

A misty, atmospheric photograph of a playground. In the foreground, several empty swings hang from a wooden frame. The ground is covered in grass and dirt. In the background, a person's silhouette stands near a fence, looking out into the fog. The overall mood is nostalgic and melancholic.

DICK  
WYBROW

PAST  
LIFE

# **PAST LIFE**

***(Hell inc Series Book 6)***

by Dick Wybrow

Novels by DICK WYBROW

THE HELL INC SERIES

**Hell inc.**

**Hell to Pay**

**Hell Raisers**

**The InBetween**

**The Night Vanishing**

**Past Life**

***Book 7 coming in 2022!***

## ***SPECIAL OFFER!***

Get your free copy of the *Number One Comedy Book on Amazon...* the humorous semi-apocalypse story *The Swordsmen* and be first to nab giveaways, more free books, and the latest updates from Dick Wybrow. Click [here](#).

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.*

Copyright © 2021, Dick Wybrow

[www.dickwybrow.com](http://www.dickwybrow.com)

Cover by Warren Design

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. All and any parts of this book that are reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically or mechanically, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system should clearly state details of the author/ publisher.

## **To My Sister Teri...**

I purposely released this book on your birthday.  
Seemed fitting since you were one of my first (belated)  
birthday presents.  
You were my first best friend. And despite being half a  
world away, you will always be my first best friend.

## **PAST LIFE**





## CHAPTER ONE

I felt the impact. Didn't hurt of course, I don't have a real body anymore, it's one-hundred percent Casper. But it surprised the hell out of me.

I'd fallen into some sort of deep hole. Underground, somewhere beneath the bandshell. I knew the asshole chasing me would be up there searching, wondering where I'd gone.

Funny thing. That's exactly what I was doing.

*What the hell?*

Surrounding me was the sort of dark that can make an atheist reconsider their options. Admittedly, I'm more of an agnostic. But in some cases, an agnostic is just an atheist with commitment issues.

If this hole was very deep, getting out would be hard. Or impossible.

I tried not to think it was impossible.

Dizzy from using all that juice, I lay there listening to the distant, echoing chatter of a couple of transients arguing up top about whose space was whose.

Then I heard him. Through all that dirt and stone and Georgia clay between us, his voice was faint. But it still sent an icy chill through

me.

“Goddamn it,” he muttered.

I froze on the spot, willing him to go away. For a long, long minute, I just waited, listening.

It was hard to discern the movements of ghost from livie, but I’d been able to pick up on the differences. The sound ghosts made wasn’t actually sound. It was hard to describe. Intent?

Up top, I heard the guy sigh and curse under his breath. He’d bought it. In his mind, I was gone, maybe halfway across the county or the country now.

I could hear him shuffling away to leave, but he said, “We got a score to settle, you and me. What you did to my girl. Payback is coming.”

Then he was gone.

Despite myself, I exhaled. Just a habit from being alive, but it still felt cleansing.

“That boy got something in for you something fierce, now.”

My calm snapped away like I’d been electrocuted, and I sat up, quickly pushing my arms out reflexively to ward off any attack. Whoever had spoken, I couldn’t see them. That didn’t make sense.

Only another spook could have seen me, and in the dark, whoever it was, they would glow. How were they hiding from me? *Why* were they hiding from me?

Trying to sound tough, I asked in a growl, "Who are you?"

In truth, my tough sounded too plaintive. My growl sounded like it had come from some skinny stray dog's empty stomach. Instead of establishing I was some badass mother not to be messed with, I'd sounded more like a pig-tailed toddler in the back of a station wagon whining that I had to go pee.

The man just chuckled, deep throaty, sing-song.

"Why can't I see you?" I asked, my voice quivering. "You're not... You're not using voodoo or something, are you?"

The chuckle turned to a full-body laugh. The guy said, "Voodoo? Boy, what the hell is wrong with you? Sound like you had a hellacious time of things." Another laugh. "Voodoo! I bet you got stories."

I wasn't going to be taken in by some folksy guy trying to play like he wanted to trade tales. Strangers can be dangerous, and I didn't trust anyone who wasn't, well, me.

"Why are you hiding?"

"I ain't hiding."

It was quiet for a moment, then I felt the guy move closer and shot him a warning. "I don't like to be touched! Back off."

Another laugh.

I growled, trying not to shout. "Why can't I see you?"

The laughing turned into a sing-song sigh. He said, "Because you got your eyes closed."

*Oh.*

When I opened them, I got a quick bead on my surroundings. We were in a long tunnel, earthen and damp. On one of the walls was a long strip of weather-rotted wood with rusted chains hanging off it. At the ends of the chains were broken manacles.

I looked back to the man who'd spoken to me. He kept smiling, but only nodded, as something silent passed between us.

I asked, "How do I get out of here?"

He leaned back against a wall, putting his hands behind his head. "You don't."

"What does that mean?"

He closed his eyes and shrugged. "S'pose you might as well rest up, get used to it for a while. I've been down here a hundred-fifty years." He then opened one eye and smiled. "Give or take. And trust me: it take more than it give."

*One day earlier...*



## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Death of Mechanic Ray Scones*

“Hey, Google, play the Rolling Stones,” Ray Scones said as he tossed his keys into the small wicker basket under the light switch. He sighed as he pushed his front door closed with a shoulder before walking into the dark house.

A tinny voice said, “Playing Stone Roses on Spotify.”

“Ugh, no!” he said, his head falling forward. If nothing else, Ray was happy Trish wasn’t home. She didn’t like it when he came in smelling like oil, dirt, and grease. In the summer, she would often make him go in through the garage. “Like a dog or something,” he’d tell the other guys at the Audi service shop to howls of laughter.

For the next few days, Ray would have the house to himself because his wife was trying to finish a script she wanted to submit to Netflix, a TV pilot she’d started at a weekend creative writing course down in Atlanta.

Apparently, all the Big Time Writers would hole up in hotels to finish their great works, so Trish Scones was now doing the same. It

wouldn't be the Ritz, but it was still more money than they both would have liked to have spent.

Ray had agreed, mostly because it was something that made her happy. And a very small part was that having the entire house to himself for a few days was a bit of freedom. Like being a bachelor but without the soul-crushing Tinder swiping.

Right now, more than anything, he just wanted a beer and to sit down to watch TV. He would have to get out of his clothes first. If Trish came home and saw grease stains on the couch from his coveralls, she'd shit kittens.

"Play *the Rolling Stones*," he tried again, unlacing his work boots. Silence.

Ray sighed. "It's like playing Mother May I," he mumbled. "Hey, Google, play the fucking *Rolling Stones*."

Lights whirled across the small surface of the Google Nest Mini Trish had bought him for his birthday. She'd gotten it on a two-for-one deal, but he knew of course that she'd just wanted one for herself. Giving it as a birthday present had been the equivalent of when a kid sneaks a cookie then hands one to their sibling: "Look, I got you a cookie too!"

The robotic voice said, "Playing the Funky Tones on Spotify."



He swore softly and walked into the next room, while some odd bass-and-keyboard monstrosity bled out throughout the first floor. Another speaker in the kitchen had picked up the beat, pumping the lyrics through the house: “What, what? Listen, can you smell that? Listen, listen—can you smell that?”

Ray sighed. “The hell does that even mean?”

Instead of asking the tiny device to turn on the kitchen lights—who knew what it might do instead?—he flicked the switch with a greasy finger, making a mental note to clean it up later. Again, he could ask the “smart” speaker to set a reminder for him, but he worried it might instead donate the contents of their savings to some Save the Pandas charity.

Ray reached for the fridge, but then hesitated and looked at his hands. At the sink, he ran them under some warm water and grabbed an embroidered hand towel to strip off some of the grime. When he looked at the towel, he saw the monogram: TSD.

*Ah, shit.* One of Trish’s towels that weren’t supposed to be used as towels, something that never quite made sense to Ray. Another sigh.

He went back to the light switch, wiped off the greasy smudge there, and then pocketed the towel to dispose of it later—or maybe

burn it.

After rummaging around the fridge—pushing aside some Greek yogurt and knocking over a couple tiny bottles of something called Yakult—he finally came out with the beer. He closed the fridge and saw someone standing in the doorway.

Ray took a step back and gripped the bottle tightly. His first thought was to throw it at the intruder. Then he saw what was in their hand.

“That’s my gun,” he said, his voice shaking with a sickening mix of fear and rage. “How the hell did you get that?”

\* \* \*

Ray Scones stood in his kitchen, a faint humming in his ears. Confused and disoriented, he looked around to such a strange tableau. He couldn’t process it right away. Swaths of dark red were smeared across the walls.

He heard his back porch bang open. The screen door bounced—one, two, three—like it always did. He’d planned to fix that when he had time.

When he looked down, he noticed a big thick pool, like a can of dark-red paint had been kicked over. And then he saw himself—lying on the floor.

“What the hell?” Ray looked at his hands again, grease-stained and dirty. Trish was going to be so mad with all the blood everywhere. He reached for the towel, but he couldn’t get his hand in his pocket.

He tried again.

Then he looked down at his coveralls. He could see the pocket, but dammit, his hand would not slip inside! Above that gap, he saw the flesh of his chest, burnt and dripping with blood and gore.

Ray screamed, stumbled back, and passed right through the wall into the living room. He screamed again, and then stumbled to the floor.

A figure stood over him. “You’re all right,” the man said. “But, sorry to say, you are dead. Don’t worry. Happens to the best of us.”

From the floor, Ray shrieked again.

“And you’re going to have to stop screaming. It attracts the...” The other ghost put out his hand, but Ray flinched away. “No one can hear you. I mean, *I* can hear you. You’ve got a hell of a set of lungs. Not that you really have lungs anymore.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Sorry man,” the other said. “Like I said, you’re dead.”

“Wh-Wh-What, where... how can...?”

“Well,” the man said and knelt down next to Ray, who was now up on his elbows. “The *how* is, far as I can reckon, that the young man who just skedaddled out of here shot you.”

“No.”

“Yes, that’s about the whole of it,” the man said, scratching some peach fuzz on his chin. “As for the where, you are now in the InBetween. It’s where people like you, like me, get kinda caught up when we’re killed.”

“No, no, no!”

“Listen, I can help you,” the other man said. “That’s what I do. I help others like you. Ghosts.”

Ray scanned the room, his eyes dancing in their sockets. “How?”

The man stood back up. “I’ll look into who that kid was, so that the world knows who killed you. It’ll rebalance everything, and you’ll get out of here. To do that... I need you to take a look at something. Get up. Come with me.”

“W-W-What? Why?”

“As I said, it’s my job.” The man smiled. “My name is Jimmy Withy. And I am the world’s best private investigator.”



## CHAPTER THREE

My name is Painter Mann, and I was in trouble.

You might think that was an odd state for a ghost to be, sure. If that is your thought, then you don't know much about being dead. Can't blame you. I didn't know much about that sort of thing until I'd died.

The dead don't sleep, so I spent a lot of time wandering around. And window-shopping.

At that moment, I wasn't staring into the shops of Marietta Square—a heavy-metal T-shirt and record outlet, a rundown wedding dress store, and a hole-in-the-wall bar called Wicked Lester's. I was flying past them, without a second glance—oh, except for that “Kill 'em All” black shirt, which was new—taking each corner as quickly as I could.

It was dark, so I could easily be seen. And I was being chased. Again.

In my early days in the InBetween, maybe a year ago now, that had happened a lot. I still worried about getting caught by black-hearted thugs like the Ghost Mob. They had been hell-bent on waging war on the living, and I'd gotten tangled up in the middle of it.

But after I took out their power grid—one that could give physical substance to an army of the dead—they'd fallen apart. Drifted away. Some might have even passed on to whatever was Next.

However, that would only happen if their individual killers had been identified. That was how it worked. Those stuck in the InBetween were there because they'd been murdered and the perp hadn't been identified yet.

*Perp.*

That was a new term for me. Sure, I had faint memories of hearing “perp” in TV cop shows, but I'd never felt comfortable just whipping it out. Still don't. But my new instructor, a cop in suburban Atlanta, he used it like others say *cat* or *danish*.

Being the world's best private investigator, or rather the best *dead* private investigator, carried a lot of responsibilities. Well, just the one—I had to find the names of peoples' killers so the dead could move on.

But just because I was the world's best dead PI didn't mean I was any good at it. I wasn't. So that mantle of “best” came with a caveat: I was the *only* one. So I was also the worst.

And given my skill set, “worst” was probably a better way of introducing myself.

That was why I'd taken up an apprenticeship with a cop in Marietta, Georgia, named Paul Barnes. He was smart about this investigator stuff. And the best part: he muttered when he thought and when he read. That gave me insight on how to work stuff out.

Of course, I was a ghost. He didn't even know I was there. However, that was not the case of some bad spook who'd zeroed in on me yet again.

A quick glance over my shoulder confirmed he was back there, moving quickly. Nowhere near my top speed, but no one else in the InBetween could "skate" like I could. He was running fast, though, faster than any other ghost I'd seen here.

Over the past few weeks, I'd ditched this guy again and again. I'd never seen his face up close, but I could feel him. He'd become *familiar* to me.

After another street, I took a quick left and whipped by a covered streetlamp, where three teenage girls were smoking. They didn't blink an eye as I rocketed past, and the smoke ignored me entirely.

*Turn, run, turn.* If I weren't so scared, I would have smiled. *Dude must wonder why I keep to the streets.*

The main reason was the stain. That was the residue from other ghosts who'd passed through an area, kind of like those nifty



motorcycles in *Tron* but not so solid. In those crisscrossing trails along the streets of Marietta, I could hide my tracks.

*There!*

The light was low this time of night, which was bad for spooks. In the dark, we glowed like those little sticks they put on toddlers at Halloween—tiny green-white plastic fingers bobbing as kids ran from door to door.

That was why I was gunning for Haynes Street. There I would find what I called “Electric Avenue,” a long, wide sloping field on the edge of town.

Straddling the grass in a long line were these hulking, ten-story-tall steel-lattice towers. They looked like a battalion of *War of the Worlds* invaders that had lost contact with the mothership and just stopped. They now waited silently, awaiting further instruction. The long-dormant monsters held up the thick black ropes that powered the city. All that electricity could give a ghost cover, too, since the stain they left behind got lost in the static wash.

I passed by the field and raced up the street, planning to double back and rabbit away. Those were his words, not mine: “Run, rabbit, run!”

I made my one-eighty and started scanning from left to right, but he was out of sight. I hooked right, about to shoot down Electric Avenue, thinking it would be time to pour on the gas and lose him.

But he'd worked me out. "There you are!"

*Oh shit.*

He'd been tucked behind a row of tall Georgia pines, waiting. The spook raced at me and drunk on some brew of frustration and fear, I tried something different—I ran toward him. He'd not seen that move from me before, and he faltered, planting his feet.

Within spitting distance, I juked quickly to the left, then again to the right, and went around him like a stock car avoiding a crash on turn two.

The prick was almost as quick, though, shooting an arm out at me and, just as I passed, his ghostly fingertips nearly caught me on the elbow. I felt a drop of energy dip out of me as it passed into him.

That was the big fear. That was what I had to, *had to* avoid. Losing my energy, my juice.

*Enough playing with this guy, time to turn on the speed.* I began pumping my legs as I had as a kid, moving faster and faster and faster.

When he called out, I couldn't help it—I glanced back.

“Painter Mann! Where ya going? Just wanna talk, fella. Slow down. Let’s catch us a beer!”

Then he laughed in a way that rippled through me, turning my stomach sour, despite no longer having a stomach. That was the first time I’d ever heard him call my name. *He knows me?*

Maybe he didn’t want to cause me any harm? Maybe he’d needed help? For an instant, my legs slackened. I started to turn, but then saw he was coming full steam toward me.

*Nah. No time to catch up.*

I rocketed back to the square—a lot of light there—but now he was moving. He could run even faster than he’d let on. Really pouring it on.

As I made the circuit, doubling back, I again caught sight of the smokers, but they looked different. Two instead of three now. That was when I noticed one of them was now on the ground, the others helping her back to her feet.

Behind me, the ghost cackled with delight.

*Wait? Did he use some juice to knock one down?*

No time to think about it, I hooked the corner and sprinted down the block.

“Come here!”

“Shit, man!” I shouted. Holy hell, he’d caught up to me. His grubby fingers—and they were grubby—took a swipe again, nearly grabbing my arm. For the first time, I got a good look at him.

The hands of a workman, scarred and dirty. The sleeves of his thick coat looked like they’d been fashioned from wool and bailing wire. The look on the old guy’s grizzled face, deep lines and some blackened teeth, told me he was really looking forward to beating the hell out of me and stealing my energy.

*Time to end this dance for now.* I forgot all about being coy, gritted my teeth, and started pouring on the gas.

“Time to skate,” I said.

Faster and faster, I moved. The trees, buildings, and homes began to blur, and I felt myself lift just slightly. It was not as if actual skates appeared on my feet—at least I didn’t think so. But once I was “skating,” I could move faster than anything else on the planet.

I figured the most remote part of the United States would be a bit northwest, so I pointed that way, hit the afterburners, and didn’t stop until I saw the sun coming up. I slowed when I saw tall trees, a vast clear blue lake, and snow-capped mountains.

“Huh,” I said when I’d finally slowed down. “That is a picture postcard.”

Anyone who'd never seen the Canadian Rockies in the sun was missing out. After a few moments to take in the sheer beauty of it, I turned in the direction of Atlanta and headed back toward where I was, for now, calling home. It would take me a few hours, so I would use that time to think.

*Who the hell is that guy?*



## CHAPTER FOUR

Ellie Walsh had been a very good cop and a very good investigator. She would remind herself of this as she dressed.

When she laced up her shiny black shoes. As she draped the Saint Christopher cross around her neck. While grabbing her big hat for the sun, umbrella for when it rained, and a small bag of candy to break the ice.

Those around her wouldn't have described it such, but it was all armor.

After nearly two decades since retiring from Ireland's Gardaí, her shoes were the same department-mandated sort when she was on the job. She still wore them because they fit so well. Or, at least, that's what she'd told herself.

Saint Christopher had been a concession to her late father, a cop who'd always hoped he would have a son who might pick up the torch.

He'd gotten Ellie.

Dad had eventually come around to the notion that his daughter would be the son he'd never had. And he'd insisted she wear the cross.

She carried with her the skills both her parents had taught her. Some were obvious; some weren't. Ellie knew she looked like some little old lady, maybe a killer gin rummy player, but she was and always would be a cop.

Ellie sighed. All that effort to get ready with nowhere to go. Then there was a knock at the door.

When she went to the foyer of her house, she saw a uniformed woman through the glass, who gave her a small wave.





## CHAPTER FIVE

The large man looked like he should have been a wrestler. Or, in the cop uniform, maybe a male stripper with breakaway clothes and a police cap resting jauntily to one side on his large head.

Scribbling in his notepad with the tiny, chewed pencil, he almost bumped into the lead detective, Marietta Police Detective Paul Barnes.

“Anything from the neighbors, Sampson?”

The officer dropped his arms. “Really, sir?”

Barnes laughed. “Sorry, I’ve heard it around. It’s a compliment, boot. And you’ve been trimming down good. Otherwise, you coulda been called Sasquatch.”

“Were those the only two options?” The big man blinked. “What about Hulk?”

“You ain’t *that* green, Officer Filoialli,” Barnes said, eliciting a small smile from the big man. It seemed the detective was one of the few who could actually pronounce his name right. “Anything useful?”

“Seems the deceased lived alone—”

“Mr. Morgan,” Barnes said, crouching down to take another look at the body. “His name is William Morgan. Let’s not put ’im on a slab

just yet. That'll come soon enough."

Filoialli nodded, as if taking notes on another pad, this one in his head. "Yeah, so I spoke to the surrounding properties. All places pretty much like this one. Originally, this here was supposed to be just the two houses, but they sold so fast, the developer chucked another three on this lot to make some easy money." The officer looked around, tugging at the waistband of his slacks. "Messes with the drainage, according to the lady next door."

"Helpful. Anything about Mr. Morgan?"

"Right. Retired, wife may have died a few years back. It seems he doesn't talk to anyone, mostly stays at home. Next door lady says when she moved in, she used to call over hello when she saw him, but the old guy just ignored her. Oh, a few of them mentioned a bird."

Barnes nodded. "Saw the cage. No bird."

"Yeah, very squawky, apparently. Especially in the morning, but compared to the previous occupants—some low-level meth dealers—no biggie."

"Ya should look into local crackheads," an old woman said, standing in the doorway of the attached garage. One arm was wrapped through the loops of a large brown purse. The other hand

was gripping the handle of an orange umbrella, its tip poking into the cement. She leaned into it.

“Who are you?” Detective Barnes asked, standing up.

From the threshold, she looked around the scene. “Maybe they buried some stash, came back for it.”

“Ma’am, you can’t be back here,” Barnes said. “Joseph, who is this woman?”

“It... uh...” The large officer pulled out his pad and flipped through it for a moment. “I think—”

“Ellie Walsh,” she said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I live a block over. One of your officers said the man who lived here was killed.”

“What?” Barnes said. “They *told* you that?”

Ellie smiled. “Not on purpose,” she said. “She’s a young and bright officer, though. She’ll do all right for herself. Might not yet be ready for wit-stats, but it’ll come to her.”

Barnes frowned and called out, “Can someone take Ms. Walsh out of here, please?”

“Did you say ‘wit-stats’?” Officer Filoialli said. “Your accent is, uh, troubling. Is that Irish?”

"I don't have an accent. All you lot do." The woman took a step forward. When the Atlanta sun hit her, a straw boater hat shaded her face, its drawstring hanging loosely around her ears. "Witness statements, Officer Joseph. Wit-stats."

"Officer *Filoiali*."

"Apologies," Ellie said and grinned. "Would you like a lolly? It's hard candy, because the soft stuff gets stuck in my teeth. Well, they ain't my teeth, but I paid good money for them."

Despite himself, Barnes smiled, looking at the old woman. She was holding out a small white paper bag, its top curled down to expose a rainbow of tiny spherical shapes. Officer Filoiali stared at them, reached forward, then stole a glance back to his senior.

"Go ahead," he said and sighed. "Then get her out of here." He caught the woman's look and added, "Please."

Ellie said, "Don't take the green ones."

"Why not?" The uniform's hand hovered over the bag.

"Because I like the green ones," Ellie said. "Those are for me." She pointed a finger at the top of the small sack. "Plenty others in there, all of them good. Get 'em sent over from the old country."

The big cop pulled one out, held it in his hand for a moment, then popped it in his mouth.

“Purple, good choice,” she said. “It signifies royalty, devotion, and ambition.”

“Tastes like grape.”

“It also signifies grape,” Ellie said, nodding.

“Okay, okay.” Barnes walked over to the other two. “Enough. Can you please take the lady inside now? And don’t you know you’re not supposed to take candy from strangers?”

The officer smiled and crunched the purple candy. “Not a stranger. She said her name is Ellie.”

“My crime scene is no place for *Ellie*, so—”

“Detective, I assure you there’s nothing here I ain’t seen before,” Ellie said, craning her neck around Barnes. “Seen plenty of dead bodies in my day.”

“This one of yours, then?” Barnes asked.

“Nah,” she said, moving to walk around the cop. “Mine I always tossed in the channel, takes ’em out to sea.”

Barnes sighed and gently grabbed her arm. “Ma’am—”

“I am not a ma’am,” Ellie said, her eyes darting around William Morgan’s backyard. Its owner lay next to an array of lush, well-tended plants. He had a claw hammer in the back of his head. “I’m a

detective sergeant with An Garda Síochána, Wicklow. And you've got a dead man in the garden."

"Thank you, Detective Sergeant Ellie Walsh, but I can't imagine anyone called Ireland's National Police, unless there's something I'm not aware of."

"Oh," Ellie said, then grinned wickedly. "I expect there's a fair bit of that."

"How can you be... I mean, you're like a hundred," Filioialli said.

"Seventy-four," Ellie said and popped an eyebrow. "And I'm retired."

When she began to move forward, Barnes took a step toward her. "Ah, if you are former police, you'll know we can't have you mess up the crime scene. I prefer—where did those come from?"

Ellie was holding up her hands. Both were covered in gloves similar to what the detective was wearing. Except they were pink. "Had 'em in my purse."

The officer said, "You carry around crime-scene gloves?"

"Never know when you'll need 'em," Ellie said and gently pulled from Barnes's grip. Surveying the area, she kept on the stones of the path, cautious not to leave any marks. There was a high fence all

around the property—dark wooden boards staggered so no one could see through.

Along the back was a raised outcropping with railroad tiles, about two feet up the fence line, that looked a little like a giant window box running the length of the property. To her left was a gleaming metal shed. Fifteen feet from the shed lay William Morgan.

For a moment, she just looked, taking it all in.

On the windowsill to her right, Ellie saw a dozen glass jars, about the size baby food was sold in. Half of them had seedlings inside, basking in the sun. With a quick move, Ellie snatched one of the empties and tucked it into her purse.

When she looked back toward the dead man, Barnes stepped in and blocked the view with his body.

“You knew Mr. Morgan, then?”

“No,” she said. “Never spoke to the man, but I did see him at the coffee shop up the road.”

Barnes nodded. “He ever there with anyone?”

She shook her head. “Old fella was there every day like clockwork, every morning, but in more than a year, I never once saw him speak to a soul. Not even the staff.” She then cocked her head,



looked back to the house, and said, “Huh. Well, right. That’s one mystery solved.”

“Do you know anything about him? Wife? Kids? Job?”

Again, she shook her head, temporarily lost in thought. The detective sighed and jammed his hands in his pockets.

“Listen, I appreciate you... being here, but we are working a crime scene,” Barnes said. “Can I get you to please go inside and give a full statement to one of the unis?”

“Already did.”

“Then, um, detective sergeant—”

“Oh, please. Just Ellie.”

“Right, then please, Ellie, can you vacate my crime scene?”

Barnes tried to get a lock on her eyes, but she was moving her head around like a bird. “As, you know, a professional courtesy?”

The old Irish detective gave him a smile. “Sure.”

Barnes turned toward one of the officers and called out. “Officer Patches.”

“*Patching*, sir.”

“Right, Officer Patching,” Barnes said. “Can you help Ms. Walsh to the front of the house?”

