the girl."

"Uh-huh," Patience said. "But how exactly? You said you don't know who she is."

"No, but I know what she is."

"How's that?"

"Her tattoos," I said. "The trio of moons, with a heart line connecting to the date 1692."

"So?"

"1692 marked the beginning of the Salem Witch Trials."

Patience gave a start in her seat. “You think she was a witch?”

“Seems likely,” I said.

“I don’t much care for witches,” Patience admitted. “Never had any dealings with them myself, but Tempest handled some back in East Malling. They were making people’s hearts explode.”

“Our witches are a little less overt here,” I said. “It’s also possible she’s not a full-fledged member of the coven, but at the very least it seems likely she was involved in that community.”

“So you’re thinking we should drive out to Salem and ask around?”

“I’m hoping it won’t come to that,” I said. “The Sisters of Salem are the premiere coven in New England, but, lucky for us, their high priestess lives right here in the city.”

“You’re kidding?” Patience said. “What, do they have some old gingerbread hut hidden away in the Commons?”

“Not exactly,” I said, drawing out the words. “Matter of fact, they—”

A horn blared, cutting me off, and I slammed on my brakes, jerking to a halt as a taxicab pulled in front of me. The driver’s hand flew up through the rear window in something that might have been an apologetic wave or a middle-fingered salute, I wasn’t sure which, and he didn’t bother hanging around to elaborate. He took off, cutting across two lanes and heading into the North End.

“Traffic always like this?” Patience asked.

“Pretty much,” I confirmed. “The founders of Boston weren’t really envisioning cars when they designed the city. As such, there are loads of winding roadways and narrow entryways that don’t always lead where you think they should, and parking is next to impossible to find.”

Patience snorted. "It's a wonder you can get around at all."

"Yeah," I said, and frowned. "Wait a minute. Yeah. Getting around *would* be a serious problem."

Patience glanced at me. "That's what I just said."

I shook my head. "Not for us. I mean for the Horseman."

"Come again?"

"Pongo," I said, and snapped my fingers. "Hey, Pongo?"

He glanced up and blinked twice before his eyes focused on me. "Yeah?"

"How many people would you say work at the hospital?"

"Uh, I'm not sure exactly."

"Rough ball it."

"A couple thousand?" he said.

"At least," I said. "It's one of the largest employers in the city."

"So what?" Patience asked.

"So how's the Horseman getting around without being spotted?" I asked. "I mean, Boston, for all that it is a major city, isn't that big a place. You can't exactly go traipsing around with a sword in broad daylight without people taking notice, but so far, we haven't heard a peep."

"You said the Sons of Liberty do it all the time."

"Yeah, but only because people are used to seeing them," I said. "They filter them away as showmen and actors, and they assume their weapons are nothing more than stage props." I considered it for a long moment. "I can see how the Horseman might avoid notice in the dead of night, but he came after us in the middle of the morning. So how's he doing it?"

"Depends if he's undead or not," Patience said. "If the little dwarf is right, then he could just come up through the walls."

“Let’s assume for the moment that’s not the case, and there’s a logical explanation for all of this,” I said.

“Well, they say he has a horse.”

“We haven’t seen any evidence of that,” I said. “And even if he does, a horse would draw even more attention than his person. Plus, nobody has reported seeing a horse anywhere near the hospital, and he certainly didn’t have it with him down in the morgue, despite what those three soldiers may proclaim.”

“Maybe he didn’t need to get around,” Patience said. “Maybe he was already close.”

“How close?”

“Very close?”

“Like he works there?”

“Might be,” Patience said. “It would explain the smoke bomb.”

“A distraction,” I said.

If the Horseman worked at the hospital, then he couldn’t just slip into a stall and change his clothes like Superman without risking running into someone. So maybe he set off that bomb ahead of time because he knew everybody would have to evacuate, thereby allowing him to slip through the halls and make his way down to the morgue in full regalia.

It was still risky, still dangerous, and there is no way he could be entirely sure that he wouldn’t run into someone along the way, but given the circumstances, a certain amount of risk was to be expected. Besides which, I reminded myself that the Horseman probably hadn’t come down there seeking a fight. Most likely, he’d assumed Mickey would be working alone. Especially if he was in a position to have access to the schedule logs. He probably thought he could slip down, disable the medical examiner, and make off with Dennis Pieheart’s body with no one the wiser. He didn’t plan on

Patience's or my presence down there, and he certainly didn't plan on the Sons of Liberty showing up.

It was a working theory, admittedly, but it fit all the boxes of being plausible. Unfortunately, it didn't really help us. Even if I was right about the Horseman being an employee, we were still looking at thousands of potential suspects. Even pairing it down by gender and age, there was no way we could go through that many names in any sort of meaningful time frame. Not without an army of officers willing to work night and day running down potential leads. And even if we had that sort of manpower available, there was no telling for sure if I was right. We needed more information, something to corroborate the idea before I could present it to Lieutenant Kermit.

I navigated west down Sudbury Street and along the northern edge of the Commons, passing by Beacon Hill before turning south. A few blocks past Statler Park, I pulled up alongside the curb of a large, three-story building situated on a narrow roadway and surrounded by brownstones on either side. I could hear the roar of the cars passing along the highway only a few blocks to our south, and the air held faint traces of tomatoes and spices, likely wafting in from the Italian eatery we'd passed one block back.

"What are we doing?" Patience asked from the passenger's seat.

"We're here," I said.

Patience frowned at me, then glanced up at the building, shaking her head after a moment. "This can't be right."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a church!" she said, pointing up toward the large crucifix affixed to the exterior of the building.

"So?"

"So, why would *witches* be here?"

“Because,” I said. “This is where they used to hang them.”

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The Sisters of Salem. April 15th

1500hrs

Patience followed me out of the car and up a stone stairway leading to a trio of green doors adorned with cathedral style stained-glass window inlays. The Christian symbols had been replaced with golden panels depicting images of white roses with long, twirling stems.

Pongo didn't even bother to rise from the backseat, but I figured it was better that way. Much like the Horseman, he wasn't ready for Ambretta Greenhall, who was no less dangerous for her lack of a sword.

"I still don't get it," Patience said. "Why would a witch choose to live here, of all places?"

"Not sure myself, although I imagine it goes back to the Goody Ann Glover legend."

"Who's Goody Ann Glover?"

"She was a housekeeper for a mason named John Goodwin back in the late 1600s," I said. "She was also the last witch to be tried and hung within the city limits."

"How do you know all this?" Patience asked.

"We had a pretty fierce snowstorm last December," I said. "I spent some time catching up on my New England lore."

"Huh," Patience said. "Was she really a witch?"

"Depends who you ask," I said. "Officially, there is no record of Goody Ann Glover, although diaries and journals at the time have more than corroborated her existence. According to legend, she was dismissed from the Goodwin's service for stealing laundry, and shortly thereafter, four of his children grew sick, leading several of the townsmen, including her own husband, to accuse her of witchcraft."

“Lord,” Patience said. “That poor woman.”

“It gets worse,” I said. “Word of her arrest reached Cotton Mather, who was a minister in the Old North Meeting House with a penchant for the supernatural and a fervent belief in the power of witchcraft. He inserted himself into the proceedings by overseeing the care of the Goodwin children, as well as testifying at her trial.”

“Was there any evidence?”

“None that would hold up in today’s court,” I said. “Her chief crime, near as can be inferred, was close proximity to those who grew ill, as well as the inability to speak the Lord’s Prayer in court. The fact that she didn’t speak fluent English probably had something to do with that last one. Regardless, she was hanged in November 1688, and Cotton’s writings, along with her execution, would go on to set the precedence for the Salem witch trials four years later.”

Cotton’s writings would also, inadvertently, lead me to meet up with the original Blue Moon team, since he would go on to pen *Sorrows of a Pale Night*. To date, it was rumored to be the only book in existence to contain a recorded conversation between a mortal and a demon, and the reason Frank Decaux and Big Ben had shown up in Boston half a year before.

“They hung her in the church?” Patience asked.

I nodded. “And buried her within the basement crypt before it was sealed away.”

“That’s awful.”

“Fast forward a couple hundred years and the church wasn’t what it was. Priests couldn’t afford the rent, and the building went up for public auction. That’s when Ambretta Greenhall snatched it up and turned it into her personal residency.”

“Why do you think she did that?”

“Personally? I think she enjoyed thumbing her nose at the papal powers. And who knows? Maybe she figured that Goody Ann’s remains could use a change of company.”

I reached out and tried the main door, but found it locked. The one beside it proved much the same, but the third one jiggled and gave way when I pushed, the old wood and aging grout having warped over the years to create some space.

“Shouldn’t we knock?” Patience asked.

“Probably,” I said. “Or maybe we’ll just let ourselves in and have a look around first.”

Patience frowned. “Is that legal?”

I glanced up at her. “Oh, my, is that a crying woman I hear? She must need help.”

Patience snorted, and I slipped my handcuffs from my belt, opened the cylinder, and used the tapered edge to dig into the doorframe. The grout gave way reluctantly as I worked the metal back and forth, struggling to free the lock.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, let me do it,” Patience said.

She shooed me out of the way, then reached into her pocket and drew out what looked like a credit card. She worked the edge into the space between the door handle, wiggling it up and down, and ten seconds later the lock gave way with a metallic *click*.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked.

Patience gave a self-satisfied sniff as the door swung open. “My great aunt Rita knew a thing or two about locks.”

“Looks like it,” I said. “Alright then.”

We stepped through the doorway and into the refurbished church. Had I been expecting something dank and moldy, I would have been disappointed. Inside, it was elegant, even spacious, with cathedral ceilings and rich hardwood floors. There were hand-carved wooden statues spread around, most

depicting female figures engaged in dance and play, and large planters near the stained-glass windows, housing greenery and bushes with wide-leaf fronds the size of my head. Several trellises were mounted along the wall, thorn-filled vines intertwining among their bodies, and a long marble table sat to my left, surrounded by a dozen high-backed chairs with yellow and green cushions. The air smelled strongly of incense, spices, and rich, dark soil.

“Oh, my,” Patience said. “This isn’t so bad,”

“You were expecting bubbling cauldrons and boiled skulls?”

She nodded. “Plus a cawing crow or two.”

I shook my head. “Ambretta isn’t like that. She respects the past, but she isn’t bound to it.”

“What’s she like?”

I considered it for a moment before answering. “She’s smart. Determined. A realist, I suppose, but with a tendency to lean toward paranoia.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “More witches have been executed in Massachusetts than all the other states combined, and yet they would never even think of leaving. I can applaud their tenacity, but there’s something to be said for greener pastures.”

“That’s a bit of the pot calling the kettle black,” Patience said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shrugged. “You said yourself that most of the department thinks Blue Moon is a joke, and those that aren’t entirely dismissive of you want you gone.”

“So?”

“So, you’re still here, aren’t you?” Patience asked. “Sounds to me like the two of you have more in common than you

think.”

I frowned, having never looked at it that way before. I wouldn't go so far as to admit that her analogy was correct, but I also couldn't refute it. Either way, we had more important things to worry about right now.

We slipped inside, passing through the foyer before catching wind of raised voices coming from upstairs. I motioned to Patience, who nodded, and the two of us headed toward the staircase, purposefully taking our steps slow so as to avoid making noise.

“We don't know for sure that anything happened to them,” a woman's voice said. I thought she sounded middle-aged.

“Don't we?” another, younger woman snapped back. “Jenni makes three. *Three!* All gone within a fortnight. Vanished, without so much as a word.”

“It does seem unlikely,” another voice, deeper but still decidedly feminine, said.

The younger woman snorted. “Try improbable.”

“And what would you have us do?” the deeper voice asked. “Go public? Reveal ourselves and denounce them to the world?”

“Fight back!” the younger woman snapped. “The answer to our plight lies here in this very building. Gather the coven's strength, and we can reign curses down upon them such as have not been seen for three hundred years.”

“But at what cost?” the middle-aged woman asked. “That which we inflict will surely be visited back upon us.”

“Scared, sister?” the younger voice asked.

“It's a dark business,” the older voice said. “You may as well salt the very ground beneath our feet. Are you really so eager to go to war?”

“The war has already begun, regardless of whether or not we wish it,” she said. “Even now, they are out there, hunting us through the streets like animals.” She shook her head. “I am willing to do what is necessary, and will bear the consequences, alone if need be.”

“But you are not alone,” another voice, a stronger voice, said, silencing the others. “You are a member of this coven, Flora, and any course of action must be taken with the full backing of your sisters.”

“Mother, please,” the younger woman said. “Even a blind woman could see that the protection spells are not working. We must look to other solutions to keep our sisters safe.”

“Really? And what would you suggest?”

“Bind them,” the young woman answered immediately. “Bind them until their bones break. Until the very bricks they shelter under crumble and crush them as they fall.”

“Bindings and death,” the strong-voiced woman said. “And if more come, then what? Should we visit our wrath upon the city itself? Will it be our fate to rule over a mound of rubble?”

“Better that than to sit here like meek lambs awaiting the butcher’s knife,” the younger woman spat.

“Be careful, my daughter. You would have us commit ourselves to violence without care for the consequences. You saw where such a path took your sister. Would you sell yourself, as she did, and travel down the path of darkness and destruction?”

“The coven will not survive unless we act,” the younger woman said.

“We don’t even know for sure who’s behind this,” the deep-voiced woman said.

“Don’t we?” the younger woman snarled. “This all began after he arrived. Are we expected to believe that it is merely coincidence? He picks us off one by one, and we sit here

endlessly debating among ourselves. It is worse than nothing! Even now—”

“A moment, sisters,” the middle-aged woman said. “It would appear we are no longer alone.”

There was a brief hesitation, then the strong woman sighed. “That darn door. I’ve been meaning to get it fixed for months.” She raised her voice. “You may join us, Sergeant Mayfield.”

I hesitated a moment, then motioned toward Patience, and the two of us made our way up the stairway, arriving at a large loft overlooking the church’s interior, as well as the four figures occupying it.

I recognized the one closest to me as belonging to the outspoken young female. I dimly recalled seeing her a few months back, but had never spoken to her. She was a year or so shy of drinking age, with dark hair shaved close along the sides of her head and too much mascara on. She had a stud ring in her nose, and her outfit consisted of a dark denim jacket and white leather pants. She glared at me as I stepped out into the loft, her features tight with anger.

The woman beside her was more matronly, middle-aged, with a comfortable, pear-shaped frame, brown eyes and auburn hair. She wore an ankle-length black skirt and a white blouse that contained a silver brooch with a toad in the center. She looked more curious than angry at our arrival, and her gaze slipped past me to linger on Patience.

I wasn’t entirely sure that the next figure was a woman. She stood a head higher than the others, dressed in dark pants with a matching shirt and shawl overtop. An arrowhead necklace with a colored gem in the center sat nestled on her chest, and dark curls dyed sea-green at the tips were visible from beneath her wide-brimmed hat. Her makeup cast her skin in bronze tones that clashed with the dark lipstick and matching mascara she’d liberally applied.

The final figure in the room was Ambretta Greenhall. The high priestess of the Sisters of Salem coven was in her early fifties, with curly light brown hair interspersed with gray extending down to the small of her back and soft green eyes that reflected the light streaming in through the stained-glass windows. She was dressed in a white satin blouse with a large bow along the neckline and a flowing black skirt that reached down to her ankles.

“I think our meeting has reached its conclusion, sisters,” Ambretta said. “If you would be so kind as to excuse us?”

It was a clear dismissal, and the trio of women began exiting the room. The youngest of them went first, glaring at us as she passed. The bronze-skinned sister followed her out, albeit with less gusto, and the matronly figure brought up the tail, pausing beside Patience.

“You have the gift,” she said, smiling warmly.

Patience frowned. “What gift is that?”

“The gift of sight, of course.” She reached out and took the Maidstone constable’s hand, gently cradling it in between her palms. “I knew it the moment I saw you. My name is Kimberly Phelps. Most of the sisters call me Verbena.”

Patience introduced herself, then motioned toward me. “This is Chloe.”

“Patience and Chloe,” Kimberly said. “Such lovely names. Alas, Chloe, you lack the inner light necessary to excel in the craft.”

“Ah, shucks,” I said.

“Don’t worry, dear, I’m sure you have other talents.” She smiled at Patience. “But you. I can feel it coming off you, blazing tall and proud like a midnight moon. Has no one in your family ever told you?”

“Not exactly,” Patience said, suddenly unsure. “My great aunt Rita was a medium, but we always assumed...”

Kimberly let out a soft giggle. “The gift takes many forms. I can feel it emanating off you like a warm light. You should consider joining us.”

“Thanks, but I’m not from these parts,” Patience said.

“Perhaps an extended visit, then?”

“Thank you, Kimberly, that will be all,” Ambretta said. “I appreciate your intent, but time is of the essence.”

Kimberly flashed a final warm smile and patted Patience’s hand before descending the stairway. Ambretta allowed them time to exit, waiting until she heard the door close before she turned to us.

“Well now, Sergeant Mayfield,” she said. “To what do I owe the honor of this most unexpected visit?”

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Ambretta Greenhall. April 15th 1522hrs

“Guess it’s too much of a stretch to believe this is a social visit,” I said, as I made my way deeper into the loft.

The interior of the room was spacious, filled with soft end tables and plush seats designed more for comfort than aesthetic appeal. There was a painting easel in the corner, as well as a small craft table near the guardrail. Most of the chairs were turned to face the same direction, a fact that struck me as odd until I noted the antique film projector in the corner of the room, positioned to display its fare onto the far wall. It had never occurred to me that witches might enjoy cinema, but throw in a popcorn maker and they’d have all the makings of a good movie night.

Ambretta noted the way my eyes lingered on the projector and her lips curled up into a soft smile. “My hobby,” she said and left it at that. “What can I do for you, Sergeant Mayfield?”

“I need information,” I said. “I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation. Seems the streets are less safe than when last I looked.”

“Boston has never been safe for me or my kind,” she said. “Though I will admit that the situation has been exacerbated over these past few weeks. I’m surprised that it took you this long to notice.”

“Might have helped if you had given me a heads-up.”

“Would it now?” she asked.

Her tone came out barbed, and I fixed her with a pointed gaze. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ambretta turned and paced the length of the room, setting her back against the guardrail. “The Sisters of Salem have

never counted your kind as among our allies. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“By my kind, you mean the police?”

“As well as others,” she said. “Those in positions of authority, especially men, have always feared us. It is why they’ve always been so quick to resort to fire. That fear gives way swiftly to hatred.”

“Pretty sure you missed a step in there,” I said. “Regardless, I’m surprised to hear this coming from you. I didn’t realize you’d gone that route.”

“What route is that?”

“Anarchist,” I said. “Next thing you know, you’ll be picketing outside the state house, shouting ‘Defund the police,’ and ‘Down with the order.’”

“Would that upset you?”

“I’d be disappointed,” I said. “Drivel like that is all we seem to hear some days. It gets repetitive after a while. And, of course, it all changes the minute someone starts breaking into your house in the middle of the night. Then those same people looking to bring down the establishment are sobbing into the phone, begging us to come right quick.”

“I do not beg, sergeant.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “But you get the point.”

“I’m not entirely certain I do,” she said. “Need I remind you that it was you who came to me?”

“For information,” I said. “And I wouldn’t have had to do that if you’d been more forthcoming.”

“Is that so?” she said. “Tell me, do you truly believe that if I drove to your police station and presented myself to the officers, I would have been taken seriously? More likely I would have been met with ridicule and turned away back out into the night.”

“Not if I had anything to say about it.”

“Oh, really?” she asked. “And how far does your resolve go? Would you champion our cause, Sergeant? Appoint yourself our defender and stand against our enemies? Come now. Even for you, that reeks of grandiose boasting.”

“I didn’t say all that,” I said. “But whatever else you might be, the Sisters of Salem are still citizens of Boston and it’s my sworn duty to protect you. Especially if someone is setting out to hurt you.”

“I assure you, sergeant, we are more than capable of looking out for ourselves.”

“Doesn’t seem to be the case,” I said. “At least not according to your friends back there.”

Ambretta’s face tightened, and her features turned stony. “As pleasant as this visit has been, I fear you’ve overstayed your welcome, sergeant. I am tired and wish to retire for the evening. I would ask that you please lock the door on your way out. I’ve had enough unexpected visitors for one evening.”

“Who’s hunting your people, Ambretta?” I asked. “Is it the Horseman? What does he want with you?”

Ambretta hesitated, and her mouth turned down into a soft frown. “What do you know of this Horseman?”

“I know he’s dangerous,” I said. “I know he’s after something. Or someone. And he’s using the mythos surrounding the legend of Sleepy Hollow to cover his tracks.”

“Is that all?” she asked. “The sum of your knowledge consists only of vague notions of who, what, and why. You don’t even have the where.”

“I also know he’s taken at least one of your people already.”

Ambretta's breath stuck in her throat, and she held it for a slow three count before exhaling. "And how do you know that?"

"Because I've seen her body in the morgue," I said.

The words hung between us like a thrown spear, its barbed end heading straight toward Ambretta, who stared at me with a hardened mixture of anger, resolve, and... fear.

I forced myself to not look away and kept going. "We haven't been able to positively identify her yet, but I'm convinced she's part of your community, if not your coven."

I walked over to the painting easel and lifted one of the brushes, drying it against the towel before dipping it into the paint. I recreated the tattoo from memory. Three moons, with a dotted heart line ending with the date of 1692. "This was on her arm."

Ambretta recognized the tattoo. I could see it in her eyes when I stepped away. Her face remained smooth, but her posture changed, her torso shrinking inward even as she fought to hold her features to stillness.

"Jenni," she said simply.

"I need to know her full name, where she lived, and any other information you think might be relevant." I said.

"For what purpose?"

"The Horseman is hunting more than just witches and she might prove to be the connecting factor."

"Is that so?" she asked. "And should you find this Horseman, what will you do?"

"Depends," I said. "If he surrenders, he'll go to jail. Otherwise, he's going in the ground."

"I see," she said and turned toward Patience. "And you, officer? Do you share the same sentiment?"

Patience nodded. “You’re not the only one who’s lost someone to this Horseman,” she said. “You can be darn sure I’m not leaving until justice is served.”

“Justice,” Ambretta said. “Is often little more than a tool used to perpetrate violence. A lofty idea, seldom realized for its intent.”

“It’s better than nothing,” I said.

“That remains to be seen,” she said. “Tell me, are you quite certain that the Horseman is responsible for Jenni’s demise?”

“Positive,” I said.

“There have been other victims?”

I nodded. “At least two that we know of, and possibly more that we don’t. I assume from the conversation with your sisters that you’re missing people?”

Ambretta gave a barely perceptible nod. “Two. Both seasoned members of our coven who have long been in good standing.”

“Unfortunately, neither of the bodies in the morgue would be a match for your people.”

“Meaning?”

“They’re both male.” I drew in a long breath and let it out slow. “How long have they been missing?”

“Two weeks at least.”

I nodded. “That would track with the rest of what we know. I have to ask you. Has the coven made any enemies recently?”

“Ours is a sordid history, Sergeant. We have never lacked for enemies.”

“Anyone you can think of that might choose now to start coming after you and would use the Headless Horseman legend as an excuse to do it?”

“If given time, perhaps I could come up with a list of possible suspects. For the moment...” She shook her head. “It would appear I’m as in the dark as you on this matter. Ironic given all we’ve seen.”

“I’m going to need that name,” I said. “And an address if you have it.”

“I do,” she said. “But why should I give them to you?”

“Are you serious?” I asked. “In case it slipped your notice, I’m trying to help. You said yourself that the Sisters of Salem aren’t very popular with the local police department, and maybe you’re right. Lord knows that mess in the subway last year didn’t help anything, but I’m here now, and I’m going to do my darndest to find whoever hurt your friends and make sure they never do it again. If that’s not enough for you, then I don’t know what is.”

Ambretta considered my words for close to a minute, then tilted her head in a curious expression. “Will you swear it?”

“What?”

“Will you give me your word? That if I give you this information, you will uphold your oath of duty, and do everything in your power to bring the one responsible to justice?”

“So long as it doesn’t extend outside the bounds of the law,” I said.

“Agreed.”

I stared at her for a long moment. “If you knew anything about me, then you’d know that you didn’t need to ask me that.”

Ambretta’s mouth twitched up in a sad smile. “You misunderstand me, sergeant. This declaration is not for me.”

“If not you, then who?”

“You, of course,” she said. “I know much about you, and more importantly, I’ve seen how you’ve conducted yourself these last few months. You are a woman who places great worth in the truth. One who strives to do what is right, even when it brings harm down upon your own head. I ask for your promise, not because I think you value my approval, but because I know that your word, given freely, will burn in your ears long after their echo has gone from my own.”

“And in return, you’ll give me the information I need?”

“I will give you what I can,” she said, by way of correction.

I drew in a breath and let it out slow. “Fine then. You have my word. I’ll do everything I can to bring Jenni’s murderer to justice.”

Nothing changed in that moment. There was no gong or shifting of the ground beneath my feet. No audible change in the air pressure or temperature, but I realized in that moment that Ambretta had been right. No sooner had the words left my mouth than I felt them settle into my skin, weighing me down like a wet blanket. I shivered and rolled my shoulders several times, just to prove I still could.

Ambretta seemed to feel it too, and I thought I saw the corner of her mouth twitch up into a semblance of a smile, but she turned her face away so fast I couldn’t be sure. She made her way over to her craft desk, drew a blank notecard and scribbled down a name, as well as an address. She crossed the length of the loft and extended it out toward me, only pulling back when I reached for it.

“Your badge, if you please.”

I blinked. “My what?”

She nodded toward the police badge on my belt and gave me a patient smile when I hesitated. “I will return it unharmed.”

I stared at her for a moment, then reluctantly unclipped my badge and handed it over. She accepted it gently, holding it cupped in her palm as she traded it for the notecard.