The tall, lanky cop stood up and asked, “Who?”

When the detective turned back, Ellie Walsh was no longer standing there.

\* \* \*

Upon my return from the Canadian hinterlands, I'd gone to the police station to look for Detective Barnes and get back to my PI training. After searching the place—and avoiding the screaming spook in there, losing her mind—I heard a couple of officers talking about Barnes being at a murder scene in south Marietta.

I headed toward the house of a man named William Morgan.

\* \* \*

Ellie could hear Barnes outside talking with the other officers as she stood in the dark, sweating. The Atlanta heat had cranked up in recent days, making the temperature inside the metal shed almost unbearable.

An hour before, a neighbor had called in to say they'd heard a groan and crash, insisting someone go over and check on the old man in the garden. A short time later, William Morgan was found dead.

Several young uniforms were dispatched to door knock the neighborhood. When one arrived at the retired Irish detective's home, she'd employed what fellow cops derisively used to call the

“Ellie Walsh kung fu-sion technique.” A skill she’d learned from her mother, it was speaking quickly with open-ended declarative statements, surgical interruptions, and wild assumptions that triggered the other party to involuntarily reveal the very thing they’d tried to keep secret.

Flustering the officer, she’d learned that William Morgan had been murdered and was now laid out in his backyard.

Now standing in the dark, she could hear the footfalls of the cops on the other side. She sighed, knowing that, even with the protective covering on their shoes, they would inadvertently change the scene just by walking across the lawn.

Two fingers to her neck, Ellie checked her pulse and said, “Good.”

Her heartbeat was fast. The heat was starting to do some damage, so even if she didn’t get what she wanted she would soon have to get out. But she had also felt the trickle of sweat down her neck and even more rolling down her back, and that was also good news. That would help.

For the next few minutes, she stood there in the shed, the empty jar in one hand, its lid in the other.

When she came out a few minutes later, breathing harder than she wished she were, the lid was on the jar.

“That ain’t the toilet,” a young cop with an unfortunate mustache said. He smiled at her. “You lost, ma’am?”

“No, officer,” Ellie said, wiping the side of her face with her wrist. She’d long given up brushing powder on her sallow cheeks, so she had no concerns about getting stains on her pristine white shirt. “But I think I found your sense of humor in there. It’s locked up tight in a box with no key.”

Hearing her voice, Detective Barnes, who was down on one knee inspecting the deceased, spun around. “Jesus Christ, what are you still doing here?”

“She was in the shed,” Officer Patching said.

Ellie caught the expression on Barnes’s face. “Don’t worry. I didn’t touch anything.”

“I don’t care—”

Before he could finish, Ellie held up both of her hands, one still clutching the empty glass jar.

Barnes pointed at it. “Ms. Walsh, please put that back where you found it.”

Officer Filoialli appeared at the door to the garage. “Detective Barnes, I did some—”

“Why is she still here?” Barnes pointed at Ellie, who was closing the shed, holding just the edge of its metal door.

“I thought she left.” The officer shrugged. “Okay, we finished up some initial neighbor wit-stats—”

“Christ,” Barnes said, groaning. “Don’t say that word!”

“It’s a good word,” Ellie said.

“Don’t use it,” Barnes said, not looking at the woman. “It’s not a word. She made it up!”

Filoialli looked between them. “All words are made up.” Fighting back a smile, he continued, “No recent visitors. Never heard arguments over this way. There’s a daughter that comes by once in a blue moon. The man in the gray house thinks she stops by when she needs money.”

Barnes shot a glare at Ellie then turned back to Filoialli. “You get a name?”

“Well, yeah, his name is Wil—”

“No. The daughter,” the detective said and saw the answer on the man’s face. “When you go back, get that.”

“Will do,” the officer said, looking at his notes. “But no one seemed to want to see the old g—er, Mr. Morgan dead.”

Barnes sighed and rubbed his face.

“Except the bastard who put the claw hammer in the back of his shiny head,” Ellie said, drawing another scowl from the detective.

William Morgan was dressed in his gardening clothes and, looking at the beautiful display of plants and flowers around them, it seemed he got use of them. Barnes wondered now if it were some kind of cruel irony that he lay, ready to be planted himself, among the foliage.

“Don’t look like he put up much of a fight, so he may have known who did it.” The big officer looked around the scene. “Maybe the daughter?”

“Steady on, officer,” Ellie said. “The nasty end of the hammer went through the top of the skull, and he’s a tall glass of lager. So, they’d have to be—”

Barnes shot her a look. “Why are you still here? For the last time, Officer—”

“But look,” Filoialli said. “See, he was probably tending to those gardenias, hunched over. She could have come right up and—*pop!*”

The old man’s sun hat was the only thing slightly askew. It had fallen a foot away from his head. There were no cuts to his hands or any defensive wounds, at least on the initial inspection. They would

have to wait for the crime-scene guys to make the final determination.

Barnes walked over, and when he crouched down, both of his knees cracked.

“You need more fish oil, Detective,” Ellie said, shuffling the paper bag of candies back into her hand. “You got the knees of an eighty-year-old.”

With a pen, he moved some of the old guy’s hair out of the way. Pictures had already been taken, so he could refer back to them if he needed. He worked slowly and deliberately. He frowned at the short gash just beneath where the claw hammer had entered the skull.

“They didn’t get him on the first swing,” he said, thinking aloud. “Took a second shot and sunk that good. Mr. Morgan would’ve been knocked out, dead probably a few seconds later.”

“Didn’t take his hammer with him, yeah?” Ellie said, popping one of the candies into her mouth. “Maybe in a hurry.”

Barnes pointed to the shed. “No, it came from...” he said, but then looked back to the body. “Hmm.”

The former detective rolled the sweet around her mouth, which to the man examining the body, sounded like a skeleton running the hundred-yard dash over a cobblestone road.

He stood slowly, craned his back in an arch, and rubbed his flank. Then he looked toward the shed again. "It's not one of his, is it?"

She smiled. "Ah, ya got there."

Barnes pointed down at the tool. "That one's some cheap department store brand." He then motioned to a hand spade and weeding fork. "It looks like all the gear our man has is the good stuff. Stanley, Craftsman."

Ellie nodded, scanning the beautiful backyard. Bursts of flowers on plants and bushes that could make an old man believe in love again. Or send him into an allergic fit.

"At least," the detective said, turning to her, "that's what I saw before you hopped inside."

She shrugged, offering the white bag to him. He gave a short shake of the head but still watched it all the way as she stuffed it back into her purse.

"Fine, fine," he said, exhaling. "You gonna tell me why you locked yourself inside the old guy's shed for ten minutes. Must have been a hothouse."

"It was." She crunched, then ignoring the question for a moment, she nodded to the body. "The old guy's got a sunburn lifting off his arms."



“So?”

“Means he was out here for a little while before one of the Pep Boys gave him a permanent headache,” Ellie said and swallowed. “Dead folks don’t burn.”

Barnes took this in, nodding slowly.

“So, he’d have been out here for a while,” she said. “That means either his attacker was hanging out in the garden with him, which is possible... or he’d been hiding. Best place would be that tin box.”

The detective walked over to the shed and reached for the door. He looked over his shoulder and gave her a half smile. “Okay to open the door now? It *is* my crime scene.”

“Fine. I got what I needed.”

Inside, all of Mr. Morgan’s tools were lined beautifully along the wall, on pegs and shelves. A lawn mower took up about a third of its floor. It looked almost brand-new, despite obviously having been purchased many years ago. Hanging on one hook was a gleaming claw hammer.

With a gloved hand, he eased the door closed then opened it again. “I dunno,” he said. “Anyone coming out of there could have made a hell of a racket.”

“Wouldn’t have mattered, of course.” Ellie shrugged. “There’s a light above the front door, so, yeah, the killer coulda come out playing with a marching band.”

“A light?”

Ellie turned and pointed to the house. “Just above the front door. Another by his phone, plugged into the wall. Little blister thing.”

Barnes sighed. *Shit*. He’d missed that. “He’s deaf.”

“None of the neighbors mentioned that,” Officer Filoialli said.

“He never talked to the neighbors,” his superior said.

Barnes looked back at the only item Ellie had taken into the shed with her. It was now sitting empty in the shade next to the house.

“Why’d you go in the shed, then? Listening for... you know, *inspiration*?”

“If you’re going to be making fun of me, then maybe I should go home?”

“Would you?” Barnes smiled then put both hands up in a surrender motion. “First—what is the jar for?”

Ellie walked over, grabbing her umbrella and the glass jar.

The detective joined her in the shade, which dropped the air around them about ten degrees.

“I expect Mr. Hammer Man was probably hiding in the shed, waiting for our boy down there to come out,” she said. “Might have been the better part of an hour.”

“So?”

Ellie handed him the glass jar, then leaned on her umbrella. “So, I was reading a magazine the other week, waiting for the doctor, who takes for-ever.”

“You sick or something?”

“Nah, nah,” she said, waving her hand. “IVF clinic. Thought I’d finally give it a go.”

Barnes laughed, slightly hating himself for beginning to like the old bat. “Fine, don’t tell me. The magazine?”

“Yeah, so there were these scientists, in Japan, and they found you could get a crook’s DNA sample from, if the conditions are right, the smallest of places.”

She pointed at the jar. This time, the detective squinted and finally did see something in the jar—a small spindly creature with a tiny red sack for a belly.

“A mosquito.”

“Yeah,” she said. “If our man had been in there a while, he mighta been someone’s breakfast.” She ticked the jar with a fingernail.

“Hopefully, that fella there.”

She then took out a tissue, nibbled on her nail for a moment and pressed the paper to her finger. It came back with a spot of blood. She put the tissue on top of the jar the detective was holding.

“Use that to determine the body juice that’s mine and if there’s another set of DNA markers in there,” she said, smiling now. “You got an ID.”

“Right,” Barnes said, slowly shaking his head.

He watched as Ellie started to leave. She pointed to the house. “Mind if I take one last look around? Won’t touch anything.”

“No!” Barnes said. “You’re not a cop anymore, Ms. Walsh, and all you’re going to do is muddle this scene. You know that!”

“Uh, detective, I’m going to hit some neighborhood hangouts.” The barrel-chested officer shifted his weight. “Got a bunch more of those wit-stats to take care of.”

Ellie laughed. “Ah, that again,” she said. “Actually, I did make that up.”

“What?” Filoialli said.

“Needed a bit of validity with the two of you borin’ into me, so... I know how you American coppers love a good bit of jargon. It’s good, though, yeah?”

Filoialli nodded. "I like it."

She smiled, lost in thought, then said to Barnes, "I'll come by later."

"Don't come by later," he said, instantly regretting how harsh it had sounded.

Ellie took one last look at the scene. "I'll spot you lunch, okay? Pig's Ear over on Memorial. That's where you lot hang out, isn't it?"

Barnes didn't get a chance to respond, because she'd already slipped into the house and was gone. He looked back at the man lying prostrate on the ground, his hat turned upright like it was filling with sunlight.

Barnes lifted the glass jar to his face; the tiny creature inside was making a fruitless attempt to drill through the glass. He muttered to himself, "Right. Right." Then he called to his officer, who was two steps away from leaving, "Filoialli."

The big man came back over, walking as though he were on the balls of his feet. Barnes glanced at the door then the windows.

He lowered his voice and said, "Write this up and then get it to the lab. Have them check to see if the blood in that little sucker matches anyone we got on file. Exclude whatever's on that wadded-up tissue too."

The officer nodded. "Why?"

Barnes smiled. Walking back toward the dead Mr. Morgan, he said, "She read it in a magazine."



## CHAPTER SIX

By the time I arrived, Barnes was getting ready to leave. A handful of uniforms had gathered in a semi-circle around him, so I sidled up to join them, listening in as if he were also briefing me out there on the late William Morgan's lawn.

The detective was nice enough, quick to crack a joke, but always carried a weight that actually made his shoulders slump.

If a cook gets something wrong, they burn an omelet. A store clerk makes a mistake, the customer might get back too much change. It was kind of a small thing. Same for accountants, web designers, painters, and pilots.

With police, when they get things wrong, someone might die—or get away with killing someone else. I'd seen plenty of that in the InBetween.

Actually... it was probably a big deal if pilots got things wrong too. A cook could inadvertently poison someone. And accountants? They seem tame, but I'd wager behind those Specsavers lies the mind of a homicidal sociopath eager to use a red Sharpie in a way it was never intended.

*So, bad analogy.*



But Detective Paul Barnes visibly carried the pressure to “get it right” with every step, every gesture, and every half smile. Of course, I could only guess that was the case. The downside to being his unseen apprentice was that, a lot of the time, I had no idea what he was thinking.

As he turned to leave, an old woman with a straw hat wandered up to him, holding a folded umbrella and a massive handbag. I listened in.

\* \* \*

“Why are you still here?” Barnes asked.

Ellie smiled. “I think you need help on this.”

The detective motioned to the half dozen officers with a sweep of his arm. “Got help. Loads.”

She frowned. “Most of these kids look twelve.”

“That’s because you’re a thousand years old.”

“Ha, I like you,” the retired detective said. “I’m going to give you a hand.”

“Please don’t.”

The woman took a step forward, closing the space between them. Barnes fought the urge to take a step back.

“A real brutality to this one,” she said and looked back at the house. “I’ve seen this sort of thing before. Back home. There’s careful planning here, and whoever did it might have... some type of grudge.”

Barnes sighed. “And it looks like he did what he came to do.”

“Sure,” she said, turning and walking down the path into the Atlanta sun. “If this is the only one they got a grudge against.”

“Goodbye, Ms. Walsh.”

“It’s Ellie!” she called back. “I want to hear what you find with the bug blood, so I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t see me later,” Barnes yelled. “I’d prefer to forget I met you!”

She spun back. “Ah, no flirting now. I want to keep this professional, Detective Barnes.”

\* \* \*

Barnes watched the woman go, and after a few minutes, he left too. I wanted to follow, but first, I needed to take a look at the scene. So I wandered through the home, cops in nearly every room, photographing this and taking samples of that, until I got out back.

“You’re stomping all over my amaryllis!” The ghost of William Morgan was racing around his backyard, from one officer to another.

They were oblivious, of course. “Stay out of my pansies, you bastard!”

I tried a couple times to console him, but he ignored me. The guy was blinded by rage and confusion and just couldn’t process it all. That happened to a lot of folks who were newly dead.

I waited, watching, my eyes constantly drifting to his head. For a while, sometimes a *long* while, ghosts held on to the image of themselves at the time of their murder. That meant the ethereal spirit of William Morgan had a claw hammer sticking out of its skull.

Spooks also had an unsettling relationship with the world. Livies didn’t know we were there, but the ground seemed to. So did steps and floors, that kind of thing. That said, walking can be like moonwalking on an air-hockey table.

The old fella was sliding all over the place as he leapt from one uniform to another.

“Uniform,” I muttered to myself and smiled. That was what Barnes called them. “You kinda have to, you know,” I called over, eyeballing the door again, “balance a bit. It takes getting used to.”

Finally, he popped his head up, looking around for where my voice might have come from. Then he locked eyes on me and scowled. “You talking to me?”

“Yeah, my name is Painter Mann,” I said, falling into my intro patter. “I’m the world’s best dead private investigator. But, to be fair, since I’m the only one, I’m also—”

“Don’t need to hear it!” he shouted, then got an odd look on his face. “But strange...”

In a blink, his features had softened, and he stared off, looking toward the treetops.

“I can hear the birds,” he said, a slight sob in his voice. “Damn, I haven’t heard birds in forever. Now I can... they’re a bit squawky.” For the moment, he left the officers to do their digging. “The world’s been silent for so long, I’d forgotten how noisy it was.”

I took a deep breath.

“You’d lost your hearing, then?”

He nodded. “Long, long time ago,” he said. “When I was a kid. Hell, haven’t talked to nobody in more than fifty years.”

“You don’t do the...?” I asked, holding my hand in front of me like I was miming a manic cat’s cradle with invisible string.

“Sign language?” He shook his head. “That’s for deaf people. I just couldn’t hear.”

“Uh huh.”

“Wrote notes. Got a pad here in my pocket,” he said and reached for the small notebook and pencil sticking out of the pocket of his pants. After several attempts, he growled. “Goddamn it, I can’t get it out.”

I shook my head. “It... That’s just your memory of it, Mr. Morgan,” I said. “It’s not really there. Just the image of it being there, like the rest of you.”

“So, I’m not really here?” He glanced around the garden, his eyes falling onto an officer pushing a pen through some brown leaves that had fallen around a clutch of bushes. “Because it looks like I’m here.”

“You’re here but not as you were,” I said. “It’s my job to help work out who put that hammer in your noggin. Then you can move on.”

He frowned. “Angels wear hoodies and track pants?”

As I’d said before, I ain’t no angel.

“I’m the world’s only dead private detective. And, of course, since I’m the only one, I’m technically the worst too,” I said, grinning, hoping it would put him a little bit at ease. “I always like to add that caveat. Managing expectations and all.”

For a long moment, he stared at me. He said, “You look familiar.”

Lately, I’d found a sort of notoriety. More and more, spooks were coming out of the woodwork, looking for help. Looking for me.

Problem was, I was severely lacking in the skills to help them.

Finally, I saw William look down at his own dead body. It could be a hell of a thing to see oneself lying still, no life left in the husk you hauled around all your days. Some people weep, some get angry. Most freak out in some way.

He went another route.

“Jesus, that’s how my ass looked?” he said, shaking his head slowly. “It’s like I filled my drawers with ten-day-old mashed potatoes.”

“Listen,” I said, moving my hands in small circular motions. “I gotta go. I’m sort of on a, uh, training program. But I’ll be back, and we’ll work out who did this to you.”

“Too late now, I’m dead! What’s the point?”

“Because once I do, you can move on,” I said. “To whatever’s next. And before you ask, I don’t know. No one in the InBetween does, but staying here isn’t really an option. There are some bad spooks around, but I wouldn’t worry about them too much. You won’t be here all that long for them to find you.”

For a brief second, I thought about telling him about the other threat. The chimera. Then, I decided against it because he’d be gone soon, and there was no use terrifying him.

As the old man stared at his lifeless body, a police photographer returned to take some additional pictures, walking right through him. His ghostly image shimmered for a moment, and William shook himself.

“Saw innards. That’s a might unsettling.”

“Yeah, you sort of get used to it,” I said, walking back toward the house. “Listen, I’ll be back. You best stick around here, but… you have any idea who might want to, you know”—I pointed at the body in the garden—“do that?”

It took him a few moments, with him just staring downward, and then he slowly shook his head.

“I’ll be back,” I said. “Don’t, you know, wander around.”

Then I slipped through the fence—my eyes treated to the flash of dirt, wood, and grime as I passed through—walked down his driveway, and crossed a few streets. Initially, I was planning on heading to the police station, hoping to catch Barnes again.

Then I spotted the woman he’d been talking to—Ellie. It would take a few minutes for Barnes to get back to the cop hive, so I decided to look into her. She’d been climbing the steps of her house, and when the door finally opened, the yapping began immediately.

“All right, Rufus, calm down. It’s only me,” she said as a panic of dirty white hair the size of a kids’ bowling ball rolled up to her. “I already fed you. They’re always getting on me about how fat you are, so just give it a minute, mate.”

Ellie dropped her umbrella into a stand next to the door.

For a moment, I felt like I was intruding. No scratch that—I *was* intruding. But this was just a bit of research. When she was leaving Barnes, didn’t she say she was a detective? Might be good to get another quick perspective.

Kitchen, kettle, hot water into a teacup, splash of milk, no sugar. She took a seat at the window facing her backyard.

“What, no newspaper?” I asked. “I thought old people still read newspapers.”

Ellie looked around and apparently had the same thought. She returned to the door, opened it, and then cursed under her breath. She pulled out her cell phone, mashed one of the numbers, and put it to her ear.

“Your boy forgot to leave the paper again,” she said. “Ellie Walsh!” She listened for a moment, then said, “No, I don’t want two tomorrow. What will I do with two papers? Send him back around.” She hit End.



Rufus the yappy dog followed her back into the kitchen, the tiny metal tags around his neck tinkling like a Disney pixie the entire way. Its little face was turned up to her the entire time, with an easy-to-read expression.

*You gonna feed me now? How about now? Do I get food now?  
Are we doing the food thing? Did you forget where you kept it?  
Come on, woman!*

As she grabbed her tea and settled herself by the window in the dining room, I took a moment to look around. Then, I realized I was missing something.

*Where's my cat? Where did Ferris go now?*

Of course, he was never very far away. I hated it, but there was a slight pang in my heart—or where my heart used to be. I chided myself. I didn't even like cats very much. Especially ghost cats. Thankfully, Ferris was the only one I'd ever seen. Regretfully, he'd taken me on as his momma after his had left.

Okay, not *entirely* regretfully. He does grow on you.

But then, so does skin cancer.

"Got an interesting one, Rufus," she said, stirring her tea with a spoon. "Some cheeky bugger hit him with a hammer in the back of the head. Boom, went down, lights out."

The dog twitched, its eyes searching her. He was obviously distressed that she hadn't said anything about food.

"I'll give Detective Barnes a few hours, then pop by to offer my services," she said, looking down at her cup. "I already got some ideas. But we need more about William Morgan, and he'll have that."

Next to a bowl of fake flowers was a pricey tablet computer. She picked it up and scanned the device. When I glanced at it, I expected to see maybe a recipe site or a Pinterest page full of knitting. Or maybe a Sean-Connery-swimming-trunks compilation video.

Instead, she was clicking through newspapers around the world. I sat on the floor and, eventually, she started talking to the dog again.

"This one here," she said, tapping the screen. "Cops are gonna write that off as some sort of gang shooting. But they need to have a closer look at the wife."

Rufus looked up.

"She says she couldn't bear living in the apartment anymore, so she's renting out a townhome about a mile away." Ellie smiled.

"Trouble is, she *owns* that townhome, right? I found the mortgage online. And the paperwork for that, my sweet boy, began about ten days before the hubby got a bullet to the brain."

The dog made a chuffing sound.

“She knew it was coming. Or at least she knew something was coming and couldn’t wait to start Life 2.0 without her old man.”

I laughed for the first time in a long while and saw she had a slight smirk too. Sure, I had to get back to my role as detective trainee, but for now, it was just nice to pretend someone was talking to me.

“Jesus, Rufus, listen to this,” Ellie said, reaching for a pair of funky reading glasses and strapping them on. “This here is a bio on a young woman who put a six-hundred-dollar Montblanc ballpoint in her own heart, apparently because of the pressures of running some big-time tech company. Says she had been depressed, increasingly paranoid, and avoiding colleagues. Bah!”

I looked at the dog, who was rapt.

“Says she left a note on her laptop and blah, blah, exhausted, anxiety about being pressured into a buyout,” Ellie said and sipped her tea. “First off, fuzz ball, most suicides don’t leave notes. Did you know that?”

The dog clearly didn’t.

“I didn’t know that,” I said, nodding.

“Well, they don’t. She probably had a pistol in the drawer somewhere, maybe her purse, since they claim she’d gotten paranoid in recent weeks, and that’s a far better way to top yourself.

And people certainly don't bang goodbyes out on their computer. They're handwritten. And, obviously, she already had a pricey pen in her hand before she shoved it between her right and left ventricles!"

"Huh."

"They need to look at the note," the old detective said. "What I've found... if the killing is deeply personal, the note will have a short list of people... a mea culpa to those who were treated unfairly by the dearly departed. The killer will have slipped in their name—like a rock star's girl after a shotgun painted the walls with his unpublished lyrics."

The dog took a step back, then forward and chuffed.

"But... but if it's more of a business rival, you look at the note, see all the people she says sorry to and discount 'em," Ellie said, sipping her tea. "Mr. Stabby—or Ms. Stabby, totally plausible—wouldn't want their own name so close to the corpse. Probably an accountant that worked with her, the CFO maybe. They're a shifty lot."

Staring up at the table, I thought, *I like this woman.*

Over the next ten minutes, Ellie Walsh would see a story that intrigued her and come up with a possible scenario of how it'd happened and who might have done it. Sure, she might have been

wrong every time, but each scene she laid out for the increasingly hungry dog rang true.

“People, they been guttin’ each other since we could swing a heavy branch, Rufus,” she said, and she stood. The dog perked up, tail wagging. “Don’t matter if it’s 2021, 1621, or 21,000 BC. It’s almost always about greed, revenge, or tryin’ to shut somebody up in a permanent way.”

Rufus barked excitedly.

“Which is what I’m gonna do to you, fuzz face, if you keep up that yappin’!”

The dog missed the slight—dogs were terrible with inference—and the swishing of its tail sounded like a mini tornado.

“Come on, let’s get you a little bit of that vomit in a can you love so much.”

I watched Ellie Walsh as she crossed the room and didn’t bother moving when she passed right through my legs. All the way into the kitchen, she chatted away with her pet, who nearly had a heart attack when she reached in the drawer.

“I think ya only love me because I can work a can opener.”

*New plan.*

Barnes was a smart, passionate detective and put everything he had into a case. I'd seen it.

If Ellie Walsh *was* going to be involved and had those same traits, she had one huge advantage over the detective. Or at least to me.

She talked to herself. A lot.

I had a new teacher.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Rufus, you been chewing on my trainers?” Ellie asked, frowning as she rethreaded the laces of her running shoes. I hadn’t seen a car in the driveway, so maybe she was a bus woman. She looked a little like a bus woman.

I heard a tentative jingling as the tiny dog poked its head into the room.

Some creatures had an innate sense of when their owner was mad at them. Probably tone of voice, but I suspected there was also something about scents or pheromones. Knowing this guy, though, he had one thought on his mind. *Oh good, you’re going to get more dog food? See if there’s one with a picture of me on it! Or don’t. Any of it will do. All of it will do!*

The old detective looked under the crook of her arm as she laced up the sneakers, seemingly trying not to smile at her pooch, but not really pulling it off. He was a cute bugger, even if he did look like the result of some mangy dog and fat rat consummating their love.

“You keep chomping on stuff, and I’ll have the vet file down those teeth of yours.”



The dog took a half step back, leaving just his muzzle sticking into the room. The image triggered a foggy memory—I *had* actually seen a tin with a creature on it almost identical to Rufus.

Now I think about it, it's kinda weird that we put pictures of dogs on their food. If an alien came down and opened a tin with the image of fish on it, they'd find tuna inside. Or salmon. Pop a can with a photo of beans on it, and they'd get beans. Same with soup, peaches, and Spam.

So the implication of a *dog* on the tin's cover? Nasty.

Actually, ET would likely flee the planet once it saw the tiny jars with the Gerber baby—rocketing away as he opened up his intergalactic map and marked Earth with a big red X.

Ellie popped upright and let out a breath she'd been holding. She grabbed her umbrella and slung her purse over her shoulder.

"I'm going on a hot date for lunch," she said, cracking open the door. Rufus sat, listening. "Probably be back around late afternoon, so no parties." She pulled the door wider. "I'll bring you something from the café."

Ellie was a delight to listen to. However long she'd been in the United States, the accent was going to remain thick until she rang the bell at St. Peter's gate.

I slipped through the gap as she closed the door. Sure, it was easy enough to pass right through it; doors weren't a problem. But passing through the door, or any object, could be unsettling. You see everything.

Paint, wood, dirt, mold. Sure, doesn't make a ton of sense, because, of course, there was no light inside, so it should just have been dark until you passed through.

But a lot of the construct of the InBetween didn't make sense. That was because it hadn't originally been a part of this world. From what I understood of it—and I didn't understand a lot—it was made not by God or the devil, but by a human. Or mostly human. Crafted from anger, rage, and, mostly, the near-carnal need for revenge.

A few months earlier, I'd met the person who'd created this place, back in New Orleans. That had been the last I'd seen of Voodoo Cher. For now.

While my original pledge had been to help those in the InBetween to cross over to the other side, I'd added an addendum after that encounter. I was going to destroy it, so no one would ever be trapped here again. Until then, I had to follow its rules, its physics.

One of those was that moving vehicles were of little use. Sure, you could use some juice to get what we spooks called "grain,"

which was a bit like willing some energy into your hand so you could pick up a stick. Or hold onto a car seat. But it took so much energy that you got sapped quickly.

To get their energy back, spooks simply needed to move around in the InBetween. It was like a trickle charge and took as long as that implied.

There are quicker ways to recover your juice—like striking another spook and stealing theirs. One punch could get a cup full of it. Beat the hell out of another ghost—we're like flesh-and-blood to one another—and you can drain them but never completely. At least, I didn't think so.

Ellie walked down the stone path leading to her home, flipped the u-shaped latch of the gate, stepped through, and secured it again. She poked into her mailbox with a long, wrinkled finger. Grunting once or twice, she moved the mail around like someone looking into the cheese compartment in a fridge after the power had been off for a few weeks.

The mailbox snapped shut, its contents remaining inside.

Stepping to the broken sidewalk, she dug into her purse and pulled out a mobile phone that looked like something from a Philip K. Dick novel. Despite her age, she apparently loved the new gadgets.

And with no dependents but a dog that felt dog food was fine cuisine, she likely had a fair bit of discretionary income.

As she walked down the path, I suddenly remembered a line from Dick that I'd always liked, written some seventy years ago. Now in the InBetween, it held so much meaning, I sometimes wondered if the old writer had known something about this place.

*"You saw, and you should not have seen. Instead of a witness, you should have been part of the adjustment."*

More than a witness now, I was, in my very small way, a manipulator, one of the adjusters in this strange world. But I needed to be able to see more. I had people who counted on me. And not just those stuck in the InBetween.

Tucking the phone away again, Ellie crossed the road as a crumpled bit of newspaper pinwheeled, crossing in the other direction. She paid no attention to it as she put a finger under her big hat and scratched beneath the material.

The big straw boater protected her some against the long- and short-term effects of the sun. With her coloring, simply looking through the curtains was a cancer risk. And the large hat provided some shade to her eyes, since she didn't seem to favor sunglasses.

Ellie began talking to herself again. While it was of great help to me, I wondered if it also acted as a deterrent to anyone who might want to approach her—whether their intent was friendly or less so.

It made her look like some crazy old person. Even bad people, most of them anyway, knew to give a wide berth to crazy. A livvie friend of mine, one of my Temps named Julius, put it this way: “You don’t play chicken with crazy, ’cause crazy don’t swerve.”

“Much easier ways to put someone down than with a hammer, mind you,” she muttered. Then she fumbled at her belt line, where a slick metal drink bottle hung. To the casual onlooker, this was an old woman in the heat, taking a sip of water.

I knew different. I’d seen her fill it with whiskey before she left.

After a sip, she clasped the bottle to her hip. “And the attacker didn’t seem like some skilled hammer man. First shot, he’d just glanced off the old guy’s noggin.” She exhaled a deep breath and took the next curve. Up ahead, a truck rumbled down the street sending tiny pebbles bouncing down the sidewalk.

“Coulda been nerves. Killin’ someone does that. But I doubt he was any sort of carpenter or—” She snapped her fingers and shook her head. “And might not be a ‘he.’ Could be why the first blow didn’t get to the gray matter. Not strong enough. At least, at first.”

Walking alongside her, I nodded along. Frankly, I felt a bit like a fraud. She didn't know I was there, of course. Oh, a very, very few livies were aware of it. But they couldn't see us, only hear us. Like Julius.

But most who could hear were so close to death, usually very old, that even if they did tell someone, that person would smile politely and, when the old person turned away, probably twirl a finger next to their temple.

In my profession, I needed them. It took some, uh, grooming—I wasn't a fan of the word for obvious reasons, but it worked—but they were necessary. And given my assistants would naturally be dead soon—which was why they could hear me—I'd given them a designation that helped remind me that was the case. Temps.

However, Ellie wasn't one of their number. And what I said was for me and me alone.

I said, "Could be some relative looking for a dead guy payout."

*Ugh. Dead guy payout?*

She said, "Person was hiding, so maybe they knew him? Brutal daytime murder... easier ways to do it if you know someone.

Especially if they're old. Smack in the head and lay 'em down on the shower floor, maybe."

Ellie had a wicked imagination for death, yet she didn't revel in it. She spoke coldly, concisely.

"Could be random..." Then something flickered in her eyes. "But the shed. That's curious."

"Perfect hiding spot if you know the old guy's morning routine," I said, again just to myself. "The fence was too high for anyone to see it happen. Seems like it was someone who knew him."

Ellie gauged the speed of an oncoming compact car, then began crossing the street. She picked up the pace when the air around us began to growl with the sounds of a motorcycle.

Slowing back to her original pace, I saw her look up at the street sign and nod to herself.

"They knew..." she said and smiled broadly. "Hmm. They *didn't know*." Then she nodded and tapped her brow once with her index finger.

I looked at my hands. "Didn't know what? What didn't they know?"

But that was it for the rest of our walk. She would chuckle to herself now and again, but I wasn't even really sure if that was about the case or just some memory from years ago.

After her declaration, she had a renewed spring in her step, heading toward her uninvited lunch date with Detective Barnes.

Walking backward a few paces in front of her, I turned to face her, going in reverse. "What didn't they know, Ellie?"

She only hummed to herself, a word from some song escaping her lips now and again. Then, amid that lyrical distraction, she would smile every so often.

I turned away, sighed, then sidled back next to her.

*Come on, ghost PI. What didn't they know, Painter?*





## CHAPTER EIGHT

As Ellie took a moment to poke at her phone outside the pub on Memorial, I took a quick step around into the parking lot. There were a handful of vehicles that looked like their owners had parked them sometime around 1984, slowly walked away, and never came back.

There was a motorcycle, which took up an entire spot. I'd seen some cities where bikes were parked up on a curb or somewhere in a yellowed-off area to leave the proper spaces open for cars. Really, I'd always suspected it was more likely the motorcyclists felt anywhere that wasn't designated for driving was a parking space.

"Cop bar," she said, and I nearly jumped. Hadn't heard her sneak into the lot.

Aside from those older vehicles, there were three police cruisers and at least two late-model sedans, which had likely carried riders of the same vocation, albeit at a higher rank.

Hearing the front door groan, I wheeled back to see Ellie heading inside. I cut through the gap and followed her.

In a corner booth, a two-seater, Barnes was reading from a small notebook.

My retired Irish detective hadn't yet spotted him, casting her eyes around the bar, shivering slightly as she did. Each of the patrons probably had gone through some similar adjustment. Atlanta in the summer is a punishing heat.

If one of Satan's minions ever took a stroll down MLK Drive in August, he would duck into the first café he could find. "Christ, you got some ice water or a damp towel?"

That blazing heat meant bars and restaurants cranked the air conditioning high enough to repunch a hole in the ozone, as if they were collectively trying to cool the city down.

More likely, it was because the door opened so often, all the cool air got sucked out, so to make up for that, they kept it ice-cold. If few people came and went, the temperature inside was bone-chilling. That was how it seemed in the Pig's Ear.

Finally, Ellie's eyes landed on the American detective.

Tugging her hat closer to her ears, she slid her umbrella into the handles of her purse and strode over. When Barnes looked up, his reaction looked like someone had let the remaining air out of a day-old birthday balloon.

"Miss Walsh, please. I don't—"

“Ellie, *please*,” she said and plopped her handbag onto a raised flat area that separated the rounded booths. “Move over.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. In truth, she could have just gone to the other side of the booth, a spot that was empty. Instead, she insisted he make room for her by adjusting his position. I couldn’t tell if it was obstinate or clever. Probably both.

I stood just off Ellie’s shoulder, facing the kitchen’s swinging door. This way, I could better prevent a server from walking through me and the accompanying visual smorgasbord that was waitstaff innards.

*Very blechy.*

“You order?” Ellie asked and sat, using a napkin to dab the line of sweat on her brow.

Without looking up from his notes, Barnes thumbed a plastic menu toward her.

“What’d you get?” she asked, but got only silence as an answer. I saw her briefly cut her eyes toward Barnes, getting a read. “I don’t trust restaurants that put photos of their food on the menus. I wanna see a menu, not a kids’ picture book.”

“What a bummer. Then maybe you should leave?” He still hadn’t looked up.

After a few moments, she tapped on the menu. "How's the pork sandwich?"

"House specialty."

"That sounds good."

"Probably causes trichinosis."

Ellie frowned. "Ah, it's good to give the immune system a kick in the arse now and again. Sounds like a winner," she said. "You gonna have anything more than three cups of coffee?"

"No, I gotta meet my wife for lunch," he said, leaning back and rubbing his rubbery face. "Late lunch. If she sees me not eating, she'll think I got a girl."

"I wouldn't worry," Ellie said, taking a slug from the water bottle at her hip. "Saw a photo of her hanging from your rearview mirror. She's way outta your league; she knows you won't stray."

"That's true." A smile. "How'd you know which car was mine?"

"A later model but looked older than it should." She smiled back.

Barnes glanced toward the door as two men in sports coats came in, both with matching bulges at their waistlines. He snapped the menu from her fingers and half covered his face.

"I was reading that," Ellie said.

"It's got six items on it. How long does that take?"

“Helps me think.”

“Oh,” Barnes said, grinning. “Yeah, a woman of your age. The mind—”

“Don’t start,” she said.

“Hey, how’d you know I’d had *three* cups of coffee?”

Ellie smiled, staring at the pictures on the menu. “Because your teeth are rattling.”

“So you guessed?” Barnes said and sighed. “Good guess.”

She dropped the menu on the table. “No, not a guess,” she said. “When I peeked in your car, I saw a stained paper cup and a balled-up sugar packet next to it.”

“So?”

“Well, son, you’re a bit in denial over that midsection you got, which is why your belt is the only thing keeping your pants from splitting in two.”

“Personal attacks already,” he said. “Didn’t know we were getting close.”

“But I reckon you’ve restricted yourself to just the one packet of sugar per cup and”—she pointed at the coffee-stained saucer—“three discarded sugar wrappers. Easy.”

“Easy.”

“Anything come back on my skeeter blood?”

“No, no.” Barnes pulled out his phone and lazily tapped it a few times. “It’ll take a day or two. Not getting any hopes up.”

“Ah, hell. Technology moves so fast, I thought maybe they might have an iPhone app by now where you can immediately share it to Instagram. Might even tag the villain in the photo for ya.”

“I’m sure they’re working on it,” he said and smiled, a real one this time.

The waitress came by, and Ellie ordered a fish and chips, no tartar sauce, no vinegar. She asked for brown gravy. Although it sounded nasty to me, the server wrote it down without comment and left.

“Whachu got there?” Ellie asked.

Barnes sighed and looked around the bar while trying not to look like he was looking around the bar. For a moment, something played across his face. Then he blinked and spoke very quietly. “If I were to consider sharing with you any details of this case—”

“You’d be a very wise man, Detective Barnes.”

“—as an unofficial consultant, *maybe*,” he said, then shook his head. “Bah, it could hurt any trial having some civvy walking around where they shouldn’t. You could be called to testify.”

Ellie shrugged. "I've been in the dock loads of times. Maybe hundreds."

"That I believe."

"First as a copper, later a forensics specialist."

"In *Ireland*."

"Detective," she said, crossing her arms. "The devil don't care where the dead come from."

Barnes continued to stare at her. "How'd you even get into it? I mean, years ago, I'd expect, you know, as a woman..."

Ellie sighed. "And you'd be right. It wasn't easy, I'll grant you. Small men stood in the way, and I reckon that wouldn't only describe their minds." She hit him with a devilish smile. "It's a story so old, it's bloody trite by now, but my da was a cop, and so was his. Went back generations, but we don't have great records much before that."

"Someone broke the stone tablets, then?" He smiled.

"I ain't as old as you think. Nor as young as I look," the Irish woman said.

"You should make T-shirts out of that."

"Listen, I came from a family of coppers, and it was the way it was."

"Your mother police too?"



“No,” Ellie said and smiled. “She was a performer, actually. Stagecraft, bit of parlor magic, and sleight of hand, misdirection. Cards, cups, and balls. She showed me a few things.”

“That help being a cop?”

“More than you might expect,” she said, then nodded to the notepad. “Listen, I’ve seen this before, and I don’t think our Hammer Man is done. If I’m wrong, I’ll happily walk away from this. If I’m not...” She took a quick sip from her water bottle. “What does your little book say about your vic?”

Barnes let out a long sigh then tapped the ringed pages. “William Morgan. Could be Willie to his friends if he’d had any.”

“Cranky bastard or just old?”

“Probably a bit of both. Neighbors said the usual shit. Nice enough, kept to himself. But he was quick to notify the cops if someone was watering their lawn during a drought. Or even if anyone was parked in the cul-de-sac in a way he didn’t like.”

“Every neighborhood, right?” Ellie squeezed a wrinkled, dry lemon into her ice water. “Not bad to have. Nosy sort is a pest until you need ’em. They see everything.”

Barnes nodded and made a small notation. “The house right next door never had any interaction with him. Three guys in their twenties,

students. One of their dads owns the place, and of course, they could crank their music at night and get zero complaints from the Morgan household.”

“Right.”

The detective flipped through his notebook, and I leaned over to get a better look. Each page was carved deeply with a handwriting that made me wonder if he went through a pen a day.

“His wife died a few years back, says the bartender at the VFW, but he says he didn’t know much more about the guy. Obviously, William wasn’t a big talker. He was seen as a pretty good dart player despite that fact he didn’t, according to the barman, really didn’t have, um, the pedigree to be in there.”

Ellie frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He had a mug up on the wall, but he never served.”

“Hmm. Seemed old enough.”

“He’d have been the right age for Vietnam,” Barnes said with a shrug. “Guess he never went. Not sure if he’d been deaf back then, but if he was, it would have gotten him out of the draft.”

The waitress brought Ellie her food, asked if they wanted anything else, lifted the check off the table, scribbled a few words, and then dropped it back down. Barnes made a reach for it, but Ellie, one

hand jamming a fish bit into some brown ooze, grabbed at the ticket with the other, and moved it out of his reach.

“So, he wasn’t much of a talker. Someone at the war bar know how to sign or...?”

Barnes shook his head. “He carried around a notebook,” he said, pointing to the pad in front of him, “much like this one, I suppose. Always had two pencils in his shirt pocket. One for him and the other for whoever he was conversing with.”

Ellie nodded. “Didn’t see any around. He save ’em or toss them out?”

“Not sure,” Barnes said, then, as if he’d heard something on delay, he added, “Why?”

“He was a neat freak—I only got a glance at the kitchen, and in there... dishes stacked by size, perfect cutlery drawer, not a fingerprint or smudge on any glass. All the picture frames perfectly in line with the rest. No bits of food on the refrigerator door handle.”

“You got that in a ‘glance’?”

“It was a long glance,” she said and smiled. “So he might have tossed the notebooks when he was done, but maybe check his coat. Or coats.”

“Good call.” Barnes nodded slowly. “We can literally read any conversation he’d had in the past few days. Or weeks, depending on his social calendar.”

She chomped at a piece of battered fish. “A unique opportunity.”

Barnes nodded and scribbled something onto his pad. As Ellie ate, staring off into the middle distance, he tapped his lip with his pen.

Ellie broke the silence. “The hat is a bit odd, yeah?”

“You mean, why didn’t we find it stapled to his head with the hammer?” he asked, and she blinked. “I think the first try knocked it off, miscalculation, which accounts for the glancing blow before the second hit its mark.”

The woman nodded with a tiny smile, throwing his words back at him: “Good call.”

“They dusted the shed, didn’t come up with any fingerprints. They’re looking for other traces now—hair, fibers. But if the killer did hide out in there, he’d have worn gloves.”

“Or she. Takes a fair bit of strength to crack through a skull and put a hammer deep into someone’s thinkin’ place. Or rage,” she said, still chewing. “A woman scorned, maybe?”

The detective made a face like he'd swallowed a bug. "The guy was near eighty. I don't think he had a lot of girlfriends."

"Hey, I'm seventy-four," Ellie said, her lips curling up at one side. "Don't count us old folks out. We got decades of practice and a lotta time on our hands."

"My mother's about your age," he said. "I don't want to think about it."

"Yeah, it's better when you don't think. Just do."

Again, the detective winced. Ellie popped her eyebrows, eliciting a small chuckle from the cop.

"You have to wonder why he—or she—*they* didn't just take one of the old guy's tools from the shed, if they were hanging out in there waiting for him to come outside," Barnes said. "Who knows? Maybe just some rando looking to take someone out."

Ellie tossed her napkin onto the plate and pushed it away a few inches.

"Been thinking about that too," she said. "I don't think the Hammer Man knew the old guy very well."

"So now he's a man again?"

She shrugged. "It's got a ring to it," she said. "But did you see the door to the shed? It was just oiled. Didn't look like any dirt built up,

and given how dry it's been, all that grease woulda been caked within a day or two."

"So?"

"I think Hammer did it. Oiled the door."

For a moment, Barnes mulled this over. "Maybe he'd tested it out and thought it'd give him away once he opened it. Or maybe the old guy oiled it."

Ellie shook her head. "A man don't oil a squeaky metal door if he don't hear it squeak."

Again, Barnes nodded slowly. "Hammer Man didn't *know* Mr. Morgan was deaf."

"Ah, there it is."

"So maybe he didn't know the old guy so well."

"Right. As you say, could be a random killing. If it is, though, that's a bigger problem for you."

Barnes nodded. "Might mean Hammer's not done."

They sat quietly for a moment, then the detective flinched as if someone had sneaked up and poked him in the ribs. He pulled out his phone and read a text message.

"The daughter sounds like a piece of work," he said and sighed. He turned the phone to show Ellie, and I bent down to read the text.

“She didn’t want to come down to the station, said she had to work.”

“Ah,” Ellie said, nodding. “She’s upset? Or just a shitty kid?”

“Who knows?” Barnes threw a couple of bills down on the table and stood with a groan. “Unis were able to convince her it was in her best interest.”

“Oh? How’d they do that?”

“It seems,” he said, nodding toward the door as Ellie slipped from the booth, “this won’t be the first time she’s stepped into a police station.”

“I’ll go with you,” Ellie said, but before he could protest, she held out a raised hand. “Come on, nothing official now, but how good are you at dealing with some brat?”

Barnes stood, slipping on his blazer. “You’re not talking with a witness. I’ll be interviewing her.”

“Fine,” she said. “Then I’ll just listen. Maybe I’ll notice something you might miss.”

“Uh huh,” Barnes answered flatly. “Like how the bill laying face-up on the table when you came in told you I’d had three coffees at a dollar apiece?”

Ellie slid out and grabbed her bag. “Exactly.”

“Neat trick,” he said. “They teach you that in Irish cop school?”

“No, that was my ma. She was a performer, so a bit of cards, floating handkerchiefs, and stuff like that. She said, ‘See what others don’t, keep it close, and drop it when ya need it.’ Funny how that sort of thing can help out when you least expect it.”

The detective headed toward the door, and I heard him mutter under his breath, “Sugar packets.”





## CHAPTER NINE

At the Marietta police station, they'd parked up on the street, about two blocks down from their destination, because every inch of curb from here to there was taken up by cars. I'd skidded up behind Ellie and Barnes just as they got to the top of the steps.

"Don't be too harsh on Officer Glover," Ellie said.

"She needs to know that she's supposed to interview potential witnesses." Barnes sighed. "Not the other way around. She shoulda never told you Morgan was dead. That was a rookie move."

The big cop Ellie had seen earlier burst out the door, almost running on the balls of his feet, and smiled wide when he saw the detective.

"What are you so jolly about?" Barnes asked, smiling. "Don't know if I've seen you bounce like that. You *are* losing weight."

Filoialli tried to hide his big grin, shot a quick glance at Ellie, then said to Barnes, "Hammer's pretty common. They'll run down the brand, see if it's been bought around here."

"You give 'em my bug blood?" Ellie asked.

"What?" the officer asked, then his smile grew as he looked back to Barnes. "You finally catch the killer, Detective? She does have a

shifty look in her eyes.”

Ellie said, “That’s cataracts, I reckon.”

“File’s on your desk,” the officer said, bounding down the steps. “I gotta go. Ultrasound for the baby!”

Barnes smiled. “Good luck.”

I slipped ahead, planning to beat them through the door, but then spun back and eyeballed the street. At first, I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, just that queer feeling you get on the back of your neck sometimes. Turns out, you get that even when you really didn’t have a neck.

Something flashed in front of me so quickly, I didn’t really catch it.

To my left, I saw the front door of the police station thunk closed. The retired Irish detective and the active American one walked inside like old friends. When I turned back, I caught a few cars whipping by far too fast, but that wasn’t unusual.

I glanced across the street. There were dozens of people moving in all directions. A woman with her two kids tugged one’s arm a little roughly. I couldn’t hear her words, but Momma was not happy. The boy she was leaning into, though, had a big smile on his face.

I laughed and called over, “Give ’er hell, kid.”

Livies couldn't hear spooks, so I knew there would be no response. But something strange happened. Farther down the street, someone *had* turned toward me. All I'd seen was the flash of a head swivel before they banked down the next lane, past a row of shops.

There was a good chance he'd turned because a nearby car had laid in on the horn after one of the city busses cut it off. But if this guy had spent any time in the city, something like that would have likely long faded away into background noise.

*Did he hear me?*

Curious, I crossed the street, keeping my eye on the road the guy had walked down.

I didn't even bother to avoid the three or four cars that passed right through my spectral body. Not that it mattered, but if there had been some spook inside going for a ride-along—it did happen—then I would have been knocked flat on my feet and down a couple of handfuls of energy.

When I finally got to the corner, taking the last few steps at a jogging run, I found nothing. A cheap motel on the far side stood next to a home that looked like it should have been burned down a long time ago. Next to that— a rundown car park, with oil-stained

cement. On this side of the street was a row of shops, including a few restaurants likely kicking out a manic blend of food smells that did not agree with each other. But no one.

For a moment, I thought about peeking into the shops, but Ellie and Barnes would soon be questioning the daughter of the dead Mr. Morgan, and I didn't want to miss that.

"Back to class," I muttered and turned away with one glance back over my shoulder. I crossed the street, lost in thought, as I headed toward the police station.



## CHAPTER TEN

### *The Death of Gardener Helen Dorsey*

“You’re messing it all up.”

Helen Dorsey ignored her husband for the moment, fingering through the thin pages he was holding, searching for the Lifestyle section of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. She caught a glimpse of him, a frown drawing down his wrinkled face.

“Just looking for the puzzle,” she said, pushing her reading glasses up the bridge of her nose. Finally, she’d found the pages she wanted and began to slip them out when he tightened his grip.

“Now you’re just trying to bug me,” she said. She jerked her hand a few times to pull the pages loose, but he again clenched his hand. She sighed after catching the quirky smile on his face. She’d seen it hundreds of times before. Thousands.

They’d been married for nearly five decades but had been together before that. He’d wanted to marry Helen Dorsey the first time he met her. However, his wife would not have approved.

“That’ll cost you a smooch,” he said, grinning. “One per page.”

Helen Dorsey forced an exasperated sigh, grabbed the crossword out, and looked at her husband.

“Don’t know why you wanna kiss an old woman like me,” she said, folding the pages under her arm. With a sigh, she leaned forward, and he offered up his cheek. Helen thumbed his chin and turned his face toward her.

“The first kiss of the day should be proper,” she said, smiling, and planted a soft one on his lips.

“Hmm,” he said and leaned forward. “I prefer the *improper* ones.”

She turned, swiping at the hand she knew was reaching for her, batting his fingers away from her backside.

“No, no,” she said, heading toward the backyard, where her padded chair and coffee awaited her. “We have to mind your dodgy heart, old man.”

“An old man with a young man’s heart,” he said, a smile in his voice.

She added, passing into the kitchen, “That’s not the body part I expect is on your mind at the moment.”

“We got Andrea and the kids coming this weekend,” he said, looking out at the backyard. He would have to bring in any stray tools again then lock up the sharp ones and the pokey ones. Their



daughter's twin boys had a habit of finding the most dangerous things in the house to play with.

Usually, the older one—only by seven minutes, but the family joke was he was the “big brother”—would end up on top of the other, swinging something dangerous, as if he preferred to be an only child.

Alfred heard the refrigerator open.

“Yeah,” Helen said, drawing out the word. “That fat husband of hers will need some of that cheap beer he likes.”

“I don't think he necessarily likes it.” Alfred stood and walked to the entryway separating the sitting room from the kitchen. He leaned against the doorjamb and looked at his wife as she peered into the fridge.