“The girl’s full name, as well as her last known address,” she said. “I would wish you good luck, but given the circumstances, that seems sorely inappropriate.”

“Best we not then.”

She smiled and traced her fingers over my badge, following the lines to completion. “Instead, I will leave you with a word of warning. Do not be so quick to dismiss the Horseman when you face him. There is darkness in the world, and truth that even righteous folk would fear to learn. To discount the barriers that shield this world, or deny those creatures of night that lay within its embrace, is to invite disaster. Should you find yourself overwhelmed by midnight sorrow, hold firm to that which you believe.” She handed over my badge, offering me a smile that didn’t quite meet her eyes. “Let it be an anchor to hold you close when darkness threatens to pull you from this world.”

What Keeps us up at Night.

April 15th 1549hrs

Patience and I left shortly after that. I wobbled a bit as I navigated my way down the stairs. I told myself that it was the absence of coffee from my diet today, and most definitely not an aftereffect of the vow I'd made, or Ambretta's final warning lingering around in the back of my head. Patience noted my slip, and offered me her arm, but I shook my head and gripped the guardrail, forcing my feet to carry me down the stairs and through the doors of the old refurbished church.

Our car was still parked along the curb where I'd left it, but to my surprise, Pongo was standing a few feet away, one hand shoved into his pocket, the other gripping my Massachusetts State Law Handbook.

"Something wrong?"

He shook his head. "Not really. It's just, uh, my shift is almost over. If it's alright with you, I'm just going to walk back to the station from here."

"You don't have to walk," I said. "We can give you a ride."

"No thanks," he said and held up the book. "Do you mind if I borrow this?"

"Bring it back."

He nodded, and walked off without another word, heading in the direction of the police station.

"Think I broke him?" I asked Patience as we watched him go.

"Might be," she said. "More likely he's having a crisis of conscience. See if he shows up tomorrow."

"If he does?"

"Treat it like you're not surprised."

“And if he doesn’t?”

She shrugged. “I know it’s hard to hear, but you’ll be better off in the long run.”

“Yeah,” I said.

I wasn’t entirely sure I agreed with her. I believed Patience and Rickson when they said we might be better off, but there was a part of me that would still feel guilty for crushing Pongo’s dream if I never saw him again. Being a police officer isn’t a job one enters into by accident. It takes time, and dedication, and no small amount of grit to reach the point where you wear the badge. To come this far only to watch it all slip through your fingers was a hard thing to witness. I’d nearly been there myself, in the aftermath of the former Mayor Cherri’s indiscretion. Being assigned to Blue Moon back then had felt like a huge blow to my ego, and I imagine it was much the same for Pongo. The only difference in this case was that I might have made it worse. No matter how badly Pongo might have screwed up on patrol, no one deserved to have their dream taken from them.

Strange as it might seem, I found myself rooting for him, hoping he showed up. If not, we’d be okay. Blue Moon had survived as a two-man department before, and could do so again. But it would be nice to have someone else to share the load. Mind you, it only worked if that person were trustworthy. And the jury was still out on Pongo in that regard.

Regardless, I had other problems to worry about right now, and other things to occupy my attention.

“What do you think?” I asked Patience as we lowered ourselves back down into the car.

“About Ambretta?” Patience shivered and shook her head. “She’s the real deal, or thinks she is, at any rate. No one’s that good an actor.”

“No argument here,” I said.

“She’s also afraid.”

“Of the Horseman?”

“Possibly,” Patience said. “But I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to put it into words,” Patience said. “Couple of years back, I was assigned to a special task force. We worked domestic violence cases, helped women and children relocate. Something about Ambretta reminds me of them.”

I frowned. “You think she’s being domestically abused?”

“No,” she said. “But the feeling is the same. Some of those women, they’d gotten so used to being hit that it was like they were always anticipating the next one. They’d get twitchy, usually around dinner time or shortly after dark. That was about the time their men had some drink in them. Ambretta reminds me of that. It’s like she knows the next blow is coming and is bracing for the impact.”

I leaned back in the chair and frowned. “Might be we can get ahead of this and head it off?”

“Maybe,” Patience said. “But like I said, I’m not entirely convinced it’s the Horseman that’s keeping her up at night.”

“Why not? He scares me.”

“Me too,” she said.

“What about the other coven members?”

“They’re beyond scared,” she said. “More like petrified.”

I nodded my head in agreement. “Hard to blame them. They’re watching their friends disappear, and they don’t know how to stop it.”

“Scared people make bad choices.”

“Darn right they do,” I said. “Like shooting into the dark, or gathering together in one place. I kind of figure that’s what the killer’s angling for, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“Way I figure, the Sisters of Salem coven has been around for a long time. Three centuries plus. And no one outside the coven really knows how many members they have, or what level of influence they possess.”

“No one outside of Ambretta, you mean?”

“Granted,” I said. “But think about it. Did you see a computer back there?”

Patience frowned. “Now that you mention it, no.”

“Neither did I,” I said. “And because of that, I’d be willing to bet the coven still conducts most of their business by word of mouth or the post office.”

“That’s a pretty big assumption to make.”

“Might be it is,” I said. “But it’s also not entirely unfounded. The first time I met Ambretta, she tried to convince me to drop the case against her former sisters. She was afraid that a criminal investigation would result in other members of the coven being dragged into the public’s eye. Say what you will about the sisters, but they value their privacy.”

Patience snorted. “You would too if your kind had a history of being burned at the stake.”

“No doubt,” I said. “But the Horseman’s been picking them off one by one for weeks now, meaning he’s either an incredibly patient hunter, or else—”

“He’s running low on targets.”

I nodded. “It’s not like he can just hack a database and download a member’s list. Course, that would all change if they start gathering together. All he’d need to do is keep watch on the members he does know about, and make a log of anyone else who shows up.”

“Darn,” she said. “You might be right. So what do we do?”

“We stay on the bodies,” I said. “They’re still our best clue. Find out what the connection might be, then use that as a way to flush the Horseman out. Preferably before he has a chance to hurt anyone else.”

Patience nodded, and drew in a long breath, wrinkling her nose before letting it out in a huff. “All this thinking puts a bad taste in my mouth. You know anyplace we might be able to get some cake around here?”

I glanced sideways at her. “I can do you one better than that. How would you like a real authentic Boston treat?”

“Just so long as it’s sweet,” she said. “And big. Last meal before I flew out, they tried serving me chocolate mousse in these little shot glasses. I sent it back and told them to bring me a beer mug full.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” I said.

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MIT Dormitories. April 15th

1747hrs

I headed for my apartment, parking along the curb and running inside while Patience waited in the car. Yosemite was up and about, running loops on his hamster wheel, and I made some encouraging noises and double-checked his food before slipping into the kitchen and withdrawing two boxes of cream pies. Both had come with obscene notes attached, but I'd burned them in the street, refusing to let such filth cross my doorstep. The pies, however, were from a reputable bakery in the city, and had been delivered sealed and untouched. I balanced them in one hand as I locked up my door and made my way back out to the car, opening the door and dropping them down into Patience's lap.

"Oh, hey now," Patience said. "What's all this?"

"Probably as close to dinner as we're going to get tonight," I said. "Hopefully it's enough to hold you over."

"We'll just see about that," Patience said. She seized the first box, and unwrapped the sealing foil, using the plastic utensil to cut herself a large slice before lifting it from the holder and taking a bite. She chewed thoughtfully for a second before a slow smile split her face. "It's cake!"

"Technically, it's pie."

"Girl, please," she said. "I know my sweets, and this is a cake with custard filling."

I inclined my head, acquiescing the point. "So, we're good?"

She nodded and made an agreeable sound, already on her second bite. "You want some?" she asked.

I shivered and shook my head, having already eaten my bodyweight in cream pies over the past few weeks. Honestly,

it was a miracle my teeth weren't falling out, and I didn't even want to think about my next cleaning.

"You buy these in bulk?" Patience asked.

"Not exactly," I said. "The Boston Globe ran a piece about me in the newspaper a few weeks back. Ever since, people have been sending them in left and right."

"Darn, girl. Sign me up for that program. I've a mind to take some of these home with me."

"You're more than welcome to them," I said. "As many as you can fit on the plane."

Patience gave me a sideways glance, possibly thinking I was mocking her, but my face stayed smooth and she gave a soft grunt after a moment. "You know what? I may have misjudged you, Chloe. You're alright."

"Thanks, Patience," I said. "That means a lot."

"So where we going?"

"The Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

"The college?" she asked. "Why?"

"Because that's where Jenni Sexton lived," I said, and held up the piece of paper Ambretta had given me.

Traffic picked up as the sun began to descend, the inevitable rush-hour mass slowing our pace to a crawl as we made our way through Back Bay and across the Harvard Bridge. I resisted the urge to activate my lights and sirens, and forced myself not to weave in and out of the lanes as we inched our way closer to the university.

First established in 1861, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, commonly referred to by its acronym MIT, was the premier technological institute in the state, and served as the alma mater for multiple Nobel Laureates, Turing Award recipients, Fields Medal winners, MacArthur Fellows, and over forty astronauts. The campus itself occupied more than a

mile along the Charles River, and housed more than sixty-five research centers and laboratories, including an actual nuclear reactor.

I pulled onto the university grounds and followed the signs toward the dormitories. There was construction in the area, and I ended up being forced to park north of the campus, out near Fort Washington Park.

We exited the car, and I fastened my police badge onto the chain around my neck and slid it down beneath my shirt. I also brought my jacket in close, using it to hide the pistol on my belt. Neither MIT nor Cambridge was known to be anti-law enforcement, but rumors have a way of carrying, and I didn't want to risk anyone unsavory getting wind of our presence here until we had a chance to look around.

Jenni's address led us to the Burton-Connor dormitory house. Nine stories tall, it was located along the edge of the Charles River, and offered its inhabitants a scenic view of the Boston skyline as well as Kenmore Square. Getting inside presented a problem, or would have, if not for Patience. I had no doubt that I could have flashed my badge and found my way in, but whoever saw me likely would have assumed I was with narcotics, and word of my presence would have spread like wildfire, as students scrambled to hide their Adderall and Ritalin.

Luckily, that proved not to be necessary, as Patience wasted no time seizing the first student we saw by the back of his hoodie and marching him over to the door. We hit a brief snag, when it turned out that he didn't actually live there and couldn't get us past the doors, but luck was on our side, and the second student she seized tapped in the code, then held the door for us as we nodded our thanks and made our way inside.

Dormitories aren't generally known for their spacious accommodations, and Burton-Connor was no different. Narrow hallways covered with flyers and advertisements with pull-away bottoms lined the walls, their curled tips brushing

against our shoulders as we made our way to the elevator. Jenni lived on the fifth floor, and we rode the elevator up and made our way down the hall, eventually arriving at a corner door overlooking the western roadway. I hadn't given much thought to how we were going to actually get inside, but once again, luck was on our side, because as I drew up beside the doorway, I caught wind of footsteps inside.

“This the place?” Patience asked.

“Seems like it,” I said.

I debated for a moment, then lifted my hand and knocked several times. Nothing happened for a moment, then there was the sound of footsteps, and the lock turned, the door opening to reveal a woman standing in the doorway.

She was college age, tall and slender, with sun-kissed skin in defiance of the New England weather and shadowed eyes. There were half a dozen purple streaks in her dark hair, their crisscrossing paths and lines suggesting a wild spirit.

“Help you?” she asked.

“Hopefully,” I said. “We're here to inquire about Jenni.”

The young woman snorted and didn't quite roll her eyes. “I might have guessed. She isn't here.”

“I'm aware,” I said. “Do you mind if we come in and take a look around?”

The woman's expression instantly changed, moving from annoyed to wary. “Are you with the University?”

“Not exactly,” I said, and drew my badge out from beneath my shirt. “Boston PD,”

The woman's eyes widened, and she hesitated a moment before stepping back and opening the door. “Okay, come on in, I guess.”

She stepped back to allow us entry inside the dormitory, which was laid out as one might expect. Two beds occupied

opposite ends of the room, with a small portable closet and a shared desk between them. Someone had stripped the sheets on the left-most bed, and folded the blanket neatly on top. There were no posters or artwork on the wall, and sparse few belongings in the drawers of the nightstand. Two closed laptops sat on the desk, and a third open, its screen displaying a photograph showing a black helicopter diving nose-first into the Grand Canyon.

“I’m Mary, by the way,” the girl said. “Mary Han.”

“Sergeant Chloe Mayfield,” I said. “This is Constable Patience Woods.”

“Constable?”

“It’s a long story,” Patience said.

“You and Jenni were roommates?” I asked.

Mary nodded. “Going on two years now. Why? Did something happen to her?”

“Afraid I’m not at liberty to say at the moment,” I said. “Do you, by chance, have any pictures of her?”

“Uh, no, sorry.”

“You guys weren’t close?”

Mary shook her head. “Not really. The university pairs like-majors together in the hopes that students can help one another study and such, but outside of computer engineering we didn’t have a whole lot in common. She was all into that wicca stuff.”

“And you’re not?”

“No way. I work on programming aeronautical computer systems as well as flight simulators. Mostly for helicopters and smaller aircraft.”

“Impressive.” I motioned back toward the laptop and the image on the screen. “That you?”

The corner of Mary's mouth flicked up into a smile. "Yeah. A couple of years ago. I was one of the youngest people in Nevada history to qualify for my pilot's license."

"Looks like you did more than qualify." I drew in a long breath, and exhaled while peering around. "Back at the door, you didn't seem surprised to see us. Have people been here before asking about Jenni?"

"Sure," Mary said. "A bunch of times."

"Like who?"

"The floor leader, for one." She noted my blank expression and explained. "The university allows seniors to act as floor leaders in exchange for reduced living expenses. They're supposed to watch over us, and make sure everyone is following the rules, but most of the guys just use it as an excuse to try to sleep with younger classmen."

"Lovely," I said. "Anyone else?"

"Campus security came by a few times as well."

"What for?"

She hesitated, considering how much to tell before she spoke again. "You know what Jenni was, right?"

"I know what she presented herself as."

"Then you know she'd been having some problems because of it."

"What kind of problems?" I asked.

"Academic probation for one," Mary said. "All this Wicca stuff wasn't so bad at first, but after last fall, she started getting really obsessed with it. She'd go to meetings four or five times a week and even started staying out all night. She was slipping behind in her classes. Me and some of the others helped her where we could, but you can't exactly carry someone through a program like this, if you know what I mean."

I glanced at the trio of laptops. "I can believe it."

“Anyway, being put on academic probation meant that she lost some of her scholarship money. She’s from in-state, but even so, lab time is expensive. To make up the difference, she started selling things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Wiccan stuff,” she said. “Potions and love charms, and little bags of old kitchen spices that she’d prayed over. I guess some of the students saw them and thought she was dealing actual drugs. They came in and tossed the room, my stuff too, thanks so much. After that, she moved most of her personal stuff off campus.”

“Hence why her side seems a bit sparse,” I said.

I stepped aside and opened the closet, peering into Jenni’s side. There wasn’t much there. A couple of changes of clothes, an MIT sweatshirt that looked as if it had never been worn, and a few spiral notebooks, all of which turned out to be blank except one. I lifted the notebook and flipped open the cover, glancing briefly through the pages. They looked to be classroom notes, written in crisp, precise handwriting. Most of them were too technical for me to easily grasp, but I noted a few hand-drawn doodles thrown in, mostly plants and vines, encircling the pages. “You think she had another apartment?”

“I don’t see how she could afford it,” Mary said. “More likely she was leaving it at a friend’s place.”

“Do you know of any friends she had on campus? Anyone who might be able to provide more information?”

She shook her head. “No sorry. She’d mention people from time to time, but they were always from her group, and they always had weird names.”

“Weird how?”

“Just... weird. Wiccan weird. Names like Belladonna or Moonbeam.”

Patience glanced at me. “Code names?”

“Could be,” I said. “More likely, they were just coven members.”

The Sisters of Salem had been around for over three centuries. I hadn’t considered it before now, but it was likely that they had generational membership among some of the families in Boston. Young girls who’d been raised around the coven, who would join when they came of age.

“Any chance you might have Jenni’s class schedule?” I asked, thinking that maybe I could ask around and see if she had any closer friends.

“No, sorry,” Mary said.

I made a considering sound, and flipped to the final page of the notebook, causing a loose paper to come free. I caught it before it could hit the ground, then unfolded it, noting the name written on the inside.

“Any idea who Tony Galuhn might be?” I asked.

“You mean Professor Galuhn?” she asked. “Uh, sure. He works in the biotechnology department. He also teaches some of the more advanced computer courses.”

“You’ve taken him?”

She nodded. “A couple of times. He grades on a curve.”

“Any idea where I might be able to find him?”

“His office is over by the Microsystems Technology Lab.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I motioned to Patience, and the two of us finished our sweep of the room but didn’t find anything else of note. As we went to leave, Mary stopped me at the door.

“Sergeant?” she asked. “Is Jenni ever coming back?”

I hesitated for half a second. “Officially, I can’t comment on an active investigation.”

“But unofficially?”

I stared at her for a moment, then shook my head ever so slightly and walked out the door.

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Microsystems Technology Lab.

April 15th 1849hrs

The MIT campus was neat and orderly, with well-lit pathways and large signs clearly marking the way. We passed a few other students along the walking paths, most of them en route to night classes, or else looking to catch dinner in the cafeteria or hunker down in the library for a few hours of studying. I tried to ignore the curious looks we received as we made our way along the path, but it was difficult. Neither Patience nor I could really pass for students, and we didn't quite fit the mold for faculty either. I could feel their youthful eyes lingering on me as we passed.

We found the Microsystems Technology Lab and made our way inside, walking up to the elevator and consulting the directory along the wall. Professor Galuhn's office was listed on the third floor, and we rode the elevator up in silence.

There were several empty classrooms spread along the hallway, along with a scattering of administration and professorial offices. I followed the numerical signs down to Professor Galuhn's office, and arrived just as the door swung open and a woman backed out.

She was in her early thirties, with a hearty, mid-west complexion, sharp cheekbones, and soft brown hair that ran halfway down her back. Dressed in jeans and a loose flannel shirt, she was lugging half a dozen textbooks in her arms, and didn't notice us standing there until it was too late. My warning cry fell on deaf ears as she spun about and crashed directly into Patience. The Maidstone constable let out a surprised grunt, but her larger frame kept her standing even as it sent the other woman crashing to the floor. Her books slid sideways and came down in a tumble, scattering loose sheets of paper from their pages.

“Oww,” she complained, her mouth curving down into a low frown.

“That looked like fun,” I said. “You okay?”

I bent down and set about retrieving her spilled belongings, gathering her loose papers and stacking them atop the textbooks. Then I reached over and helped her up to her feet. She winced and rose gingerly, grimacing and rubbing her back as she straightened.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said. “Sorry about that. My fault. Guess I should start looking where I’m going.”

“No harm done,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Patience said, rubbing her stomach. “That hurt.”

“Sorry,” the woman apologized for a second time.

“She’ll be fine,” I said, ignoring Patience’s glare. “I’m guessing you’re not Professor Galuhn?”

The woman shook her head. “No, my name’s Ashley Flowers. I’m Professor Galuhn’s teaching assistant. He’s not here right now.”

“Any idea where we might be able to find him?”

“Uh, do you have an appointment?”

“No,” I said. “But I think he’ll want to speak with me.”

“He does private tutoring at this time,” Ashley said. “I can show you the way. It’s a small class, so I don’t think he’ll mind.”

I nodded and motioned for her to lead the way. She paused to haul her mountain of textbooks up off the floor, balancing them carefully on her hip as she turned and locked the office door. The ease in which she handled the book’s weight bolstered my suspicion that she wasn’t native to New England. More like the mid-west, possibly Kansas, if I had to guess. Once she finished, we made our way back to the elevator and

descended one floor, following Ashley down a long hallway to a corner classroom.

It was a smaller classroom, with space for about twenty seats or so. Fluorescent lights shone brightly overhead, highlighting the narrow tables angled to face the teacher's pulpit and desk, the latter of which contained a large bundle of gray cloth wound atop it. There was only one other student inside, along with a man I assumed to be Professor Galuhn, standing in front of the classroom.

In his early fifties, Professor Galuhn was on the shorter side, with wavy salt and pepper hair and dark eyes. He wore a red and blue sunset Hawaiian shirt beneath an olive-green jacket with patches along the elbows, and stood with his back to us, facing a whiteboard displaying some sort of electrical circuit and their connection points. A pair of figures sat on the desk beside his computer bag. The first was of a woman dressed in a hula skirt. The second was one of those Polynesian tiki masks,

“Uh, Professor?” Ashley said as we entered. She walked across the classroom and dropped her textbooks down onto the desk with a heavy *thump*. “Someone here to see you.”

Professor Galuhn blinked and then turned to face us. “Yes?” he asked. “May I help you?”

“Hopefully,” I said, and flashed my badge. “Sergeant Chloe Mayfield with Boston PD. This is Constable Woods. May we speak to you for a moment?”

Professor Galuhn looked momentarily taken aback, but he recovered quickly. “Of course,” he said and glanced toward the seated student. “Pranav, catch Ashley up on what we've been discussing. And could one of you please call Vihaan and remind him about tonight's session? I should only be a minute.”

We slipped back through the door and out into the hallway. Professor Galuhn followed us out and closed the door behind

us.

“There now,” he said. “What can I do for you, officers?”

“We’re inquiring into the activities of one of your students,” I said. “A young woman named Jenni Sexton. Do you know her?”

“Jenni Sexton...” he said, and frowned.

“Name not ringing any bells?”

He gave an uncomfortable shrug. “You’ll have to excuse me. I deal with several hundred students a semester. It can be difficult to keep track of them all.”

“She was in the computer engineering program,” I said.

“I’m afraid that doesn’t really help to narrow it down,” he said. “This is MIT. Every student here is required to have a high degree of computer proficiency. Was there something specific about her that you were interested in?”

“Right now, we’re just trying to gather a more accurate picture of her life here at MIT. We found your name written down in one of her notebooks. We were hoping you might be able to help us.”

“I see,” he said. “Well, I can certainly check my class attendance records. It’s possible she was a student of mine. I could also have Ashley check our office hours appointment book. It’s not unusual for a student to approach me seeking assistance on a project. Maybe she was looking to make an appointment.”

“I would appreciate that.”

“Of course,” he said. “Was there anything else?”

“Actually, yeah,” Patience said. “You know a Dennis Pieheart?”

Professor Galuhn’s eyes widened. “Dennis? Of course, he’s one of my graduate students. A very bright young man. He and I worked together on several projects over the past....” His

voice trailed off, and something in his expression changed. “Is he alright?”

Neither of us said anything, and Professor Galuhn’s face paled by several shades. “Oh, my gosh,” he said. “Do the families know?”

“Dennis Pieheart’s next of kin have been notified,” I said.

“And the other girl?”

“Jenni’s family is proving harder to track down. Hence our presence here.”

“Do you know...”

“Both investigations are still ongoing,” I said.

“I’m so sorry,” Professor Galuhn said. “I had no idea. It’s such a shame. If there’s anything I can do...”

“We’re hoping someone might be able to paint a clearer picture of what their day-to-day lives were like,” I said.

“We’re also trying to ascertain if they knew each other.”

“It’s possible,” he said. “The university encourages social groups and outings among the departments, and biotechnology and computer science are fairly intertwined fields. It’s likely that they would have run across one another a time or two. I’m afraid I can’t really be more specific than that.”

“I understand,” I said. “Last question. Have you ever heard of the name Walter Crosier?”

Professor Galuhn frowned, considering. “It sounds vaguely familiar.”

“He works in the financial sector.”

Galuhn’s frown deepened, and several seconds passed before he shook his head. “It’s possible I met him at a university function. MIT runs several fundraisers throughout the year, and I fill in wherever I can. Perhaps if I saw his face?”

I shook my head because I didn't have a picture on hand and drew a business card from my pocket. "It was just a shot in the dark. If you should think of anything else or come across any more information you think we should know about, please don't hesitate to reach out."

"I'll be sure to do that," he said.

He accepted my card and slipped it into his shirt pocket, nodding once before turning and heading back into his classroom. I motioned toward Patience, and the two of us made our way back down the hall to the elevators, descending one floor and exiting through the doorway.

The sun had slipped down below the horizon while we were inside, casting the MIT campus into a soft twilight. Lights illuminated the walking path, highlighting the students' silhouettes as they passed. We started walking back toward the car, moving at a soft pace.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Patience answered. "It's like she was hardly even here. Even her own roommate didn't know more than a few basic bits."

"I was just thinking the same thing," I said. "I know some kids are shy by nature, but this runs deeper than that. It's almost as if she had one foot already out the door."

"Wonder what was holding her back?"

"Who knows," I said.

We drew within sight of the Burton-Connor dormitory and followed the sidewalk around the edge of the building, making our way between Roberts and Fran O'Brian Field before crossing Vassar Street and turning west.

"You know what's worse? We still have no idea why the Horseman went to such lengths to retrieve Dennis' body. I mean, why didn't he just take it with him the first time?"

“Maybe he had a change of heart?” she said. “Or maybe he wasn’t able to.”

“Or maybe he realized there was something on the body that could lead us to the identity of his killer?”

“Maybe,” Patience said.

“We could try talking to Dennis Pieheart’s roommate again?”

Patience shook her head. “I read the report already. Poor kid seemed pretty shaken up. I doubt he had much more to add.”

“In that case, we’re back at square one,” I said. “Might be we need to take another swing at Ambretta, or else some of the other members of the coven. If Jenni really was as active as Mary Han seemed to believe, then maybe they can help us figure out—”

Patience drew up short, snapping her hand out and seizing my forearm, causing me to stop short.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s the big idea?”

“Chloe,” Patience said, her voice breathless. “Look. In the park.”

I frowned and peered out toward the park, narrowing my eyes against the darkness.

Fort Washington Park was a well-known site within Boston, containing the oldest surviving fortifications of the American Revolutionary war and the last remnants of the Siege of Boston. A heavy wrought-iron fence surrounded the property, its spear-tipped pickets stretched between wide stone gate-pillars with images of cannons carved into their base. A quartet of man-made earthworks formed a half circle, with two large decommissioned cannons facing east and a statue of a soldier on horseback erected between them.

My frown deepened as the seconds passed, and I cast a confused glance toward Patience. “What am I supposed to be ___”

The words died in my throat as the statue, the one I’d assumed to be a continental soldier on horseback, moved. The horse trotted forward a handful of steps, carrying its rider through a scattering of shadows cast by the trees overhead and back out the other side. The shifting shadows, as well as the light from the freshly risen moon, highlighted the Horseman’s broad shoulders, as well as the sword fastened along his belt, and the leather bag hanging from his saddle. More importantly, it also highlighted the empty space where his head should have been.

“Chloe?” Patience hissed, her voice low. “What do we—”

“Run!” I snapped.

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Chase Through the Park. April 15th 1935hrs

They say that, as a society, we've become too dependent on technology. That we've lost our connection with nature, foregoing our ability to adapt to the elements in lieu of comfort. They say we've lost our fear of the unknown, that we've forgotten our place in the hierarchy of primal predators.

They say a lot of things. But in this case, I'm here to tell you.

They are absolutely right.

There's a reason that humans have waged war atop horseback for thousands of years. It isn't just for the increased height, speed, and power that comes from doing so. It's all of those things *and more*. Words cannot describe the feeling that comes from seeing a skilled rider mounted atop a half ton beast coming right at you. It's a different kind of fear than most people ever experience, one that cuts with acute precision and slices down deep into your guts.

Mounted, the Headless Horseman stood better than nine feet tall, his shoulders broad and menacing as he reached down and seized his sword's grip. The raven-pommeled saber came free with a *wisp* of metal on leather, the blade catching the freshly risen moonlight as his horse reared, carrying him up into the night to deliver a silent salute.

Patience and I were running before his horse touched back down.

I'm not all that familiar with horses, but I could see that his was a sport horse, bred for jumping, with slanted shoulders and powerful hind legs able to propel it forward over obstacles. A midnight-black drape covered its body, extending over its back and down to its forelegs. Three steps into our

flight, the Horseman kicked his heels into the beast's flank and sent it charging forward.

It covered the park in a handful of strides and leaped over the iron perimeter fence, clearing the tapered spikes with ease and coming down onto the other side. Its shoes hit the cobblestone with a flash, metal and stone grinding together in a small shower of sparks. The horse clearly hadn't enjoyed being forced to stillness, and it jerked its head from side to side, letting out a whinnying cry as it took off in pursuit.

Our footsteps slammed down against the pavement and my blood sounded in my ears even as my heart threatened to beat its way right out of my chest. We made it ten yards before Patience began to slow. Strong, determined, and tenacious as she might have been, Patience wasn't a distance runner. A quick glance to my left revealed that she wasn't going to be able to keep pace for much longer, and since there was no way in heck I was leaving her behind, it begged the question, what *was* I going to do?

There are lots of things I've learned during my time in law enforcement. I've learned to read between the lines, how to escalate and deescalate a situation. I like to think I've learned a bit more over this past year about who to trust, and when to play my cards closer to the vest.

I have not, unfortunately, learned anything even remotely resembling effective combative tactics against a horse and rider intent on taking my head and my memory.

Because at the end of the day, that's what this was really about.

The Horseman wasn't just here to kill us. If that was his goal, he would have just driven up on us with a semi-automatic weapon and blown us to bits where we stood. Or else hired some two-bit thug with tinted windows and a hooptie ride to do it. This went deeper than that. The

Horseman wanted his victims' deaths to mean something. To serve as a signal, a warning. He wanted not only to end his victims' lives, but to deny their loved ones the closure that comes with a proper burial. He wanted to humiliate them.

Jenni Sexton, a proud coven member in good standing. He'd taken her identity, likely knowing that her fingerprints wouldn't be in the system, and used her death as a way to spread fear among the coven.

Dennis Pieheart, a gifted academic student. He'd killed him, then taken away his remains, stealing away his family's chance to say their final goodbyes.

Walter Crosier, he'd killed on Acorn Street, in the heart of Beacon Hill, surrounded by those whose fortunes he'd managed. He'd left his remains there, sprawled in the open for all to see, as a way to show them that no amount of money or physical wealth would keep him at bay.

And us? Well, I suspected the Horseman viewed Patience and me as more than just a nuisance. We were an opportunity, a chance to show the world what he could do, and more importantly, to show the law enforcement community what they were helpless to prevent.

It was that last one that really got to me.

Working in law enforcement isn't like other jobs. It can't be. There's too much anger, too much hate and heartbreak. You see the worst of humanity, and you have to deal with it while trying to keep the innocence of your soul intact.

I'm not one to claim that all cops are good. They're not. In every department you're going to have guys like Mack, corrupt egotists who only care about themselves and aren't above lining their pockets with blood money. But you also have guys like Rickson, who would willingly throw themselves into the path of a drunk driver if it meant saving an innocent life.

I'm not sure which camp someone would count me in, but I know which one I'd lean toward if given the choice, and sure, some days, it can feel like the Mack's outnumber the Ricksons, and that we're losing some sort of silent war for the soul of this nation, but every once in a while, someone shines through with an act of heroism and bravery that even the most callous heart can't help but to stop and admire.

I'd joined Blue Moon because I'd refused to remain silent in the face of depravity, and I'd stayed because I believed that I could actually do some good. That the people who called weren't merely gullible losers who got what they deserved. They were everyday citizens, just like you and me, most of whom had been through some sort of hardship or traumatic event that made them vulnerable to predators looking to take advantage of their grief and regret. I believed that what I was doing was important, and that the people who would prey on that weakness deserved to be caught and punished for their crimes.

And that included the Horseman.

Still running, I lowered my hand down and drew my pistol. A quick turn revealed the Horseman in hot pursuit, closing fast. I couldn't afford to stop, he would be on me in seconds if I did, so I angled my stride, raised my gun and aligned my sights on his form.

The Horseman noted my weapon, and he shifted his body to the right, coming around the horse's side so that he was almost riding entirely on the creature's flank.

Animal, I told myself. Not creature.

The Horseman was just a man, and the horse was just a horse. He wasn't a revenant, and the beast wasn't some magical mount risen from the grave, boasting increased speed, stamina, and maneuverability. Funny how hard it was to remember that when he was bearing down on me.

I started to shift my sights, intending to follow the Horseman's form, but didn't have the angle. My next impulse was to aim for the horse itself, but something told me that was a bad idea. For starters, I had no idea how many rounds it would take to bring down an animal that size. And that's assuming it could even be hurt. It was possible that whatever means the Horseman used to deflect my shots earlier would extend to the horse as well. Plus, I had no idea how the horse would react to being shot, but I suspected it would not be positive. The animal was already honing down on me. Did I really want to give it even more motivation not to like me?

I shook my head and dropped my pistol, aiming not toward the horse, but at the ground in front of it. I fired three times, and each bullet struck the cobblestones and ricocheted off with a heavy shower of sparks. The sudden eruption of light caught the horse's eye, and it jerked involuntarily, jerking right as they closed the final few paces toward our running forms.

"Down!" I screamed, and shoved Patience.

She went down in a heap, and I followed my own advice, throwing myself forward into a roll and grinding my shoulder into the cobblestone as the Horseman's blade swept past.

I felt the wind of the saber pass over my head, and smelled the scent of the horse as he went past, the heavy echo of his footsteps shaking the cobblestones beneath me. I'd been fast enough to avoid the blade, but couldn't avoid the scrapes and cuts that came from going head over heels across the aged stones. Thankfully, my surging adrenaline allowed me to ignore the worst of it.

The horse charged past our downed forms and continued on for another half dozen strides before the Horseman reined him in. The horse let out a whinnying scream as the Horseman yanked the reins, its backside momentarily dropping as the pair came around to face us.

“Come on!” I screamed and bounced to my feet. I seized Patience and hauled her up after me, giving her a push in the direction we’d just come from. “That way! Into the park!”

We raced back in the direction of our car, cutting left and slipping through the entrance into Fort Washington Park. The grass felt slick beneath my feet, and I mentally willed myself not to fall as the sounds of the pursuing Horseman grew louder in my ears. A flash of motion caught my eye, and I glanced back to find him closing in from the opposite side of the fence. The Horseman’s mount squealed and snorted, thick cloth flapping as it exhaled out through its nose. My gaze caught the horse’s eye, just for a moment, and its blackened orbs seemingly drew in what little light there was.

The Horseman shifted in the saddle, drawing his saber and bringing it close to the fence’s edge, allowing the metal to slap against the halberd and spearpoint pickets. The sound sent shivers up my spine, and caused my footsteps to falter, but I caught my balance fast, and forced myself to keep going.

I could see our car in the distance, standing there in the barren parking lot just past the park’s edge. No matter how fast the Horseman’s mount might be, it couldn’t match the speed of a modern-day automobile. If we could only get there, we might be able to save our own lives. If we could—

The Horseman veered away, looping back out into the street and turning in a ninety-degree angle. He slapped his heels into the animal’s flank, and the horse surged forward, leaping the fence for the second time and coming down not ten feet behind us. I heard the impact when it landed, and could smell the beast’s sweat even as it tore through the grass and rounded on us. Fear welled up in me, threatening to choke me and leave me a trembling mess, but I forced myself to swallow, and told myself that this was exactly what I’d been counting on.

You see, sometimes it pays to be a homer, especially when it means you get to know the landscape better than your

opponents.

I'd been to this park before. There are exits on every side of the wall, but the western wall, the one leading to our car, was narrower than most, and lined with six miniature iron cannons attached to concrete bases standing at vertical attention. There was enough space for a person to fit through, maybe even two, provided they were slimmer than average, but no way a horse and rider could follow us out. Furthermore, the western side backed right up to Talbot Street, and the adjacent parking lot, meaning that if the Horseman tried to jump the wall, his mount would risk coming down on three different surfaces. First there was the red-brick sidewalk, which was bordered by a cement edge, and then, lastly, the blacktop street pavement. Three surfaces, all at slightly different heights, with three different feels to them. The slightest misstep could cause the horse to lose its footing, and possibly even break something on the way down.

Unfortunately, whether from previous experience or some other unseen manner, the Horseman seemed to realize what I was doing. I heard his heels hit the horse's flank, heard the beast scream, and the sounds of its footfalls increased, the rhythmic pattern rising as it closed in on me.

"Go Patience!" I screamed. "Go!"

Remember what I said about two people being able to fit through if they were slimmer than average? Yeah, that wasn't us. Patience was what could only be lovingly described as big-boned, and I'd been snacking on cream pies for the better part of five weeks. Trying to squeeze through together would most likely result in one, if not both of us, being stuck, so I was forced to ignore every instinct in my body and drop back, slowing my footsteps.

Patience reached the exit, and she sucked in a heavy breath, tightening her abdomen and twisting her body to the side. She slipped between the upright cannons and came out on the other side, racing over the sidewalk and into the parking lot.

I pumped my legs and dropped my shoulders, lowering my head and forcing every ounce of speed I could. The Horseman's galloping mount was so close I could practically feel its breath, and the echo caused by its hoofs hitting the earth shook the ground beneath my feet, each step threatening to send me crashing face first into the grass where I would be trampled.

I was moving fast as I closed on the park's edge, too fast to really time anything properly, so I trusted to instinct, flinging myself the last six feet and twisting my body sideways like a baseball player attempting to steal home. Had my aim been off, I would have crashed headfirst into one of the iron cannons and broken my neck. Luck was with me, and the moment I leapt, I felt something sweep past. There was a flash of light as the Horseman's blade passed within inches of my skull, the curved blade smashing against the top of the fence with a resounding *clang* as I sailed through the space between cannons and came out the other side.

Landing on the red-brick and cobblestones wasn't fun, I believe I mentioned that already, and it was certainly no better the second time around, but neither was being beheaded, and the inherent threat of that allowed me to ignore the plethora of scrapes and bruises that came about as a result of landing. I hit the ground and rolled twice before managing to regain my feet. Patience was a few feet ahead of me, and I followed in her wake, having to force my legs for several steps before I was able to resume anything even remotely resembling a rhythm.

My car was where we'd left it, looking untouched, which came as no real surprise. Unless someone was intentionally looking to sabotage me, any reputable car thief in Boston would have taken one glance inside and kept moving. It was the lone benefit I had found to owning the vehicle, and under the circumstances, it was a good one.

I dug the keys from my pocket as Patience danced from foot to foot, breathing heavily and casting frequent glances back toward the park.

“Chloe?”

“I know,” I said.

I fumbled the key, almost dropped it, but grabbed it at the last moment, bringing it up and sliding it into the keyhole. I unlocked the vehicle, and we piled in, slamming the doors closed before I inserted the key into the ignition and brought the engine to life.

“Where is he?” Patience asked. She’d turned in her seat and was peering out the back window. “I don’t see him. Do you see him?”

I didn’t, but counted that as being for the best. As the engine came to life, I kicked it into reverse, and backed out of the spot, kicking up dust and little rocks. I hit the brake and shifted into drive before dropping my foot back down atop the pedal.

My car gave a little whimper, and lurched forward like an asthmatic geriatric, wheezing and puttering smoke from the exhaust as it went forward. A chain-link fence adorned with blue tarps surrounded the lot, forcing me to accelerate down the aisle toward the exit.

“I don’t see him,” Patience said, her voice breathless from beside me. “Where did he go? I don’t see him, Chloe. It’s like he just— Watch out!”

I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye, and the Horseman appeared from between the cars to my right. He angled his horse toward us, and the beast leaped into the air, bounding over the hood of our car and coming down smoothly onto the other side. As he passed, the Horseman shifted in the saddle, leaning hard to the right and swung his blade around, landing a hard blow atop our windshield.

I have to say upfront that I'd never really given much thought to the idea of magical swords. Probably should have, given how prominent they are in magical folklore. Excalibur, Arondight, Gramr, Zulfiqar, Durendal, Harpe and so on. Every major legend seems to have one. Heck, even Ethel claimed her rapier was papal-blessed, which I suppose would amount to the same thing. I'd never made a point of fighting her on it, since she'd used it more than once to save my life.

I wasn't willing to admit that the Headless Horseman might possess some sort of magical weapon imbued with the spirits of the dead.

However.

The Horseman's blade landed solid, and all the windows in the vehicle, not just the windshield mind you, but all the windows, exploded simultaneously, blasting glass in every direction. Bits and shards rained down over me, slicing shallow cuts in my exposed hands and finding their way into my jacket and beneath my shirt collar.

The physics of it all denied rational explanation, other than to attribute it to an aging automobile that had already survived too many Boston winters. Regardless, I didn't have time to debate it, because the sudden eruption sent us careening to the right. We crashed into the nearest parked car, bounced off, and caught the one beside it, grinding our passenger side fender against four vehicles in total before I regained control of the vehicle. It was a miracle the airbags didn't go off, although that too could be attributed to advanced age and overall neglect the vehicle had endured before coming into my care.

I seized the wheel and brought it back under control as we reached the end of the aisle. We came out the exit onto the roadway and I turned left, heading the wrong way down Waverly St, hoping fervently that we wouldn't end up in a head-on collision.

"Chloe!" Patience screamed from beside me.

I acted on instinct, turning the wheel and carrying us up onto the sidewalk as the Horseman reappeared. He swept in from behind us, his horse drawing level with our vehicle an instant before he leaned over and stabbed his blade inside.

I jerked right, practically ending up in Patience's lap, as the Horseman stabbed at me. His blade caught the edge of my shoulder, slicing through the space in my jacket and sending a burning line of pain across my side.

I had no experience with the difficulties associated with sword-fighting atop horseback, although I assume they are plentiful. The Horseman, however, seemed to have little problem managing it, and drew back his sword, shifting his aim so that the blade would fall lower this time. And by lower, I mean just below my rib-cage, into my side and through the muscle into my intestines. I couldn't do much, given that I still had one hand on the wheel, and the other was in the process of trying to push myself up. Thankfully, I had Patience, and she jerked her nightstick from her bag, bringing it around and swinging down hard as the Horseman's blade swept back inside the car.

The blunted end of the nightstick struck the Horseman's sword, knocking the blade away from my side and sending the tip into the back of my seat cushion. It pierced through the upholstery and struck one of the springs, letting out a metallic cry as the Horseman tore it free. He started to draw his arm back, intending to strike again, but I pushed myself up to a straightened position, and slammed my foot down on the accelerator.

The vehicle lurched, and then started forward, the speedometer needle rising as we gained speed. I knew we were going the wrong way down a one-way street, and that if any cars, or God forbid pedestrians, had appeared, our chances of stopping in time would be next to zero, but I trusted to fate and the late hour to see us through, and it was a gamble that paid

off. The Horseman fell back, slowly at first, his mount galloping behind us as it strained to keep pace.

We were pulling away, and the Horseman's mount could only push so fast for so long. Another couple of seconds and we'd reach the Brookline intersection and lose him across the bridge. The Horseman seemed to recognize this, and he slid his sword back into its sheath and seized the leather bag attached to his saddle.

I watched through the rear-view mirror as he tore the ends open and reached inside. I didn't see what he grabbed because a pair of headlights appeared ahead of us, reflecting off the side of a nearby storefront, and I snapped my eyes forward. I didn't have time to stop, so I gunned it and swerved wide to avoid the other vehicle as they came off the Chestnut Street turn. The other vehicle slammed on their brakes and then their horn, blasting it long and loud. I ignored them, but couldn't ignore the Horseman behind us as he brought his arm around. I caught a brief flash of something leave his hand, then it flew through the back where our windshield used to be and crashed against our back seat. It hit with a wet-sounding splat, and my first thought was that he'd thrown some sort of sticky-bomb. Fear seized me, and I reached into the back, feeling around until my fingers found the foreign object. It was roughly the size of a cantaloupe, but when I went to seize it, a new fear suddenly appeared, causing my blood to turn to ice, and my heart to sink as my fingers registered the feel of it.

I prayed for a brief moment that I was wrong. That the Horseman had lobbed a cantaloupe, or a basketball, or any one of a hundred other things that might have tricked me through our window. But I wasn't wrong, and a part of me knew it, and refused to allow myself to pretend otherwise.

"Patience," I said, my voice coming out as little more than a breathless whisper.

Patience glanced in the back, and the moan that escaped her mouth made me think she wanted to throw up.

“Drive, Chloe,” she said. “God help us. Just drive.”

I drove.

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Waiting on a Ride. April 15th 2050hrs

But not too far.

Neither of us said a word about what was in the backseat, but once we were over the bridge, I hunted around until I found a relatively well-lit parking lot with a clear field of vision. I didn't think the Horseman was following us, but if I was wrong, we'd see him coming in plenty of time.

Once I parked, we emptied out of the car, closing the doors behind us. Neither of us said anything. I think we were both trying hard to catch our breath, not to mention struggling to come to terms with what had just happened. Several minutes passed, and I'd be lying if I said I felt any better at the end of it, but at least I was able to think more clearly.

I started making some calls.

Specifically, I called the police dispatch system and requested backup in the form of officers, medical personnel, and lastly, forensics.

Then I sat back to wait.

Close to an hour passed before the first emergency responder arrived. I recognized him as a firefighter/EMT named Thomas Michael Lewis.

"Hey, Thomas," I said and waved my hand. "What's shaking?"

"Chloe," he said, coming up with his medical bag slung over one shoulder. Had he gone into professional wrestling, Thomas would have been a baby face, something the other firefighters were quick to point out, but I'd once seen him dislodge a quarter from a choking child's throat, and that made him a darn hero in my book. "Are you okay?"

“Little banged up if I’m being honest.” I snorted, and something between a laugh and a sob slipped out past my lips. “Some guy on a horse just tried to kill me.”

Thomas’s mouth tightened, and he stared at me, his face concerned. I didn’t really blame him. The story sounded nuts to me too, and I’d lived it.

“Do me a favor and look at me.”

I did as Thomas asked, allowing him to flash a little penlight in my eyes, followed by picking some pieces of glass out of my arm. He was just finishing up when a police cruiser pulled up along the side of the curb and Rickson got out.

“I tell you what, Chloe,” Rickson said as he came up beside me. “You may just have the worst luck of anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Appreciate that, Rick,” I said.

“You really got a head back there?”

“See for yourself.”

Rickson stared at me for a moment, then nodded and made his way over to my car. He shined his flashlight into the backseat, and even forewarned, I heard him let out a surprised curse before he came hustling back over.

“Jesus Christ,” he said and shared a look with Thomas. “There really is a head.”

I blinked and then narrowed my eyes. “You thought I was making it up?”

“No, it’s just—” Rickson cleared his throat.

Beside him, Thomas tied off the last bandage, then bid me farewell and strode away, likely on his way to update the other medical personnel.

“Who is she?” Rickson asked.

I shook my head. Once we'd exited the car and I managed to catch my wind, I'd crept back and peered in through the window. It was a woman's head. I didn't think she was young, although it was difficult to tell. She had shoulder-length blonde hair, and her face was still drawn back in the visage of a horrified scream that she must have uttered prior to death. I didn't want to know what color eyes she had.

"No idea. I'm hoping criminal investigations will be able to identify her, or maybe forensics."

"Call said you were attacked by the Horseman. Any chance she was a bystander?"

"Doubtful," I said. "The Horseman already had her in his little sack when he came after us."

"Seriously?" Rickson asked and exhaled. "Unbelievable."

"Tell me about it."

"Seems like only yesterday we were worried about clashes between Southie and Dorchester gangs. Now we got some Halloween nut job running around cutting ladies' heads off. I tell you, it's enough to make a guy consider hanging it up for good."

"You'd never do that."

"I might," he said. "I'm getting too old for this, Chloe. My brother-in-law's been talking about running a charter fishing boat. Maybe I'll go be a fisherman."

"You're not that old," I said. "Besides, who would watch my back with you gone?"

"Fair point," he said, and glanced at his watch. "Speaking of which, forensics will probably be another half hour or so. I'm going to establish a perimeter, but you know they're going to want to keep the car for a while."

"Yeah, I figured," I said, feeling mixed emotions.

On one hand, I'd be lying if I claimed to love my car, but I also didn't relish the idea of taking the T-line to work. The car might have been aging and on the fragrant side, but it allowed me a degree of independence that couldn't be matched by using public transportation.

"Can I offer you a ride home?" Rickson asked.

"Thanks," I said. "But that won't be necessary."

I'd assumed this was going to happen, so during the hour I'd been waiting for Rickson to show up, I'd advised Patience to flag down a taxi to take her back to her hotel. We'd agreed to meet first thing in the morning. After she was gone, I'd made arrangements for my own ride, then settled back to wait.

Two more patrol officers arrived while Rickson was setting up the perimeter. Neither was familiar to me, and neither said anything as they went about cordoning off the area. Ten minutes after that, an unmarked FBI vehicle pulled up along the curb, and a familiar face flashed me a smile from inside.

"Rickson, you got everything you need?" I asked.

"Sure do," he said. "Forensics shouldn't be too much longer. I'm sure whoever's assigned the case will want to speak to you, but it can probably wait until the morning."

I nodded and waved goodbye before heading toward the vehicle. I'd already filled out my written report during the time between when Patience left and Rickson arrived. It was bare bones, admittedly, and I would need to go back and add some addendums to it later, but for now, it should be enough to get everyone started.

Forensics would most likely begin with the head itself, then move on to the car, and finally, the surrounding street. I didn't envy them the night they would have. Whichever detective was assigned the case would probably have Rickson and any other patrol officers going door to door looking for potential witnesses. I doubted they'd have much luck. The heavy course load meant that most of the MIT students had been hunkered

down indoors when the attack occurred. I hadn't noticed anyone nearby, and the dorms were far enough away that, even if the noise carried, they wouldn't have been able to get there in time to see anything.

A more prudent action would have been going door to door trying to access any cameras facing the street. I wasn't sure which way the Horseman had fled, but if we could figure it out, then might be we could track him back to wherever he was staying. Unfortunately, that would take time, and more manpower than just Rickson and two other officers.

Time and manpower.

There never seemed to be enough of either.

I came up alongside the vehicle and dropped into the passenger's seat, glancing over to find FBI Special Agent Alexander Gordan staring at me. Still dressed in his work clothes, his soft brown hair was mussed, and his beard was in need of a trim, but his eyes said he was happy to see me, and the boyish smile on his mouth warmed my chest in a way few other things could.

"We've really got to stop meeting like this," he said.

"Like what?"

"This," he said, and motioned outside. "It's always the same story with us."

"Heists, killer clowns and severed body parts?"

"Exactly."

"How else would you have it?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Dinner would be a good start. Someplace other than back alleys and ghost-filled parks. I'd bring flowers, and we'd order wine. You could wear that little red number hanging in your closet with nothing on underneath. And definitely no bombs."

“Whoa, no bombs? This is sounding dreadfully dull. Next thing you know, you’ll be wanting to buy a little house in suburbia.”

It might have been my imagination, or maybe just a flickering of the shadows, but I thought I saw something in Alex’s face change. He glanced away and put the car into drive, pulling away from the curb and u-turning down the street toward downtown. Several minutes passed before either of us spoke again.

“Would that really be so bad?” he asked.

I glanced at him. “Would what be so bad?”

“A little two-story house outside the city? Something with a white-picket fence and a front porch where we could raise... tomato plants?”

“No,” I said, drawing out the word. “But it’s been hard enough just trying to get our schedules to align for a date night. I’m not sure either of us is ready for the type of commitment that tomato plants require.”