*Girl's still got it.*

Her voice echoed out of the ice box: “Fool me, the amount of it he guzzles.”

“That's why I get the cheap stuff,” her husband said. “You need anything from the store? I'm heading over before lunch.”

“Don't go to Publix, too damn expensive,” she said, standing upright and leaning on the door. “Get some hamburger, I suppose. We can do sloppy joes or something.”

“Kids won’t care,” he said, with a weak smile, “but I expect Drea wants some of Mom’s home cooking.”

Without looking back, Helen closed the fridge, rattling a few of the bottles in the door.

Frowning, Alfred said, “You could—”

“Won’t have time for anything fancy,” she said, stepping out into the sun, leaving her husband alone in the kitchen.

His frown deepened. “Sloppy joes,” he mumbled and shuffled back over to his reading table. “Married a great cook, ended up with the high-school lunch lady.” He took a long sip of his coffee and winced.

Helen passed by the small alcove in their yard, not even looking over at the window. If she had, she would have seen her husband eyeballing her sixty-six-year-old frame as the sun treated him to the silhouette of her body.

“Well, at least she doesn’t look like a high-school lunch lady,” he said and smiled to himself.

Alfred read a handful of stories about the Falcons getting a new quarterback, again, after the last one found himself in legal troubles. Again. Flipping the pages, he scanned some of the smaller articles about local sports.

It was almost in reverse. Some of those young men and women, boys and girls really, inhabiting the back pages would eventually grow up and end up in those first few pages. Some might even make the cover.

A small article about Pebblebrook High School setting up new standards for water and heat restrictions made his heart twitch. A young woman practicing cheerleading had collapsed in the ninety-plus degree heat, so a petition had started circulating to restrict outdoor activity in the summer to keep the kids safe.

*Someone's gotta get hurt before they ever do anything.*

A sadness in him began to take root, and Albert knew a mood like that could get its grip and not let go for hours. Or all day. For a moment, he closed his eyes and let the sun warm his face.

Alfred only noticed he'd fallen asleep when his body jolted moments before he tumbled to the floor. He blinked away the haze, flipping to the comics, realizing that the sun looked like it had lost some of its wattage.

The comics weren't really very good anymore, too safe, too sterilized in the new age, but it would at least be a distraction from the syrupy dullness that was now blanketing his mind. Then he

remembered Helen had taken her puzzle outside. The Lifestyle section was the one with the comics.

He stood slowly, a bit wobbly, and shuffled his way through the kitchen then outside. "Helen?"

When he didn't get an answer right away, it wasn't unusual. They'd been married more than forty years, and after a while, it just wasn't necessary. He knew where she was. But when he got outside and saw his wife, for the first time in as long as he could remember, he screamed.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I'd been in a few police stations when I was alive, at least from what I could recall. However, my memory of that experience might only have been what I'd seen on cop shows.

But that faint memory, either real or televised, told me that a police headquarters was a bustling, buzzing hive of activity. Uniforms moving in and out. Plainclothes detectives with beer guts and scowls checking their weapons. And some sassy hooker popping her gum, giving lip to the desk sergeant.

The Marietta police station on Sword Avenue was more like the waiting room at a Hertz Rent-A-Car. In the lobby, there were just two people sitting in chairs, waiting, lost in their own worlds. No cops milling around, looking tired and bored. No gum-snapping prostitutes. Just an older guy sitting at a raised desk behind bulletproof glass.

As I headed down a hallway, out of the blue, a crazy woman started storming in my direction down the hall, screaming. I mean, full-throated, bat-shit, incomprehensible, and shrill. If I'd had ears anymore, they would have been ringing.

Looking around, I caught sight of two staffers sifting through a pile of files all spread out on the floor.

“This is going to take all day,” one of them said. Or at least, that was what I thought he’d said, because the Screamer was a bit closer, halfway down the hall, just looking into the various offices and bellowing.

It was so incomprehensibly loud, I couldn’t even make out words.

“Fuck-olive-shitty, cuntin ba-fuuuuck!” It sounded like beat poetry from a meth head mid-cardiac arrest after someone had set her on fire.

But with no one else reacting, it was clear this woman wasn’t a *live* woman. She was another spook. Thankfully, in the light, I would look to her like every other shitty-cuntin person in there, so I stepped into the office, my rear to the hallway, and scratched a spot on my back, pretending to lean on the doorjamb without falling through.

“You got the file on the Sarah Conner case?” I asked, looking at the two staffers shuffling the files. “There’s a big guy out front. Motorcycle jacket, weird accent, dark shades, real insistent.”

Of course, the two on the floor just sighed, muttering to themselves.

As the Screamer got closer, I eased away so that her flailing arms didn't tag me, giving away what I really was. Moving into the office with deliberate steps, I went to a desk and pretended to look into an open drawer.

"Chop-chop, people," I said. "Ol' boy looks twitchy."

"Cockballs all fuuucknuts shitforfucking braaaaains!" The Screamer stormed past, and as she did, a piece of paper thumbtacked to the door fluttered just slightly. One of the clerks casually looked up and shook his head with a weak grin.

I heard the Screamer retreat to somewhere on the far side of the building.

It took me a few minutes to find Ellie and Detective Barnes standing outside of the small cafeteria. Inside, half the tables were filled with cops or lawyers or maybe family members of those the other two groups were fighting over.

At one table, I noticed a young woman with a ring in her nose, a short leather jacket, and a shorter leather skirt. She sat with her arms crossed, scowling at a cup of coffee resting on the table in front of her.

Ellie shot a glance in the girl's direction then turned back to Barnes, her voice low. I listened closely, the diligent student.



\* \* \*

“You doing this in the café?”

Barnes kept his eyes on the girl in a way that looked like he was trying not to look like he was keeping his eyes on the girl. “Boxes are full. This is just a chat at the moment anyhow. Might spook her if we put her in a room.”

“She doesn’t look too sad,” she said. “Despite losing her dad a few hours ago. Not sure if that’s denial or some hangover from teen angst.”

“That’d be a hell of a hangover,” Barnes said, matching her volume. “She’s thirty-one.”

“Christ, really? She looks twelve.”

The detective nodded, staring at his notebook. “The uniform had to wake her up. No easy task. She pounded on the door for two minutes and eventually went around and found a window, saw the daughter inside, sleeping like a log. Even then, it took a few minutes to coax her out of bed and open the door.”

Ellie lifted her folded umbrella and spun it across her shoulder for a moment. “Okay, hypothetically, if she’s your Hammerman, why? Morgan have money?”

Barnes shook his head, scanning his notes. "Nah, he got a pension from the chemical plant he used to work at, back from when those were more of a thing. After that, there was a bit of income, not much, maybe a thousand bucks every month."

"Income? The old feller didn't have a paper route or nothing. Where's he gonna get income?"

He shrugged. "It's cash deposits, but they've all got a tag on them, identifier."

"Identifier?"

"Yeah, so you can track it, for your records. Each had 'MGS' on it."

"But not a lot, you say?"

"Nah. In fact, we got some prelims on it. Promised the bank we'd have the warrant. Have to backdate it, sure, but the MGS money went back years and years and years. Pretty much hit a grand or so on the nose, although that dipped by a few hundred bucks a couple months ago."

"MGS?" Ellie thought. "Could it be some payment? Like a payoff?"

Barnes shook his head. "Can't imagine. But who knows?"

Ellie stared at the young girl sitting alone, arms crossed. She knew the look. The woman was trying to appear tough and was, for

the most part, pulling it off. But the old detective was familiar with this façade—it was one she'd employed for many years.

In her case, it had been to let the other guys on their tiny force know she was hard and unapproachable. However, once she'd earned her stripes and gotten a few collars, she could have dropped the tough-cop veneer. But at that point, she'd done it for so long, it was all she knew.

"Let me talk to the lass," Ellie said, fishing around her bag, eyes never leaving Morgan's daughter.

"What? No," the Atlanta detective said, answering a text on his phone. "You're just here to watch, Ellie. You're not cop."

"I was a cop before your daddy stopped spilling your would-be older brothers into tube socks and finally had you."

Barnes lifted his hand from his phone and wrapped the crook of his arm over his eyes.

"Jesus H. Christ, don't say stuff like that," he said. "You're supposed to be, I dunno, some nice old lady. You talk like—"

"A cop?"

The detective sighed, looking back down at his phone. "Don't talk to her without me."

“Look how she’s leaning, hand draped over the chair, feet crossed at the ankles. As you said, Barnsey, she’s been in a police station before.”

“All the more reason I should be interviewing her, Ellie.”

The old detective shook her head. “She even found the coffee. Didn’t wait around for someone to tell her to grab it. She made it herself,” Ellie said then placed a hand on her new friend’s arm. “If you go in there all cock of the walk, she’ll button up. She knows anything she says to you ends up in a report. Like she’s dictating.”

“And not with you?”

“Nah,” Ellie said and patted the man’s shoulder. “Remember? I’m just a nice old lady. Harmless.”

She stared hard into Barnes’s eyes. She knew she’d already won the argument. She just needed to wait until he realized it. Finally, to save a bit of face, he tapped on his phone with a chewed nail.

“Fine, fine,” he said and blew out a breath. “You warm her up, but *don’t* talk about the case. They’ve gone through the house, initial search, and I’m going to take a quick look to see if there’s something that could help.”

“Yes, yes. Go see your friends. Good plan.”

“They’re not my friends!” he said, hoping he didn’t suddenly sound like some eight-year-old boy whining to his mother. Barnes knew he’d failed. “Five minutes. *Nothing* about the case. I’ll be right back.”

That was the in she needed, so she turned away without another word and headed into the cafeteria.

A moment later, her water bottle in one hand, she stood over the small table. “Mind if I sit here?”

She was met with a shrug. Had the woman given her any other response, Ellie would have been surprised. Smiling, she plopped down in the seat and let out a heavy sigh, as if thankful the younger woman had given her a chance to rest her weary old legs.

“You like lollies?” Ellie asked, her wrinkled hand holding a small white bag. The woman unconsciously tugged on her nose ring. But Ellie had seen her eyes dart toward the bag. “Aw, come on, everybody likes loll—err—candy.”

“I’d always heard you weren’t supposed to take candy from strangers?”

Ellie smiled. It was like a script sometimes. And, here, the woman had given Ellie the exact opening she was looking for. She stuck out her hand.

“Ellie Walsh,” she said, her fingers hanging in the air briefly before she tucked them away again.

“Gabrielle,” the girl said, only giving her first name.

*Interesting*, Ellie thought.

“You’ve got an accent.”

Still holding the bag of candy out, the retired detective said, “No, I don’t. It’s you lot who’ve all got the accents. All those hard vowels do my head in sometimes. ‘Don’t park your car in the yard’ and all that.” Ellie had leaned hard on the ‘*ar*’ sound, sounding like a Disney pirate.

Gabrielle gave her a small smile and reached toward the tiny sack. “You do a terrible American accent.”

“Whereas yours is quite good,” the older woman said. “Don’t take the green ones. Those are my favorite, but there are heaps of others.”

Ellie knew Barnes would be back in a moment, so she tried to get to the point. But first things first. “I’m sorry about your da. Hard thing to lose a parent.”

The young woman shrugged. “He was a prick, actually.” Then the corners of her mouth twitched, and her eyes went down to her hands.

*She wants to hate her father but can't*, Ellie thought as she dug out her own candy, a red one this time. *Give it up, lass. Sooner you do, the better you'll be off.*

Desperately, she wanted to question Gabrielle, but after nearly a half century of deposing victims and criminals alike, Ellie knew sometimes the best question was the brief silence between two people.

"Do they have any idea who did that?" the girl finally asked, filling the void.

"Ha, I wouldn't be privy to such things. That's for all the shiny coppers in here," Ellie said. She wanted to reach out and put her hand on Gabrielle's but restrained herself. "They're speaking to the neighbors, find out if anyone heard anything."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Dad wasn't the neighborly type. I expect the only time he had a conversation with any of them is when one of their dogs shit on his lawn."

"Oh, he was one of those?"

The woman blinked. "One of what?"

"A Lawn Man," she said with a mock severe tone. "Ya don't mess with a Lawn Man's turf. Probably got a ruler out to measure the growth, daily, I bet."

A small smile and, now, a dampness in the younger woman's eyes.

Ellie added, "He take samples down to the Council to get the PH tested, did he?" She got a shrug in response. "I expect he did and then poured all sorts of goo, bits of crystal to get that greener than green."

When Ellie had been in the metal shed awaiting some hungry mosquito, the bucket of the man's lawn spreader had dug into her calf. With the blood thinners she took, she suspected it had likely left a bruise there by now.

"Why do you think they do that?" Gabrielle said, rolling the candy across her teeth. "The Lawn Men."

"Ah," Ellie said, tucking the small bag of candy back into her purse. "It's something they can control, yeah? The right amount of water, the sharpest spinning blades, and a bit of fertilizer, and you get just the result you want. All your hopes, desires, and dreams fulfilled before you in an expanse of green carpet."

The woman's nose ring twitched slightly as her eyes met Ellie's.

"That's clever of you," she said. "Are you asking me if my dad treated all of his life like that? Worked the people around him like they were blades of grass?"



Ellie shrugged. "I was talking about his damn-fine lawn, but if you felt..." She let the question trail off into that vacuum of silence.

Gabrielle, once again, filled it.

"Dad is—he *was* very orderly, yeah. Had to be, I suppose." She looked toward the windows, a long row of dirty panes facing red brick. "He was deaf, so he had all of these things he did to keep it, you know, orderly."

"He have many visitors?"

"Dad? Uh, no." Gabrielle's mouth turned up into a thin hook. "He was popular, though. In his own way."

"What does that mean?"

The young woman shrugged. "You like ice tea?"

The question was so strange and out of place that, for a moment, Ellie had lost track. Did she miss a part of the conversation? She'd always feared losing her faculties as she'd got older. And now she was, well, old.

"Um, yeah, I do," she said. "But not like you lot brew it up. Too much sugar."

"Right, but hey, we're in the south, yeah? These rednecks love a good, sweet tea."

The detective rubbed her lips. “What does that have to do with your da?”

“Mr. Golden Sun. You’ve seen it around town?”

Ellie shook her head. “Is that ice tea, then?” Then it hit her, rolling the words around her head. *Mr. Golden Sun: MGS from the bank records.*

“It’s pretty popular. Dad didn’t make a fortune off the stuff, but he’s been brewing it up for years. Selling it to local corner stores. The big places wouldn’t give him the time of day—he made the stuff in his kitchen, right?—but the little places, he had dozens of them. They loved the stuff. Or at least their customers did.”

“You think maybe someone was after, um, Mr. Golden Sun for all that ice tea money?”

The woman laughed softly and then harder.

“No, god no,” she said. “He maybe made enough to pay the mortgage. *Maybe*. But...” She stared off for a moment. “Use to be he’d be in the kitchen every other month, all the burners on the stove going, pots everywhere. But a few months ago, it picked up, I guess. Every month instead of every other. But he was getting better at it. Didn’t take him out of commission the entire weekend.”

Ellie smiled. “You saw him every weekend?”

“Not every weekend, but I could do my laundry and get a few free meals. And, ha, of course it was quiet. Not like an apartment with three other people. Especially when one is a couple.”

“I see.”

“I hear them. All the time,” Gabrielle said, holding up two fingers nearly in a pinch. “Thin walls.”

Ellie nodded, following the other woman’s eyes to the brick wall. “Do you know sign language?”

“Oh, nah. Not so much. Didn’t have to.”

The girl’s head snapped to Ellie’s right as Detective Barnes pulled out a chair and slumped into it. It was a tired, worn-out sort of gesture, but she knew a performance when she saw one.

*Like, Ah, say anything you like, confess, whatever. Me, I’m just tired. Needed to take a load off.*

“This is Detective Paul Barnes of the MPD.” Ellie sighed. She’d been getting somewhere. “But don’t hold that against him.”

“Hey!” Barnes said with a half-smile.

“The detective is looking into your father’s case, Gabrielle.”

Barnes turned up the wattage of his smile. “Yeah, Gab—do you go by Gabby? Or maybe Elle?”

The young woman stiffened in her chair, just slightly, then shot a glance at Ellie. “He a Lawn Man too?”

“Ah, darlin’, the trick is to realize that they all are,” she said with a weary drawl. “Even if they got no grass and live in a shitty apartment, like I expect our friend Barnsey here does.”

The detective chuckled. “I just sat down. Usually people wait a minute or so before they outright insult me.”

Ellie said, “Ah, good, then. We’re all bonding, we are.”

Gabrielle looked at her chipped fingernail polish and waited. Ellie knew this moment very well too. Questions about some crime that had befallen a loved one suddenly made that crime present and all too real. They were forced to think about it.

*This was not a woman who hated her father, Ellie thought. But it doesn’t take hate to swing a hammer.*

Barnes went through the preliminary questions, and Gabrielle was tense but forthright. When the answers to his questions suffered their inevitable entropy—statements turning into sentences, sentences to phrases, phrases devolving into single words—he closed his notebook and slid it into a jacket pocket.

Still facing away, Gabrielle flicked her eyes down, catching the black grip of a gun on the man’s hip.

“Is there anything, I dunno, unusual about your dad?” Barnes asked. “Anything that might make him stand out to someone?”

“You mean something that might make someone want to kill him?”

Barnes shrugged and nodded.

“Well, he didn’t like people very much, and naturally, it wouldn’t take long for that sentiment to be reflected back,” she said. “I suppose I inherited that from him.”

“And the eyebrows,” Ellie said with a smile. “You both have the most lovely eyebrows. Mine, I hafta draw them on. I’ve got more hair on my upper lip than I do above my eyes now.”

“Come on, El’,” Barnes said.

“Ah,” she said, patting the detective on the hand. “He don’t like to hear about women aging. Thinks they should all look forever like Linda Carter.”

“I, what?” Barnes asked. “I don’t even know who that is.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “Wonder Woman. The original, back from the eighties. You’d like her—perfect smile, golden lasso suggesting light BDSM, big knockers.”

Barnes put both hands up, facing outward.

“I can’t win here.”

“Good,” Ellie said. “Finally, we’ve an understanding.” She turned to the woman who’d lost her father just hours earlier. “I don’t suppose he socialized much. No RSA—err, VFW potlucks or bridge clubs?”

“Oh, he’d go up to the VFW, yeah. And take part in a couple competitions every year,” she said. The sadness was back.

“Gardening, cook-offs, anything involving brewed teas. At one point, he even took up needlepoint. Can you imagine?”

“No, not really,” Ellie said, grinning. “Seemed like a hard man.”

“He’d do anything where he thought he might be the best at it. Or, really, anything where he could show others weren’t as good.”

Barnes went to reach into his pocket for his notebook but found Ellie’s hand instead. She gave him the slightest shake of the head and, still holding his hand, brought hers up onto the table, as if they were close friends.

Barnes asked, “You think maybe he said something to one of those others, someone he might have beaten at some competition, that set them off?”

“Ha, no,” Gabrielle said. “He didn’t talk, of course. Only way he ‘spoke’ to anyone was with one of his pads, but most people, he

didn't feel they were worth the pencil lead. Each month, a new pad. Some were, you know, blank. Whole thing."

Barnes slowly withdrew his hand from Ellie's and steepled his fingers on his belly. "That would explain the small ringed notebook we found in his robe pocket."

Ellie cocked an eyebrow.

"He had great penmanship. I'll give 'im that," Barnes said. "Each page was nice, neat block letters of the same handwriting on either side of some other scrawling. Hard to read some of the other writing, but there really wasn't much in there," he said, eyeballing his pocket again, then thought better of it. "Some argument with a tradesman about drainage. Runoff coming from the neighbor's property into his. They'd done some work in the yard, shifted the rock or dirt, and the rain would pour onto his cement deck."

"How do you know it was an argument?" Ellie asked.

"Short sentences. And the handwriting dug into the page hard enough to leave an imprint on the next three or four."

"Yeah, okay," Gabrielle said. "Who gets along with their neighbors, though?"

Barnes shrugged. "I do." He got a glance from Ellie, and his voice hitched up an octave. "I *do*!"

Finally, Ellie leaned forward and put her hand on the other woman's. She looked down but didn't pull it away.

"You going to be okay? Got a place to stay with friends?"

"I'm fine. He was old." Gabrielle nodded. "And like I said, I share a house, so not alone." She slipped a phone out of her short jacket's pocket and groaned. "I gotta go to work."

Barnes made a noise and said, "But... your dad just died. Surely they'd give you a day off. A week."

Gabrielle shrugged. "Yeah, but Master Card doesn't. The guy we pay rent to doesn't."

Ellie nodded and stood slowly, a sign the interview was over. Barnes sighed. This was his investigation, but he was smart enough to follow Ellie's lead, at least for now. He had to admit: she seemed to have a good sense for reading people.

The Irish detective pulled out a pen and a scrap of paper from her purse then wrote down a number. She clicked the pen and slipped it back. Then she handed the paper to Gabrielle.

"That's my number," she said. "If you need anything or think of anything, give us a call."

Barnes handed her a card emblazoned with the Marietta Police Department emblem. His work and mobile numbers were both on



there.

Gabrielle pocketed both, picked up her phone, and grabbed her coffee cup. When she was out of earshot, Barnes looked at Ellie.

“Cards are too impersonal, Barnsey. Like you’re handing out fliers.”

“Please stop calling me ‘Barnsey.’ I’m not eight.”

Ellie watched the girl rinse the coffee cup and drop it into a rack next to the sink.

The two detectives tracked her as she headed toward the door of the cafeteria. As if she’d just come up with a thought, Ellie snapped her fingers and took a few strides toward the door. By now, Barnes knew better. She’d planned this whole dance.

“Gabrielle?”

The girl turned.

“You mentioned some of your da’s notepads were blank. How can you be sure?”

She sighed. “He was old. His memory shot. So he kept them hidden away, but there were so many, easy enough to find. Boxes and boxes of them, dates on the side, in the spare bedroom in the closet.

“Read a few, but a couple months back, he noticed they’d been ‘disturbed’ and got really angry. He said he threw them out, but some of the handwriting had been mom’s, so... I can’t imagine.”

Ellie’s eyes twinkled, and she nodded. “I am truly sorry about your father.”

A moment later, the young woman was gone.

“I wasn’t really done talking to her,” Barnes said.

“She was done. There’ll be other opportunities to question her; this isn’t the last we’ll see of young Gabrielle,” Ellie said. “In the meantime, you’ve got some hunting around to do.”

“For the notebooks?”

“Yeah.”

“Man, I really don’t want to read about some old guy’s innermost thoughts. Weird fantasies about the retiree next door, any of that.”

“Don’t be a dolt,” Ellie said. “You have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity boyo.”

Barnes smiled. “Reading the banal, day-to-day arguments of a grumpy old man?”

“Well, unless this is random, and with nothing stolen, it doesn’t seem like a robbery...”

“We won’t know that until the rest of the house is inventoried.  
Hard to tell if anything is stolen or not.”

“Gold watch in the bedroom taken?”

Barnes’s mouth hung open. “How’d you know he had a gold watch? You never went into the bedroom.” The detective stiffened. “Did you go into the bedroom? I told you—”

“No, no, don’t get your knickers in a twist,” she said and sighed. “He had striations around his wrist but no dark marks. If it had been copper or nickel or silver, there’d be some skin discoloration.”

“Coulda been stainless steel for all you know.”

She frowned. “He didn’t look like a stainless-steel sort of fella.”

“Really?” Barnes laughed. “And what does a ‘stainless-steel sort of fella’ look like?”

Ellie said nothing, just looked down at the watch on the detective’s wrist. He put his hands in his coat pockets.

Ellie looked outside to the red brick and thought for a moment. Then: “If it is someone he knew, then they must have had a conversation. Maybe an argument.”

“Right,” Barnes nodded. “Oh wow.”

“‘Oh wow’ is right. Every chat he’s had, everyone he’s spoken to and what they said, what they might have quarreled over will be in

those notepads. Odds are, you will see the words of the Hammer Man—in his own handwriting—written in one of those books.”

Barnes pulled out his phone and said, “We need to find out where the old guy stashed them.”

“Don’t bother,” Ellie said, heading to the door. “I already know.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Standing there, watching the daughter, Gabrielle, walk out, I stared at Ellie. Funny part is, just a few feet away, if I took a few steps and leaned into her, I would be able to see inside her brain. Gray matter, white matter, blood vessels, and sheathing, the whole lot.

What I wouldn't see, of course, was whatever she was thinking, which was what I really wanted to know.

I watched Barnes lift his phone and say, "We need to find out where the old guy stashed them."

"Don't bother," Ellie said. "I already know."

As I continued to listen to her and the Georgia detective work through some of what the woman had told them, I tried to piece some of it together myself. What did they hope to find in the notebooks? The words of William Morgan's killer? Some argument? Some resentment revealing itself in the loops and curves written on the page?

Then I almost laughed. I didn't *need* the notebooks, because I had what they didn't. Morgan was back at his house, probably still muttering about his begonias. I could just ask him who'd done it.

He may have lain there for a while, bleeding out slowly. But if he'd died instantly and ghosted, then he may have seen his killer's face.

I was debating on heading back and asking him, but at the moment, my case wasn't about solving this crime. It was about learning how to solve crimes, like a proper PI. Morgan could wait.

"You don't belong here."

Snapping my face toward Ellie, I was surprised how angry I was that someone would speak to her like that. Sure, she was not official police, but she had every right to be there. Maybe it was because she was foreign.

"Man, I'm talking to you!" the voice to my right said. I turned toward the woman.

"Sorry," I said. "Didn't see you, uh, standing there."

*Shit.*

Not the best choice of words, but for the moment, she let me slide. *Ha, slide.* Dammit, now I had the giggles.

"What? What is that?" she asked, her face drawing back into heavy creases. "You laughing at me?"

"No, man. *No,*" I said. "Just had a thought in my head. I was thinking, you know, sl... er, stupid stuff."

The woman *slid* closer toward me. She had to because, with just the one leg, she didn't do much strutting.

Judging by the eyes, she was about thirty, but something about her face made her look ten years older. She sported a leather hat with a shortish brim, a bit like a fisherman's cap but nearly black, except for the bits that were worn and cracked.

I wasn't against people wearing hats. They looked better on women than men, but that was true for everything except handlebar mustaches. However, I'd recently had a run with some hat-loving assholes, and that was why, now, I was associating hats with assholes.