“I’m not saying it has to be right now,” he said. “But it’s something to think about.”

“Are you sure that’s something you want? You’ve never mentioned wanting tomato plants before.”

“I think so,” he said. “Two, maybe three.”

“That’s a lot of tomato plants.”

“Do you want tomato plants?”

I drew in a breath and held it for several long moments. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve thought about it from time to time, but I’m not sure I’d be much of a gardener.”

“I think you’d be an amazing one.”

Another flash of warmth shot through my chest. “Thanks,” I said. “But tomato plants take a lot of work. Someone would probably need to stay home with them. And that would mean

giving up on my career. I don't think I'm ready to do that right now."

"But someday?"

"Maybe," I said. "Are you in a big hurry to get these tomato plants?"

"Not particularly," he said. "For now, I'm content to keep coming out to Cambridge in the middle of the night to rescue you."

"Hate to tell you this, but if that was your goal, you missed it by a good hour."

"Traffic," he said. "Though I did come as soon as I got your call."

"I appreciate that."

"You're not hurt?"

I shook my head. "Just scrapes and bruises. Mostly I'm exhausted."

"Home?"

"Please and thank you," I said.

I relaxed in my seat and let my head lean back on the headrest as we drove. I could feel my mind starting to spin up again, but I forced myself to breathe and willed it to stillness. The last twenty-four hours had been exhausting, and I didn't want to think any more right now. I just wanted to sit here, safe and secure, and watch the lights of the city pass me by.

We cut through Brookline and Back Bay, and arrived in the South End just after nine o'clock. Pulling onto my street, Alex spotted a parking spot two doors down from my apartment. It was a tight squeeze, nestled between an old Cadillac and a sedan I couldn't easily identify but whose owner had spray-painted it in pink and blue zebra print. Alex managed to wedge his way inside, only lightly scraping the bumper of the zebra mobile.

“Darn,” he said and glanced at me. “You didn’t see anything.”

“See what?” I asked.

“That’s my girl.”

We exited the vehicle and made our way up the stairway to my apartment. I inserted my key, but didn’t feel the familiar *click* as the lock turned, causing me to pause and frown.

“Something wrong?” Alex asked.

I hesitated, then turned my doorknob. It opened without complaint, swinging inward to allow me access inside. I stared into the dark for a moment, then reached down and drew my pistol. Alex let out a surprised noise, then drew his own weapon, moving in alongside me as I slowly crept inside.

Any cop who claims to have never cleared their own house before is a liar. We’ve all had those moments, fresh off shift, when we come home and stand in our doorway, something unseen causing us to hesitate. I moved silently into my apartment, flicking on the lights and taking note of the things I saw.

There were dishes in the sink where I’d left them, and my television was still on the wall, the remote sitting on the edge of the couch where I’d left it. My tea kettle was angled on the stove, exactly as it should have been, and my refrigerator door was closed. Yosemite was standing upright in his cage, his momentary excitement at seeing me evaporating once he saw Alex come in behind me. Immediately, he backed away from the cage wall and hissed, his puffed-up cheeks rising to show his little hamster teeth.

“Just try it, pal,” Alex said as he followed me into the kitchen. “I know several sex shops whose clientele would love to get their hands on you.”

“Play nice, boys,” I said as I continued clearing the apartment.

I checked the closet, finding it much as I had left it, and moved on to the bedroom, again finding nothing amiss. I checked my bathroom last, clearing the shower and behind the doorway before holstering my pistol. All of my knick-knacks and personal belongings were where they should have been, no drawers or dirty clothes out of place. There was nothing to suggest anyone had been inside, save for this lingering feeling taking root in the back of my neck.

“Everything okay?” Alex asked.

“Yeah,” I said after a moment. “Seems to be.”

“Door was open?”

“Yeah.”

“You forget to lock it?”

I frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“But you’re not sure?”

“No, I guess I’m not.”

He grunted. “When was the last time you were here?”

“Couple hours ago,” I said. “I picked up some cream pies for Patience.”

“Maybe you left it open then? Or maybe the landlord came by?”

“What for?”

He shrugged. “Pest control or inspection. Maybe a repair order from the apartment above.”

“I think you’re overestimating my landlord’s commitment to this place,” I said. “But I guess you could be right.”

“We can always run by and ask in the morning,” he said.

I nodded and let out a sigh, peering around. My apartment looked exactly as it always had, but there was something

unseen that refused to allow me to relax. Alex noted it, and came up behind me, gently rubbing the sides of my arms.

“Go take a shower,” he said. “I’ll make some food.”

I considered arguing, but a shower sounded too good to pass up, and I mutely nodded and slipped into the bedroom, giving it a second once-over but not finding anything. I disrobed and stowed my gear, including my pistol and cellphone, which I placed upon my nightstand.

I made my way into my bathroom, where I checked my cuts in the mirror, wincing at several of the scrapes and bruises, including the shallow gash along my side where the Horseman’s blade had cut through my jacket. It wasn’t deep enough to need stitches, but it hurt like hell when I cleaned it. I clenched my teeth and finished quickly before stepping into the shower. I turned the water on as hot as it would go and left it there, allowing the steam to fill the shower before stepping inside.

There’s a reason showers have stood the test of time. Nothing else feels quite as good when coming off a long shift. I let the water course over me, enjoying the heat and the sting as it washed away the muck and grime. I stayed there for as long as I could, or better said, as long as the hot water allowed. Once the temperature started to wane, I turned the knob and wrapped myself in a towel before stepping out.

I’d dropped my clothes onto the floor, and I kicked them into the corner, making a note to deal with them later. Once the walkway was clear, I wiped my towel across the mirror and set about bandaging my wounds. Antibiotic cream was good enough for most of the scrapes, as well as a couple of the deeper bruises, but I had to use medical grade adhesive glue for the gash along my side. It hurt, but I grimaced and groaned, sealing the separate ends and covering them with a combination of gauze and medical tape. Once that was done, I slipped into my bedroom and donned a loose cotton t-shirt and

a pair of sweatpants. Then I slipped back out into my living room to find Alex putting the finishing touches on dinner.

I'll be the first to admit that Alex has many wonderful qualities, but cooking is not among them. The edges of the toast were burned, and the middle of the eggs was runny, and he'd cut the banana in three different directions, resulting in an uneven mess. I didn't care about any of it. Tired as I was, it might as well have been a feast.

I chewed and ate and made appreciative sounds. For once, Yosemite didn't bother coming to the edge of his cage to beg for some leftover morsels. Apparently, his hatred of Alex went deep enough to include anything cooked by his hands. Suited me just fine, since I wasn't really keen to share.

"Here," Alex said once my eating slowed. He reached into his pocket and fished out the keys to the car.

"What's this?" I asked.

"I pulled some strings at the Bureau. You can borrow it for a couple of days until your car is ready to be returned."

"What about you?"

"I can use my personal vehicle," he said.

"You don't have to do that."

"I know," he said. "But we can't really have you riding the T-Line, now can we?"

He had a point. There was nothing inherently wrong with the T. But riding it with my tactical patrol bag, not to mention my gun, was bound to draw some attention, and the less of that I had right now, the better.

"Thank you," I said.

He nodded. "So, are you ready to fill me in now?"

I drew in a long breath, then nodded and started at the beginning, relaying everything that had happened over the past... day? It felt like it had been longer somehow. Along the

way, we rose from the kitchen and made our way into the living room, lowering ourselves down onto the couch. Alex sat beside me and listened in silence, nodding his head every now and again to show he was paying attention. Once I finished, he considered my words for a long moment before letting out a breath.

“Christ, Chloe. You’re in a mess.”

“Tell me about it.”

“This Horseman, he’s dangerous. I mean, really dangerous. The leprechauns were bad enough, but this guy...”

“Yeah.”

“How can I help?”

I sighed and spread my hands. “I wish I knew. Right now, my victims are still my only leads, and I’m having a hard enough time scrounging up any information about them. There’s just not much to be found in the legal records.”

“What about the illegal records?”

“Eh?”

He frowned and shook his head. “Sorry, that came out wrong. I meant, what about the records not associated with any government agency?”

“Like what?”

“Well, financial records for starters,” he said. “You said this girl Jenni, the witch, you looked into her, right?”

“Of course,” I said. “Forensics was having a heck of a time identifying her, but Patience and I ran her name on the way over to MIT.”

“And?”

“And there’s not much there,” I said. “She’s never had a driver’s license or a state ID card. She’s never registered to vote, or been in any sort of legal trouble that would require her

fingerprints be kept on file. The only connection we found was to a woman I presume to be her mother, who moved down to Georgia when Jenni was only sixteen. Like I said, there's not much to work with."

"Maybe not from a legal standpoint, but you said she was a student, right?"

"So?"

"So, someone's paying the bills," he said. "I could run a check and look into her financials. Find out who she's associating with that way."

"Don't you need a warrant for that?"

"Please," he said. "I'm with the FBI. Besides, she's deceased. This is technically a murder investigation. We have more leeway."

"You think it will help?"

"Worth a try. You don't actually need an ID in order to get a credit card, but everybody needs money for food and lodging and such."

I started to tell him no, but stopped before the words ever left my mouth. The more I thought about it the more I realized he was right. Somehow, Jenni had managed to avoid having more than a bare minimum presence on any government related sites. I assume that lack of trust probably came from her Salem upbringing. But Alex was right. Even witches needed money, and anything he found was more than I had right now.

"You're cute when you're stewing things over," Alex said. "Don't worry, I'll get started on it first thing tomorrow. And in the meantime, we're free to focus on some other things we've been neglecting."

He leaned in, pressing his mouth against mine for several long seconds before he abruptly stopped and pulled back.

“What?” I asked.

“I was kissing you.”

“I noticed.”

“You weren’t kissing me back,” he said.

“I wasn’t?”

“No.”

I blinked and shook my head. “Sorry. I guess I was just thinking.”

Alex stared at me. “My God.”

“What?”

“You want me to leave, don’t you?”

“No,” I said. “Of course not.”

“You do,” he said. “I can see it in your eyes. You want me to get started on this right now, don’t you?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Chloe...”

“Okay, fine,” I said. “It’s just, it is kind of important. Several women are dead, and...”

“And you want to see their murderer brought to justice,” Alex said, and sighed. “It’s okay, I get it.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“No reason to be.”

He straightened and rose from the couch, rubbing his face before heading for the door.

“Alex, wait,” I said.

I rose and made my way after him, taking his face in my hands and pressing my lips to his. It was a good kiss, warm and comforting, and lasted several seconds before he pulled away.

“Thank you,” I said.

He nodded and cleared his throat. “I’ll get started and be in touch as soon as I find anything.”

He squeezed my hand and then exited the apartment, heading down the trio of steps and toward the T-Line station. I watched him disappear around the corner, then shut and locked the door, retreating back into my apartment.

Yosemite started squeaking when he saw me, and I reached my hand inside his cage, gently stroking his fur while making soothing noises. He always seemed to need a little extra love in the wake of Alex’s departure. I smoothed his ruffled fur and rubbed underneath his chin, then retreated into the kitchen, returning with his little box of hamster nuggets and filling his bowl to the brim. Thirty seconds after that, my cell phone began chiming.

I made my way into my bedroom, thinking it might be Alex calling to say he was coming back, but the screen revealed the caller as unknown. Figuring it might be him calling on his government phone, I answered and brought it to my ear. “Forget something?”

There was no response.

I waited for several long seconds, and something in the silence tickled the back of my neck, causing me to draw inwards. I kept listening, but there was no sound beyond the slight static and normal background noises. A couple of seconds passed, and I started picking up on a third pattern. It was someone breathing. Slow breaths, in and out, with a slight whistling waver at the very end, as if they were savoring the last lingering notes of my voice.

“Who the heck is this?” I asked.

“You know who this is, Sergeant,” a voice said. It was a male voice, but he spoke in a low whisper, as if afraid of being overheard. “We have unfinished business.”

Instantly, alarm bells started sounding in my head, but whatever fear I'd felt before was washed away in anger and annoyance. I'd become something of a pro in dealing with prank calls over these last few weeks, ever since the newspaper article hit. I don't know how some of these people had gotten my cell phone number, but they had. A couple of friends had recommended changing it, but I'd refused. Why should I change just because people are jerks? I'd held onto my number and dealt with the calls as they came.

"You took something from me," the low-voiced male said. "And now—"

"Now you're going to give it to me?" I asked, cutting him off. "Because I've heard that one before. What's next? You'll tell me that your favorite animal is a beaver or how I would look nice with a pretty pearl necklace? Maybe you're an amateur chef who just loves tossing salad?"

"Tomorrow," he said. "I'll be reaching out for you tomorrow."

"Oh, goody. Let me guess. You're sending me a package? Another cream pie maybe? Man, you're really behind the curve. I suppose you'll have some stupid note attached implying I should be amazed at how big the package is. Because I've seen that before too, pal. More times than I can count at this point. Now, how about you crawl back into your mother's basement and get a freaking life?"

I hung up and tossed the phone onto the couch, watching it bounce off the back cushion before landing atop the seat.

"Some people," I told Yosemite, "are just losers with too much time on their hands. It's like they think their little games are actually going to win them some brownie points with a real woman who—"

A knock sounded from my front door.

My head snapped around, and I narrowed my eyes. I knew it wasn't Alex. His knock had a distinctive sound to it, an

almost music trio of notes that he did involuntarily. This knock sounded unsure, almost tentative. As if someone were debating whether they should be there.

I remained where I was for a fraction of a second, then I shot out of the kitchen and into the bedroom. I retrieved my duty belt from the floor, and drew my pistol from its holster, holding it close to my body.

Prank phone calls were one thing. Hell, even lewd bakery orders could be excused under the circumstances. But showing up at my house late at night? That's the sort of thing that will get you an all-expense paid visit to the local jail with a brief stop by the hospital to reset a broken arm on the way.

I crept across the living room as whoever was on the other side of the door knocked again. I didn't bother looking out the window or the peep hole. Instead, I readied my pistol, turned the deadbolt, and yanked the door open, simultaneously taking half a step back to give myself room to maneuver. My arm snapped up, and I adopted a sideways shooter stance to greet my attacker.

"Whoa!" the man on my doorstep said. Something green fell from his hands as he raised his arms out to either side, palms facing outward. "Don't shoot!"

It took me a split second to recognize the figure at my door, and the adrenaline gave way to confusion as I lowered my pistol a fraction of an inch.

"Luke?"

Luke Hubbard, second grade teacher at Waverly Elementary School and adopted father of Princess Pickles the gerbil stood dressed in jeans and a cashmere sweater. He wore a tie with the top button of his shirt undone, and he smelled good, like fresh laundry and cinnamon aftershave.

And beer.

I detected a faint whiff of alcohol on his breath when he exhaled, but didn't see any other signs of intoxication.

"Sergeant Mayfield," he said. "Uh, don't shoot. It's only me."

I stared at him for a long moment, then lowered my pistol. "What are you doing here?"

"Uh, well, I was hoping I could speak with you for a minute."

"How do you know where I live?"

"I went by the police station. They redirected me to the parking garage where your office is. I spoke with a red-headed kid who I guess is your secretary?"

"Robbie," I said.

"That's him," he said. "He couldn't tell me when you'd be back on shift, but he sort of mentioned that you lived on this street."

That sounded like something the little jerk-face would do. "So, you've been going door to door looking for me?"

"Uh, well, not exactly," he said. "I got lucky on my second try. The lady knew who you were and directed me here."

"And you just came right over?"

"Uh, well, sort of, yes," Luke said, drawing out the words. "Can I just say, in my defense, that it all felt very reasonable at the time, but now that I'm hearing it aloud, I'm giving myself serious stalker vibes. It wasn't my intention to invade your privacy, and I certainly wouldn't hold it against you if you slammed the door in my face this very instant."

"No need for that," I said. "It just surprised me. It's late."

"It is," Luke agreed. "I meant to come by earlier, but once a month, I hire a sitter for Avery and meet up with some friends down at the local watering hole for a few rounds. Guess it took a little while for the liquid courage to take effect."

“What did you need liquid courage for?”

“I wanted to bring you this.”

He reached down and lifted the fallen item off the floor. It turned out to be a piece of folded posterboard. He handed it over, and I accepted it, turning it over in my hands. It was bright green, and for a brief moment it made me think of the leprechauns I’d battled last month, but I shook my head and pushed those memories away, unfolding the poster board to reveal a hand drawn picture of a giant mutant hamster with a royal crown standing atop a large pickle.

I wasn’t sure what to make of it for about half a second, then I realized it was meant to be Princess Pickles. There were several stick figures surrounding her, each with a childish signature nearby, numbering two dozen or so. Someone had written out the words **Thank You** at the top and then applied liberal amounts of glitter to it.

“Oh, wow,” I said.

“The students wanted to express their gratitude,” Luke said. “What you did, well, it really meant the world to them.”

“It was nothing,” I said.

“Didn’t sound like nothing,” Luke said. “I saw on the news report that the man who took Pickles was some sort of deranged psycho. That he was dressed up like a clown and such. You didn’t have to put your life at risk for us, but you did, and I figured the least we could do is deliver this card to show our gratitude.”

“That’s actually really sweet,” I said. “Thank you, Mr. Hubbard.”

“Please, call me Luke.”

“Luke.”

“And maybe I could call you Chloe?”

“Chloe works,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “I was also wondering if maybe I could call and ask you to dinner sometime?”

I blinked, momentarily stunned. “Oh, uh, well...”

“Nothing implied,” he said. “No expectations of any kind. Just two adults sharing a meal.”

“That’s very sweet of you to offer,” I began.

“But you can’t?”

I shook my head.

“Boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Is it serious?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. “There’s talk of tomato plants.”

“I think I read about those in the Five Love Languages,” he said and let out a breath. “Well, the offer is open if things should change. In the meantime, I’ll take my leave and wish you a wonderful evening. It was very nice to see you again, Chloe. Thank you for what you did for our class. It meant the world to the children.”

“Goodnight, Luke,” I said.

I watched him turn and head off down the street toward the T-Line, closing the door once he disappeared from view. I flipped the deadbolt, then took a breath and rubbed at my neck.

I’d never been very good at relationships. I’d been too dedicated in college to really pay much attention to boys, and afterwards, I’d learned the hard way that not too many guys are secure enough to date a female police officer. I could count the number of real dates I’d been on in the last five years on two hands, and few, if any, had warranted a second date.

Now, it seemed I was spoiled for choice.

There was no denying that Luke was a cutie, bumbled as his approach might have been. A girl could get lost in those golden locks, and there was a gentle kindness to him that was warm and genuine. Of course, the same could be said for Alex.

I wasn't sure how I felt about Alex. On one hand, our relationship was still new, still finding its rhythm. I'd been content to keep things casual, but all this talk about tomato plants had thrown a wrench into that idea, and I couldn't help but feel like something had changed, almost as if we'd missed a couple of steps, and... I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes before running a hand through my hair. My love life was a problem for another day. Right now, I still had a murder to solve. Multiple murders, come to think of it, and every moment I delayed could mean another victim.

Unfortunately, I'd done everything I could for the moment, and running myself into the ground wasn't going to help matters at all. The best thing I could do right now was to get a couple hours shut-eye and come back at this with fresh eyes first thing in the morning.

I double checked the locks, then bid Yosemite goodnight and turned off the lights, plugging my phone into the charger beside my nightstand before falling into my bed and drifting off into a hard, dreamless sleep that carried me through the night.

Mickey Carter's Apartment.

April 16th 0645hrs

Rickson called just after sunrise.

I answered on the third ring, the chiming noise rousing me to a state of semi-consciousness before I grabbed the phone and hammered at the green icon with my thumb.

“Hello?” I asked, slurring my words. The morning sun was coming through the blinds, stabbing at my eyes and forcing me to turn my face away toward the opposite wall.

“Brenda Blumefield,” Rickson said.

“Eh?”

“You really need me to repeat that?”

I drew in a breath, willing my brain to wake up as I slowly rose to a sitting position. “No, I got it the first time. Who’s Brenda Blumefield?”

Rickson chuckled. “Well, I could say she gives great head, but maybe that’s a little too on the nose?”

“Oh, God,” I said, the memory of the previous evening coming back. “The woman the Horseman threw at me?”

“That’s her,” he said. “Apparently, she’s the director of Student Financial Services over at MIT.”

“Wait,” I said and straightened. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said. “Co-workers found her body when they came in this morning. Apparently, she’d been working late the night before. No husband or immediate family to notice when she didn’t come home.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“Afraid not,” he said. “Working theory right now is that the Horseman finished her off and then came for you.”

“They have the murder on video?”

“Negative,” he said. “Apparently, there was some kind of system-wide glitch that turned off all surveillance equipment for the entire campus in a six-block radius. Forensics is looking into it but they don’t seem hopeful.”

“Why not?”

“The whole system was set up by some computer engineering whiz kid who graduated two semesters ago. They’ve had it running on auto-pilot ever since. Whatever he did is a bit beyond our local forensic technician’s reach.”

“So, we’ve got nothing?”

“Just a name for now, but it’s more than we had a few hours ago.”

“I guess.”

“Anyway, homicide is going to want to interview you again this morning, but I thought I’d give you a heads-up first.”

“Thanks, Rick,” I said. “You’re a pal.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “I’m going off shift in a couple hours to catch some shut-eye. Be safe out there.”

“Will do,” I said.

I hung up, then rose from my bed and made my way into the bathroom. I splashed some water on my face, then dressed quickly and made my way into the kitchen. Yosemite wasn’t much of a morning hamster, and he barely stirred as I brewed myself a cup of tea and sat down at the table, lightly bobbing the vanilla chamomile bag as I considered what I’d just learned.

Brenda Blumefield. Jenni Sexton. Dennis Pieheart. Three victims, all connected to MIT. And then one, Walter Crosier, who had no apparent connection to any of them. I thought it over, arranging the pieces in my mind, trying to make them fit and coming up empty. I could feel that there was a connection,

but I was still missing something, a crucial piece of evidence or knowledge that would bring it all together. Unfortunately, I wasn't going to find it sitting here in my kitchen, so I needed to figure out my next step.

Investigating Walter Crosier felt like a bad idea. By now, his lawyers would be bringing in their lawyers, and the whole lot of them would be salivating at the prospect of dividing up his estate. Trying to learn anything through that cluster of scheming, money-hungry vultures was only going to make me break out in hives.

Likewise, I felt like I'd gone as far as I could with Jenni Sexton. Any additional information I might find was likely to come from Ambretta and her coven, and I doubted they'd be eager to share any more with me.

Brenda Blumefield was the latest victim, but homicide was already working to track down her next of kin. With no immediate family, it was unlikely that I would get there before them, and even if I did, I wasn't entirely sure what questions I should ask.

That only left Dennis Pieheart.

I'd been thinking about him for the last two days, and one question that still bothered me was why the Horseman had gone to such lengths to retrieve his body. The obvious answer was that there must have been something he was worried we might find, some clue or bit of evidence that could lead us to discover his identity. Except the medical examiner had Dennis' body in custody for more than twenty-four hours and hadn't discovered anything of note.

Or so I thought.

But what if I was wrong? On average, approximately fifty people are killed every year in Boston, with another two hundred or so more on the receiving end of non-fatal gunshots. That equates to about four bodies a month, or one a week. Whenever a homicide occurs, a medical examiner is

dispatched to collect the remains and bring it back to the laboratory for testing.

Each case is different, but there are some standard tests that are always conducted. Things like fingerprinting the corpse, taking swabs of the murder wounds, examination of the victim's clothing, toxicology and body tissue samples, and an autopsy when requested or deemed necessary. In this case, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner would have run all those tests on Dennis Pieheart before agreeing to sign off on the release of his body. Obviously, they hadn't found anything incriminating, or else I would have heard about it, but not incriminating isn't the same as nothing at all. Maybe they just weren't sure what they were looking at. Either way, it was worth a second glance, and lucky for me, I knew just who to contact about those test results.

First things first, though.

I called Alex. He didn't answer, likely having worked late into the night and only recently laid down to sleep. I left a message on his voicemail, sharing my suspicions and asking him to do some digging for me. Once that was done, I called Patience. She answered on the second ring, and her voice sounded groggy. I told her what I was thinking and gave her an address to meet me at before I hung up.

I finished my tea and made my way back into the bedroom, gathering my belongings, including my Kevlar vest, which I cinched tight around my torso. I double checked my duty belt and secured my pistol in the holster, along with extra ammunition, handcuffs, and pepper spray. Then I grabbed my tactical patrol bag and headed out the door, being sure to lock it behind me.

The blue and pink zebra print sedan had disappeared sometime during the night, and I opened the door to Alex's FBI loaner car and tossed my bag into the passenger seat before dropping down. It was a larger vehicle than I was used to, and it wasn't new, but it was clean, functional, and the seat

cushion wasn't in danger of deteriorating beneath me. The engine came to life on the first try, and I found myself briefly fantasizing about what it might be like if the FBI were to embrace the concept of Blue Moon and begin their own division. Having federal resources would make a huge difference in my day to day working life. The databases alone could clear half my cases.

Alas, for now, I still needed to do things by hand.

I pulled away from the curb and headed north, cutting across Stuart Street and the Trinity Church before arriving in Back Bay.

A residential neighborhood located just west of the Common, Back Bay extended roughly a mile inland from the Charles River. The rows of Victorian Brownstone homes forming the three blocks south of the water were considered to be some of the best-preserved examples of 19th century architecture, and many viewed the neighborhood as a stepping stone for those looking to one day upgrade to Beacon Hill. The homes were listed in the millions, and it was a good bet that anyone renting there was pulling in more than six figures per year. Lawyers, bankers, and doctors, including medical examiners.

Mickey Carter lived on Marlborough Street, three units down from the corner. He and his fiancé and their new baby occupied the ground level unit, with wide bay windows looking out into the street.