"This is my turf, man," she said, hands balling into fists. A few inches taller than me, she leaned forward, flashing her bloodshot eyes into mine. "I will grant ingress but will not stand for trespass."

*Stand?* She was messing with me.

"No, no," I said, raising my hands in surrender. "I can see you won't stand for that. But, um, it wasn't like there was a sign or anything, so—"

"That gives you no right to intrude!"

My girl was getting a bit agitated, which wasn't a good thing. Spooks could go from zero to one hundred on the anger



speedometer in a snap.

“Listen,” I said. “I mean, no one’s got turf around here, right? It’s not like we can own anything.”

“It’s not about owning; it’s about having a place where nobody can mess with you,” she said then relaxed. “Now, you seem all right so, if you keep ya nose clean, you are *permitted* to pass through.”

Of course, no one needed anyone’s permission to go anywhere in the InBetween. But this woman had a beef with someone, or someones, and was doing what she felt she had to so that she was safe.

“Gotcha,” I said and smiled. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking for any trouble, uh... I don’t know your name, sorry.”

“Sandra. Sandra Pegadini,” she said. “But everybody calls me Peg.”

“Is that because...?” *Don’t look at the leg. Don’t look at the leg.*

She frowned. “Because my last name is *Pegadini*. It’s a nickname.”

*Don’t smile. Don’t laugh. Don’t smile. Don’t laugh.* “Okay, Peg. I’m Painter Mann, the world’s—”

“Aw yeah, aw yeah,” Peg said. “I know who you are. Everybody knows who you are. And I don’t really care who you are, just happy

to know you are passing through. So, why don't you go on and pass through?"

Sure, I could have argued, but what was the point? I gave her a wave and started away, looking to follow Ellie and her new cop bestie. It had only been a minute or so; they couldn't have gone far.

Then I turned back. "Ah, hey, if you need any help, you know?"

"With what?"

"If you want me to help you find out who killed you, get you out of here. I can look into—"

"I know who done it, man," Peg said, slowly backing away from me. Then she said more softly, "I know who killed me. And I know the life I led, not all good, so while this here ain't the Ritz..."

She met my eyes for a moment then shrugged. I got it.

No one knew what was next. But if any one of a hundred religions was right, then good people went to a place of light, white-winged horses, and harp music.

The bad people, they went the other way—skies of fire, lava pits, thorny-cocked amorous demons, and Spotify accounts that only played Ed Sheeran.

In that case, it was better to wander purgatory as long as possible.

In a way, I felt I was doing the same thing. This woman remembered her Life Days; I didn't. All I knew, aside from a few flashes, was here. This place. I couldn't remember who I was, what I'd done, or who I may have hurt. I did know that I needed to "do good," which was how I'd come to choose my admittedly unusual profession.

Why I had made that choice, back at the beginning, I didn't know. Maybe I was looking to balance the ledger so I wouldn't be subjected to an eternity of Gnarflack the Cuddly's romantic liaisons with the warbling drone of a ginger-haired vocalist on shuffle.

As I turned to leave, I heard that throat-shredding wailing again. The Screamer had found some new target to lose her shit on, and when I looked back at Peg, she cracked a smile.

I said, "Hey, who *is* that?"

"Some angry spook," she said. "She ain't the only one around, place like this, but she damn sure is the loudest."

The howling went up a notch, but thankfully, it seemed to be moving deeper into the building.

"She, um, live here?"

Peg bobbed her head once. "It's taken a year, but now me and her are on good terms. She don't even see me anymore, just floats past,

wailing at the top of her lungs.”

“You ever see her go, you know, full noise?”

“Poltergeist style?”

*Poltergeist. Damn good word.* I nodded.

“Thankfully, ol’ girl goes right up to within spittin’ distance of the berserker event horizon—I mean toenails and shit hanging off the edge, right?—but doesn’t fall in. Bad shit happens then.”

Nodding, I said, “I know it. What’s her deal, then?”

“Dunno. Hell, I’d wager she don’t even remember anymore.”

“I’ll steer clear.” I gave Peg a nod, said thanks, and again turned to the door.

“Aw, hey, Painter?”

I spun back, my eyebrows raised.

She continued: “There was someone looking for you. Asking around. Not just here but around town.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, me, I got a network of spooks who check in now and again. Information is king, right? I’d heard from some of the cuzzies there was a craggy dude looking for Painter Mann and not in no friendly kinda way. He was up in this place for a while...” Her voice trailed off, and she looked toward the sound of the Screamer.

“You get a name?”

“Just the first: Jimmy. And he don’t seem all that right,” Peg said, rubbing the back of her hand on her mouth. “Fixed me with a glare, that man. I’m sure I was imagining it, but goddamn if he didn’t have the strangest eyes I’d ever seen. Like ping-pong balls in a nuthouse.”

“Yeah, I know the guy.”

“Well, just sayin’, you know, steer clear,” Peg said, drifting farther toward the back wall.

“Way ahead of you,” I said then had a thought. Sometimes, when you want something from someone, you’ve got to know how to speak their language.

I said, “I’d like to ask a favor. You know, if you’d allow it.”

Peg tilted her head back. “Proceed.”

“If you hear anything about this craggy dude, can you let me know? I’d appreciate it.” Then I added, “I’d owe you.”

That seemed to do the trick. Peg saw herself as the lord of her turf, and here I was, a humble squire, beseeching myself to her good graces.

“I don’t know what you’ve got in return, other than a pretty good rep,” she said, “buuut that’s good for me, so yeah, sure. I’ll have my

cuzzies keep an ear out. If I hear anything, and if it pleases me to do so, I'll give you a heads-up."

"Cuzzies?"

"Yeah, if we are all God's children, then if not brothers and sisters, we are cousins."

"Ah, so I'm a cuzzy?"

Peg frowned. "No," she said. "Not yet."

I wasn't sure of the best way to respond to that, so I went with my go-to: an ironic smile and a thumbs-up.

When I looked toward the door, I saw Ellie Walsh step back into the hall, covering her mouth with a hand. Then she and Barnes bolted out of view. The looks on their faces told me everything I needed to know.

There'd been another.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I was skating after Detective Barnes's car, my eyes trained on Ellie, who was riding shotgun.

Downtown traffic moved pretty slowly, often bumper to bumper even in the off-hours, so I spent a bit of my time standing in the backseat of Barnes's late-model Chevy, catching their conversation.

"What do you know about the victim?" Ellie asked.

"Only what the boot told me, enough to know we might have a problem," Barnes said, fiddling with the radio at a traffic light.

"Another hammer attack?"

He shook his head, frowned, and flicked the station off.

"No, but I... Feels like it might be the same guy."

"Oh?"

"Helen Dorsey lived only a few blocks away from William Morgan. The vics are similar age, both retired."

"Anyone see anything?"

Barnes shrugged. "Dorsey's husband was at home with her but says he was sleeping. He's the one who found her. Same as before, out in the backyard. Near a garden."

"Garden," Ellie said. "Maybe it's one of them garden gnomes."



“I think we can rule ‘em out.”

With a straight face, she said, “Don’t trust ‘em. Pointy red hats, dirty white beards, beady little eyes.”

*Damn.* My girl was dark. But I supposed gallows humor was the best way to survive a half century of policing.

Barnes eased the car forward as the light turned green. “The husband’s all shaken up. Don’t blame him. Not something he’ll ever forget.”

Ellie lifted her hat to let some of the cool air from the blower get under it.

“Not a hammer, though, yeah?”

The detective sighed. “Goddamn *sewing needles*.”

The old woman rubbed a spot on her chest. I couldn’t imagine what was going through her head. Pulling away from the main center, the traffic was flowing again, so it was getting harder to keep up with the car to listen.

Then I saw the strangest thing. It looked like some guy was riding a bike, but... he was going through the cars in front of me?

No, not on a bike. It was a spook with crazy eyes, booking top speed right at me.

At first, I considered hitting the afterburners and launching into him, but since New Orleans, I couldn't touch another spook without seeing highlight reels of their past. I would get lost in the visions and then fighty no good.

I sighed and knew the truth: I had to run. Again.

The last time I'd whipped past Marietta Square, I'd noticed a possible hiding place. Hiding's a respectable plan, and, bonus, it didn't require crossing an international border.

After a quick glance at a nearby street sign, I snapped at a right angle and rocketed down the road. I was a full block ahead of the guy when I heard him calling my name.

The Square's band shell was draped with streamers and flags for some upcoming event. Too hot in the midafternoon for a picnic in the park, there were just a few homeless people milling around.

Over the years, Marietta Square had lost a bit of its shine, an echo of a time when someone had given a shit. The luminous glass globes that hung from a giant maple tree may have once looked like giant, glimmering Christmas-tree ornaments. Now they looked more like dirty fish bowls.

A massive three-tiered fountain in the middle was now dry—full of leaves, sticks, and dirt. From the fountain, four red-brick spokes—

fifteen-feet-wide walking paths—led all the way to the edges of the square. Much of the stone was busted and crumbling away.

But the band shell remained the crown jewel. It was a place for local amateurs to play music, local wannabe politicians to hold small rallies, and, when not being used in some official capacity, local kids to play with their local trucks and dolls.

Making a wide arc around the square's park, I saw a small dark gap beneath the band shell. If I could get *there*, I would be out of sight entirely.

Behind me, again, he called out, "Come on, Painter! We got a score to settle, you prick!"

*Oh, he is not a friendly ghost. No, no.*

Heading for the steps of the band shell, I glanced over my shoulder. Nope, he hadn't made the turn. So I went down on one knee, sliding with the momentum, heading toward the stage. That was the easy part. Now to slow down so I didn't simply pop out the other side.

Ghosts could pass right through stuff—everything, trees, cars, houses, and band shells. Only the ground and, basically, places people walked on held any grain for us. So I would have to avoid the stairs, because they would be solid to me. So would the deck of the

performing area, so to get under, I would have to duck down low and go flat.

Light went to dark as I did, but now I had to stop. Willing energy into my fingertips, I pressed them into the dirt. I was slowing but not fast enough. At this rate, I would shoot right through. Grunting, I willed more juice into my fingers, feeling the energy drain from me so fast, I felt like passing out.

“Painter!”

*Dammit!*

I looked under my elbow and saw the other side coming fast. Squinting, I pressed harder. Then the strangest thing happened.

My fingers went slack. I hadn’t used up all my energy. I couldn’t really, but I couldn’t work out—

Then I could. The ground had given away. And I fell. Everything went black, and I could feel nothing around me. Total darkness, weightlessness.

*Jesus, have I moved on? Did he do something that kicked me out of the InBetween?*

Then I had a far more chilling thought: *Did one of the chimeras touch me, sending me into the All Time?*

No. I could still hear the echoes of the square above me. In the All Time there is nothing. An eternity of nothing.

A moment later, I felt the impact. Didn't hurt of course, I don't have a real body anymore, it's one-hundred percent Casper. But it surprised the hell out of me.

Ten minutes later, I wasn't feeling much better about the situation.

After going up and down the short tunnel, I wandered slowly back to where I'd seen the only other person down there. He was leaning against the wall, hands behind his head, a satisfied look on his face.

If the dude had had a piece of straw to gnaw as he grinned at me casually, I thought he would have been in heaven.

"Can't get out," he said. "I've been up and down these tunnels hundreds of times. Ah, hell, thousands by now. At least"—he leaned forward, studying his large hands—"now I got some conversation. What's your name?"

Lost in thought, I stared down to the other end of the tunnel.

*Is this how a rat in a maze feels? Like, maybe if I go down there one more time, it'll be different. Some stairs that could take me to the top. Elevator would be better.*

That said, I realized I'd never tried an elevator in the InBetween. My best guess was the floor would pass right through me, leaving

me to look at the bottoms of shoes and up pleated skirts.

I blinked and felt like sitting down, but at the moment, I wasn't yet willing to give that final concession. "There's really no way out?"

"Best you get used to it," he said and shrugged. "Not so bad. Nobody bothers you down here. Up there, it's a different story."

That was when I looked down at his hands, which he was rubbing together. In my head, I could actually hear them, one sliding across the other. Dry and calloused, they sounded like sandpaper on an old porch chair.

Then I noticed his bonds. They weren't linked together, just two thick cuffs on either wrist. A half dozen short loops of iron dangling from each one.

"That's a bummer," I said, cracking a smile.

"What?"

"You've actually got one of the proper fairytale ghost tropes—rattling chains—and they don't even rattle."

The guy gave me a half grin. "I got a feeling you might spend less time with other people than I do."

I smiled back. "Touchy."

"Ha," he said and put his hands behind his head again. "That ain't how you say that word. It's French, I believe. Too-*shay*, yeah?"

The guy was clever. At least, if I was going to spend an eternity in a hole, I might have interesting company.

After another glance up and down the corridor, I finally sat down across from him, sighed, and closed my eyes.

“I can’t stay here, man,” I said. My voice sounded muffled, like talking through a wool blanket. “There are people counting on me.”

“Who?” he said, grinning again. “Nobody knows you’re around.”

I felt too weary to explain and just tried to enjoy my self-pity.

He said, “You mean other haints? Ha, nothing you can do for any of them. They’re doomed like the rest of us. Only with more cardio.”

For the first time, I laughed. Not full-on, but more like the grim chuckle of a man condemned to die. Tricky affectation for a dude who was dead, by the way.

“Cardio? They have that back... back then?”

He wiped his mouth. “Nah, man. But I can hear the folks just above here. Took me a while to work out what all the noise and bouncing was about. Thought it was some new dance or something. I was a hell of a dancer back in the day, now.”

“I bet.”

“But then when I listened, I could hear just above the music. Some man or woman—hard to tell—was telling people to ‘push

harder' and 'love the burn' and all sorts of stuff."

"You mean like a class?" I asked. "Probably up on the band shell. The Marietta mommas out for an early sweat."

He shrugged and took a deep breath. "I... man, it's so strange talking to somebody. Been a long, long time."

Up top, faintly, I could hear a few of the homeless guys joking around. Raspy, life-long-smoker types of laughs from a world that had long forgotten about me and my new friend.

"I will say, your music today isn't very good," he said. "Lotta scraping and screeching. Your people really listen to that?"

"My people'? What do you mean by that?" I asked with an indignant tone.

"Wha... Did I cause offense? Did not mean to offend."

I shook my head and said, "No, no. Bit of a modern joke, actually. I was... man, take too long to explain. And then it wouldn't be funny anymore."

"Assuming it was funny in the first place."

"Fair point."

"And no matter if it would take 'too long to explain.' All we got is time," he said. "My name is Houser. You are?"



“Painter Mann,” I said and then grinned. “The world’s best private investigator.”

He nodded, unimpressed. Then he fixed me with a strange look. “There are a few words there I am unfamiliar with.”

Often that phrase had preceded my pitch—who I was and what I did. But now, I just wasn’t feeling it. Being trapped in a damp tunnel beneath an Atlanta suburb could have that effect on someone. Instead, I asked about how he’d come to be down there.

He smiled, drawing his wrist across his brow.

I wasn’t sure if that was some sort of answer. The chains at the base of his hands flashed in front of me in an “Oh, how do you think I got down here?” sort of move.

After blowing out a deep breath, he leaned forward, rubbing those big hands together again. There was a tension in his shoulders and arms, and for a moment, he just stared at me with a face I couldn’t read.

“There was a time, when all this here was where we hid out, right? Those who escaped from their masters, looking for a shot to head up north, maybe,” he finally said. “But maybe that was all just some... story that got passed around.”

“By who?”

Houser laughed softly. "I was worth good money back then. Got at least twelve-hundred dollars when I was down in Lou'siana, but I was younger then. See, what they do, sometimes, is they *want* people like me to run away."

I nodded, unsure what to say.

"Even the people who owned ya, just so they could hunt you down again with their dogs and give you a lashing."

"Jesus."

"Nah, nah," Houser said with a frown. "I don't go in for takin' the Lord's name in vain, now. You and me will do right if'in we're clear on that point."

I held up my hands. "I'll watch it. Been a long while since I've been in church."

"Oh, that was salvation, that was," the big man said with a smile that lit up his face. "Because if there's anything a true devil does believe in, even the ones walking around on earth, it's God. Even if they don't always act like it."

I looked him up and down, and something tweaked in my chest. "I can't see how anybody would be devout under the circumstance."

"Oh, churchin' wasn't just about hidin' from the work or the whip," Houser said. "We had music in there that lift ya soul all the way up."

Maybe you don't got a coin for the plate, but you offer up your voice with something from the heart? Give your whole self to a song of heartache and joy, love and regret?" Houser said with a radiant smile.

"Heartache and joy, love and regret," I repeated, liking the cadence of it.

"That'll save ya, right there. *Save you.*"

"Yeah, but is it any good for a spin class?"

He laughed and shook his head. "I'm *spinnin'* a yarn here, now, so don't you go interruptin' with foolishness."

"Got it." I looked at my own hands and reset the scene for him.

"They wanted you to run away, so they could track you down again."

"Yeah, like it was some sort of sport, some foxhunt like they do over in England, from what I hear," he said, then his eyes lost focus for a moment. "That was my target, truth be told. I had heard in England, people treat you with as much respect as they might do a white man. Not sure if that was true... but it was better than what I was looking at."

"How'd you end up down here?"

"Don't jump to the end now." He smiled wide, and for the first time, I realized he was missing a front tooth. "The story's just got started

and, I reckon, won't finish the way you thought."



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ellie closed her eyes and let the cool air pass over her as she rode along in Detective Barnes' car. They were only a few minutes away from the home of the recently deceased Helen Dorsey, so she mulled over what little they had so far.

Hammer kills the gardener. Sewing needles for grandma?

Years ago, back in Cobh, when she was gunning for a Garda detective slot, there had been a very bad summer. Four different killings in as many months.

A baker had been bludgeoned to death with a cast-iron dog figurine that had sat upon his mantel for two decades. A late-night barber had been discovered one morning with a pair of his shears in his throat. A teacher had been killed with a glass ashtray. First knocked out cold, then the shards... Ellie didn't want to think about that.

And a construction boss, who had actually been the third to die. He'd been killed with a new device: a nail gun. Nails to the skull, hands, and feet. The latter had come first, so that meant the victim had suffered immensely. To cap it off: A hacksaw to the genitals,

which were missing. This had set the others apart, something that Ellie the cop had made a point to anyone who listened.

The others were relatively quick kills—or at least in the case of the teacher; she'd been out cold when she was murdered.

Three other police on the force and two big-shot detectives in from the city, nearby Cork, were busy trying to connect the dots between all the killings. Coming up empty, they all waited anxiously, eyeballing the black battered police telephone with its rusty, hammering ring that would announce another body had been found.

But after nearly half a year, nothing.

*Had the killer stopped? Dead? Incarcerated for some other crime?*

Ellie always came back to the foreman. The brutality of it, the way the man had been tortured before finally being given the gift of release.

Eventually, she'd learned about a contractor, a roofer, who'd been fired more than a year earlier. Alex Keen had been quite successful before he got lost at the bottom of a bottle and couldn't crawl out. When he eventually did, he'd burned all of his bridges.

The foreman, a man named Fred Bewley, had given him a shot, despite protestations from the other builders. Keen's previous

departure had been a messy, tirade-filled split, and no one felt like welcoming him back with open arms.

Except for Bewley. He'd brought the man back into the fold again. It'd soon become clear that the foreman wasn't some altruistic employer. He'd been trying to get to Alex Keen's wife, whom he'd had an eye on since their school days. And he'd gotten her, if only for a few weeks. Keen had found out, and when he confronted Bewley, he was fired. He could never look at his wife in the same way.

The construction worker's life had once again fallen apart.

This time, Keen hadn't sought solace from booze but another more intoxicating elixir: revenge. A prime suspect, he buried his crime with the random killings of three others.

Ellie had gotten a tip from, of all people, her ex-cop father. But the revelation had been so strange that she'd never told a living soul about that moment. One that had changed her life.

After that, Ellie pressed and pressed, eventually getting a warrant to search Keen's old home. The discovery was unearthed in the backyard: The construction worker's tool that had brutally fired nails into Fred Bewley's body. And Bewley's tool that had ripped Keen's



life apart, the one that Keen had cut off his body with a hacksaw. The dogs had found both. Buried and burnt.

Alex Keen had been set to be executed in 1965, but the year before, Ireland all but abolished the death penalty. That didn't matter in the end. Keen was murdered in his cell the same year his punishment had been scheduled. The only suspect, the husband of the school teacher who'd been imprisoned after his wife was killed, was never charged.

"Ah, it all gets settled in the end, lass," her supervisor had said to her. "One way or another."

The squeaking of the car's brakes brought her back to the present and, when she opened her eyes, she saw Barnes already sliding his body out of the driver's seat. She followed him up the sidewalk toward the cottage-style home.

"Hiya, Officer," Ellie said with a broad smile. Officer Filoialli shook his head and pushed open the small home's door for her. After passing through, she spun and held out the tiny white bag. "You want a lolly?"

Filoialli's eyes dropped to the offering, and he frowned. "Of course. But my wife says I gotta lose a few pounds."

“Smart man,” the old detective said, stuffing the bag back into her purse. “Always listen to your wife; she knows better.”

The officer looked over his shoulder. “You sure you supposed to be here, Ms. Walsh? Does Detective Ba—”

“Yes, yes, lad. I’m just here to observe and offer the musings of an old lady, if they help.”

Filoialli nodded and retreated to the upper floor of the house.

After slipping on some white paper booties from a box by the door, Ellie took a cursory look at the lower floor of the two-story house. There was a cop in each room, making sure nothing was moved before the crime scene techs got there.

Ellie rubbed a spot on her chest as she looked at the beautifully decorated home. After one circuit—Barnes was interviewing the husband in a cramped living room choked with small figurines—she circled back to the foyer again, her right hand briefly fiddling with her left.

A wooden staircase led upward, and she noticed the door to a cupboard under the rail. She had a flashback to the Morton house and thought, *Did the killer hide in there?* On the opposite wall were tons of pictures, all arranged so tightly that the wallpaper was visible in only one spot.

There, a picture had been removed. Or possibly, it had fallen, its glass shattered and not yet replaced.

When she returned to the living room, she stood just behind Barnes, consoling the man whose wife would never again walk through the front door. Outside, Helen Dorsey still lay where she'd been found, covered in a gray sheet.

"No, not anymore," the husband said, answering Barnes's question. On the ride over, Ellie had learned the man's name was Alfred.

"Retired, then? Both of you?"

"Well, we both retired," the husband said and gave a small, sad smile. "But Helen felt I was getting underfoot at home, so I help out at the community center down the road. A bit of fix up there, whatever they need." He looked up, smiling a little wider. "No ladders though. That was Helen's rule for me, and I agreed. She said we didn't need another invalid living in the house."

"Right," Barnes said, reflecting the smile. "So she was...?"

"Hips didn't work so good," Alfred said. "Although I tell her she still got plenty of wiggle left in them. She was a dancer years ago. Really good too."

Ellie had seen some black-and-white photos of a graceful young woman dressed in a white leotard. Helen the Dancer.

“She got dropped by some clod—oh, I shouldn’t say that; she’d hate me for it—and then her hips never quite, you know, fit right with her body anymore. She got around all right,” he said and nodded out to the foyer. “Stairs were out of the question. That’s why my tools are all up there and she’s got a space out back for gardening stuff.”

Both victims had been gardeners. Was that a connection? Or was it just that they were retired and, it seemed, that was what Americans did when they became pensioners. As their lives wound down, they filled their surroundings with things that grew. Ellie was sure some police shrink would have a theory about extending life or making the dirt pretty before they were put in it.

The Irish detective thought old people just liked to garden. Her thoughts drifted back into the room, where Dorsey was shaking his head.

“No,” the widower said, his voice flat. Barnes had asked some question Ellie had missed. “Everybody was fond of Helen. She was easy to like. A lot of people said that was why she was with me.” He chuckled, a hollow sound. “I can be a cranky bastard, so if it wasn’t for Helen, we’d have no friends.”

Barnes said, "I know it's a hard time, but when you can, we'd love a list of your friends. Maybe they knew something or someone..."

Alfred Dorsey was staring off.

When Ellie finally spoke, she asked a question that didn't land, just flitted over him like a breeze. She tried another tack.

"I like Helen," she said first. "House proud, something you don't see in young people these days. Everything has just its place."

Alfred looked up at that, with a small smile. "This is her house, no question. Like you say, everything has its place. If I even bump one of her snow globes, she gives me the business... fitting it just back into place, right the way it was. She liked it how she liked it."

"I was married once," Ellie said then sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the man, which earned her a raised brow. "He was very particular. Clean lines, not a lot of fuss. The kitchen was my world, though. He knew better than to muck around in there."

"Oh, the kitchen is definitely Helen's. She's a helluva cook," he said then darkened again. "When she wants to be."

Ellie picked up the scent of something in his answer, so she pushed her nose in.

"Use ta be that they taught little girls they needed to be good cooks to be wives," Ellie said. "Now, plenty of men are in the game."

Some of the top chefs in the world, I suppose... or at least the celebrity ones. Maybe because they're more shouty."

Another faraway grin from Alfred. Then silence again.

"I noticed"—Ellie nodded back to the hallway—"that there's a picture missing. In the hallway. Did it fall?"

He looked up like it was hard to move his head. Then he blinked.

"Ah, no. She took that down after that, um, thing," he said, waving his hand. "Gone a whole year but never put anything else up in that spot. A bit like a—I don't know—a shrine without anything in it."

"A shrine?" Detective Barnes asked, trying to keep his voice even. "To what?"

The man's shoulders slumped, and he sat on a footstool just off Ellie's shoulder. She began to wonder if he might eventually just cave in upon himself. She reached forward and put her hand on his knee and gave him a pat. He smiled and nodded.

"That thing at the cook-off, you know," he said and was met with blank stares. "Pretty horrible. Helen had nothing to do with that. They looked into it. But she couldn't shake it. Like maybe, maybe, she had been the one." He looked up, a small fire in his eyes. "But she wasn't. She was cleared by you guys. They came in here for half a day, taking all of her stuff. Tested it and it came back clear."

Ellie smiled. "I am newer to these parts, which is why I've got such a pretty accent. What happened at the cook-off?"