I parked along the edge of the curb, killed the engine and exited the vehicle just as a yellow taxicab pulled up alongside me. Patience Woods got out. She looked rested, or at least more rested than I felt at any rate. Dressed in a button-up shirt that stretched at the bust, dark pants, and a leather coat, she had her hair drawn back into a tight braid, and her own tactical patrol bag thrown over one shoulder.

We exchanged pleasantries, but we both knew why we were here, and wasted little time getting down to business. We made our way up to Mickey's front door and knocked twice, hearing a voice call from within, followed by an infant's cry.

Mickey answered the door, dressed in loose hospital scrub pants and a plain white t-shirt. His eyes widened at the sight of us, and a glimmer of fear reflected back at me.

"Oh, no," he breathed. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Sorry about the house call, Mickey," I said. "This couldn't wait."

"You can't be here," he said. "Either of you. This is harassment. I can report you for this."

"Go for it," I said. "What do you think they'll do? Transfer me to the dumping ground division of the department? Oh, wait."

"I'm serious, Chloe," he said. "I did what you asked, and now I'm facing a full inquiry at work. The amount of damage done to the lab has the chief up in arms. Any more screw-ups, and I'll need to start dusting off my resume."

"Easy there, Peach-fuzz," Patience said. "We're not looking to make trouble for you. We just need some information."

Mickey frowned. "What kind of information?"

"Dennis Pieheart," I said. "You did his examination?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, I want to see the results," I said. "From the tests you ran. Everything you have in his file."

"What for?"

I shook my head. "I can't say."

I meant that literally, but Mickey took it as me being secretive. Truth was, I wasn't entirely sure what I was looking

to find, but desperate times call for desperate actions, and I was running out of leads.

Mickey stared at me for a long moment before he lowered his voice. "If I do this, we're done. You understand? No more veiled threats or strong-arming tactics. You stay away from me and my work. Deal?"

I considered it for a moment before nodding. "Deal."

"Alright," he said. "Come on in."

He stepped back and allowed us entry. His apartment wasn't the biggest I'd ever seen, but it was a good size for Boston, or would have been, if not for the toys and baby apparel crammed into every corner.

"Honey, who's this?" a woman's voice asked from the back near the kitchen. A young brunette came around the corner, holding an infant in her arms. It was the first time I'd ever seen his fiancé, and she was around my age, pretty, but with circles under her eyes that spoke of broken sleep. The baby was wrapped in a swaddling blanket lined with duckies, and whimpered softly in his mother's arms as she peered at the pair of us, her eyes lingering on me. It might have been my imagination playing tricks on me, but I swear I saw a momentary suspicion gleam back at me. Luckily, my cellphone chose that moment to come to life, buzzing away in my pocket, and I fished it out, grateful for the excuse to pull my gaze away.

It was a Boston number, but I didn't recognize it, and my recent foray into the world of prank calling had left me leery about answering unknown numbers. I let it go to voicemail and slipped it back into my pocket.

"It's no one," Mickey said. "Just some work stuff. I'll only be a few minutes."

His fiancé frowned, then nodded, and slipped off toward the back of the apartment where the bedrooms lay. She hummed softly to her baby as she moved, lulling the infant in

her arms back to sleep. Mickey motioned us to follow and led us into the kitchen, where a half-eaten bowl of cereal lay beside an open laptop. I heard a talking voice that made me think there was a television on nearby, but I quickly realized that wasn't the case. A police dispatch radio sat atop the refrigerator, running at a low volume. It was attached to a charging mount and tuned to the city channel.

“You eavesdropping?”

“I have to go to work here in a couple of hours. Just wanted to see what my day was looking like.”

“And?”

“So far, so good,” he said and dropped down into the kitchen chair. He brought his laptop around and navigated to the medical examiner's page, logging in with his username and password. He searched among the files for a moment, typing Dennis Pieheart's name into the search engine before bringing up all his relevant data.

“Okay, I can access all his reports. What am I looking for?”

I frowned, and took a deep breath, telling myself that it was time to roll the dice. “Anything out of the ordinary, or anything that piques your interest.”

Mickey flashed me an incredulous look. “Wait, you don't know? I thought you had something specific in mind you were searching for.”

“Just go with me on this.”

Mickey snorted, and grumbled to himself, but he began opening files, bringing up pictures with hand drawn annotations and accompanying notes.

“Okay, let's see. Cause of death was acute blood loss due to decapitation. Toxicology report came back clean. No drugs. There was some ethanol found in his blood but not enough to be considered impaired.”

“Ethanol meaning alcohol?”

He nodded. “It’s not unusual for college kids.”

He switched photos, revealing Dennis’ clothing. “Blood on the clothing all came back to match him.”

“Meaning the killer didn’t bleed.”

“There were multiple hair fibers found in his clothing that analysis determined as belonging to both men and women, but nothing that stuck out as suspicious.”

“How come?”

“According to testimony from the roommate, Dennis Pieheart lived in the MIT dormitories. Each floor shares a laundry room, meaning—”

“Bits of everyone’s clothes get mixed together in the dryer.”

“Precisely,” he said.

“What about the wound itself?”

Mickey flashed pictures, bringing a close up of Dennis Pieheart’s severed neck to the front of the screen. Patience let out a noise next to me, and her mouth tightened, but she didn’t turn away.

“The wound itself was clean, suggesting one fluid cut as opposed to any sawing. There were gray fibers found around and inside the wound, but no sign of heat or cauterization to suggest—”

“Wait, back up,” I said. “Gray fibers?”

“Uh, yes. It’s not unusual in a case like this for bits of clothing to get mixed into the wound.”

“But his clothing wasn’t gray,” I said. “His sweater was blue, and his pants brown.”

“Uh... yeah, that’s right.”

“So where did those fibers come from?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Could be a jacket? Or a scarf?”

“If so, why wasn’t it recovered with the rest of his belongings?”

Mickey frowned. “I suppose it could also be from a carpet or a car interior.”

“I thought he was found in a parking lot?”

“He was,” Patience said.

“All the same,” Mickey said. “There could be another explanation. These fibers don’t necessarily mean anything, Chloe.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “But we know the Horseman came after him for a reason, and maybe this is it. Where are those fibers now?”

“Secure down at the medical examiner’s office,” he said.

“How long would it take you to identify their source?”

“Depends,” he said. “I can try to match them up against some of our known samples, or anything found at the crime scene, but after that, it’s like trying to match a needle in a haystack. I won’t know for sure until I start looking.”

“But you’ll do it?”

“Depends,” he said. “Technically, we no longer have any legal standing to proceed. The body was released to Miss Woods. She’ll have to approve it.”

I glanced over at Patience. “Well?”

“Do it,” she said. “If we can’t find Dennis, then at least I can bring word back to his momma that we found the one who murdered him.”

“Alright,” Mickey said, and rose from his chair. “No promises, but I’ll be in touch if I find anything.”

“Thanks, Mickey,” I said. “In the meantime, we’ll head back to the station and—”

“Hello?” a voice said, coming through the police dispatch radio. *“Is this thing on? How can I tell if this thing is on? Can she hear me?”*

The radio cut off, muffling the other person’s response, but it appeared to be an affirmative, because a moment later the radio keyed up again

“Good morning, brave citizens of Boston. Such a pleasure to speak with you on this fine day. Most of you don’t know me, but I know you, all of you, and one in particular.” His voice dropped as he moved his mouth closer to the radio. *“Good morning, Sergeant Chloe Mayfield.”*

A sudden cold shot through me from head to toe, as if I’d stepped into a frozen pond. “Oh, my god,” I whispered.

“Who the heck is that?” Mickey asked.

I shushed him, and seized the radio, raising the volume to maximum.

“I bet you’re surprised to be hearing from me, Sergeant. You’ve been so busy hunting your little Horseman that you probably haven’t stopped to give me a second thought. But I’ve been thinking about you.” He cut off, violently coughing several times before keying back up. *“I tried to call you last night. I thought maybe we could work this out between us, but you weren’t interested in speaking with me, so I’ve had to up the ante a little bit, starting with your friend here. Hey, you! Tell them your name.”*

There was a moment’s hesitation, then another voice came on the radio. “R-Reynolds.”

“What’s your first name?”

“I-it’s George.”

“George Reynolds. And what do you do, Mr. Reynolds?”

“I-I’m a police officer, for the city of Boston.”

“*Indeed you are,*” he said. “*Are you a good officer?*”

“I-I try to be.”

“*I believe that. I can see it in your face. How long have you been with the department, Officer Reynolds?*”

“T-twelve years.”

“*Quite the illustrious career. Shame that it has to end now. Do you know Sergeant Chloe Mayfield, Officer Reynolds?*”

“N-no. I never met her.”

“*I know her. And she’s going to know you. In fact, she’s going to think about you every day for the rest of her life. However short that might be. She’s going to wonder why you had to die, and why I didn’t just come after her directly. I would have, you see, but her little boyfriend put quite the cramp in my gait. She’ll need to come to me now, and to ensure she does, I’ve taken out a little insurance policy. Something I know she’s going to want back.*”

Officer Reynolds said something, but whatever it was caused his captor to break out in horrible, grating laughter.

“*You? Oh, no. You’re far too large to make a good hostage. I mean, what would people think if they saw me lugging your body around the city? No, I need someone smaller. Younger. Someone whose death will be so much more impactful. Sergeant Mayfield knows who I’m talking about. And as for you, Officer Reynolds, I’m afraid your value is spent, now that I know I have the good sergeant’s attention. Not to worry though, I’m sure someone will be along shortly to collect your body. No doubt they’ll give you a hero’s funeral, a full twenty-one-gun salute. Just think how proud your mother will be when the chief vomits forth some concocted story about how you went down fighting the good fight and defending the citizens of Boston, as opposed to squealing like a sweaty pig.*”

It's going to be beautiful. Trust me, I know all about vomiting."

The line went dead, and no one moved. It was absolute silence in the room, a feat that I imagined was repeating itself all over the city, as officers instinctively leaned in. A subjective eternity went by, and then the radio keyed up again.

"For those who might be curious, you'll find Officer Reynolds remains near the Ellery St. Parking lot, in the trunk of a black Ford sedan. Don't bother rushing over. I'm already gone, and he's not getting any deader."

"You son of a bitch," I whispered to myself.

"And as for you, Sergeant Mayfield. You took something from me. All my glorious plans for the future. You took them, and you stomped on them right in front of me. And now, well, I've had to make some new plans. If you'd like to hear more, you know where to find me. I told you before, you can't run from Bloodcuddles. You can only run toward me."

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Boston Police Department.

April 16th 0829hrs

I don't really remember driving back to the station.

I know I did it, and I probably hit a few curbs along the way, but Patience didn't complain, and neither did anyone else.

They found Officer Reynolds' body before we arrived. Apparently, he'd been coming off an overnight shift and disappeared two hours before. Thinking he might have fallen asleep somewhere, his fellow squad members had been quietly searching his zone, hoping that they could locate him with no one the wiser.

The first officer on scene was crying when he radioed in that he'd located Officer Reynolds exactly where Bloodcuddles said he would be. I stopped listening after that, allowing my mind to take me to a safe space where I struggled to work through how this could have happened.

The logistics of it were easy enough to figure out.

Bloodcuddles had been taken to the hospital to be treated for his gunshot wound. That, combined with the torn ligaments in his shoulder and damage done to his teeth, had meant it would be a few days before he was transferred to prison.

He didn't need to wait that long, though.

Approximately ten hours after he'd arrived, the Headless Horseman had cut power to the hospital and detonated some sort of an explosive device in the lobby, forcing a building-wide evacuation. I'd been there for it. I'd seen the chaos. Bloodcuddles had seen an opportunity and used it to make good on his escape. Thinking back, I could dimly recall Pongo mentioning something about how an officer had been wheeled out on a stretcher, and that others were searching for missing patients, but I hadn't made the connection.

Although someone else had.

Someone must have known that Bloodcuddles had escaped. Someone must have realized that there was a wounded psychopath on the loose, and they hadn't bothered to tell me. The realization set my teeth on edge, and I gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles began to ache. My direct chain of command led right to Lieutenant Kermit, but I knew him better than to suspect him of keeping something like this from me. Chances are, he'd been just as much in the dark as I was. Which meant that the flow of information had stopped somewhere higher up the chain of command. And that meant Deputy Bulwark.

I tried to tell myself that Bulwark must have his reasons for keeping us in the dark, but I couldn't really make myself believe it. Bulwark had nothing but disdain for Blue Moon and our mission, but even he wasn't petty enough to risk the lives of innocent civilians for a grudge.

Unless, of course, he hadn't bothered to read my report.

A quick skim of the contents would have revealed a clown enthusiast who'd vandalized an elementary school and then attacked his least favorite officer when she descended into the underground to retrieve some chicken nuggets and a gerbil.

When looked at in that light, I could see how he might have viewed the entire affair as a ridiculous waste of taxpayers' money, and written Bloodcuddles off as just another demented loser who was no real danger to anyone. Likely, he'd put in the paperwork for a warrant to be issued and figured a patrolman would bring him in at some point.

But he'd been wrong.

Horribly wrong.

And now Officer Reynolds had paid the price for his scorn.

Bloodcuddles was right about one thing. No, make that two things. The first was that I would think about George Reynolds

for the rest of my life. There was no getting beyond that now. A man had died because I'd failed to follow up. Because I'd believed Bloodcuddles beaten and subconsciously written him off by telling myself that I had more important things to worry about.

Things like the Horseman.

Maybe I was right to have done so, and maybe, if presented in the right light, Officer Reynold's family would one day be able to understand and even forgive, but I would never be able to forget.

That was the first thing.

The second was that I could no longer run from Bloodcuddles. In fact, I was about to do the opposite. I was going to come at him with everything I had, and make darn sure that he spent the rest of his life in prison. It was time for some payback, and I'd be damned if I wasn't the one to bring it.

News of Officer Reynold's death was making its way through the local media stations, and you could see the effect on the citizens. Flags were being lowered to half-mast, and people drove slower, those on foot double checking the crossways before stepping through. I forced myself to stay focused and navigated through downtown, pulling into our parking garage.

I didn't bother heading inside Blue Moon Headquarters. I knew I wouldn't find anyone inside. In times of crisis, of which this definitely qualified, the upper brass met inside the station, in a series of conference rooms set aside for emergency response.

I scanned my key fob and made my way into the building, with Patience following close behind. The hallways were empty, and I made my way through the corridors to a T-shaped intersection. I turned left and made my way halfway down the

hall before catching a glimpse of the figures filling the emergency response room.

Several of the brass and division commanders, including Lieutenant Kermit, were gathered together, their attention focused on a large map of the city being displayed on the television. I spotted a couple of the patrol commanders, as well as a few members of the city's tactical team, dressed in dark green pants and plate carrier armor. I also spotted Deputy Bulwark, speaking animatedly to what appeared to be the chief of police. A man in civilian clothing stood beside him, and I did a double-take when I realized it was Luke Hubbard. What was he doing here?

I figured the best way to find out was to ask, so I started that way, but ten steps from the doorway, a figure swept out of the adjacent hall and seized me by the arm.

“Come with me,” he said.

I started to fight back, but subsided when I realized it was only Robbie. “What are you doing?”

“Uncle Kermit told me to keep an eye out for you. Come on, this way.” He hustled me down the hall away from the emergency crisis room and eventually through a bathroom door into the women's restroom.

“Robbie, what is this?” I snapped.

“Stay inside and don't come out until Uncle Kermit says it's okay.”

He disappeared back out the door, leaving Patience and I staring at one another in confusion. Maybe three minutes passed, then the door opened again and Lieutenant Kermit stepped inside.

“Sergeant,” he said. “Constable Woods.”

“John,” Patience said, and inclined her head.

“I wonder if you might be so good as to give us the room?” Lieutenant Kermit asked.

Patience glanced at me, then nodded, and slipped out through the door, leaving the two of us alone.

“Did you know?” I asked.

Lieutenant Kermit shook his head, and the tension in my chest eased a fraction of an inch. “I found out at the same time as everyone else.”

“It was Bulwark,” I said. “Mark my words, he got wind of Bloodcuddles escape and tried to brush it under the rug.”

“I concluded as much,” Lieutenant Kermit said. “Unfortunately, he’s already working to cover his tracks.”

“By deflecting the responsibility onto us?”

“As well as the hospital security staff.”

“Bastard.”

“You can’t blame a snake for living up to its nature, Sergeant,” he said. “And in the meantime, we have more important matters to worry about. Firstly, you can’t be here.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I see you, I have orders to deliver Deputy Bulwark’s orders verbatim.”

“And what are those?”

“First, that you’re to take absolutely no action whatsoever. He’s put in a call to the FBI and requested assistance from their crisis negotiation team. He’s hoping he can convince Bloodcuddles to release his victim and surrender.”

“That’s a fool’s hope,” I said. “What do we know about the victim?”

“Her name is Avery Hubbard,” he said. “She’s seven years old.”

Something twisted inside of me, something sharp, with hooked edges that seized hold of the muscles in my chest and tightened them until they threatened to break.

“How?” I whispered.

“Apparently Bloodcuddles was able to gain access to Waverly Elementary this morning, and he abducted the girl, as well as her pet gerbil. Her father is in the room back there.”

“Luke,” I said.

The edges of my vision began closing in as images began flashing through my mind, still shot images of Avery in the grip of Bloodcuddles, powerful enough that they threatened to send me to my knees.

“Sergeant?” Lieutenant Kermit asked.

I gritted my teeth and shook my head, willing myself to hold firm as they struck like hammer blows, one after another, each rebounding until I was able to push them back into the darkness of my mind. “I’m okay.”

“I doubt that very much,” he said. “Regardless, you need to leave, preferably without being seen.”

“And then?”

Kermit’s face grew bleak. “You know this man. You know what he’s capable of. Do you think he can be reasoned with?”

“Not in a thousand years. He’s given in to his own psychosis, embracing the persona of the killer clown. He’ll never relent.”

“I feared as much,” Lieutenant Kermit said. “In that case, I have no orders for you at this time, Sergeant.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me correctly,” he said. “Do whatever you believe to be right, and I’ll support you as best I can, regardless of the outcome.”

I stared at him for a moment, then nodded. “You’re a good man, sir.”

He shook his head. “A good man would go with you.”

“If you did that, Bulwark would know right away that something was up. You’d be arrested for obstruction of justice, and I would never get near Bloodcuddles or the girl.”

Kermit nodded, accepting the truth even though I could see the regret in his eyes. “Robbie will keep a lookout and let you know when it’s safe to exit.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll be in touch as soon as—”

The door to the bathroom opened, and Rickson stepped inside, followed by Patience. Robbie stood in the hallway, shrugging his shoulders in helpless appeal.

“Sorry to interrupt, sir,” Rickson said, addressing Lieutenant Kermit. He looked tired, which was appropriate given that he’d been up all night, but also determined. “Any chance I could speak with Sergeant Mayfield for a moment?”

“Of course,” Lieutenant Kermit said. “I was just leaving.”

He flashed me a final look, then turned and headed out, motioning for Robbie to follow. The door swung shut, sealing the three of us inside.

Rickson waited for the door to close, then he turned and raised his hand. My palm smacked into his, and he pulled me in, giving me a quick hug before separating. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You look like you’re about to make some poor life choices. I specialize in those.”

A feeling of warmth flowed into my chest, and I worked to keep it from showing on my face. “You sure about that?” I asked. “You already helped me once, and look what it cost you.”

“Ah, screw Bulwark,” he said. “Besides, if this works, I’ll be able to check fighting a killer clown and rescuing a little girl off my career bucket list.”

“You keep going like this and they’ll end up erecting a statue of you.”

“You think?” he said. “That would be a heck of a sight. Something to make Momma Rickson proud.”

“I’m serious, Rick. You sure about this?”

“I’m sure,” he said. “Let’s go get her.”

I nodded and glanced toward Patience. “You in too?”

“Girl, do you even have to ask? I ain’t about to let no killer clown harm a little girl. Not on my watch.”

I nodded and swallowed twice before speaking. “Thank you both.”

“If we’re going to go, then it has to be now,” Rickson said. “Bulwark is waiting for you to show up, but eventually he’ll realize that you’re intentionally keeping your distance, and he’ll order a BOLO.”

A BOLO stood for Be on the Lookout. Once that was issued, every cop in the department would be searching for me. It was now or never.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

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Lessons Learned. April 16th

0914hrs

A borrowed jacket and a Boston PD baseball cap helped hide my face as we made our way back out through the police station and into the parking lot. I stayed between Rickson and Patience, and kept my head down whenever we passed anyone. Luck was on our side, and we made it without incident, helped largely in part by the fact that no one was looking for me... yet.

I briefly debated stopping by the armory, thinking we could use some additional firepower, but the risk of being spotted was too great, and besides, the armory keeps a log that would show what time said items were removed. I didn't want to give Bulwark anything he could potentially use against us down the line, so I made the choice to make do with what we had.

We made our way through the parking lot, pausing briefly at Rickson's patrol car so he could retrieve his shotgun before moving on to my FBI loaner vehicle. It seemed the safer choice, especially if Bulwark issued a BOLO for me. The FBI car would allow us to blend in with traffic and buy us some more time, assuming, of course, we could avoid being spotted, which was harder than—

“Sergeant Mayfield!”

I heard a voice call my name, and recognition dawned, bringing a low feeling of dread as I slowly turned in the direction of the voice.

Pongo was awkwardly jogging across the parking lot toward me. He was still dressed in yesterday's outfit, as evidenced by the wrinkles, and the dark patches under his eyes suggested he'd been up all night. His glasses hung crooked on his face, and he had a patrol bag slung over one shoulder, and was gripping my Massachusetts State Lawbook in his hand.

The pages were bent and crumpled, as if it had been tossed across the room more than once.

“Hey, Pongo,” I said. “This isn’t a great time, but—”

He slowed to a halt beside me and dropped the lawbook on the hood of the car. “I’ve been up all night with this book. I’ve read it cover to cover three times, and there is absolutely nothing in there about having sex with a corpse.”

I schooled my face to stillness and gave him a neutral look. “And?”

“*And* I think you knew that. I think you’ve had me running on a wild goose chase since yesterday morning.”

“Chloe,” Rickson said. “Seconds matter.”

I held up my hand, begging a moment before turning back to Pongo. “Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “At first, I just thought you were giving me busy work because you didn’t want me around. But then I realized you could have just pawned me off at any time. Which means there was more to it.”

“Like what?”

Pongo drew in a deep breath and pushed his glasses up his nose. “Look, I’m a rules guy. Always have been. Even outside of work, my friends used to accuse me of being a power gamer. I can’t help it. I see a system and I just need to know the ins and outs. But I still know right from wrong. And I know in my heart that having sex with a corpse is wrong.”

“Even if it’s not in the law book?”

“Even then,” he said.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Patience said and shook her head. “What the hell kind of Blue Moon are you running over here, Chloe? Tempest and Amanda didn’t ever have no cases about people getting busy with corpses. They would have set that straight right quick.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said, then turned back to Pongo. “So, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I get it,” he said. “I understand there’s more to this job than just knowing the law. There’s also a people factor. And maybe the lawbook can’t always provide the answer to every possible scenario, and sometimes you have to go with your gut. Like when you find someone violating a corpse.”

I stared at him for a moment, then nodded. It wasn’t a perfect fix, but it was a good start. “I’m glad for you, Pongo, but I’m a little busy right now. Later, if there’s time, we can talk more about it.”

“I want to come with you.”

“What?”

“I heard about Officer Reynolds on the way over,” he said. “And the little girl. This clown, Bloodcuddles, you’ve tangled with him before, right? And you’re going after him again?”

“So what if we are?”

Pongo’s mouth tightened. “You’ll need someone to watch your back. Maybe I’m not some elite special tactics guy, but I’m here, and I want to help. That should count for something.”

“Chloe,” Rickson said, his voice carrying a warning.

I debated half a second, then gave Pongo a pointed look. “You understand what we’re walking into?”

“I do.”

“And that if we fail, a little girl dies?”

I worded it that way on purpose, refusing to allow myself to consider that alternative possibility, even within the bounds of my own mind.

Pongo nodded. “I do.”

“And you realize that, even if we’re successful, there could be consequences. This could be the end of your career, Pongo. You sure you want in?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure. This is important.”

“Okay,” I said. “You have your gear?”

He nodded and motioned toward his patrol bag. “Inside.”

“Good, because we’re leaving right now.”

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Turning into the Storm. April 16th 0957hrs

We got into my FBI loaner vehicle and pulled out of the parking garage, making the short trip over the Longfellow Bridge and into Cambridge. Rickson drove, cause that's what guys like Rickson do, and Patience rode shotgun, ironically while holding Rickson's shotgun. Apparently, she'd been serious about not riding in backseats unless the payoff was worth it. I ended up stuffed into the back along with Pongo, our twin patrol bags shoved between us in a makeshift barrier.

I navigated from the backseat, leading Rickson down Vassar Street before turning left on Massachusetts Avenue. The MIT chapel was a couple hundred feet down on our right, and we parked along the curb, in the Buses Only section. I exited the vehicle, then wrote my rank and badge number down on a piece of paper, slipping it onto the dashboard and hoping like heck it would prove enough to keep any meter maid who came across it from calling for a tow truck.

Once that was done, we opened the trunk and began loading up. Rickson had come loaded for bear, with a vest, shotgun, and pistol holstered on his hip. He also had a metal water canister that he slid onto his belt. Pongo had his own gear, and Patience had a custom vest, modified to fit her torso. What she didn't have was a gun, but if it bothered her, she didn't show it, and when Rickson offered her his pistol, she waved it away.