The man was silent, and after a moment, Barnes filled the void. "Your wife was at Five Points?"

Alfred nodded, eyes on the floor.

Barnes turned to Ellie. "There was... They think one of the stalls had served up a bad batch of chili. Turns out—"

"She had nothing to do with that," Dorsey said, turning angry.

Ellie pulled her hand back.

"Didn't matter. Helen tortured herself over it for months. Gave away tons of her pots and pans. Some of that stuff she'd gotten from her grandma!"

Barnes said, almost in a whisper, "An accident, surely. Never did find—"

Dorsey interrupted him, as if he hadn't heard the other man already speaking. "You know Helen wrote to her?"

"Who?" Barnes asked.

The man rolled his eyes. "The mother," he said. "Or, I mean, she woulda been a mother. She wrote a few times. Even tried to call, but the husband just hung up on her. Helen desperately wanted to apologize for something she never did."

“They think one of the stalls handed out samples with a strain of something,” Barnes said to Ellie. “Bacteria of some sort. Made a few people sick.”

Alfred put his hands to his face and wept softly. Through his fingers, he said, “Helen had been so proud of her tiny trophy. Third place. B-B-But after...” he stammered. “She took the photo down. The winner’s circle. It only reminded her of the woman.”

Ellie gasped. “She *died*?”

Barnes shook his head. He mouthed, *The baby*.





## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The ghost of William Morgan watched his daughter being escorted through his home.

"You come into your old man's house after he's dead, and you still just scowl," he muttered, trailing behind Gabrielle and the cop.

"Always scowling. No wonder you scare away all your boyfriends."

His daughter reached for something on the mantel, but the officer, a woman named Monica Glover, gently put her hand on Gabby's.

"No, sorry. Don't touch anything for now," Officer Glover said. "Just... if you see anything out of place or if anything's missing."

The young woman shrugged.

"Shrugging and scowling," William said. "Turns out it didn't matter I was deaf. You never said a goddamn word!"

William followed the two of them through the house. Every few minutes, his daughter would stop and look at something, pondering, then move on.

"Stay out of my bedroom!"

The officer walked next to the bed, but Gabrielle stood at the door, peered in, and shook her head slowly.

The two made a circuit around the living room, dining room, and kitchen—an open-space plan. It took only a moment. William Morgan had lived a decidedly sparse life. There was little to take, because he'd collected very little in his later years.

“No, sorry,” William said in a half growl. “Nothing here for you to sell. Maybe you’ll have to get a real job. How about that?” the ghost said and laughed loudly.

They were heading into the back of the house, toward the garage, when Gabrielle stopped and looked back over her shoulder.

William’s wicked grin fell when he saw her face. Then he hardened again. “Don’t even pretend you’re going to miss me, girl,” he said. “Finally, your old man’s kicked the bucket. You’re free of me!”

But the look on her face... It was something tender and sweet. Those were two words that William Morgan would never have used to describe his daughter. At least, not since she was twelve.

Officer Glover opened the door to a spare bedroom, which had been converted into a storage area that butted up against the back of the home. She flipped a switch in the dark room, and when it lit up, there were boxes floor to ceiling.

On the front of them, the label read “Mr. Golden Sun.” Beneath the words, which arched like the top of a rising sun, was its logo. It was a picture that Gabby herself had drawn when barely a teen—a small glass of ice tea, with wiggly rays coming out of it.

She reached for the box but didn’t touch it, slowly passing her hands over the words.

William wasn’t buying it. “What’s this act? I hope this stupid cop does—”

“He was so proud of his brew,” Gabrielle said, her voice soft but with a raspy edge. “I bet he had half the county addicted to it.”

The ghost twitched his head.

“Nobody could resist my poppy’s tea,” she said, her eyes watering. “It was the best.”

“I’m not much of an ice tea person,” Officer Glover said. “Unless you drop a bit of rum in there.”

“Nah. Nothing you could add would have made it any better,” the girl said. “It was perfect.”

William stumbled back and reached for the wall, but his hand passed right through. He heard a groaning as he tried to regain his footing, his knee hitting the floor, hands splayed out like he might retch.

He then realized there was sobbing—coming from him. On his knees, facing away from the door now, he lifted himself and rolled his hands into fists.

“He worked on it for years,” his daughter said behind him.

William’s mouth fell open, and he slowly closed his eyes.

“Grew herbs in his garden. ‘That’s my secret stash, Gabby. Don’t mess with it!’” She laughed. “Anyone else, you would have thought he’d been growing pot. But it was mint and...” Gabby stopped and smiled, wiping away a tear. “Ah, no. He wouldn’t want me to tell you.”

William noticed he was back on his feet, within arm’s reach of his daughter. He could only stare. Bitter words no longer fell from his lips.

At that moment, he felt as though he’d heard his daughter’s voice for the first time.

Finally, he managed, “Gabby...?”

Gabrielle began telling the officer about the times she’d come over while he was brewing up in the kitchen, sweat pouring down his face, with pots, pans, and boiling concoctions on the stove. But this time, William saw no contempt. He saw no hate, derision, or dismissal.

Instead, what he did see put a broadsword through his heart. On his daughter’s face, on the curl of her lip, the twinkle in her eye as

she talked about her daddy, he saw only love. A girl who loved her daddy.

William fell to his knees and covered his face, weeping.

*All those years.*

*All those years.*

She had still loved him. They'd both worked so hard to convince themselves and each other that was no longer true. But it had been a lie.

After all those years, she still loved him.

All those years, now lost.

Through his sobs, he heard his daughter's sweet voice: "When I missed him, there was a corner store I'd go to."

"Missed him?" Officer Glover asked. "He go out of town a lot?"

The girl laughed. "No, but when he was working..." She motioned to the boxes. "On all of this, he was, you know, gone. Lost in it."

The officer gave a slight chuckle. "Man musta loved his ice tea!"

Gabrielle nodded slowly, smiling sadly. "It was all he had left of Mom."

William snapped his head up and looked at his daughter's face. His heart burst into a million pieces. *How did you know?*

“Even when they were fighting,” Gabby said. “And, *whoo* man, they could fight. They were both stubborn, but then... the tea. After all those harsh words, at some point, she’d pop one of his bottles and pour a glass. I think that was her version of an apology for something she’d said... or forgiving him for something he did. After that, everything was all right again.”

William closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

“So when she died, he made it his life’s work,” she said and put a hand out. “Maybe he thought if he made enough of it, she’d come back one day.”

Again, William collapsed, this time lying on the floor, his chest heaving in broken-hearted sobs.

*All those years. Wasted.*

“When I... when he got busy,” Gabby said, her voice barely a whisper. “I’d go and pick up a few bottles, sip them slowly in my apartment to make it last. We fought, me and Dad. Not like they did, but we had doozies. I suppose some part of me would drink his tea, hoping... I dunno. Me and him would be all right again too.”

It was too much. Too much. William lifted himself to his feet, stumbled, fell onto his side, and slid into the hallway. He tried to

regain his footing and then slid again. This time, he passed through a wall, into the dining area.

The voices of the officer and his daughter, along with the occasional laugh, were now muffled. William just lay on his back, eyes squeezed closed, wishing he could cry real tears.

*All that time. Lost. Lost. Lost.*

“Hey friend, you gonna just lay around all day?”

The old man snapped his eyes open and saw someone standing over him. A hand came out, and he looked at it warily.

“What do you want?” he asked, his voice still shaky. “What are you doing in my house?”

“It ain’t your house anymore, though, is it?”

“It’s still my house!” William shouted and jumped to his feet.

The other ghost raised his hands and waved them downward.

“Settle down, old timer. Everything—”

“Who you calling ‘old timer,’ you prick? You look as old as me.”

Jimmy Withy smiled. “Listen, I’m here to help you. You and me will find out the name of the guy who killed ya, and all of this gets better. All that pain in your heart, that goes. You move on.”

William’s face fell, and he turned toward the wall just as he heard his daughter chuckle again from the other room.



“What if I don’t want to *move on*? Maybe I’m not done here,” he said.

Again, Jimmy raised his hands. “That’s up to you. But at least you’ll have what you need—the name of the guy who did ya—and you can move on when you want to.”

Slowly, William nodded.

“Listen, you and me, we’ll work this out. I’m the best private investigator in the world.”

The declaration turned William’s stomach sour. *Another one?* “You guys have a guild here or something?”

Jimmy frowned, but there was a twinkle in his pupil-less eye. “Whaddya mean?”

William looked back at the wall, where his daughter and the cop stood just beyond. “How do we find out who did this to me?”

“Come with me. I’ll show you.”

The old man stiffened. “Ah, I’d... I want to stay here. Why can’t you go do it?”

The other ghost pointed to the wall. “A minute ago, you were on the floor, blubbering like a baby. All sad and shit because of your daughter or whatever. You don’t want to stay here. Too much pain, man.”

“But,” William said, “I’m not supposed to leave. Painter said—”

“*Painter Mann?*” Jimmy asked, gritting his teeth. “He was here?”

“Yeah, he says I should stay here. That there’s ‘bad spooks’ out there, and I should keep outta sight.”

Jimmy twisted his fingers into balls but then breathed himself calm.

“You don’t wanna trust that guy. He wants you to stick around so he can bring his crew back. Then they take you... Well, you don’t want to be here when they get back.”

William contemplated that a moment then said, “What is it you want me to do?”

“There’s a shop nearby, not far,” Jimmy said, heading back toward the door.

“What the hell we going to do in a shop? You wanna buy some clothes or something?” William stared at the ghost in front of him, who looked like a dockworker from the middle of last century.

When Jimmy turned, his smile was unnerving. His all-white eyes were terrifying. “I just need you to look at something.”

“At what?”

“A picture,” Jimmy said, spreading his arms wide. “Just a picture.”

“And that will help me?”

Jimmy slid over without moving his feet and placed a hand on William's shoulder. The old man winced slightly, and the other man loosened his grip, smiling again.

"There's something in that picture that will solve everything," he said and leaned in close. "Solve all of our problems."

\* \* \*

I made one more circuit up and down the dark tunnel, leaving Houser where he sat before he could get into his life's story. I didn't want to hear stories; I wanted the hell out.

Generally, I wasn't claustrophobic. I might have been when I was alive, but as a ghost, not so much anymore, because there were no tight spaces. Except here.

When I tested out the wall, it felt like a wall, which shouldn't have been a surprise. The ground was solid to us, but this felt *hard*.

A while back, when I was hanging out with this Chicago reporter I knew, we were able to chat while we sat in a busted-out old car. Normally, I would go to sit and go right through. The difference with this car was that it had been a wreck—two kids driving it had died violently in the crash.

Only way I could describe it was that stuff like that left a type of emotional residue for a while. The more violent, the longer it lasts.

That gives stuff grain, making it solid to ghosts.

Don't ask me how it works. I don't know and neither does anyone else in the InBetween. There's no manual for this place. It just, you know, is.

These walls were like that, like they had grain, which made the tunnel feel like a closed fist tightening. Then the smell of the place rose up and started messing with my head. Dirt, water, mold. And worse: shit, piss, blood.

If I could smell it, the odor had to be strong. Overpowering. We don't have noses, but of course, scents are merely data passing from somewhere on the outside to the brain.

The stink in the tunnel had to be a whopper.

"I'm doing this," I muttered to myself. "Freaking myself out. Calm down, man. Calm down..." I took a few deep breaths.

Behind me, I could hear Houser's gurgling chuckle, like he'd just remembered a joke someone had told him the day before, and he was just getting it now. *Laughing and laughing, this guy.*

But, of course, I was the joke.

It should have been dark-side-of-the-moon dark in the place too. But it wasn't. Not lit up like the square above, sure, but I could see the entire tunnel ahead of me. I had never experienced anything like

it. Just when I thought I was getting a handle on the InBetween, there was always something new. Trouble was, usually that new thing was seconds away from fucking me up in some manner or another.

I'd need Houser's help, but I had jumped up before he could "spin his yarn." I turned back, hoping he didn't think I'd insulted him.

Then something drew my attention—the strangest noise, very faint. It was like a rasping, fast-paced, like someone gasping in short, clipped breaths.

I looked up. Above me was another short tunnel, albeit vertical and much skinnier.

On both sides there were thick ropes of root and moss, but nothing I would be able to get a grip on. At the very top, I could see a small patch of grayish white. Concrete.

If I could get up there—and I couldn't—I might be able to pass through whatever that was. I tried to imagine Marietta Square once more. Band shell. Gardens. Big colorful train for kids to sit in. Bike racks. Fountain.

*Ah. The fountain.*

I was looking at the base of it. But there was no way up. I was trapped.

\* \* \*

As Officer Glover was opening the door to her cruiser for Gabrielle Morgan, she saw Detective Barnes and Ellie Walsh coming up the path. The young girl was straining slightly with the weight of a box, which had a sunburst pattern on its side.

Barnes called out, "Hey, Glover, need to get back inside if you've got a moment."

The officer nodded to the woman with her. "I just have to get Ms. Morgan back home. Why don't—"

"It would be great if you can hold that," Ellie said then looked at the dead man's daughter. "Gabrielle, I know it's hard, but can you join us in the house? Just take a mo'."

She put her box in the police car and sighed.

"Nah, no biggie. Whaddya need?"

After the officer fumbled with the keys at the door for a moment, they all piled in.

In the converted storage room, Barnes started flipping open boxes of ice tea, the bottles inside banging against each other, which filled the air with a strident clanking of glass. Gabrielle's eyes were wide, her hands over her ears. The detective grabbed another box then

pulled a Leatherman multitool from his pocket and flipped open a small knife.

“Stop!” Morgan’s daughter shouted again. “Why are you doing this?”

“Hold on, mate,” Ellie said to him. He sighed and put a hand up on the wall, waiting. Then to Gabrielle, she said, “How many times have you been in this room, Gabrielle?”

The woman’s eyes were still unfocused, staring at the open box, as if something sacred had been desecrated.

“Gabby?”

“What?” she asked, her voice a whisper.

Ellie said, “When was the last time you were in here?”

The woman shook her head slowly. “It’s... He used to,” she said and sniffled. “I used to help him bring the boxes to the car, so... but that was years ago now.”

“Does the room look any, um, different to you?”

The girl continued to stare at the opened box.

“Gabrielle, look around the room,” Ellie said, a little louder this time. “Is it different? Smaller?”

“What? What does that mean? No, it looks... like it always did.”

Ellie pointed to the ceiling with a jut of her chin. "When they built this place, the walls went in first, then the ceiling on top, so it's a clean line. Except for up there."

Officer Glover looked up, squinting.

"I noticed it the first time I peeked in here," Ellie said. "Barnsey, let me look around some."

"No," Barnes said. "Never did."

"These other three walls, smooth," Ellie said. "That back wall, you can see it's a bit rougher. A little jagged at the top."

The female cop said, "How can you even see that?"

Barnes chuckled, shaking his head. He muttered, "'See what others don't...'"

"So what if the wall's rougher?" Gabrielle said. "Doesn't give you the right to start tearing open dad's work! This is the very last of it. There'll never be any more made. Ever!"

Officer Glover put her hand on Gabrielle's arm. "You could, you know, carry on your dad's—"

"No, I can't," Morgan's daughter said and pulled away. "I knew parts... but Dad was the only one that knew the whole recipe."

The Irish detective stepped toward her, trying to keep up the questioning line. "That wall was put in later. After the others."



“So what?” Gabrielle asked, nearly shrieking.

“You said before that your father had upped his schedule, every month instead of every other month. But his bank records show he made a hair less money, not more. I think he was making smaller batches of the stuff, more often.”

This time, Glover asked the question. “So, why does that matter?”

Ellie frowned, looked at the ceiling, then ran her eyes down the wall. The boxes were piled six high at the back. As the stacks worked deeper into the room, they were gradually shorter—five high, four high, three high.

“I think,” she said, “that it means that his storage room is now smaller.”

“Smaller?” Gabrielle shook her head. “Why would he do that?”

Ellie smiled.

\* \* \*

In the dark tunnel, I sat back down across from Houser and just waited until he spoke.

He watched me for a minute then said, “You know, there’s good money, I hear, in stealing something that ain’t yours and selling it to someone else who don’t care much about where it came from.”

*Uh huh.*

“Houser, to be honest, that sounds a little like a veiled threat,” I said, looking into the dark void. *Could someone be hiding in here?*

“Nah,” he said and snickered. “This is my story, not yours.”

“But now I’m a part of your story. What part, I don’t know yet.”

He stared at me for a long moment then nodded. “Interesting. You’re smarter than you look.”

“Well, I’d have to be, right?”

Again, he chuckled. For a guy who’d been trapped in a hole for more than a century, he was in pretty good spirits.

He started again, “See, I ran away a few times, and not braggin’ or nothing, but I was pretty wily. Good at getting away. Problem was, I didn’t have no map and wouldn’t do me much good anyhow.” He grinned. “Didn’t have no TomTom back then to get you around.”

“TomTom? I don’t think that’s a thing anymore. Most people can just, you know, use the map software on their phones.”

Houser waved a hand in the air. “Ah, I only get bits and pieces from above. Whatever people might be talking about. So, maybe I’m not so up on the latest.” He drew in a deep breath again and blew it out. “Anyway, so I’d run away, but there wasn’t no wandering around town for people like me. There were freemen about, but depending

on where you were, they could get snatched up right quick like any other.”

“Okay.”

“So, when I was on the run and get, you know, stuck... I’d find someone to sell me to someone new. Maybe someone better than before. ’Cept, it never played out that way. The sellin’ part, yeah, that did but... never did find anyone better.” He turned his head, and I saw a scar that trailed from just in front of his ear and down his neck, then it got lost under his thick, dirty shirt.

“I can’t imagine that, man,” I said and meant it. “Incredibly messed up.”

He started to talk again, then he stiffened, looked around in a panic, and stared upward. My heart went to my throat, and I wondered what could be a threat to either of us *under* the earth.

I started to ask him when he put a finger to his lips, just staring up at the long hole that led to the surface above.

Listening.

Listening.

“What—” I started, then he leapt forward and covered my mouth with his hand.

*Whoosh!*

*The world fell away, exploding into a swirling daemon of blacks, blues, and purples. Then I saw a bright burst of light.*

*A campfire. No, a bonfire.*

*My hands ached. My wrists were on fire. And I was spinning, turning, twisting to the point of nausea. Trying to twist around did nothing, because my body wouldn't respond. I was an observer but feeling every bit of the pain.*

*"Boy, thought we taught you a lesson last time," a high-pitched, angry voice said, cackling. "Guess we didn't lesson you hard enough!"*

*A large hand came out and slapped against my knee, and I started spinning again. I was hanging by my hands from a rope, the dark sky above me, wrists bound. My legs wouldn't move; my left foot was wrapped with a thick leather belt to the top of my right knee, so my leg stuck out like a handle.*

*Glancing down, I saw a post where I could stop the spinning and end the screaming in my hands, if I could just stand on it. But then I noticed the post was sharp at its end, the point sticking up toward me. It was black with dried blood.*

*A flash behind me. A dirty gray wide-brimmed hat. In the man's hand was a long cord. No, not a cord. It was a bull whip. He raised*

*his arm back and—*

*Whoosh!*

“Jesus!” I said, trying to stand, but quickly fell to the floor of the dirty tunnel.

“Shh!” Houser was over me again, panic on his face. He went to grab me, but I quickly skittered back on my legs, out of his reach. He whispered, “I ain’t gonna hurt you now.”

“No, no,” I said quietly, trying to calm the sensation of my heart beating so hard, it made my ears ring. “Please don’t touch me. You *can’t* touch me.”

He nodded, put up his large hands, and again put a finger to his lips.

We sat there for a moment, his eyes never leaving the ground above us. There weren’t many people out, but there was something snarling.

Then I understood and shut the hell up.

We both froze in our places—him, leaning forward slightly, hunched over like a skinny linebacker waiting for the call, and me on the ground, arms pulled in tight and staring at him for any clues to what might happen next.

After a few minutes, his shoulders slackened. He stood up straight and gave me a casual wave. It was over.

When Houser spoke, he sounded a thousand years old. "Wasn't always down here. I got out once. Ran into... something not right. Some kinda haint-beast."

I nodded. "They're called chimeras. At least, that's what we call them," I said. "Don't ever let them touch you."

"That's one of the reasons why I'm staying down here," he said, his voice thick. "You can't imagine... It's like an empty room with no walls, no light, no sound. And it don't never end. I mean proper never end." He looked around the tunnel. "Sometimes, I wonder if this is heaven, this here. You have no idea."

"Oh," I said. "I do."

The large man looked at me and nodded. I hated the look of pity on his face, but this guy knew. Some part of me wondered if that expression hadn't been solely for me.

"You know," he whispered. "When I was a bit lonely, which happens from time to time, I used to sing some old church songs to make myself feel better."

"That work?"

“Those are old slave tunes turned into songs of salvation,” he said and looked up at the damp earth above. “They can make you blue and lift you up all at the same time, but all that emotion was like ringing a dinner bell for those haint-beasts. Those chimeras,” he said. “So I don’t sing anymore.”

I closed my eyes slowly, feeling exhausted.

On the ground, I laid my head back and stared at the roots and clumps of earth just above us. For a moment, I wondered how this tunnel had held up over the years of Georgia rains and floods. But then it just seems some things—living or not—just hang around, almost out of spite.

He gave one final glance upward, as if checking to see whatever it was had left, and then stared at me for a moment.

“You... uh, you had a fit, you did,” Houser said. “Kinda like when a big ol’ spider is walkin’ the room at night and you light a lamp. It stops dead in its tracks. Then starts to tremble. What was that all about?”

“Shit, man,” I said, sitting up and scooting back toward the wall. “We’re in a very spooky, dank tunnel. Don’t start talking about spiders.”

He laughed. “Ah, you one of *them*? Don’t worry none about it. Plenty of big men are scared of spiders.”

“No, no. Not scared. Who said ‘scared’? I just don’t trust ’em.”

Houser nodded slowly then prompted me again: “You still didn’t answer my question. About your fit.”

“Because I don’t have a great answer. Something, ah, happened to me in New Orleans.”

“Been to N’awlins,” he said. “I was in a pen for about three months. Eatin’ tossed-out grub every day, up on the auction block.”

*Jesus shitballs.*

“Listen, I ain’t gonna tell you any of my stories if you’re going to one-up me all the time,” I said, not really feeling what I said but just trying, in my poor way, to rationalize what this guy had been through. “I say, ‘I fell down and got an owie,’ and you say, ‘Yeah, I fell down, and someone set me on fire.’”

“Nobody ever set me on fire.”

“Good. Seriously, glad to hear it.”

“But I did get branded one time,” he said. “Still got it, deep into my haunches.”

That sent a jolt of fury into my heart, but I tried, for now, to hide it. Houser didn’t seem like the kind of guy who was fishing for pity. He



had his story to tell, and now had someone to tell it to. I looked at his blank face, and he lifted his hands, breaking into a gap-toothed smile.

“Naw, naw,” he said. “You tell me your story.” He smiled. “But just know, I got one better. I mean, not *better*, right? But I wanna hear what you got.”

There was a part of me that just wanted to tell him I was sorry. But, again, I don’t think that was the sort of sentiment he wanted to hear from me.

“In New Orleans, I had a case, so—”

“Case? Ah, yeah. The ‘private investigator’ thing you were talking about,” he said and tapped his head with a thick finger. “I listen. Remember everything.”

“Right. Met some real bad types and not just spooks. Or haints, as you call them. There was this one guy, a livie...” I thought for a moment about a man I knew called the Cajun, but then waved him away.

“He still around, that one guy?”

I shook my head, unsure what to say.

“I get it,” Houser said. “A person gotta do what a person gotta do.”

“Right, and sometimes you’ve got to do the right thing at the wrong time,” I said. “Anyway, met a few others who were, well, other. A bit more than just, you know, you and me. Had something extra.”

“Like voodoo.”

I started talking but then stopped, my mouth hanging open. My eyes darted around for a moment, and I suspect that if I could have seen myself, I would have looked like one of those black cat clocks from the thirties, with the eyes that darted left and right.

He said, “When you first fell down here, you said something about voodoo. And now you talking about N’awlins, so...”

“Right, I, uh, yeah. Some of the locals I met called it ‘juju.’”

Houser huffed and laughed. “Now why you call it juju when you’ve got one of the coolest words in the English language right there for your usin’? Voodoo, man. It don’t get any better than that!”

“Right! *Right?*” I said, happy to have found my vernacular soul mate. “So one of them did something to me.”

“Uh oh.”

“Nah, nothing like that. It’s just that when I touch someone, another haint, I get flashes of their life,” I said and looked up, staring at him. “And sometimes their death.”

Something strange passed over his face, but then his hand came up again, and he rubbed it away. “You tryin’ to be spooky,” he said, snickering again. “Lookin’ at me all wild-eyed.”

He said, impersonating me, “I can see their death!”

This time, I laughed. It was something that people who weren’t from the Americas didn’t quite understand. If we like someone, we give them a bit of shit. A little grief. It was a bit of comradery that, when someone took themselves too seriously, their friend helped them step outside themselves to take them back down a peg.

It wasn’t mean. It was the two of you, stepping back together, with a bit of a laugh at your former selves—from ten seconds earlier—and going, “That dude, the one that looks like you? He was so dumb!”

We were just two Americans sharing a somewhat uniquely American trait. It didn’t matter that we’d been born a century and a half apart.

“Anyways, smart guy,” I said and smiled. “Since then, I can’t touch other spooks without this avalanche of light and sound and pain. Joy too. But, yeah, I’m not getting into any fistfights with anyone anytime soon.”

He rubbed his sandpaper hands together, staring down at them, the corners of his mouth tweaking upward slightly.

I waited for the inevitable, but it never came.

But he did not ask me what I saw. What I saw of him. Instead, he nodded to my clothes. “So, why’d you pick that outfit to wear while you eternally walk the earth?”

For a moment, I thought of regaining a bit of my learned role by telling him that no one got to choose what they wear in the InBetween. At first, ghosts looked as they had when they died, like William Morgan with his ax-split skull.

When they finally settled into it, after a while, they would revert back to whatever image they had of themselves. However, some never shed their death mask. That said, I’d met two spooks for whom neither of those states applied.

In New Orleans, there had been a lovely woman named Madame Mini. She could switch up her attire, and did, to match the time of day or occasion. Wardrobe changes, as it were.

Another guy, a friend of mine named Gary, could change all of it. Head to toe. And he usually traipsed around as some variation of a hideous, gooey monster. Weird, too, because he was the sweetest guy I’d ever met.

“You know,” Houser said, breaking the silence. “There’s one fella up there, wandering around these parts. Dunno how long, since I don’t really keep a calendar around.”

“Okay.”

“This guy, though, he’s bad news.”

I knew the guy he was talking about now. My chaser with the crazy white eyes.

Houser said, “You can feel it oozing off of him, even way down here. He got some dark intentions. You can hear it when he talks. And you can feel it. He’s evil.”

*Evil. Yep, that feels right.*

“You said he talked? What did he say?”

My new friend shrugged. “Asking around some. Or just talking to himself. Calling out.”

“Calling out?”

“Yeah, he was searching for someone,” Houser said. “Didn’t make sense what he was saying until you showed up.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he’s been looking for ‘Painter Mann,’ sayin’ you took something from him. That ol’ haint is gunning for you, and I don’t know who he is, but trust me now—you don’t want no part of it.”

Houser looked at me, stone-faced and serious. "You stay away from that man. He will only bring you harm."

It took me weeks to work out what Houser did in a minute. "Maybe I should stick around in your hole here a while longer," I said. "Might make me smarter."

"That'd take more time than either of us got, I reckon," he said and flashed me a smile. "Anyway, this hole ain't really big enough for two people to wander around in. Time you got back topside."

"What?" I asked.

"You said you want to get out, yeah?" he asked. "And I don't have a guest bedroom or nothing."

"Wait," I said and took a step toward him. I nearly reached out but pulled back. "There's a way out?"

He nodded his head toward the end of the tunnel. "Back there, where you just came from. You woulda seen that hole going up. That's how they useta drop us down in here."

"But there's no way to hold on," I said. "I could use a bit of juice to cling on, but I'd weaken so fast, I'd just end up falling down."

"There is a way."

"No, man," I said. "I'm not taking *your* energy to get out of here. You'd be down here damn near in a coma for weeks, maybe months,

waiting for it to trickle back in.”

He shrugged. “I ain’t got nothing but time, man.”

Again, I shook my head. “I may be a screwup, but I couldn’t live with myself.”

Houser took a step back, slumped down onto the wall, and put his face in his hands. I just stood there, unsure what to say, worried I’d upset him. Eventually, he lifted his head again.

“Never had nobody give a damn about me for a long, long time.”

“Oh jeez, man,” I said, staring down at my feet. I fought the urge to say “I’m sorry,” because it somehow felt less like an apology and more like an insult.

After another moment, he drew his arm up and pointed down into the dark tunnel. “There are some chains hanging down. You gotta look for them, because after all this time, they sorta blend into the scenery. Look like tree roots, they do now.”

I had seen moss and dirt and roots. I’d been staring right at them but failed to see.

“Wait, though,” I said, my mouth moving faster than my brain. “My hands will go right through them, man. If they’re solid, then...”

*Aw, shit-fuck-damn.* Like that car seat I once shared with the Chicago reporter, where two teens had died screaming, those bonds

would have grain.

He saw the thoughts that played over my face then only nodded.

“They’ll hold,” he said. “Just take care going up.”





## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Listen, Gabby,” Ellie Walsh said softly. “This will only take a moment, and we promise not to hurt any more boxes.” She looked at Barnes leaning patiently against the wall of William Morgan’s makeshift storage room.

When the young woman began to protest, Ellie patted her arm and held her hand.

Barnes worked his way down the rows, right to left. When he got to the end, he turned and looked at Ellie with a huge grin. “This one is empty,” he said and lifted it, balancing it on one hand. “Sealed, but nothing inside.”

He removed two more columns of boxes, all empty, and when he got to the last stack, he pushed the top one aside. Hidden behind it was a small door in the wall.

After removing the remaining empties, he looped his finger into a small latch and pulled it open. Pressing his head inside the cubbyhole, he squinted. “Can’t see nothing.”

“Move outta the way,” Ellie said, shoving her tiny frame past him, the light on her mobile phone cutting swaths of the dark in front of her. “There we go.”

In the hidden space, there were more boxes with the sunburst and bottle logo. In black marker, dates had been written across each.

Or more specifically: years.

Ellie stepped into the tall, thin room and cast her phone's light over them, running her fingers up and down their sides.

Barnes heard a few clicks, then poked his head through the hole. "Whatcha got, Ellie?"

She spun around and slapped her hand against one of the boxes. "This one's the most recent. Grab it and pull it out."

"What's in there?"

Ellie frowned. "His diaries, of course."

Barnes pulled his head out for a moment and then peeked in again. "Why the hell would he hide them?"

She shuffled back out of the hidden room, saying, "If every conversation you'd ever had was written down, no matter how mundane, would you want anyone else reading them?"

A moment later, Barnes squeezed in and stood his full height, shining Ellie's light at the tall stack of books.

He reached forward and nodded slowly.

"These newer ones," he called out, "have more years written on them. Took longer to fill 'em up, I suppose." He said quieter, almost

to himself, "He didn't talk to so many people anymore."

Over the next few minutes, Barnes moved in and out of the hidden cubbyhole, pulling out three of the boxes. The third looked a little different than the first two. William Morgan's daughter, whose eyes had settled into a damp redness, no more tears left, nodded toward it.

"That's the older design," she said. "Few years back now."

Ellie looked over the boxes, scanning the writing on the sides. She tapped one of them with the toe of her black shoe. "This one," she said. "Officer, please hand me anything from this year."

"That's got to get documented for evidence," the cop said, her hands clasped behind her back. It seemed she didn't care to be told what to do by a civilian.

Barnes stepped toward the box, sighed, and went down onto one knee.

"There's not that much to go through," he said, slipping on a pair of latex gloves. He hadn't seen her do it, but Ellie already had her pink ones on. "We'll do it right here, and when we're done, you can take these back to evidence."

Glover glanced toward the small door. "We should have the techs get in here first."

“Suit yourself,” Ellie said. “I took a few pictures before I disturbed the boxes. I’ll forward those to you.”

“We’ve got pros that do that, ma’am.”

The Irish woman chuckled. “I’ve been doing crime scene snaps back before we used cameras. Had to paint ‘em by hand.” She looked up at the officer. “Always found rose madder to be best for the blood.”

Officer Glover’s mouth twitched. “They stopped using rose madder for dye two centuries ago.”

Ellie raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’ve been at this a long time.”

Casting a sideways glance at Barnes, Glover put her hand on Gabrielle’s elbow. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

\* \* \*

I didn’t know if I’d been in the long, dank tunnel for hours or days, but now I was buzzing at the thought of finally getting out. I stepped closer to Houser.

“Come with me, man,” I said. “You’ve been down in this hole long enough. Why don’t you come up into the light? Hell, maybe I can find out who murdered you and set you free of this place.”

He shook his head, slowly. “I know who murdered me. And I’m staying right here in this hole. Until...”

I waited, but he didn't finish. "Until what?"

"Until it's over, Painter," he said then closed his eyes. "You know, there's stuff up there worse than your chimeras."

"Worse? Worse than some creature that drags your soul into a lightless void of time and space for all eternity?"

"I have stared the devil in the face," Houser said, rubbing his mouth. "And she has stared back at me." He'd given me hints about his past—a life I couldn't fathom. But this felt different. "You see my mother, she was a hard woman. Real hard."

"You know, they say it's the toughest job in the world," I said, "having a mother."

Houser looked at me and chuckled. "Except, the last time I seen her, it wasn't really her. I'm familiar with some of the old ways, so this was different. You know Santeria?"

"Is that like a Spanish Kris Kringle?"

This time, he didn't laugh. "I know you don't got a lotta church up in ya, but I do. And some time back, it all got mixed around. Jesus and Mary—I liked those parts—but also animal sacrifices.

Possession and spells. Some fine people practice Santeria, for sure. But power like that in the wrong hands, well, makes things all wrong."

“What did you see?”

The man locked his eyes on me, unblinking. “She looked like Momma, but this wasn’t her. The person I saw, if it was a person, this was someone who hated the world and everybody in it. Wanted all of them...”

“Gone?”

He nodded, and I knew what he was talking about. “You met Voodoo Cher,” I said and sighed. “And you’re not wrong. She created this world, the InBetween, and my job now is to, um, uncreate it. Destroy it.”

For a minute, we sat there in silence. Without meeting my eyes, he said, “Then you better get a move on. You got important work to do, Painter Mann.”

“I’ll come back, Houser,” I said.

“I know you will. I’ll be here.”

With that, I turned and walked deeper into the tunnel. He called out to me as I walked.

“You won’t be able to go through the fountain,” he shouted.

“Why not?” I called back.

“Same reason that you can hold on to them chains, man,” the man said. “All that violence, all that pain. And death.”

*Jesus.*

All anyone saw was a beautiful park—trees, paths, and a fountain with a stone angel shooting water out of its hands. But they couldn't see the past.

Who might have, a century earlier, been swinging from one of those trees, lifeless?

Who might have begged for mercy in that fountain on a moonless night?

Who might have carved an angel from stone to remember them?

I let Houser's voice echo in my head, swearing to myself I wouldn't take things on face value as much as I had been.

When I reached the end of the tunnel, where greasy black vines and roots spurted from the earthen wall like long, dead fingers, I forced myself to look up. In the darkness that still had light, I stared at the clumps of damp mud and thick roots.

The hole above me was probably twenty feet long, maybe less. And as I squinted—as if that would help—to look, I finally picked out all the chains leading upward—two sets on the far wall, two sets on the other. Manacles capped the end of each chain, a couple of them broken.



I ginned up as much courage as I could and reached for the lowest one, but it was just beyond my reach. My fingertips nearly brushed the bottom. As I did, I could feel the hum of energy within.

*All that violence. All that pain. And death.*

I thought about calling down and asking for a boost, but I pushed that idea away as fast as it had come. Leave the man to his own horrors. This was my task and mine alone.

After a quick rec of the area, I didn't see anything I could stand on. And, of course, if there were some chair, stool, or old box, my foot would pass right through. The walls, though, were solid to me.

I had faint memories of when I was alive, but it was all whispers. I couldn't even recall my own face. One day, I'd asked Gary how old I looked.

"I'd say maybe thirty-three?" he had said.

"It's not a quiz, man," I'd said. "I'm asking if by looking at me you can tell."

"Ah, okay," he said. "Good, because I'm not good at quizzes. Make me nervous."

That had been funny from a guy who'd recently morphed into a three-headed monster, replete with fur, scales, and sharp claws from four different arms. *He* was nervous.

“So?” I prompted again.

“Okay, so definitely mid-thirties,” he said.

“Great. Okay, that’s something.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Could be forty, you know. If you’d taken care of yourself really well.”

“Right.”

“Maybe forty-five?”

Gary had been little help. He was a good man—or monster or whatever—but I didn’t think he was all there. Probably had something to do with him telling me he’d been schizophrenic when he was alive. That trait, I could only assume, have given him the odd power to transform into whatever he wanted in the InBetween.

Whatever age I was, I did have a faint memory of Jackie Chan. Or maybe I’d caught one of his movies after I died.

Ghosts watched a lot of movies. We had time to kill. So if a livie got a feeling someone was there, right next to them at the cineplex... there was a good chance there was.

I had a memory of Jackie climbing a tall fence. He ran nimbly, put a foot on an adjacent wall, pushed up, and grabbed the top lip of the

fence. He'd made it look so easy. So that was my horrible plan: run toward the wall, put a foot on it, push up, and grab that first chain.

I psyched myself up, taking deep breaths that had no air. Then I walked a few paces in reverse, my eyes trained on the wall. I looked up to the hole above me, saw the spot I was aiming for, then pumped my legs as fast as I could. I hitched my foot on the wall and collapsed forward, smashing my knee into my chin, which sent stars twinkling into my brain. Then I fell to the earth.

*Goddamn Jackie Chan. Probably had a stunt double.*

In the middle of chastising myself, like before, I heard a very, very light scratching above me. *Maybe a tree outside, rubbing up against the fountain? Or something else?*

After forcing myself to my feet, I again took another few paces back, the cheerleader in my brain going, "You can do it! You can do it!"

Five seconds later, I was lying flat on my back and staring at the chains hanging there ungrabbed.

*Screw this.*

I started walking back toward Houser, my hands twisted into fists, and if my feet could make thumping sounds, he would have heard me coming from thirty feet away.

Houser was sitting again, one leg up on the wall, staring at his fingertips. When he saw me, a small smile came across his face, but he said nothing. He probably knew I would come crawling back, asking for a lift.

When I passed by him, all he did was give me that low chuckle of his.

I called back over my shoulder, “You’re going to want to keep back at the wall as much as you can.”

“Why’s that?”

I shouted, disappearing into the darkness of the other side of the tunnel, “It’s safer.”

Finally, I got to the far end, met by the same sight as the other side—clumps of dirt, vines, and roots, and even a few small shreds of clothing. A glance up confirmed what I already knew. No hole on this end.

I guessed it was sixty or seventy feet from end to end. Plenty of room for me to get up a good head of steam. That was what I could do, and as far as I knew, no one else in the InBetween could.

One of the few things I knew of my past was that I’d been a hockey player. Back when I was a kid, at least. For whatever reason, that ability had come with me, and I could skate here in the afterlife.

I didn't know how it worked but didn't want to think too much about it because then maybe it wouldn't.

I started pumping my legs, making cutting motions with my feet as I ran, and a moment later, I was up and skating. In my head, I could even hear the *shuk-shuk-shuk* of the blades.

Faster.

Faster.

I took the slight bend in the tunnel, rocketing by Houser.

"Look at 'im go!"

The second half of the trip took only a fraction of the first. When I saw the wall, I gritted my teeth, trying not to close my eyes. I lifted myself parallel with the ground, knees bent, and I hit the wall.

A fraction of a second before I hit, I kicked my legs out. My vision filled with nothing but black, but I could feel myself sail through the air, just briefly, and threw my hands up, scrabbling for any hold I could get.

"Ow, shit!"

The small of my back registered contact, but, of course, there wasn't any real pain associated with it. That was my mind assigning some memory of pain to the blow.

Looking down, I could see the tunnel floor below. Looking up, I had one handful of dirt wall, shaking, and the other hand clasped around a length of chain.

“All right!”

But even just hanging there, I could feel myself weakening. It was taking some of my energy to hold on. Not much, but enough that I could feel the drain. I had to move, upward, upward.

Lifting was simple enough—I was a ghost. I didn’t weigh anything. But I was affected by gravity, so there was a pull. *Got it!* And with each yank upward, hand over hand, I could feel the juice in me dropping lower and lower.

A reach to the other wall of the whole, the next chain. I put my foot forward, using the sod and root as a brace, and grabbed the second chain. I pulled myself forward, but without the foothold now, I dropped.

I had both hands on chain two, though. I scrunched myself up, knees pressed against the dirt wall, and I looked back over my shoulder. I reached for the third chain with my right hand, but it was just a palm length too far. I would have to jump and grab again.

The sound I’d heard above earlier got louder.

That scratching noise. It sounded like... shit, I didn't know what it sounded like. But whatever it was, something was up there. Unless, again, this was all in my head.

After one last look at chain three, my hand outstretched, I pushed off and started falling.

"No!"

My back smashed against the side of the vertical wall, my head swimming. But when I looked up, my right hand was locked onto the chain. The broken manacle slowly, softly banged against my wrist.

My energy was draining faster now. I had to keep moving. One more chain.

I would have to leap higher this time. The thought of it made my head swim. Or that might have been the juice ebbing from my body. My arms were trembling slightly, then not so slightly.

Again, above me, was the scratching, louder this time. *Is that my mind screwing with me? Or is there some creature above waiting?*

No time to think, I pulled myself up, this time facing chain four. The heels of my feet were inching me higher up the wall. The thought of putting the effort into leaping again made me wearier. I wasn't sure if I had the strength to get to the next hold point.

So my plan was to get as high as I could and then basically fall forward, with whatever push I could give it, and try to grab the last chain.

*Scritch, scritch, scritch!*

“No, no!” I muttered. *Ignore that. Focus now on getting to the last chain.*

Then, in one quick move, with blacks and purples dotting my eyes as I was now half drained of energy, I lifted and pushed forward, kicking feebly with my heels.

I’d missed.

My fingers grabbed at the earthen wall, and in my mind, I could feel them raking down the side of the dirt, leaving desperate claw marks as I did. I held on, and a hum began to rise up in my head. Weakened, inevitably, I would soon fall to the floor below.

Then I felt it. My fingers had caught something. I looked up and saw grayish white, like a stone but with strange striations. Whatever it was, it was a hold. Pulling hard, I lifted myself until I could grab the chain.

*There!*

My left hand now gripping as tightly as I could, I again pulled myself upward. When I passed the area where my hand had caught,



I saw what I'd been holding on to.

It wasn't rock, root, or chain. It was bone. Human bone.

Finally, I was at the top, within reach of the dirty white underside of the fountain. But my head was spinning now, like a motor on fumes. My energy was dangerously low, but I held on with my left hand, banging my hand into the fountain's bottom, seeking some way out.

Houser had been right. It was solid to us. *There must be a way around.*

But as I tried to scoop out the edges around the lip above me, nothing moved. If I'd had just a little more juice, maybe I could have moved the mud away, but I was helpless. In a few seconds, I would have nothing left and fall.

*Scratch, scratch, scratch!*

My heart seized. My face was inches away from whatever was up there, something clawing toward me from the ground above. My thoughts went back to the chimeras and the hell that they brought with a single touch.

This was it. I'd failed. And if I hung on any longer—not that I really could—the chimera up top would drag me into the All Time. I would

rather lay on the tunnel floor for months or years than be taken back to that hell.

Searching below for a spot to land as best I could, my eyes blurring and no longer focusing, I began to loosen my grip on the chain. Defeated.

That was when the tiniest beam of light blinked into the tunnel. The thin line grew larger, wider.

*Scritch, scritch, scritch!*

It had found the edge of the fountain base and was breaking through to get me. Jumping away was the only—

Then I saw the beast push its face into the gap, staring at me with its gleaming eyes. The pointy teeth. The whiskers.

I blinked, barely able to focus anymore, but then, despite being drained, I nearly laughed.

I said, “Hello, Ferris.”



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Thanks, Ferris,” I said to the cat as it licked a paw and rubbed it across the good ear. An odd move for a ghost cat without a real body, but he was just doing what he’d done when alive, maybe as some sort of comfort.

I did that all the time—taking “deep breaths” to calm myself or “rubbing my eyes” with a thumb and forefinger when I felt tired. Of course, I didn’t have lungs to breathe or eyes to rub. And tired? Well, despite never sleeping and never feeling the need, strangely, I always felt exhausted.

I’d learned recently that the InBetween had been created for one purpose: revenge. A woman named Voodoo Cher was attacked and as she died had used her extraordinary abilities to create this ethereal way station, so that she might exact vengeance upon... whom, I didn’t know. Everyone it would seem.

The upshot was that other murder victims were also caught up in here. I had sworn to help them move on by revealing their killers to the living world. I’d always thought they cleared out because it restored some sort of a balance but, I suppose, exposing a murderer was in itself a form of vengeance.

My eyes cut from bush to tree to band shell to that spinning circle thing that kids get on and go round and round until someone barfs. No sign of my chaser. No sign of any of the chimeras.

Ferris was now working his other ear, tiny pink tongue sliding over a curled paw that would travel to an ear, wipe, wipe, then return for another round of licking.

In the center of Marietta Square was the huge cement fountain, solid stone in both worlds. I could only imagine the horrors staged in those peaceful waters, among the pennies, quarters, and wishes that had never come true.

This realm of the dead did not come with a rule book. And, like life itself, the rules changed subtly all the time without warning.

Dawn was winking in the east, splitting the horizon like a weeping wound.

"It not safe to hang around here, cat," I said, finally looking back at my newly inherited charge. "I'm going to go find a friend, if you wanna tag along."

Done with his bath, Ferris swiveled his head casually to the left, as if to say anything over there—a leaf, a rock, or a discarded candy wrapper—would be more interesting than anything I had to say.

*Cats.* Dead cats were even worse.

I wanted to get back to see how Ellie and Barnes were doing on the case, but Houser had spooked me. I was again feeling like I just didn't know shit, so what I needed was a little clarity. It was time for a trip to the top of Stone Mountain to talk with a friend.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The smartest, and maybe oldest, person I knew in the InBetween was someone called the Professor.

In death, she'd chosen a solitary life. She was always up there, always watching, always listening. It did give me pause sometimes. The Professor knew the InBetween better than anyone, at least to my knowledge, and she chose to hide out at the top of a mountain. Alone.

Sure, she would never say she was "hiding out"—and I would never tell her that was how I perceived it—but if she was up there and away from everyone, maybe that was the best option for anyone stuck in our realm.

When I slid up and over the lip of the rock they called a mountain, there she was, staring right at me. Sitting as she always did, cross-legged, right in the middle of Stone Mountain's flat top.

"Painter," she said and nodded. "Been a long while since you paid me a visit. Thought you might have flitted away, moved on."

"Still, you don't seem surprised to see me."

She nodded over to the north, eyes still on me. "You move through this place like a Mack truck sometimes. Hard to miss you."



Also”—she cast her eyes back over—“you’ve brought a friend.”

I tensed, but then I looked in the direction she’d indicated.

Scanning, I couldn’t see—

“Tree line.” She sighed.

It took me half a minute until I saw it. A chimera. Not exactly pursuing me, it was at the very spot where I’d exited the surrounding forest.

“Goddamn, why are they still here?”

She chuckled. “You don’t really understand the idea of All Time, do you?”

“Well, they said I could have either beauty or brains,” I said and smiled. “Ain’t I pretty?”

Some weeks earlier, I’d come across a guy in New Orleans who dabbled in voodoo. The chimeras were his abominations—one head was the Cajun’s, the other some hapless ghost he’d enslaved. To carry out his plans, he’d cursed them with eternity: the All Time.

That place was a hell I’d once been thrown into, and I would rather die a thousand times than return to it. Still, it made no sense to me that once he was gone, the creatures somehow remained.

“They are like the dead stars in the sky,” she said, looking up to the deep blue sky. “They are gone, yet we still see their light.”

“So totally harmless, right?” I sat down across from her, mirroring her sitting position.

She cocked an eyebrow. “You know that’s not true.”

Down below us in Stone Mountain Park, a cover band was butchering an old Charlie Daniels song. The name of it escaped me.

Ferris hopped down off my shoulders, took a few strides, and licked his paws again, as if touching me made him dirty.

The Professor smiled. “How’s life as a parent?”

“God, don’t say that. I’m just keeping an eye on him until I can find Madame Mini again.”

She nodded. “So *you* are taking care of *him*?” she asked, and I wondered briefly if she somehow knew the cat had helped me escape the tunnel.

I shrugged and waited.

“You’re in trouble again.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Because you always come when you’re in trouble,” she said.

“What’s happened?”

I frowned. “You don’t ever sound like you’ve got a very high opinion of me.”

“I do,” she said. “You have a noble goal. If likely unattainable.”

I bent my frown up into a smile. “Which one?”

The Professor spun slowly in a circle. It seemed casual, but I knew from experience, she was simply checking the perimeter. As she did, I wondered, *What is she looking for all the time?*

“Well, they’re one in the same, aren’t they?” she finally said. “The first time we met, you said you were looking to ‘do good,’ because, for whatever reason, this was the task you’d assigned yourself. Probably afraid of hell or something.”

“Is that a thing?”

She said nothing, which was the answer I would expect from a guru.

“Man,” I said and exhaled. “I can’t even remember the first time we met. How long ago was that?”

“Not so long. Now, the last time you came by, you said you were going to destroy this place. Take this entire realm and fold it back into space-time or something or other.”

“You know as well as I do, the InBetween is not supposed to be here, so yeah, I’m going to make it, um, not here.”

She was now facing me again. “Eloquent as always. But, of course, the two goals are the same. You plan on doing good by destroying this shadow world.”

“Voodoo Cher created this through sheer will so that she could get revenge. It’s an affront.”

“To whom? God?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know if I believe in that guy. But, no question, I have seen the evil of this place.”

“Ah, so you do believe in the devil?”

“Not sure about that one either.”

The Professor grinned darkly. “Well, she believes in you.”

For a moment, I stared at her, my mouth hanging open. “Why do you say spooky shit like that? That’s horrifying.”

“I’m a guru on a mountain. I’m supposed to say horrifying things.”

“You could pepper that with some stuff about flowers and rainbows or whatever!”

This time, she shrugged. “Rainbows come after the storm. Do you think that is you, Painter Mann? Are you the coming storm?”

“I dunno. I don’t think I’ve got full storm qualities. More like partly cloudy with a thirty percent chance of rain.”

Straightening her back, hands on her knees, she took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, she nodded to me once. My cue.

“There’s some spook after me.”

“Always.”

“Right, whatever. But everything tells me that he’s real trouble.”

“How do you know him?”

“That’s the thing: I don’t. At least, I don’t think so,” I said and sighed. “He’s even going around pretending to be a private investigator. My gig!”

She frowned. “To what end? To annoy you, draw you out?”

I shook my head. “I think it’s more than that. And before you ask—no, I don’t know what it is. I do have a name, though.”

Her brow furrowed. “Oh? Then you have a good chance of eliminating him as a threat.”

“No, just the first. Jimmy. Not enough to look into who might have killed him, give that to one of my Temps, and *fwoop!* Send him on his way.”

Closing her eyes again, she nodded slowly, as if bobbing her chin to a song in her head. It wouldn’t be to the guy now destroying CCR below us, because that was terrible.

“For those determined to stay here, our names are our biggest weakness.”

“Is that why you go by ‘The Professor’? Instead of...” I said and gave her a smile.

“Jane,” she said with a flat expression. When my eyes widened, she gave me a wicked grin. “Or Janet. Or maybe Jill.”

“Whatever,” I said and chuckled.

“Don’t laugh,” she said and wagged a finger. “I could be up here Jilling all day.”

Ferris, sitting just a few feet away, perked up his ears like he’d just heard a flock of birds.

As a reflex, my hands went out to steady myself, slapping against the rock. “Uh, don’t—wow. Just don’t ever say that again, ’kay? It means something else entirely.”