“Never needed one of those before now,” she said. “Me and this here nightstick do just fine.” She hefted her nightstick to emphasize her words, swinging it twice before slapping it into her open palm. I debated arguing with her, but doubted it would get me anywhere, and since time was an issue, I left it alone.

For my part, I had my handgun, my Kevlar vest, handcuffs and pepper spray. I also removed a tourniquet from my medical kit, along with a pouch of Quick-clot, just in case. I secured everything on my belt, then took in a long breath and let it out in a rush.

“Okay, people,” I said. “Gather around.”

There was some shuffling as they came to stand around me.

“I’m not really one for speeches, and we already know what’s at stake,” I said. “But there are a couple of things I want you to remember down there. Firstly, Bloodcuddles is wounded, but don’t let that fool you. Animals are the most dangerous when they’re injured, and this is no different. If he tries playing the ‘Poor me’ card, don’t buy it. Put him down fast and hard. Second, whatever goodness or moral compass we all like to think exists in everyone, Bloodcuddles doesn’t have it. Trust me, I’ve met this guy. He might be a walking caricature, but he’s dangerous, and he’ll kill you without a second’s hesitation. Stay together and watch your corners. Got it?”

A round of nods greeted me, and I slammed the trunk closed and motioned toward the chapel. “Move out.”

We started forward in a loose formation, with Rickson taking the lead. Pongo shifted out to the left, and I ended up beside Patience.

“You’re going to need to work on that,” she told me.

I glanced at her. “Work on what?”

“Your speeches,” she said.

“What was wrong with it?”

“Nothing wrong, exactly,” she said. “It’s just that I’ve heard a few of those during my time. Tempest does it better.”

“Well, Tempest isn’t here, and I’m acting on a time constraint.”

She nodded. "I'll have Amanda send you some notes."

I stared at her. "Thank you, Patience."

She shrugged. "Just trying to do my part."

The entrance to the old tunnels was located where the sidewalk dead-ended in the Martin Luther King Gardens. From a distance, it looked like any number of storm drains found around the city. It was only upon closer inspection that you discovered the handle grips beneath, and the imbued **Danger Keep Out** sign welded into the metal. The first time I'd been here, I wasn't sure I was in the right place. This time, though, someone had graffitied a large red smiling face on the cover, complete with two X's for eyes.

We were in the right place.

"Careful," I said.

Rickson nodded and handed Pongo his shotgun. The smaller man fumbled it, but managed to regain control without shooting either himself or us. Still, it was a close thing, and I made a mental note to get him some time at the range, or maybe enroll him in a self-defense class. Something to improve his hand-eye coordination so that, at the very least, he wasn't a liability to those around him.

Rickson seized the subway's handle and lifted. The hinges let out a rusted groan as they rose to a forty-five-degree angle and revealed the rickety old metal stairway beneath. There were no lights on inside, not that I'd expected there to be. I flicked the switch on the flashlight attached to the under barrel of my pistol, prompting Rickson and Pongo to do the same. Patience had an honest to goodness magnum flashlight that could also double as a club if necessary. She flicked it on and held it in one hand, gripping her nightstick with the other.

We formed into a single file line and made our way into the tunnel, descending the small flight of stairs into the darkness. Rickson took point, and I went second, figuring that anyone who got through him would find another barrel waiting for

them. Patience came behind me, the theory being that if two guns weren't effective, then maybe bashing the perpetrator with her nightstick would do the trick. Pongo brought up the rear, because he could do less damage back there.

Rickson's flashlight revealed the steps of the rickety old metal staircase, and we took our time, watching for trip-wires or other explosive devices. None of us doubted that we were in mortal danger now, and sacrificing caution for speed was a fool's game.

No booby traps or masked killers appeared from the darkness, and we descended down the floor without incident, drawing to a sudden halt three steps from the bottom.

"Uh, Chloe?" Rickson asked. "Are you seeing this?"

I brought my pistol up, shining my flashlight around his shoulder and down into the tunnel below.

"Crud," I said.

The twisted hills of rusted metal and debris that I'd encountered the day before were gone, covered over by hundreds of circus balloons. Bloodcuddles had filled the tunnel with them, forming a makeshift carpet of black, gray, white and red orbs that rose to knee height and hid the ground beneath.

"What do you think?" Rickson asked.

"He's screwing with us," I said. "Keep going, but watch your step. There are lots of old wires and outlets down here. Look first before you move and keep your movements slow."

Rickson nodded and stepped down, using the barrel of his shotgun to clear a small path, which we tried our best to follow. It was difficult, since every movement sent the nearby balloons scurrying and rebounding off one another, bouncing around the tunnel and up the walls before floating back down. If I thought we could have done it quietly, I would have ordered us to pull back and clear some of them out, but the

sheer number of them was prohibitive. Even working in pairs, we would be here half the night popping them. And Avery didn't have that kind of time.

The tunnels beneath MIT were expansive, spreading up into Cambridge and along the waterfront toward Charlestown. Even my contact at the TSA wasn't entirely sure how far they went, since the government had stopped sending in work crews nearly ten years before after a few of their workers had become trapped by falling debris. The first time I'd come down here, I'd been following a map I memorized, and I'd taken the time to mark my path so I wouldn't get lost.

Bloodcuddles had evidently taken a page out of my book, and spray-painted a giant "**This Way!**" sign in bright red paint along with an accompanying arrow along the wall.

"Chloe?" Rickson asked.

"He's still screwing with us," I said. "But keep going."

The tunnel mouth extended into the dark, occasionally expanding into small chambers and what I believed was supposed to be alternative stops. We followed the path for fifteen minutes, guided by his signs, which grew more inventive the deeper we ventured. "**This way!**" "**Not this way!**" "**You're almost there.**" "**Not too much further now!**" I was surprised he didn't start narrating his own macabre tour.

We came to a small cavern with multiple branching tunnels, and spread out, each moving to a mouth and peering into the tunnel's darkness. I couldn't see anything, but I thought I caught wind of a snuffling, stamping noise, although I wasn't sure what direction it was coming from.

The tunnel Bloodcuddles wanted us to venture down was clearly marked, with twin spotlights fastened up near the tunnel's head, casting their spotlights out and highlighting the sign. I was getting tired of following his orders, however, and was considering branching out when Pongo sneezed suddenly.

It was a violent, jerking sneeze, punctuated by an explosive exhale that carried through the tunnels. We all drew silent and stared at him as he rubbed his nose and gave us an abashed look.

“There goes the element of surprise,” Rickson said.

“You got a flu or something?” I asked.

“No,” Pongo said and shook his head. “I felt fine up top. It’s something down here. It’s making my whole-body itch.”

I glanced at Rickson and Patience, thinking that maybe Bloodcuddles had deployed some sort of aerosol attack, but they both shook their heads. Whatever was affecting Pongo seemed to be directed at him alone, and I took him aside and lowered my voice.

“If you want to head back, now’s the time, but you’ll have to go alone.”

“I don’t,” he said. “I can’t explain it. I haven’t felt like this since that summer my parents sent me to a dude ranch out in Montana.”

“You got a thing against farm life?”

“Grass allergies,” he said.

“Oh,” I said. “Well, do what you can, and keep your finger off the trigger unless you’re ready to shoot.”

He nodded, and the four of us got back on task, Rickson hesitating at the mouth of the tunnel. “Keep following his path?”

“Yeah,” I said.

He nodded, drew in a breath, and started forward, shotgun at the ready. He didn’t notice the trap, and neither did any of the rest of us until it was too late.

Amidst the sea of balloons, half a dozen of their number had been fastened along the wall. Large orbs arranged into a U shape extending up no higher than waist height. It would have

taken close inspecting, along with some luck, to realize they weren't moving freely.

As Rickson stepped through the door, his foot caught the tripwire, rendered almost invisible because of the spotlights arranged overhead. We heard the wire pull free of its perch, and there was a horrible, frozen moment as realization dawned, followed swiftly by a flash of sparks as half a dozen lighter's caught fire, their flaming tips flickering across the balloon's bodies and detonating them with a series of loud, explosive shocks. As their bodies burst, they cast their payloads into the air, orange and red liquid spraying out in a giant cloud of fiery mist that anyone with law enforcement or military experience would have recognized as pepper spray.

There's something you have to understand about pepper spray. When compared to a typical officer's load out, it is, arguably, the least effective weapon we employ, but when it works, man, it *really works*.

The contact pain isn't so bad. I'd been pepper sprayed before and it rates about the same as a bad sunburn. But it hits you everywhere at once, and when combined with its disorientating properties, the sudden plethora of stimulation can prove overwhelming.

Your eyes start to sting, and even if you can muster the will to keep them open, you'll be blinded by tears in seconds. Your lungs burn, and mucus drains from your nose and mouth in quantities you didn't believe was possible. And that's assuming you don't get any in your mouth, which is its own special brand of torture.

Rickson took it full blast, six balloons worth, dousing him from head to toe.

I've known a lot of tough guys in my life, and Rickson would rank among the very top of that list, but no one could walk through that. I'll give him credit though, he kept his head and didn't panic. He knew what was happening, and mitigated

it as best he could, dropping to his knees and taking his finger off the trigger while still keeping the shotgun's barrel pointed in the direction of the tunnel. He waved with his opposite hand, silently urging us back even as he struggled to breathe.

Between Patience and I, we had over a decade on the force, and experience enough to know to wait for the cloud of pepper spray to settle before rushing in to Rickson's aid.

Pongo had all of four months, and more enthusiasm than common sense.

He let out a cry and threw himself forward, rushing into the cloud. Might be he was hoping he could pull Rickson clear, but if so, then he was gravely mistaken.

I recognized what Bloodcuddles was doing, but wasn't fast enough to stop it from happening. It was an old sniper's trick, wound an enemy, then wait for one of his comrades to come help and finish two birds with one stone.

Pongo raced toward Rickson, cutting through the sea of balloons without checking his footing, and I heard the metallic *twang* as his foot came down onto the bear trap. Twin ends snapped shut, tapered metal teeth sandwiching his leg between them, and Pongo screamed and collapsed.

I started shouting orders, but can't remember exactly what I said. Mostly I was telling Pongo to stop flailing, but he couldn't hear me, and after a moment it became clear that we were going to need to wade in ourselves to get him.

From a tactical perspective, it was a bad decision. The chances of more traps were high, but we did it anyway, because that's the risk you take when you are trying to save other officers.

Patience and I moved in slowly, clearing away the balloons. We found three more bear traps, arranged in a half circle, around the tunnel's mouth. Patience used her nightstick to set them off before continuing forward.

“Rickson,” I said, my voice coming out clear. “How you doing, buddy?”

Rickson groaned through clenched teeth, but remained in his crouched position. I didn’t even want to think about how much pain he must be in, but he was harnessing at least some of that and using it to fuel his anger.

Pongo, on the other hand, had gone pale, and was a trembling mess. I headed for him first, and Patience and I reached him about the same time.

“Careful where you put your feet,” I said.

In addition to the bear traps, we found half a dozen smaller, less conspicuous traps. They resembled modified mousetraps designed to bring a heavy nail down into the foot of anyone unlucky enough to trip them. I cleared them as best I could, allowing for a walking path while Patience used her nightstick to pry open the bear trap.

Pongo’s boot had absorbed some of the bear trap’s wrath, but the cuts along his calf were still plenty deep and in need of a doctor. I pulled a tourniquet from my belt and wrapped it up around his leg, securing it just below the knee. That should help stem the bleeding and allow him time to get back to the surface. Once that was done, Patience helped him back to the mouth of the tunnel we’d come through, laying him down against the wall while I made my way over to Rickson.

He was shaking when I finally got to him, and biting down so hard that there was blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, but he barely spoke as I removed my shoe, then my sock, using the latter to wipe at his eyes.

“Belt,” he said through gritted teeth.

I glanced at his waist and found the water cannister there. It came free without complaint, and I turned his head to the side, pouring out a small stream to wash his face and eyes. Most of the damage had already been done, but I was able to clear enough away that he could open his eyes, if only momentarily.

I helped him back to the opposite tunnel's mouth, laying him down beside Pongo, who I was pretty sure had gone into shock.

"Go," Rickson said, once I had him leaning against the tunnel's wall. "You gotta go."

"You kidding? I'm not leaving you here. We'll radio for EMS, and then—"

Rickson's hand shot out, giving me a glimpse of his burned, orange-caked forearm as he seized me around the arms. "Chloe," he said, the words obviously paining him. "He knows we're here. You've got to keep going."

"He's right," Patience said. "Bloodcuddles wants you. If you turn back or bring in reinforcements, he'll think you're no longer playing by the rules of his little game, and he'll make that little girl pay for it."

I stared at them both for a long moment, working it over in my mind before realizing that they were right. I only had one choice.

"You'll get them out safe?" I asked Patience.

She nodded and tightened her grip on her nightstick. "No problem."

I nodded and handed her Rickson's water bottle. "Be careful. Bloodcuddles knows these tunnels. I wouldn't put it past him to have something nasty waiting for you."

"Don't worry about us," Patience said. "That clown so much as peeks around the corner and I'll make sure it's the last thing he does."

I nodded and squeezed Rickson's arm before turning around and rising to my feet. A handful of steps carried me across the chamber, bringing me to the edge of the tunnel mouth, where darkness and danger loomed up to meet me.

“Okay,” I said to myself. “You want me, freak? Well, congratulations. You’ve got me. Let’s do this.”

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Bloodcuddles. April 16th

1027hrs

Most of the pepper spray particles had settled within the tunnel's mouth, coating the floor in orange residue, but enough lingered to burn my nose as I walked through. I wasn't the only one, either. From somewhere in the distant tunnels, I caught wind of a snorting, stamping sound, as if a dog or a larger animal were down here and just now catching the first whiffs of the pepper spray as it made its way through the tunnels.

I crept forward into the darkness, keeping my flashlight low, so the light wouldn't carry, not that it necessarily mattered. Bloodcuddles knew I was coming, and you could bet he was ready for me.

Which meant I needed to be smart.

I couldn't afford to go running in blind, not if I didn't want to end up sliced and diced like a piece of raw fish. I needed to out-think him, to pick my movements carefully, and avoid letting him maneuver me into a bad position. And I needed to do it all on the first try, because I wouldn't get another shot at this.

I went to take a step, but my footsteps faltered, and I set it back down as a cold feeling came over me.

Fear does that sometimes.

I was certain of my purpose. Rescue the little girl and defeat the bad guy. It all made perfect sense on paper. But fear doesn't care about logic or what makes sense. Fear is only concerned with making sure you survive to see another sunrise. And right now, I could hear it whispering inside me, its insidious voice telling me that I didn't want to die down here, alone in the dark, at the hands of a deranged clown. I didn't want to fail, didn't want to have to confront the reality

that I wasn't smart enough, wasn't fast enough, or that I didn't have what it takes to come out on top.

The fear-filled voice urged me to turn around, whispering that I could still get out of the tunnels, retreat back to the surface and wait for backup to arrive. The Special Tactics team could storm the tunnels in force, corner Bloodcuddles, and end it. I could help them and would have a much better chance of survival than if I kept going.

But the same couldn't be said for Avery.

If I left her here, then her chances of ever seeing the sun rise again were next to zero. How was I supposed to reconcile with that? The fear-filled voice didn't have an answer, and I told it go to hell and purposefully lifted my foot, setting it down in front of me then repeating the motion on the other side.

Following this tunnel down to its end might be a bad idea, but retreating was even worse, and there was no way in heck I was going to allow a little girl to buy my safety with her life.

I picked up the pace, kicking a steady stream of balloons out ahead of me as I made my way across the tunnel tracks and through the mounds of discarded machinery before eventually coming to a large chamber. There were half a dozen lit candles inside, their wax bodies impaled on old railroad spikes, their flames allowing me a glimpse of the chamber.

It was roughly the size of a modern-day tram stop, with a boarding platform and the remains of an old escalator rising toward the surface. The ceiling was twenty feet high from the platform, twenty-five from my position on the tracks, and the walls contained a handful of walking pathways that extended out into the darkness. I swept my gaze across the tram station, taking note of the old mattress in the corner, as well as the upturned cooler with flies buzzing around its surface. There were half a dozen mannequins that looked to have been fished out of the dumpster, loaded down with spray painted wigs and

clown paraphernalia, and three large floor fans connected via extension cords and duct tape. An old vanity dresser missing one leg sat against the far wall, propped up by an old soup can, its broken mirror covered in bits of makeup and paint.

A smelting furnace sat suspended above a cinder block fire pit not far from the vanity, connected to the wall via thick wires, with bags of charcoal around its edge. There was a heavy iron anvil that looked like something out of a blacksmith's forge, and a corkboard, its aged pegs loaded down with rows and rows of fixed blade knives. Most of them looked to have been hand-forged, void of decoration and marking.

Avery was in the middle of the platform. She sat upright, tied to her chair, rough ropes cutting into her skin and clothes, with an old rag wrapped around her face and mouth. Her face was flushed with heavy tear marks down her cheeks, and I suspected she'd screamed herself hoarse hours before. I spotted Princess Pickles' cage beside her. The gerbil was nestled down beneath her cage lining, her shaking body and the reflection from her eyes as she peered around betraying her terror. There was a campfire not five feet from them, with twin picks and a long skewer between that was just about the right thickness for a rat, or a gerbil.

I stayed where I was for a long moment, waiting and watching, but no one moved, and slowly, I emerged from the tunnel and made my way up onto the platform. My gun was drawn, the barrel pressed close to my body. Not that it did much good. It suddenly occurred to me that the candles didn't so much illuminate the room as merely force the shadows to gather together into the corners, creating pockets where someone could easily hide.

I came up beside Avery, who began making little choking sounds, and shushed her, keeping my voice soft as I went to work on the ropes. I didn't have a knife on me, and I had to holster my pistol to loosen them enough to set her free. Even

then it was rough, and the cords burned her skin as I pulled her hands loose, then her feet. She was shaking so hard by the time we finished that she could barely stand, but I managed to get her to her feet, then lifted Princess Pickles' cage and set it in her arms.

"It's okay," I whispered, soothing her hair. "You're okay. We're going to get out of here now. You stay beside me, and do exactly what I say. You understand?"

She was crying and hyperventilating, but she managed a shaky nod as I drew her close to me.

"Okay," I said. "Good. Now, we just need—"

Sparks flashed from the far wall, and music suddenly filled the chamber, emanating a static-filled rendition of the old Barnum and Bailey's theme. The trio of fans situated near the mannequins came on, their whirling blades casting out flows of air that lifted the nearest balloons and sent them hurtling into the air. The sudden noise and floating orbs filled the room, echoing off the stones and causing me to stumble as I reached for my pistol.

That misstep was all Bloodcuddles needed.

He rose from the floor, having hidden himself beneath the carpet of balloons, and crashed into me, driving an elbow into my sternum and carrying the pair of us down to the ground. We hit hard, and he brought his full weight down on top of me, knocking the air from my lungs even as he threw back his head and let out his grating laugh.

He was dressed in a full onesie that had once been white but was now the color of water-logged cardboard. The polka dots and stripes were deteriorating, and the black spray-painted wig sat crookedly on his head. He'd sliced one pant leg off at the thigh, removing it to allow for the makeshift cast around his knee. He fastened it himself, using old metal rebar and electrical tape. The stitches the hospital had given him

were dirty and inflamed, red and puffy around the edges where infection had taken hold.

“Going so soon, Sergeant?” he asked. “That just won’t do. I’ve got plans for you.” He smiled, revealing two rows of broken and chipped teeth, and turned his head to glare at Avery. “For all of you.”

“Fat chance,” I said, and snapped my hand forward. My fist struck the side of his jaw, a jagged piece of tooth cutting a gash across my third knuckle as his head snapped to the side.

He let out a pain-filled cry that turned into a snarl and jerked his head back around, swinging his arm forward and backhanding me across the face. My head bounded off the concrete, black spots dancing across my vision as he laughed again, his cackle containing more than a hint of madness.

“You know, Sergeant Mayfield, I can’t help but feel as if we’ve developed something of a special relationship. We might have gotten off to a rocky start, but honestly, I feel as if I should thank you.”

“Thank me?”

“Oh, yes.” He shifted his body atop me, bringing both legs over onto my side and using his makeshift brace and torso to keep me from being able to reach toward my pistol. “You took something from me. You took my indecisiveness. You see this?” He slapped the rebar brace down against the concrete. “Turns out, it was just what I needed. I was so conflicted before, so much hesitation and insecurity. And that other fellow, the one sharing this space?” He tapped his head. “Well, I think we can both agree he was something of a disappointment.”

“No argument here.”

“Right?” he said. “I mean, let’s be honest, chicken nuggets? That was the peak of his ambitions? I suppose it’s not entirely his fault. Mommy had a hand in that one. But you, Sergeant, you solved that little issue.” His hand disappeared inside his

shirt, and came back out a moment later, wielding a homemade fixed blade knife which he shoved up under my chin. “The more pain you inflicted, the deeper he withdrew, and now, well, I don’t hear a sound.”

“You think you’re in pain now, just wait until you see what I’ve got in store for you next.”

Bloodcuddles’ jaw snapped open, and more horrible laughter spilled forth, casting sour spittle on my face. “See, that’s what I like about you, Sergeant. You think you’re tough, strong. But you’ve never really pushed yourself to the limit, never allowed yourself to follow your baser impulses to the edge of your humanity so you can see where the boundaries lie.” He let out a low groan and licked his lips, smearing the makeup. “I know where they lie, and I know how to take someone there.”

An involuntary groan slipped past my clenched lips, and I tried to struggle, but he was stronger, and held me down with one hand, keeping the knife pinned beneath my chin with the other.

“The silence was a bit of a shock at first. I’d be lying if I said my initial impulse wasn’t to hunt you down and kill you,” Bloodcuddles said. “I even let myself into your apartment, thinking that I could paint the walls with your blood. But as I stood there, peering around your bedroom, I realized what a wasted opportunity that would be.” He shifted his grip, seized me by the chin with his free hand and tapped the edge of his knife against my head. “You see, Sergeant, I did some digging, and you’ve had quite the sordid career. Most people would have quit by now, but not you. You just keep on going, that dogged determination driving you forward.”

“Since when is stubbornness unique in the city of Boston?”

“Oh, this goes beyond just stubbornness,” he said. “The more I looked into you, the more I realized you and I were not so very different.” He shifted his grip and tapped his finger

against the side of my head. “I can see the madness within you. The self-hatred. I can almost hear it, whispering to me, begging to be let out. You and I, Sergeant, well, we’re going to make quite the pair, once we break down some of those barriers you’re holding.”

“You think I’m going to become like you just because you have a knife?” I asked.

“What, this?” he asked and motioned with the knife. “No, pain isn’t enough on its own. That’s the easy part. No, we have to go deeper than that. We’ll need to reach inside that beautiful mind and find the madness that lives there. Then we’ve got to hook it, and bring it to the surface, like a great, black whale. And to do that, we’re going to need to stretch you beyond your beliefs.” He leaned in until his face was touching my own. “Tell me, Sergeant, have you ever considered devouring a child? I think we’ll start there, and then—”

People often underestimate children, and granted, most of the time they’re uncompromising, illogical little beings fueled by raw emotion, but they can also rise to the occasion in ways we’d never expect, as Avery proved in that moment when she stepped up and smashed Princess Pickles’ cage down overtop Bloodcuddles’ head.

I’ll never be sure if she and Princess Pickles worked out what happened next ahead of time, but not all questions need to be answered. The cage shattered, hunks of glass, lining and barbed wire flying in every direction, and Princess Pickles threw herself forward through the wreckage, her claws at the ready as she disappeared into Bloodcuddles’ wig.

There was a flurry of movement, followed by a gerbil’s scream as Princess Pickles began to bite and claw. Bloodcuddles jerked up and off of me, scrambling up to one knee, his wounded leg extended out before him. He seized his wig and tore it from his head to reveal the bald pate beneath. Open blisters marred his skin, either as a result of the spray paint or sweat I couldn’t say, but one of the sores opened when

he tore the wig free, the scab ripping away and causing yellow pus to slide down the side of his face as he threw it to the floor.

Bloodcuddles screamed and seized his knife, stabbing it into the curled, faux hair body. Again and again, his knife plunged down, and he failed to notice Princess Pickles as she scampered out the side, seeking the shadow of my prone form.

Bloodcuddles sliced his wig in two, then did it again, casting the pieces down before turning his murderous glare on Avery. She wilted under the pressure of his gaze and backed away, shaking and trembling as the killer clown stumbled up to his feet.

I pushed myself up to my feet as he took his first step, and threw myself forward, hitting his back and wrapping my arms around his neck. The sudden pressure of my weight took Bloodcuddles by surprise, and the force of the momentum carried us off the platform and onto the tracks below.

My fall was cushioned by Bloodcuddles, but the landing still hurt, and I went over his shoulder, striking the pavement and flipping over backwards. Time got a little fuzzy for a few moments, and the darn circus music stretched and thinned, but I came back to myself right about the same time Bloodcuddles entered my field of vision.

He screamed and stabbed at my prone form, but I got my arms up, knocking aside his forearm and parrying the knife away. It struck the ground to the right of my head, and Bloodcuddles cursed and seized my throat, drawing his arm back for another strike.

“You know, Sergeant, I’m starting to think you might not be what I’m looking for after all,” Bloodcuddles said. “I was going to give you a gift and set you free from all the societal chains that bind you, but now, I’m thinking maybe I’ve been looking at this all wrong. Perhaps my attention would be better spent on a younger, more supple mind? That girl up there,

she's a fighter. What do you think would happen if I make her sleep beside your corpse for a month?"

"The only corpse here is going to be you," a voice said from behind us.

I hadn't heard anyone else approach, hadn't noticed any movement between the music and the floating balloons, but I recognized the two arms that appeared, wrapping themselves around Bloodcuddles' form.

Constable Patience Woods seized hold of the deranged clown, pressed her front to his back, and hauled him into the air. She suplexed him over her shoulder, and Bloodcuddles discovered a valuable rule relating to the laws of physics.

Turns out that the human body, for all its miracles, is surprisingly fragile and psychotic thinking can only take you so far. Bloodcuddles learned this when he came down and his head struck the ground with a resounding *crack* that sounded suspiciously similar to several neck vertebrae shattering. He flopped to the ground, and let out a wet, wheezing sound, air and blood leaking from his mouth.

Patience hauled herself to her feet, wiping her palms against the front of her pants as she came up beside me. She reached down and helped me to my feet, holding me steady as I found my balance. The pair of us stood there, panting and dirty, as balloons floated all around us, their bodies occasionally venturing too close to the candles and popping.

"You came back for me," I said.

Patience sniffed and glanced at Bloodcuddles' twitching form. "Seemed like you might need a hand. Besides, even in England, we're big on rule number one."

"Rickson and Pongo?"

"I got them most of the way," she said. "They were calling for reinforcements when I left. Help should be here shortly. How's the girl?"

“She’s okay,” I said.

As if to give credence to my words, Avery appeared, clutching a battle-worn Princess Pickles to her chest. She glanced between Patience and me, then looked down at Bloodcuddles’ paralyzed form and started to cry.

Patience moved up and enfolded her in her arms, holding her close to her chest. “Come on, honey,” she said. “Let’s get you home.”

They started back the way we’d come, and I moved to follow, but Bloodcuddles let out a sudden hiss, and called out to me.

“Sergeant,” he said, blood leaking from his mouth. “Sergeant!”

I hesitated, then turned and stepped up beside him, glaring down at his form. “Yeah?”

“I wasn’t finished thanking you,” he said, struggling to push his words past the blood and dirt caking his mouth. “You see, you didn’t just remove all my distractions. You also gave me a purpose, something to focus on. Something I could really sink my teeth into.”

“Get to the point, clown.”

“You, Sergeant Mayfield. I wasn’t lying when I said I’d been thinking about you. I’ve been looking into your entire Blue Moon Division. And I want to know more. I want to understand what drives you and then I want to pull it apart, one thread at a time, until madness is the only place you have left to turn.”

“The only place you’re going is to jail, Woodrow,” I said. “And this time, there won’t be any escape.”

“Don’t use that name with me,” he hissed, anger spewing from between his broken teeth. “Never that. My name is Bloodcuddles. You’re going to remember my name. We’ve already established that you can’t run from me.”

“I’m not running anywhere. I’m turning my back, and I’m leaving you right here where you belong.”

And I did. Following Patience and Avery out of the tunnel, I left Bloodcuddles where he’d fallen, surrounded by his balloons, the sounds of his music drowning out his laughter.

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The Missing Piece. April 16th

1132hrs

Patience and I emerged from the tunnels to find an entirely different sort of circus waiting for us.

Rickson's call for help had apparently been successful, and what felt like every cop in the city had shown up to answer. They quarantined off the tunnel entrance, then set up a perimeter, making space for more incoming ambulances and the bomb squad. I didn't even try to rush them, since Bloodcuddles wasn't going anywhere.

Most of the upper brass, including Deputy Bulwark, were already gathered around outside, some more eager than others to have their pictures taken. They rushed down to help when they saw us emerge, but Patience shouted them back, using a slew of curses I was pretty sure she was inventing on the spot before escorting Avery to an ambulance waiting to take her to the hospital. I heard on the radio that her father would meet her there. She'd need a full examination, but I was pretty sure she was mostly unharmed. I didn't envy her the nightmares she would have in the foreseeable future, but I told myself that kids are resilient, and with enough kindness and compassion, she would make it through.

Rickson and Pongo were transported to the hospital, and I found myself being treated by a pair of EMTs. They glued the cut along my knuckle shut, then dabbed it with antibiotic and wrapped it with gauze. They also gave me an ice pack for my face, which I pressed to my cheek.

The bomb squad set about clearing the tunnels, and once they had a pathway, the Special Tactics Team went in and secured Bloodcuddles. He was still laughing when they brought him out via stretcher, everything below his neck hanging lifelessly, and I turned away, avoiding contact as they

loaded him up and carted him off, first to the hospital, then jail.

Once Avery was gone and Bloodcuddles was in custody, the upper brass cleared out, until only those who needed to be there remained. None of them seemed to want to speak with Patience or me, but it wasn't long before we began to catch snippets of what was being reported via the news and local media.

The official narrative was that Rickson, while out on routine patrol, had stumbled across Bloodcuddles' lair, and he and several other unnamed officers, who I suspected would remain that way if Deputy Bulwark had anything to say about it, had staged a heroic rescue that resulted in the girl being recovered safe and sound. Rickson's name was already circulating the news, with most of the stations calling back to his prior acts of heroism.

I was happy for him, and more than happy to stay in the background on this one. I'd had my fill of being in the news over these past few months. I left my information with the crime scene officer, then turned and headed back to my loaner car. Patience met me halfway, falling into step beside me.

We were nearly across the lot when my cell phone buzzed in my pocket. I fished it out and saw Alex's name greet me before I brought it up to my ear.

"Chloe?" he said, his voice strained. "I just saw the news? Are you alright?"

"Fine," I said, and glanced at Patience. "We're all fine. One bad guy down." I left off the obligatory, *and one to go*. Bloodcuddles might have been finished, but the Headless Horseman was still at large.

"I can't believe that psychopath managed to escape. How is it that no one called to warn you?"

"Guess it just sort of slipped through all the confusion," I said, purposefully not mentioning Bulwark. Stirring up trouble

between the FBI and Boston PD wasn't going to do anyone any good in the long term.

"Still," he said.

"Yeah."

"Are you free to talk?"

I switched the phone to my opposite ear, glancing around to confirm all the other officers were too far away to hear. "Yeah, go ahead," I said.

"I was looking into Jenni Sexton's financial records, and there are some things you're going to want to know."

"Okay," I said. "Lay it on me."

He told me, and little by little, I felt my stomach turn sour. When he finally finished, it took me a moment to speak again. "Is that all?"

"I'm afraid not," he said. "You see, I thought about what you said, and I did some more digging. She's not the only one this has happened to."

"Who else are we talking about?"

He told me, and just like that, I felt the puzzle pieces click into place, the missing bits emerging out of the darkness to form a picture that was both complex and horrifying.

"Chloe?"

"I'm here," I said.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard."

"And?"

I was quiet for a long moment before I let out a long exhale. "I've got to go, Alex."

"You're going after them, aren't you?"

I darn sure was, but I wasn't about to admit it. I didn't need to, though. Alex read the truth in my silence.

"Should I come meet you?" Alex asked.

"No," I said. "I have enough help here."

"You're sure?"

"Positive," I said.

Alex had already bent the rules enough for me. Involving himself in a case that wasn't part of any official FBI investigation, not to mention using federal resources to do it, wouldn't go unnoticed if it came out that he was directly involved.

I wasn't sure if the FBI had its own dumping ground division for officers who'd screwed up too badly to work anywhere else, but if so, then I didn't want to see Alex condemned there, especially not on my account.

"You'll let me know what happens?" Alex asked.

"You'll be the first one I call," I promised, and hung up.

The day was still young, but the street seemed a little darker than it had a moment before, or maybe it was just me who'd changed. I couldn't be sure, but I didn't have time to dwell on it either.

"Something come up?" Patience asked.

"Yeah, something," I said. "We did good work here, didn't we?"

Patience snorted. "Darn right."

"You got one more in you?"

"Depends," she said. "Lunchtime is drawing near. I might need some more of that cake first."

"We can do that."

"Alright then," she said. "Where are we going?"

“To end this,” I said. “And to bring the Headless Horseman down, once and for all.”

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MIT Campus. April 16th

1220hrs

The MIT campus hadn't changed on the surface, but there was something darker, more menacing, that I could feel watching me from the shadows as we pulled up along the curb outside the Microsystems Technology Lab.

Psychologists would have classified it as the heebie-jeebies. A sense of unwell being brought on by knowledge I didn't have the last time I was here. Maybe they were right, or maybe I'd grown a keener sense of detection in the past few hours and was just picking up on the dark aura that had been here all along.

I couldn't say one way or another, but it didn't matter.

I still had a job to do.

Patience and I exited the vehicle and made our way inside. There were no classes scheduled for today, and we took the elevator up to the third floor. The janitorial staff had been through recently, and the air still smelled of pine and chemical cleaner. We didn't see anyone as we made our way down the hall. Professor Tony Galuhn's office was locked up, but a swift kick broke the door off its hinges and we made our way inside.

His office was on the spacious side, but still felt cramped by the addition of an extra little desk that I assumed belonged to his teaching assistant, Ashley. Professor Galuhn's area was littered with scientific papers and literary journals, none of which meant much to me, as well as various hand scribbled notes. Nothing stuck out to me, and we finished our sweep and headed back out into the hall, taking the stairs down one floor.

Voices reached us when we exited the stairway, and Patience and I shared a meaningful glance as we instinctively inched closer to the wall. At the end of the hall, we came upon a classroom with the lights on. It was the same classroom we'd

been in before, and I peeked through the glass panel and caught sight of Professor Galuhn inside. He was seated on one of the tables, the familiar bundle of gray cloth on the table beside him, with a whiteboard to his back containing complex electrical circuitry. A handful of students were in the room. I recognized Ashley Flowers, his teaching assistant, as well as Pranav, who'd been the lone student in class the last time I was here. Mary Han, Jenni's roommate, was also there, which should have surprised me but didn't.

I lingered by the door for a moment, working the angles in my head, then glanced at Patience and nodded. She stepped around and seized the door, flinging it open. I went in first, keeping my gun in its holster but allowing my footsteps to sound loudly as we made our way down the center aisle.

"Class is dismissed, guys," I said. "We need to have a word with your professor."

A series of confused looks passed between the students, then they rose from their chairs, gathered up their belongings and departed the room, casting sideways glances at us as they passed.

"Sergeant Mayfield," Professor Galuhn said. His wavy hair was more disheveled than when last I'd seen him, and the red rims beneath his eyes suggested he hadn't been sleeping particularly well. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Stow it, Bill Nye," I said. "We know you're involved."

"Excuse me?"

"With the Headless Horseman. We know you're mixed up in it."

"The Headless... Sergeant, I don't know what you might have been told, but I can assure you that—"

"You lied about knowing Walter Crosier," I said.

"What?"

“Before, when we spoke. You claimed not to know him. But that’s not true, is it? You’ve known him for a very long time. Better than thirty years, from back when you were only a freshman.”

“Sergeant, I can—”

“You know the university keeps financial records of all their students?” I asked. “Digitalized, of course, but they’re there. I can go back to your freshman year and see exactly what classes you took, and more importantly, who paid for them.”

“Sergeant Mayfield—”

“He wrote the check by hand,” I said. “From his own personal account. Why would he do that?”

“Sergeant—”

“And now he’s dead,” I said. “And so are two of your students. So think hard before you tell me again how you’re not involved. The way I see it, you’re either directly responsible, or the person behind it is using you like a pawn. Which is it?”

Professor Galuhn opened his mouth, intending to plead his innocence, but he hesitated, and I saw a change come over his face. His mouth tightened into a thin line, and his eyes hardened. “Well, I suppose that’s that then.”

“Not quite. Start talking.”

“Of course,” he said. “You’re absolutely right, Sergeant. I haven’t played it straight with you. Give me a moment, and I’ll be happy to tell you all I know.”

He reached across the table and seized the gray sheet. A quick flourish revealed it to be roughly the size of a twin-blanket, and he moved before I could stop him, casting it up into the air and over his head, like a kid on Halloween donning their bedsheets as a ghost costume.

Except in Professor Galuhn's case, he really did disappear.

I didn't know how to explain it. One second, he was there, and the next, he was just *gone*. His entire form disappeared, along with the blanket, and all I could do was stand there with my mouth gaping open.

"Chloe!" Patience snapped, and whirled.

I tried to follow her, but I was a hair too slow, and barely glimpsed the trio of students as they stepped back in the room. Mary Han stood at their head, Professor Galuhn's teaching assistant, Ashley Flowers, on her left, and the other student, Pranav, on her right. Each of the students were holding tasers. The police issue kind, with projectile prongs that shot out toward the target. Realization dawned, and I reached for my pistol, but they were faster. Ashley shot me first, twin prongs lighting me up like a Christmas tree, even as the other two did the same to Patience.

The sound of electrical current filled my ears as every muscle in my body contracted all at once. A breathless groan slipped out past my lips, and I toppled over onto my side, catching a brief glimpse of the table an instant before my head struck the corner, and everything went dark.

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The Face Behind the Shroud.

April 16th 1249hrs

I came to sitting upright, my hands tied to the armrests of a wrought-iron patio chair. Every muscle in my body was aching, no doubt an after-effect of the taser shot I'd taken, and the side of my head felt as if someone had taken a hammer to my temple. Black stars flashed across my vision, and sight came a full ten seconds before sound returned.

I was somewhere outside. I couldn't see the sun behind the clouds, but I didn't think I'd been out for very long. Patience was beside me, bound to her chair in much the same way I was. Her head lolled back, but she stirred when I called her name, and I repeated it again and again, using it as a line to draw her back to consciousness.

"Patience," I said. "Are you okay?"

"Hurt," she said.

"Badly?"

"Need cake."

I snorted out a breath and shook my head, which turned out to be a mistake.

"Where are we?" Patience asked.

We were in a small cobblestone alley, with a tiny pocket park surrounded by benches to our right. I recognized the logo for the Pfizer building, and LabCentral on the other side. No lights were on inside, and no movement appeared from behind the windows.

"Nowhere good," I said.

"What happened?"

"We got bamboozled by the understudies for The Big Bang Theory," I said.

“What?”

“The science nerds got us,” I said.

“Ah.”

“Now, now,” Professor Galuhn said, as he came into view. He was wearing his green professor’s jacket atop a blue and yellow pineapple Hawaiian shirt, and had the grey shroud swung over one shoulder, working to smooth the ends.

“There’s no reason to resort to name calling. Science makes the world go round. It’s the foundation of our very society, even if most of the population is too dim-witted to truly understand it.”

I struggled against my bindings, but the ropes remained taut, and my muscles were still strained. Several seconds passed before I slumped back into the chair. “Well, speaking on behalf of the dim-witted, at least we don’t resort to murder when our student loans come due.”

Professor Galuhn’s face darkened. “That was self-defense.”

“Oh, sure. The old, ‘I rode him down from atop horseback and cut his head off,’ defense. That always plays well with the jury.”

He stared at me for a moment, then dropped his head and brought his hand up to the shroud, stroking the length of it as if the mere touch brought him comfort. “There isn’t going to be any jury.”

“You sure about that?” I asked. “Cause from where I’m sitting, there’s a pretty big paper trail connecting you to all of this. I found it, others will too.”

“No,” he said. “They won’t. You see, as you were so kind to point out, the university has gone to digitalizing everything. That’s the beauty of computers. A few clicks of the mouse and poof, it’s as if it never existed.”

“We both know it’s not that easy,” I said. In the distance, I heard a vehicle pull up beside a curb, and what sounded like a

van door opening. “Even if you delete it off the university computers, you think Walter Crosier doesn’t have his own records? The man paid for your education, even funded your research projects, and you killed him rather than pay it back. You think people aren’t going to notice?”

He snorted. “Haven’t you seen the news, Sergeant Mayfield? Walter Crosier was a money-hungry, greedy bastard of a man, and it’s finally caught up with him.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning Avant-Guard’s Board of Directors is turning on itself. First there was the poor publicity from Fidelitycoin, then that whole affair with Gerome Reed and his leprechauns, and now this. All indications are that they’ll be tearing themselves apart by the end of the week. It will be years, *decades*, before anyone even thinks to look into his personal loans, and by then things will have become so muddled that they won’t even know where to begin. Whatever hold he had over us will vanish from this world as if it never existed, and even if someone did notice, there’s no one left to collect.”

“All the same, it seems like a pretty poor way of saying thank you.”

Professor Galuhn’s eyes hardened, and a glint of something dangerous peered out at me. “Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“If so, I missed the punchline.”

“You think he did it out of the goodness of his heart? That he was some sort of philanthropist, going around doing good works? Tell me, Sergeant, did you ever even meet the man?”

“I did, actually,” I said. “One time.”

“One time is usually enough for most people.”

“It was for me,” I said. “But just because I found him personally distasteful doesn’t mean he deserved to die. This was a personal attack, and I want to know why.”

Professor Galuhn stared at me, his anger slowly subsiding. “You couldn’t possibly understand.”

“Spell it out for me.” I motioned toward my arms, bound to the chair. As I did, I glimpsed a flash of blue peeking around the far corner, gone so fast I thought I must have imagined it. “If it helps, consider it a last request. Clearly, we aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. What could it hurt to alleviate my curiosity?”

Professor Galuhn considered it for several seconds before he scowled. “Fine. Have it your way, Sergeant. What do you know of peer-to-peer lending?”

“I stopped loaning my things out after sophomore year when my sister took my textbooks and sold them back to the college bookstore for beer money.”

“Very amusing,” he said. “But this is no laughing matter. A peer-to-peer loan follows all the same principles of a regular loan, save that it is taken out through an individual, as opposed to a bank or government institution.”

“What’s the benefit?” I asked.

“For the lendee, interest rates and pay schedules tend to be more favorable than traditional routes, and the approval process is much faster.”

“And for the lender?”

“They’re able to customize their clauses and conditions beyond what a normal bank or institution could reasonably seek to collect. As long as they don’t break any laws, they’re completely enforceable under the current judicial system.”

“Is that what happened to you? He made you sign away your first born or something?”

“Something like that.”

“What was it?” I asked. “Tell me.”

“Full repayment of the loan, as well as ten percent of my base salary for the first five years after payment was complete.”

I grunted. “That’s high, but so what? You’ve been past that for some time. Why kill him now?”

“He also maintains an eighty percent royalty on any inventions or patents that I might produce.”

My eyes widened. “Oh.”

“You’re beginning to understand now?” he asked.

“For how long?”

“Forever. It’s what they call in perpetuity.” He grew quiet for a moment, his eyes peering off toward something distant. “Do you have any idea what it’s like, Sergeant? To watch other men profit off your work? Men like Walter Crosier? To see them reap the rewards of your sweat and toil? To know that no matter how much you struggle, they will always garner the benefit?”

“You could have fought it,” I said. “Taken him to court, shown a judge what he’d done.”

“You think I didn’t try?” Professor Galuhn asked. “Avant-Garde lawyers would have crushed me, and even if I could get it in front of a judge, they would just buy the judge off.”

“You still could have tried.”

“To what end? Walter Crosier had the power to end my career with a single phone call. I’d seen it happen before. Tenured professors with years of loyal service, banished from the field and cast out into the street, unable to secure work for daring to move against him.”

“That still doesn’t give you the right to kill him,” I said. “And it certainly doesn’t excuse dragging your kids in with you.”

“You think this is all for me?” he asked. “Sergeant, open your eyes. This is about them. You think Walter Crosier amassed his wealth through stock investments? He’s been involved in the scientific community for decades.”

I noted a second flash of blue coming from the far building, but it was gone almost as fast as the first. “Jenni Sexton took out loans through Avant-Garde. They looked straightforward enough.”

“Jenni Sexton was a C-student at best,” he said. “She was lucky to even be passing. You think Walter Crosier would have wasted his time on her? Please. He had people, scouts, except instead of sporting events, they went around visiting science fairs and robotics competitions. Anyone he thought he could profit off of, he would find a way to corner them.”

“Corner them how?”

“He’d sell them on the college dream. All expenses paid. If that didn’t work, he’d involve the families, offer a sign-on bonus payable immediately. Hell, he’d even reach out to his friends in the financial industries and cancel any pre-existing loans. He’d go as far as he had to until the students had no choice but to sign with him.”

“It might be unethical, but it’s still not illegal.”

“Well, it should be!” Professor Galuhn snapped. “The students who come here, they’re signing up for a lifetime of slavery. Four years tuition, even at a prestigious university like this, is nothing to a man like Walter Crosier, and if they don’t graduate, they still have to pay it all back. If they do, those who go on to lucrative jobs will end up repaying him a hundred times over before it’s through. And for those who truly excel, the innovative field leaders, he will make millions in royalties. Profiting off the sweat of those who have sacrificed and toiled to create something truly exceptional.”

“Like that shroud?” I asked.

Professor Galuhn blinked, and his face lost some of its hard edges. He slipped the shroud from his shoulder, stretching it between his hands. “Yes, just like that. It’s magnificent, isn’t it? It’s taken me a lifetime to perfect it.”

“How does it work?”

“Electrical circuits create an energy field that bends light around the object, making it invisible to the naked eye. We call it Hyperstealth technology. It works on the visible spectrum, as well as ultraviolet and infrared. It’s taken me twenty years to bring this into being, and now it’s finally ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“Real-world field testing. Next year, we’ll begin contract talks with the military, as well as several private security organizations.”

“You mean mercenaries,” I said.

“Well-funded mercenaries,” he said. “Who are willing to pay top-dollar.”

“And if Walter Crosier were still alive, you would barely see any of it.”

Professor Galuhn nodded. “I still would have been credited as the inventor, but what is that worth? When you reach my age, you come to understand that those accolades are hollow whispers when compared to money.”

“Why the other victims?” I asked. “Why Dennis?”

“Dennis,” Professor Galuhn said and shook his head. “He was one of my most promising students and instrumental in making this shroud a reality. He was a brilliant young mind, but he was, shall we say, easily distracted by the opposite sex.”

“Jenni,” I said, feeling something click into place in my head. “She wasn’t part of your little group.”

“Not officially,” he said. “But she was a crafty young lady, and not averse to using her feminine charms to coerce her

classmates into doing her work for her.”

“Is that why the Horseman killed her?” I asked.

I was thinking on the fly, working on a theory in my head, and I threw the question out, wanting to see how he reacted.

Professor Galuhn’s mouth tightened, but he nodded after a moment. “It was a mistake. The girl, she was trouble. I thought maybe I could sit them both down, make them see reason, show them how she was only using the two of them, but Vihaan, well, he’s always been something of a hot-head.”

A flash went through me at the mention of the name. “Who’s Vihaan?”

“One of our exchange students, here under Walter Crosier’s loan program. A brilliant young mind, and former Olympian.”

“Let me guess, fencing?”

“As well as Equestrian Dressage,” he said. “I thought he and Dennis could get things sorted between them, but Vihaan, he, well, you know. And afterwards, there was no talking Dennis around.”

“So you killed him,”

“Vihaan killed him.”

“But you helped him cover it up for fear that he would expose you.”

“It’s not like I had much choice,” Professor Galuhn said. “If Vihaan were to be arrested, the entire charade would unravel, and we would all find ourselves staring out from behind prison walls.”

“That’s why you took Dennis’ body. Those gray threads found in the wound. They’re going to match up to your little Hyperstealth shroud, aren’t they?”

“Very good, Sergeant.”

“What about the other students?” I asked. “How do they fit in?”

“Oh, much as you might expect,” he said. “Ashley and Pranav each played their parts in the shroud’s creation. Science is a complicated affair, and few great works are ever accomplished alone. I never intended to involve Mary Han, but her skills have proven invaluable in ways I never could have anticipated.”

“Because of her skill with computers?”

He nodded. “Her work deprogramming the university’s surveillance systems, as well as their financial records, has proven most advantageous.”

“That’s why you killed Brenda Blumefield.”

He nodded. “Brenda was an odd duck, but she was good at her job. She would have noticed right away that someone had been inside her precious financial software system. With her out of the way, though, it was open season within the university records. Come midnight tonight, all records of our debts to Walter Crosier will vanish like mist rising off the coast. We’ll be free.”

“If it was that easy, why the Horseman getup?” I asked. “Why even bother?”

“Public opinion,” he said. “We couldn’t just kill Walter Crosier outright. That would have brought far too much police attention, and there’s no telling how it would have shaken out. A caricature was necessary. A gimmick, with a flair of absurd to give it a bizarre twist. No cop wants to investigate a supposed ghost killing, and since Walter Crosier has no next of kin to pressure them—”

“You figured his death would go down as unsolved and remain that way.”

“I hoped so,” Professor Galuhn said. “I even thought they might turn their attention onto Jenni’s little witch friends. Alas,

things have gotten more complicated.”

“I should say so,” a new voice said from off to our right.

Several footsteps sounded, and then four figures came into view. Mary, Ashley, and Pranav looked much as I’d seen them before, but it was the fourth figure who drew my eye.

A shade over five feet tall and dressed in a dark frontiersman leather and a high collared dress coat, the Headless Horseman looked less fierce in the daylight setting, more of a caricature, like Professor Galuhn said. Although there was nothing amusing about the raven pommeled saber on his hip. That was all too real. He was leading his horse, still covered in its protective material, gripping the reins with one hand as he drew to a stop beside us.

Patience shifted and started muttering beside me, and I couldn’t help but stare at the space where his head should have been. Even knowing what I knew now, it was unnerving to see, and it didn’t get any better when the Horseman began to laugh.

His chuckle echoed out from where his mouth should have been, and a long moment passed before he reached up and seemingly grabbed hold of nothing. There was an electrical hum, and the air suddenly smelled of ozone as the shroud popped into view. It was fashioned into a full balaclava mask, with covered goggles for eyes. The Horseman, Vihaan, pulled the mask free, revealing a dark-skinned youth with curly hair dyed light along the tips. He had an eyebrow piercing and dark eyes, and when he spoke, his accent was decidedly English.

“Are you still going on out here?” Vihaan asked. “What’s next? You want to give them your life story?”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Vihaan,” Professor Galuhn said. “Disposing of them was never part of the plan, and we know who we have to thank for that, don’t we?”

“Aye, always quick to lay the blame at my feet, aren’t you?”

“It’s not about blame,” Professor Galuhn said. “it’s about practicality. Now, let’s finish this so that we can put this whole mess behind us and move on to more profitable pursuits.”

“Aye, we been thinking the same thing,” Vihaan said.

“Glad to hear it,” Professor Galuhn said.

“We’ve also been thinking that it was high time we bid you farewell.”

Professor Galuhn frowned. “Excuse me?”

“You’re out, Professor,” Vihaan said. “We took a vote. Didn’t go your way.”

“B-but that’s preposterous. The entire Hyperstealth research is based on my work.”

“I think you mean our work,” Vihaan said, and motioned to the others around him. “We did all the heavy lifting ourselves.”

“It was my idea!”

“Yeah, but we’re the ones who made it real,” he said.

“Vihaan, think about what you’re saying,” Professor Galuhn said. “You’ll never get this off the ground without me. My contacts in the field—”

“What contacts would those be, exactly?” Vihaan asked. “A bunch of fifty-year-old buggers like yourself? Haven’t been relevant in the field for over twenty years? Crusty old academics trying to relive their glory days by taking advantage of us students?”

“You’re making a mistake,” Professor Galuhn said.

“No, mate, I don’t think we are,” he said. “In fact, I’m thinking you’re not so different from Walter Crosier. Just another old codger eager to profit off our ingenuity.”

Professor Galuhn gaped open-mouthed before turning to his teaching assistant, his eyes pleading. “Ashley…”

“Sorry, Professor,” Ashley said. “You’ve been so afraid of becoming irrelevant that you convinced yourself you were more important than you are.”

“Yeah, he did,” Vihaan said. “But don’t worry, we’re going to change all that today.”

Professor Galuhn swallowed and straightened. “If you even think about trying to pitch the Hyperstealth technology without me, then I’ll have my lawyers all over this so fast it will make your head spin.”

Vihaan snorted and shared an amused glance with his three co-conspirators. “Lawyers, mate? Did you seriously get the impression that we were going to decide this in court?”

“Well, if not there, where?”

“Right here looks good.”

Professor Galuhn’s eyes widened, and he took an uncertain step back. “You can’t be serious.”

“Afraid so,” Vihaan said. “You see, that was part of the vote, too. We decided on a speedy resolution.”

“N-no,” Professor Galuhn said. “I-I have a family.”

“A divorced wife and a step-sister you haven’t seen since she was five hardly count,” Vihaan said. “Something tells me they’ll be alright.”

It’s only happened once or twice where I’ve witnessed a man come face to face with his own mortality, and it’s never been pretty. Professor Tony Galuhn’s expression fell, and fear, real fear, entered his eyes. He held firm for a moment before it won out, and a low scream echoed out from his mouth as he turned and fled.

“Oh, there he goes,” Vihaan said. “Never seen that before.”

He turned and mounted his horse in one smooth gesture, coming into his saddle and kicking his heels into the animal’s

flank. The horse seemed to know what was expected, and took off, racing fast and low as Vihaan drew his sword.

Professor Galuhn wasn't a runner, and he didn't make more than fifty feet before Vihaan was on him. It wasn't pretty, but it was clean, and a single swipe sent the Professor's body crashing to the ground, and his head bouncing off into the bushes.

Vihaan reined in his horse, then turned it around, trotting past Professor Galuhn's corpse with an ugly sneer. He savored the moment, then twisted his wrist with a flourish and turned his attention toward Patience and I.

I didn't realize what was happening until the three other students moved off the sidewalk, leaving us alone in the center of the alleyway's walking path. Realization dawned, and I jerked in my chair, fighting in vain against the bonds as the horseman lined up his next target.

Patience realized what was happening a split second after I did, and the pair of us struggled to no avail as Vihaan lowered himself down in the saddle and kicked his heels, spurring his mount forward.

I suddenly felt like I was in the middle of a jousting competition, save that I had no horse, lance, or armor. The Horseman was bearing down on us, and in another moment, I was going to find out what it was like to be in two places at once. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing but brace for impact and—

“Get down,” Patience screamed.

She hurled herself sideways, her curves proving to be more than the chair's legs could hold, and crashed into me, sending the pair of us toppling over onto our sides. My arms were still bound, and I couldn't brace against the impact, but I avoided cracking my skull on the bricks as a giant explosion sounded, and something with roughly the same size and dimensions of a bowling ball tore through the space where we had been.

I'd never actually heard a cannon blast before, and it was surprisingly loud within the confines of the campus. The explosion echoed off the nearby buildings and caused the nearby windows to tremble. The cannon ball struck the ground in front of the Horseman, blasting bricks into the air and sending mount and rider spinning head over horsey-tail.

“Sons of Liberty, charge!”

I blinked against the noise and the dust, and turned my head as several dozen figures wearing colonial military uniforms with tricorn hats came around the corner. Someone was playing a drum set, and another was blowing into a flute, and three, including Amos, were gathered around an actual cannon they'd wheeled around the building. The rest, however, wielded long musket rifles attached with bayonets. They charged into the alley, encircling the trio of students and forcing them face down to the ground. If any of the students still had their tasers, they at least had the sense not to use them, and in moments their hands were bound behind them.

Vihaan had been knocked senseless from the fall, and the Sons of Liberty bound him quick, securing his sword and hogtying his feet and wrists together. The horse proved more difficult to catch, but eventually three of them cornered the beast and made their way in by offering it drinks from their flasks. I never knew horses cared for alcohol, but after the third or fourth flask was empty, the horse had calmed down enough that they were able to get hold of the reins and lead him toward the grass.

Several of the Sons of Liberty lifted Patience and me from the street, righting us and slicing us free from our bonds. I got my arm loose just as Titus Broggart came up beside me, dressed in his full battle regalia, including his crooked admiral's hat.

“The Sons of Liberty, at your service, Sergeant. We may be drunk, or at least I am, but we're here.”

“Is that your new official motto?”

“It could be,” he said. “What do you think?”

“I’ve heard worse,” I said. “Is the area secure?”

“Indeed,” he said. “All enemies have been accounted for.”

“Good work, Admiral,” I said.

He cleared his throat. “No doubt you’ll wish to—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “Drinks are on me tonight.”

Titus smiled. “Excellent.”

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One Question Remains. April 16th 1800hrs

Alex had called Titus and the Sons of Liberty as soon as we'd gotten off the phone. You probably figured that out already, but just in case you hadn't, that's what happened.

They'd immediately mustered, loaded up into their respective vans, and made for the university. Once they couldn't find us, they spread out, searching the streets before one of their scouts noted the students carrying us out and summoned the rest of them. Fearing the Horseman's ability to ignore small arms fire, they unloaded the cannon from the van and wheeled it three blocks to the corner intersection, where they'd loaded and rolled it around the building moments before it ignited.

It wasn't the easiest thing to explain to the responding officers when they arrived on scene, but I took control pretty quickly, and the Sons of Liberty quietly disappeared from view, retreating back into their vans and taking the horse with them.

I remained in charge until Lieutenant Kermit arrived, then I gratefully relinquished command to him. After that, things started progressing more smoothly.

Vihaan and the rest of the students were arrested and transported to the jail. They're scheduled to head to trial later this year. All except for Mary Han, who was the first to bond out and promptly secured a helicopter, flying off into parts unknown. Last I heard, the district attorney's office was preparing the extradition paperwork, but didn't seem hopeful. Ashley Flowers and Pranav quickly turned state's witness once they learned they were to be charged with murder, and are set to testify against Vihaan in exchange for consideration of a reduced sentence. They'll have to serve some time, maybe less than I think they should, but Lieutenant Kermit reminded me

that it's an imperfect system, and so long as the murders stop, I should consider it a win.

Professor Galuhn was laid to rest in a local cemetery. I didn't attend the funeral and the university quietly removed any mention of him from their website. Before long, it was as if he'd never even been there.

Brenda Blumefield, by comparison, was celebrated as a dedicated and hard worker. The university started a scholarship the following semester in her honor.

Walter Crosier's estate began to collapse just as Professor Galuhn said it would. Lawyers were already filing motions by the end of the week, and every financial analyst in the country seemed to think Avant-Garde's days are numbered.

Bloodcuddles was transported back to the hospital, where X-rays revealed that he'd shattered three vertebrae, resulting in total paralysis from the neck down. He's scheduled to go to trial for his part in Avery Hubbard's kidnapping, as well as the death of Officer George Reynolds, but given his current condition, the District Attorney has already said that the death penalty is off the table. I tell myself that I'm safe with him behind bars, and every once in a while I even let myself believe it. I haven't spoken to Luke, but I'm sure he has his hands full ensuring Avery and Princess Pickles are making a full recovery. I worry about them, but figure it's best I stay away for now.

Rickson spent the better part of a week in the hospital recovering. News outlets continued to replay the story, citing his previous bravery and valor in service to the city. He's managed to rack up quite the fan-club, especially once news broke that he was unmarried. Hospital security has already had to turn away at least three women who tried sneaking into his room, and those are only the ones that we know of.

Pongo was stitched up and released without fanfare. He showed up to work the next day, but wasn't sure quite what to

do with himself. Lieutenant Kermit and I put our heads together and decided he should become the division's official legal advisor. Essentially, he'll be responsible for drafting any legal opinions or arguments necessary to assist our officers in courtroom trials, as well as any legal conundrums we may encounter while fulfilling our mission. He'll also be responsible for aiding our officers should the department ever attempt to bring charges against any of us for executing our duties. It says something that I was more concerned about that last part than the first, but that could just be me being paranoid. Either way, Pongo seemed happy with the work, and it kept him out of the field and out of trouble. Oh, and as for necrophilia? It doesn't appear anywhere in the Massachusetts State Law Handbook because the crime falls under the umbrella of sexual battery and is treated as such.

Mickey Carter was able to smooth things over with his chief once Vihaan and his collaborators were identified. He continues to work at the chief medical examiner's office and I haven't been by to bother him since.

Once it became clear that the Horseman's mount wouldn't be facing any charges for his part in the deaths, Titus legally adopted him and had him stabled just outside the city. We figured out that Vihaan had been keeping him inside the tunnels beneath MIT. It was dark, damp, and altogether unpleasant. The horse, rechristened Samuel Adams, seems happier in his new surroundings. He's been sworn in as an honorary member of the Sons of Liberty and is regularly seen outside the Oyster House ingesting large quantities of alcohol, much to the merriment of its fellow members.

We were able to recover both the Horseman's mask and the shroud from Professor Galuhn's corpse. Blue Moon took possession and once it became clear the District Attorney didn't need them to make their case, we burned and buried them in an unmarked hole. As near as I can tell, they were the only functional units, and a part of me hopes that Professor Galuhn's invention died with him. Might be some enterprising

young student will piece it together one day, but it won't be anytime soon.

My name was never brought up during the course of the Horseman debriefing, and Deputy Bulwark never said a thing, though Lieutenant Kermit did see to it that forensics returned my car to me a few days later. I regretted giving back the FBI loaner vehicle, but that's life.

We executed a search of Professor Galuhn's lab the same day he died and found Dennis Pieheart's remains hidden away in the freezer. It was well preserved, thank God, and Patience was able to take possession with only minimal complaint from our forensics team. She booked a flight out of Boston for the following day, and I presented her with an extra carry-on loaded with cream pies, which seemed to please her. I also drove her to the airport, pulling up along the side of the curb and offering her my hand.

"It's been a pleasure, Constable Woods," I said. "Please give my best to the Blue Mooners on the other side of the pond."

"I'll tell them," Patience said. "But you should think about coming over and doing it yourself."

"Might be I'll do that one day."

"You know one thing that still bothers me?"

"The whole sex with a corpse thing?"

"No," she said. "Don't get me wrong, that's all kinds of nasty, but I was talking about the witches."

"What about them?"

"Something I still don't understand. We caught the Horseman, and we figured out how Jenni was connected, but what about the other witches? Ambretta and her coven? They said Jenni was the third one of them to go missing. It just makes me wonder, what happened to the other two?"

I stared at her for a long moment, as a brick of ice slowly took form in my guts. It was a darn good question, one I hadn't allowed myself to register before now, and one that bothered me as I pulled away from the curb.

I tried to ignore the feeling in my chest, or the rapid beating of my pulse, but it was a losing game, and I eventually tossed caution, and the speed limit, to the wind, activating my flashing lights overhead and speeding down the highway before taking the exit and making my way to Ambretta's refurbished church home.

The lights were dark inside, and there was a heavy manila envelope taped to the stair's guardrail. I exited the vehicle and made my way over, seizing the envelope and tearing it free from the wrought iron grate.

Something sharp pierced my finger as I slid my hand beneath the envelope, and I jerked back, noting the black thorn as it fell to the sidewalk. I cursed and slid the envelope open, withdrawing the lone piece of paper inside. Droplets of my blood stained the edge of the letter as I unfolded it, reading the contents by the light of the flashing red and blue strobes coming from the dashboard of my car.

Dear Sergeant Mayfield,

My apologies that it has come to this, but I could see no other way to ensure your cooperation. I hope that you may one day forgive me, but please know it was necessary for the survival of those I care deeply about.

I bind you, Chloe Mayfield.

By oath and deed, by word and shield. With these words, written in good faith, and by your blood and vows, given freely, I bind you to uphold your oath to protect the citizens of Boston, to see to those who are under my care and look after them as if they were your own. Lastly, I bind you to find the

one who hunts us and bring them to justice, so that my soul need neither linger nor wallow in despair.

Do this for me, Sergeant Mayfield, so that we may both know peace.

Sincerely yours,

Ambretta Greenhall.

High Priestess of the Sisters of Salem Coven.

Thunder rolled and storm clouds billowed in the darkness overhead, and a cold that had nothing to do with the weather settled inside of me. Its chilled breath whispered a silent warning as the first drops of rain began to fall, filling the air with the scent of dark soil and a dead woman's memory.

The End

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

I'm not going to lie. This one was a heck of a lot of fun to write. I've always loved the story of the Headless Horseman, and the Legend of Sleepy Hollow is a timeless classic that continues to resonate in modern fiction. The fact that I got to face him off against Chloe, as well as giving me an excuse to bring back Titus, Ethel, and the Sons of Liberty, was a treat too good to pass up.

Bloodcuddles was a bit of a surprise for me. Like many of you, I grew up in a time where Stephen King's *It* series turned clowns from lovable circus performers into deranged psychopaths. It amazes me to see how that novel has shaped our culture. Blue Moon fans will be quick to point out that Tempest has already tangled with clowns, and it was for this reason that I'd originally intended him to be a quick throw-away character. Just a fun little anecdote to start the story off with some action and reacquaint readers to Chloe and some of her lesser-known cases. Unfortunately, Bloodcuddles wasn't having it, and the dialogue between he and Chloe stuck in my head even after his departure off the page. He refused to just disappear, and eventually, as I wrote my way deeper into the story, it became clear that he was going to be coming back for round 2. I'm very proud of the way that sequence turned out, especially since it allowed me to show off Blue Moon Division working as a team in a hostile environment. Although done for the moment, I can't promise that Bloodcuddles won't make another appearance down the line.

Regarding Student Loans, I am by no means an expert, however, I do believe it is a predatory business that preys off people's hopes and dreams for a better life. While researching this book, I came across stories of people who had been paying off their loans for *years* and still owed more than they initially borrowed.

Should students be required to pay back loans taken for their schooling? I think they should. But should they be forced to pay it back multiple times over? I don't believe that's good for anyone.

My choice to set a large portion of this novel on the MIT campus was not an accident. Massachusetts is known for its colleges, and they truly are beautiful wonders to behold. The water views along with the city skyline along the edge of MIT are breathtakingly beautiful, and the realization of exactly how much science and good comes out of those buildings is truly humbling.

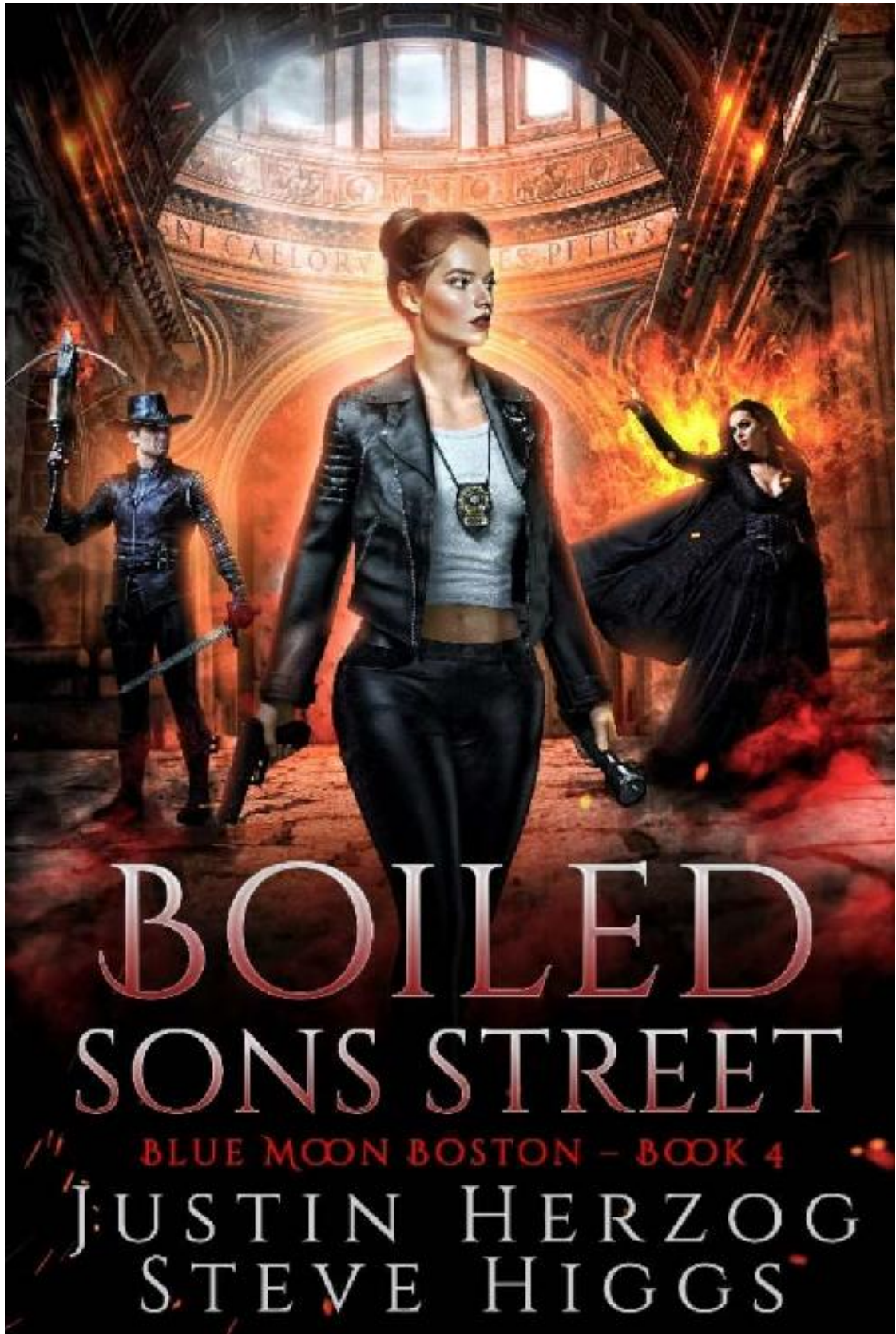
It is my sincere hope, dear readers, that you have enjoyed Chloe's adventures up to now. I know I have enjoyed writing them, and being able to partner her with Patience Woods and see the unfolding fireworks was a heck of a lot of fun.

What's next? Book 4 will follow Chloe and Blue Moon Division as they look to discover the identity of the person targeting the Sisters of Salem. Chloe will find herself in a war between rival witch factions as well as the Catholic Church and witch-hunters.

Until next time, thank you all so much for your continued support. It means the world to me.

Justin Herzog

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What's Next for Chloe?

If the world of supernatural creatures is just a bunch of hokum, why does Boston PD have their own paranormal division?

The Sisters of Salem are in disarray, their coven leader murdered and left to be found. The case has already been closed; the death attributed to the headless horseman's reign of terror. But was he really to blame?

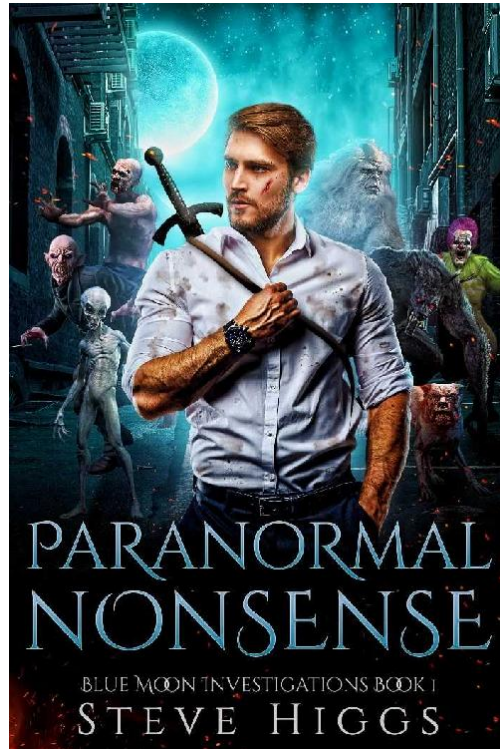
Sergeant Chloe Mayfield doesn't think so, but her one cop mission to find the real killer clashes with her orders and she's already on shaky ground with the higher-ups. All they need is one good reason and she's out of a job.

Nevertheless, she feels responsible – Chloe should have spotted the clues and been able to prevent the coven leader's death. Shouldn't she?

Right or wrong, there is a sinister force at work in Boston's seedy underbelly and Chloe is the only cop in town trying to prevent the next murder.

She'll figure it out, be sure of that, but as she gets closer to the truth, will she discover it was always a trap?

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

...

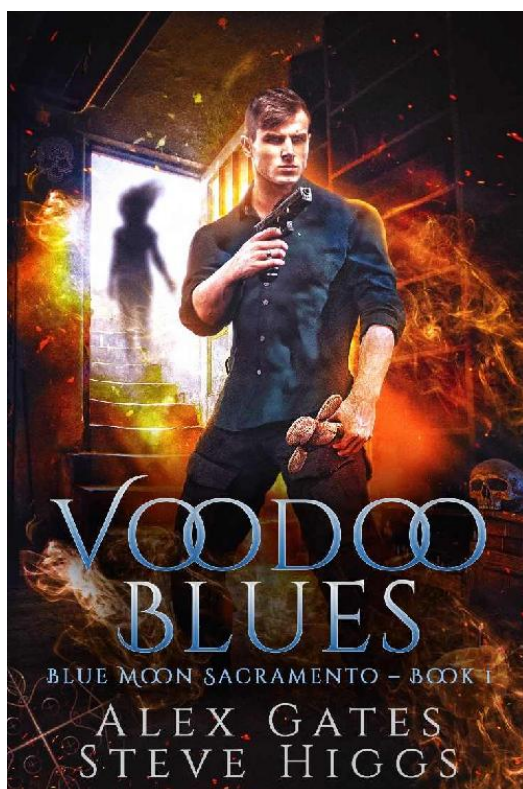
... and soon a race against time turns into a battle for his life. He doesn't believe in the paranormal but has a steady stream of clients with cases too weird for the police.

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.

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Curiosity. It's going to get more than just the cat killed.

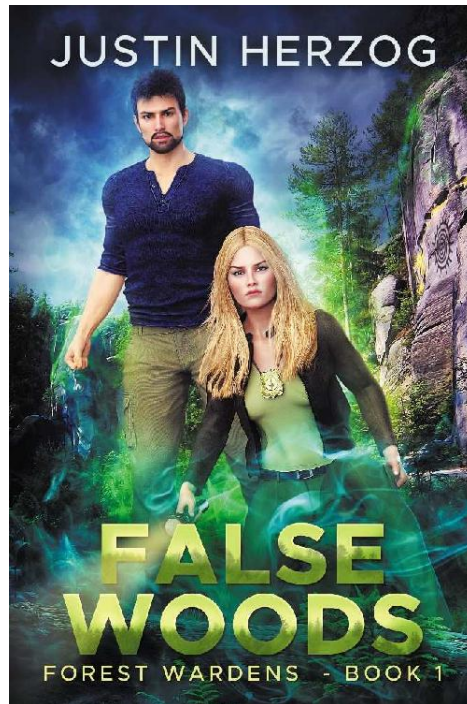
Sacramento has its share of spooky, crazy, and unexplained, just like everywhere else, but most other places don't have a self-appointed paranormal investigator to really stir things up.

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.

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More Books by Justin Herzog



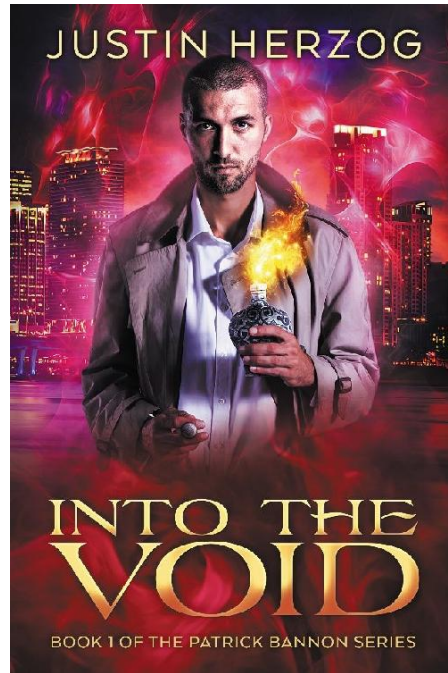
Fairy tale legend Goldilocks is all grown up and working for the US Forest Service.

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.

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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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