She frowned. “What?”

I changed the subject. “So if I find out this guy’s name and do some poking around, I could have enough to get him outta my hair. He’s off to the Next.”

“But you don’t yet have his name,” she said. “Does he know yours, Painter Mann?”

“Yes.”

She looked off to the west. “Do you know what he wants?”

“No.”

“Then you have nothing.”

“Why do you think I’m here?” I said, my hands starting to buzz as I raised my voice. “I don’t know who the fuck he is, what the fuck he wants, but I do know he scares the hell out of me, and he’s after me, for chrissakes, and if I don’t—”

The Professor made a soft shushing sound, and at first, I thought it was just to settle me down. However, when I traced her vision, I saw that her eyes had gone back to the tree line. Looking down, there were two chimeras this time, swirling around each other, snapping and snarling.

I’d drawn them closer after they’d caught scent of their favorite prey—despair and fear. Yelling like a toddler smashing a broken toy hadn’t helped much either. Calming myself, I breathed through it, and after a minute of it, I nodded and rolled my eyes slightly. That had been stupid; I knew better. “When will they be, you know, gone?” Then, I held up my hand. “Never mind. The All Time, I got it.”

She smiled and shook her head. “You’ve glimpsed at infinity, something your mind was never meant to see. That would... change you in some way. Your perception.”

I nodded slowly with a solid plan to dismiss the statement as more guru speak. There were more important things to deal with. But then

I lifted my head and met her eyes. “Wait? You mean how I can see the past, the death, and lives of people I touch?”

Another shrug. I hated when she fell into shrug mode, because it made me feel like I was stupid. Rather, more stupid.

“It would be like...” she said, sighing, staring off toward the west. “Like a dog suddenly realizing how cars worked. Might stop chasing them, sure, but that knowledge, that bit of forbidden insight would be like a drop of red ink in a white paint pot. It would grow, seep into what was known—the white—and make it different. Unique.”

“Pink? So my brain’s turned pink?”

“You don’t have a body and thus don’t have a brain.”

“Oh, *now* you get literal. Meanwhile, your dog is pissed because he can’t drive a stick.”

The Professor laughed, and a moment later, I joined her.

“Jesus, you have such terrible analogies.”

“Never my strong suit,” she said then waved her hand. “Go. You’ve got work to do, Painter Mann.”

I winced. “I don’t like when you say my full name. It’s like my mother yelling at me for leaving sandwich crumbs on the counter.”

“And I have bad analogies?” she asked, still chuckling. “Go. Leave me, so that I can meditate. There is trouble brewing. More than you



can imagine. But you need to do your part—stop this man. It's more treacherous than you know."

"It usually is," I said, standing, imagining my knees cracking as I did. The cat wound around my leg for a moment then climbed up my back. "But I do know how dangerous he is to this world. Both the living and the dead."

\* \* \*

She watched as Painter left, and a sadness gripped her heart. Again, she looked down at the two chimeras swirling at the tree line.

The Professor muttered to herself, "I mean, to *you*, Painter Mann."



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

By the time I got back to Ellie Walsh's house, it was dark. The trip to Stone Mountain had trickled back some of the energy I'd lost climbing from the tunnel. I'd picked up more on my return trip after taking an admittedly circuitous route.

Like I'd heard, the Grand Canyon was indeed lovely at sunset.

I crept through the living room until I felt something nuzzling my foot.

"Hey, Ferris," I said. "You going to hang with me for a while, then?"

The ghost cat with the half ear looked at me with his amber eyes. After a few moments, he padded away toward the door.

"Where the hell you going?"

With a quick swish of the tail, straight up in the air—there was no question what that gesture meant—Ferris slipped out of the house.

"I shoulda gotten a dog."

Ellie was walking toward the same spot I'd seen her sit earlier, dropping into the chair like she hadn't slept much in her seventy-four years. Barnes came in after, carrying a small white jar with a fancy porcelain spoon sticking out of it.

“What is it with Brits and tea?” he asked as he yanked out a chair and put down the sugar bowl. He sat, staring out the window. “At least you’ve got a nice view.”

“Tea’s good for the soul,” Ellie said, pouring each of them a cup. “And I’m not a Brit, for chrissake. I’m Irish, eejit.”

Barnes smiled and imitated her: “I’m Irish, eejit.” He laughed.

A moment later, they both got quiet, gazing into their respective cups. The Atlanta detective stirred in four spoonfuls of sugar, swirling the mixture together.

“You should have a bit of tea with your sugar,” Ellie said, nodding with her chin.

But now Barnes’s smile was gone. “So now there’s a third.”

I thought, *Third?*

Ellie winced as she sipped her tea and eyeballed the sugar.

“Technically, it’s the first. Ray Scones appears to have been the first killing,” she said. “Only found out about him when his wife returned from her holiday.”

“Maybe she’s involved?”

“The wife?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t annoy me,” Ellie said. “Did your officers get through the rest of the old man’s notebooks?”

“Almost. Filoiali says he’s got to take breaks every now and then, go for a walk down by the lake to clear his head. He’s a quiet, sensitive guy.”

Ellie smiled. “It can’t be easy sifting through a man’s entire life. I suspect they’ve come across moments to break your heart.”

Barnes shook his head slowly, looking out the window. “Could you imagine if every private conversation you ever had, everything you’ve ever said to someone, was laid out for total strangers to read?”

“Well, if those were laying around, I’d do something extreme. Like build a false wall and hide them in my home.”

A nod. “He was a cranky bastard. Joe says—”

“Joe?”

“Officer Filoiali.”

“Ah,” Ellie said. “I didn’t even know he had a first name.”

“You thought he was called Officer?”

A shrug. “Who knows? Maybe he grew into it.”

“Anyway,” Barnes said. “Joseph says the books go back decades, which we knew. But nothing in those early days really stood out.

Arguments with his wife, his daughter.”

“About what?” Ellie asked, leaning forward.

“Usual stuff. Nothing really stands out. And William Morgan got darker as the years went on. You could literally see it on the page, because when he was angry—and he got angry a lot in his later years—he’d dig the pen deeper into the paper.”

Ellie nodded, stirring the tea with her spoon. “And any thoughts on the entry from March twenty-seventh? That name mean anything to you?”

Barnes read it aloud.

\* \* \*

27 - 3

*What do you want?*

*Sorry, just got back into town and I’m lo (a squiggly line of ink strikes horizontally across the page)*

*Who are you? Do I KNOW YOU?*

*No but I think you know a friend of mine. If you’ve got a moment. Don’t. Come on pal, it would only take a second. If you would (another line cuts across the page)*

*Wasting my time. Get off my porch!*

*I want to show you a photo, my friend migh*  
*You've got ten seconds, then I'm calling the police!*  
*Wai (several lines, deep cuts in the paper, then:) Have you ever*  
*heard the name Painter Mann?*

\* \* \*

"Not anyone we're familiar with," Barnes asked, looking at his own notebook.

Ellie scowled but with a slight curl in her lip. "That name sounds made up."

"Maybe, but when I was asking around, one of the officers said it rang a bell. We did a quick Google, and sure enough, about a month ago, there was a bit of a kerfuffle in New Orleans involving a supposed someone named Painter Mann."

"Don't say 'kerfuffle,'" Ellie said. "Makes you sound silly. And what do you mean by 'supposed someone'?"

Barnes chuckled. "He's supposed to be, um, a ghost. Not like he's 'hard to find.' I mean an actual ghost."

"Rubbish."

A shrug. "This guy at William Morgan's door was possibly some amateur ghost hunter, or maybe one of this team of Wranglers that were searching for him. TV show."

“Bollocks,” Ellie said, pulling her lip. She stared out her window.

Her cop friend watched her for a moment then nodded slowly.

“But...?”

“What?”

“You’ve got a ‘but’ face,” Barnes said and smiled.

“What are ya? Twelve?” Ellie stood up and walked into the kitchen. When she returned, she had a small white plate with four rectangular cookies. “Have a biscuit.”

“Biscuit?”

“Cookie, then,” she said.

He grabbed one and then simply waited until she spoke again.

“The photo bit stands out a little, yeah?”

Through bits of crumble, Barnes asked, “Whaddya mean?”

“Well.” She blew out a long sigh. “Grasping at straws, yeah, but this fella at the door, he’s asking about some photo. And there was a photo missing from Helen Dorsey’s wall.”

“The one from the cook-off,” he said. “When the baby died.”

She sat back down, pushing the plate of treats closer to Barnes.

“What if it’s the same photo?”

Barnes frowned. “Dorsey’s husband said she took it down, didn’t want to think about it anymore after... you know. Not sure how it



could possibly be connected to Morgan's visitor. Coincidence."

Ellie shook her head. "I don't like that word: *coincidence*."

"Why?"

"Because it means two things just happened, can't be connected, so don't bother looking into it. That's no way to carry out an investigation," she said, then she finally succumbed to the temptation and nabbed a cookie for herself. "Three different murders with what appears to be no connection whatsoever except in their brutality." She snapped off a bite. "I think we need to see that photo."

Barnes's cell phone chimed, and he dug into his pocket to pull it out. Still reading the screen, he hopped up, grabbing his coat.

"What?"

"They've got a hit," he said, heading for the door. "Fingerprint match from Ray Scones's house, our first murder." Opening the door, he looked over his shoulder with a smile. "I think we've got him, El."

She nodded and gave him a smile that disappeared the moment he looked away.

\* \* \*

"So that's bad," I said to myself as I lay on the floor.

Behind me, the door slammed and the lock clicked. I heard the sounds of their footfalls as they walked down the path, then the car

doors opened and closed. I listened to Barnes's Chevy rumble down the street until it was quiet again.

Someone out there was looking for me.

Someone *living* was out there looking for me. Again.

Some strange visitor of William Morgan's and now Jimmy were both *investigating* Painter Mann. My vocation was getting overly crowded. But what were the odds that Jimmy and Stranger were both looking for me? They could be working together, I supposed. I had seen livies and the dead do that.

Before, it'd been to raise an army of the dead to wage war on the living.

*This time?*

Maybe Jimmy had heard about the stranger from William Morgan? Before returning to Ellie's (via the Grand Canyon), I'd swung by Morgan's home. He wasn't there, but I'd seen the faint stain of two spooks: William and someone who had become familiar to me. Jimmy.

Like Ellie, I wasn't a fan of coincidence. However, my interpretation was far more paranoid than hers. Too often, coincidences were actually a chain of events orchestrated by

someone who was staring at the whole chessboard while the other guy was playing with his bishop.

Something told me this stranger had something to do with Jimmy. But I had nothing on the guy. *Nothing.*

“Wait,” I mumbled to myself as a memory bubbled back to me. “That’s not entirely true.”

*Despite my famous peepers, I ain’t blind like my daughter was.*

*Despite my famous peepers...*

I had never seen a spook in the InBetween who had eyes like his. And I could recall something someone had said about a guy with no pupils in his eyes.

*When was that?*

I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing, concentrating as the mentalist named the Amazing Kreskin had once taught to me during a whirlwind few days. To this day, he was one of the few non-dying livies I knew who could talk to the dead.

I focused on those “famous peepers,” the ghoulish look of eyes only white. They looked like damp river stones... or the bellies of two dead frogs... or...

*Wait.*

It had been from a story told to me by a bartender. *Not stones or frog bellies.*

*“In ’74, this guy comes in here. Spook, big mean-looking bastard with the wildest eyes you ever seen. I swear, not making this up, but the guy didn’t even have any pupils.”*

*“White as boiled eggs, they were.”*

Boiled eggs.

My stalker, my enemy, Jimmy had been in—*What was his name?*—Handsome Dan’s Chicago bar back in the seventies. From what I recalled, Jimmy had owned the “was-is bat” as Dan had called it, which was both in the living world and the dead.

After taking down the Ghost Mob, I’d hidden the bat away. Maybe Jimmy knew that and wanted it back? It wasn’t much, but it was something.

Ferris the cat finally returned, and I could *hear* his feet padding toward me, which was odd. But the furry creature was odd “full stop,” as Ellie might say, and the only ghost animal I’d ever seen in the InBetween.

After the case in the Big Easy, his owner Madame Mini had disappeared to chase after Voodoo Cher, the architect of this strange world. Mini left behind the damn cat, which, good or bad, had

decided I was his new momma. On the plus side, he had stopped swiping at me with his claws.

“You are a strange, strange critter, little cat.”

He gave me a bored expression—the resting bitch face for cats.

I needed to get to Chicago and find some answers about Jimmy the spook. But I had a stop to make first. Back home.

*Time to get some help.*

“You gonna hang around here and torture Ellie’s dog or...?”

Before I could finish the sentence, Ferris had swished around my leg and leapt onto my shoulders like a tiny hairy backpack.

I nuzzled my face against him. No purring, but I could feel a warmth. Which, for a dead cat, yeah, was probably just my imagination.

Back outside, I got my bearings and looked around, wondering if this was the best plan. Then I thought, *Hell, I don’t have any other plan. North. Time to head back home to Minneapolis.*

I took my first step, but then there was an odd sensation, like a song playing way off in the distance. But instead of music, I sensed... cigarette smoke. I turned toward the bushes. “Who’s there?”

There was a rustle in the hedgerow, so I called again, "I can see you. And smell you. Hiding really isn't your thing."

A haggard woman stepped out, chewing on a ghost fingernail, eyes moving around, left to right.

I said, "What are you doing?"

"Ya can't smell me. Don't be so smart," she said with a hint of anger, which faded the moment it rose up. "Peg said to keep tabs on you."

"You're one of her cuzzies?"

"Paris."

Frowning, I asked, "What is that? Is that some cuzzy code?"

"No, no. My name is Paris. I'm supposed to keep an eye on you."

"Why? To see what I was up to?"

"Partly."

"To see if I was okay?"

"Partly."

"To see if I knew where Hoffa was buried?"

She looked at me for a millisecond, then down to her hands, then left and right. "No, I don't think so. Do you?"

"He told me once, but I forgot."

"What?"

I laughed, feeling a bit of juice trickle into me. From where, I didn't really know. *Hmm, maybe there's some energy in laughter?* No, I didn't think so. *What was that, then?*

Turning to leave, I looked back and called out to her, "Hey, I gotta go outta town for a bit."

Ferris twitched; he was ready to roll.

"But I'll be back." Then I had a thought. "Listen, can you get a message to Peg for me?"

Paris shifted from foot to foot then said, "Why? What about?"

I looked toward the north and started skating in a circle. "I need her to do something for me."

I told Paris what that was and left her blank stare behind me as I picked up speed, faster and faster, heading to Chicago via Minneapolis.





## CHAPTER TWENTY

It felt good to be cruising the streets of my old hometown. Strangely, I slid past the road I'd meant to turn down and had to spin back. *Have I been gone longer than I remember?*

Being in the familiar was always calming. Or depressing, I supposed. Just depended on the memories the place held.

I was looking for a friend. Gary was the only spook I knew who could change his appearance entirely, head to toe. Given that ability, many of us would probably choose to shapeshift into the appearance of some movie star or rock god. Not Gary.

I'd known him from my early days in the InBetween, and for the entire time I'd known him, he'd been some form of gruesome, drooling monster. Not that the guy was particularly violent. On the contrary, he was the sweetest person I knew, never had a bad thing to say about anyone.

Maybe he was just some horror fan, living out some fantasy about being a ghoulie. Or maybe he took the form of a monster to keep the real ones at bay. Although, other than the chimeras, the real ones looked just like everyone else.

I knew if I tooled around long enough, I would find him. Spooks had a tendency to be drawn to the familiar, which meant that after fifteen minutes of crisscrossing the city, I should have bumped into the guy.

But after a few hours, time I didn't have, I gave up. With the sun now in the sky, it was time for me to leave for Chicago, with or without Gary. I had one last idea, something I should have done when I first arrived.

I headed over to find my current Temp. Julius, like the handful of those who'd helped me in the past year, lived in a rest home. For the most part, only those close to death—and only a very, very few of those—could hear ghosts. My Temps were an important part of work because they would take what I'd learned from an investigation, publish the details of the killer and their victim online, and the spook would be set free. They'd wink out of the InBetween to whatever was next.

But searching the cafeteria of Shady Hills, the guy was always eating, I was surprised to not find him there.

I saw a half dozen residents milling around the courtyard. Three people on a bench under a tree were having a heated discussion about some old television show I'd never heard of.

There was a couple doing some gardening, chatting happily away, while one man sat with a paper sack and was tossing bread crumbs to squirrels. At least, I hoped they were bread crumbs.

Next to me, Ferris growled at the creatures. None of them seemed to notice. He then shot me a glance as if I should do something about the tiny interlopers.

“Give it a rest, cat.”

It took me about ten minutes to wander up and down the halls and peek into all the rooms. I only gave each a quick glance. When people were by themselves, they were more real than at any other time, and it was kind of unfair to intrude on someone when they thought no one was watching.

It was mostly routine, though. Some were watching TV, some were napping, and a few were reading dog-eared novels they’d taken off the shelves of the home’s pathetic library. But no sign of Julius. Then I felt a pull, ever so slight, back out to the courtyard.

Ferris had seen a mouse nosing around one of the rooms, so he’d lost all interest in me for the moment.

My heart sang.

“Julius!”

There he was, just chilling, his face turned toward the dying sun, lying in the middle of a grass patch just beyond the garden I'd seen earlier. He lolled his head toward me, and I strolled up and stood over him.

"Hey, man, how—" I said, then looked him over. He'd ditched his big fluffy robe, and of all things, he was now wearing something a bit formal for an old folks' home. "You going to a wedding? What's with the tux?"

Slowly, he sat up, surveying the grounds. "Ah, hell. Thought it was time I classed the place up a bit, Painter," he said and then looked toward me. "How are ya?"

"Good, man. You look... You look great. What? Are you getting better?" I said and chuckled. "Thought you were dying."

"I was," he said and then looked at me, which, of course, wasn't a thing. The living couldn't see the dead. "You're shorter than I thought you might be." He hit me with a big toothy smile.

"Don't start on that again. You can't see—"

That was when one of the gardeners nearby walked around a dying fern, frowned, and called back to the woman on the other side. Then he strolled right through Julius.

All I could manage was "W-Wha?"

He stood up and extended his hand, but I only looked at it. "Wait. You're *dead*?"

"Funny thing, that." He stared at his open palm, shrugged, and let it fall back to his side. "You been gone awhile, haven't ya?"

I just stared.

He said, "Got kinda bad in the end, lotta pain, you see. I always knew it was coming, and they said they could treat that, but who wants to spend their wrappin'-up days in a total haze?"

I forced a smile. "More and more people all the time, it seems."

"Not me. So..." He blew out a sigh. "A little while back, I was whining about it all. Just wanting it to end, and... some very kind doctor helped me out."

"I don't understand."

"We were alone in the room, and, well, I'm embarrassed to say, but I was blubbering a bit, pushing the tablets away. Didn't wanna be loopy from dawn till dusk no more." He pointed back toward the home. "So she says there ain't nothin' more they can do for me, except to make me comfortable."

"Okay."

"And here I was, crying again," my friend said. "I admit I was acting the fool. But I'd had it. My girl was gone, years now, my family

don't come by so much anymore. I was just waiting to die. Only bit of fun I ever had was when you'd show up. But you kinda just..."

His voice trailed off, and I felt my stomach twist.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I got, you know, so busy. I shoulda—"

"Nah, nah, nah," he said and waved me off. "You out there helping dead people. The living ain't your concern no more."

I closed my eyes and frowned.

"So she looks at my chart and asked what I would think of... getting more comfort than they usually give. Like two, three times as much," he said, eyes sparkling. "Told her I just wanted to go home. See my girl again."

"Julius..."

"So she and I had an unspoken agreement," he said, looking back at me. "She gave me some time to think through it, but it—" He sighed. "The only way it would work was if I stayed off those meds for a few days and kept it quiet."

"Jesus, man."

"It hurt, all through my body," he said. "But you can put it out of your mind some. Then on the third day, she checked with me, and I smiled at her and said I was ready to go." He lifted his eyebrows. "I

even got a kiss! On the *lips*, now. Nothing weird, just, you know... Just goodbye, I suppose."

I looked up to the sky for a moment then back down. "Man, that's one of the bravest things I've ever heard. I can't imagine making that decision."

He shrugged. "I had the easy part—make the pain go away. She was the brave one, taking all the risk."

"But wait—" I said then slowly bobbed my head. "Oh shit. Since—"

"Yeah, I suppose since she done it, that means she killed me. I was dying already, sure, but she pulled the plug. Or put it in. Not sure how it all works."

"Hold on, though. That means all we have to do is give someone those details, and you can go. You see your girl!"

Julius slowly shook his head. "Nah, can't. The doctor gets listed as the person who, in effect, murdered me, and she's cooked. Trial, jail. At the very least, she wouldn't be able to practice anymore. I owe her too much to do that. Ain't right."

"But you did your time, Julius. You should be able to leave," I said and felt my eyes watering. "Yes, she helped... but now you're stuck here!"

"For a while, sure," he said. "And my girl ain't going anywhere."

My heart broke. Julius must have seen that on my face and reached out for me.

“Can’t—” I said and stumbled backward. “Sorry, man, I can’t touch other spooks. Draws me in. I get lost in their world.”

“Is that a thing here? I’ve only been dead a few weeks, and other than Gary, haven’t seen nobody.”

“Wait. You saw Gary?”

“Did I?”

“Your memory didn’t get much better after you died, did it?”

“Still better than yours,” he said and grinned at me. “Least I know who I am and where I been.”

“Right,” I said. “Helpful. Actually, I came back because I was looking for Gary. I gotta head to Chicago for something, part of an investigation.”

Julius shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Haven’t seen him in a good while. I think you inspired him, so after I got into my... predicament... he took off, said he was going to try and work out how to make things right.”

“He left the city?”

“Dunno. Maybe.”

“Huh. I never knew him to leave the city.”



“Maybe he went looking for you,” Julius said then added, “No matter. You got me, and I am much smarter than ol’ Gary. He’s a monster, by the way. Just like you said. Nasty.”

“Yeah,” I said, lost in thought. “I bet if I just—”

“Painter, he’s gone,” Julius said. “Used to visit me every day, he did. Like I said, haven’t heard from him in weeks.”

“I hope he’s all right.”

“He’ll be fine. I mean, he’s already dead, what harm could come?” Julius motioned to put his hand on my shoulder, stopped, and dropped it to his side. “Let’s go.”

“Go?”

“Yeah, time to head to the Windy City,” Julius said and started off, faster than I’d ever seen him move. “You can tell me on the way what this is all about.”

Passing through the big glass pane into the courtyard, I saw, as if on cue, the orange ghost tabby heading toward me.

“Gotta wait for the cat.”

“Uh... what? The InBetween has *cats*?” He looked up to the darkening sky, frowning. “This place is the work of the Devil for sure.”

“I’m babysitting him.” Ferris glared at me as he walked past.

“I don’t get along much with cats,” Julius said and winced as a set of claws casually raked his leg. “Godblame-it! See what I mean?”

As Ferris hopped up onto my back, I shrugged. “He does that.”

“Oh, he do, do he? I’ll remember that,” Julius said and started walking again.

I watched his wobbling gait and laughed. “First off, you’re going the wrong direction. We gotta head east, not north.”

“You gotta take 35W north to—”

I raised my hands. “No, you’re right. You’re right. At the rate we’re going, we’ll have to take the interstate or risk smashing into some spook watching TV. But to hit that speed, I’m going to have to pull you along.”

“How you going to do that?”

I looked over my shoulder and saw my cat’s tail swishing back and forth. Smiling, I said, “Well, it’s not going to do wonders for how you and cats get along, to be honest.”

\* \* \*

To my surprise, I only lost Julius twice on the way to Chicago. Each time, I had to stop, swing back, and get him situated again. Of course, getting situated meant getting him back up on his feet and

convincing Ferris to let him grab his tail once more. Each time, the orange tabby gave me a low growl.

After recovering him in a town called Menomonie because I had to swerve to miss some frizzy-haired spook in a cheerleading outfit—or more specifically, the garden rake that was still hanging off her back—I cut directly east through Chippewa Falls, Wausau, then north of Green Bay. Crossing Lake Michigan, it was a straight shot south, water all the way.

About a hundred miles out of Chicago, though, I saw that once again, Julius wasn't holding on. Scanning around, I could only see what seemed to be, but couldn't have been, a smirk on my feline's face.

"Did you knock him off?"

I was curious as to why I wasn't affected by touching Ferris like other ghosts. There were no visions of baby Ferris suckling on his momma, chasing after rabbits, or, thankfully, how the strange creature finally had died.

After about fifteen minutes of retracing my steps, I finally found Julius standing in the middle of Lake Michigan, running but not running on the water's surface. Seeing him there, I tried desperately not to laugh. And I failed.

“You think this shit is funny?” Julius asked, exasperated. “I been running for the shore for the past hour!”

“It hasn’t been an hour.”

“You try running in spot,” he said, breathing heavy without reason. Maybe he was just stressed. Anxiety was still a thing in the InBetween. “See how long that feels. I was hoping to make it over to Milwaukee. Useta have an aunt lived there long time ago.”

“Did she trade furs with the Native Americans?”

“I ain’t *that* old,” Julius said with a faraway look in his eyes. “Lived in the same house her whole life. She told me one time she’d never move ’cause her daddy’s spirit was still there. Fever took him years before, and she didn’t want some new family in there making him uneasy.”

Shrugging, I said, “Julius, every spook you see here is an unsolved murder. If he got sick and died...”

“Painter, all these rules you think you know, I get it, makes you feel safer. Like you’ve worked it all out.” He smiled and nodded to himself. “But the world is a strange place and only gets stranger the harder you look.”

I looked toward Beer City and sighed. “You’re right, man. I’m sorry,” I said. “Her daddy’s ghost may have well been hanging

around. What do I know?”

“Nah, she was just too lazy to move house,” he said and held out his hand to grab Ferris’s tail again. “Big lady too. All her furniture was bent to the shape of her backside. Her bed sagged down so far underneath, looked like a dog’s balls.”

“Ah,” I said once he was holding on again. “There’s an image I wish I could delete from my mind.”

He was quiet the rest of the way. Or I was just moving so fast now, making up for lost time, that he was too busy holding on for dear life to be able to form a complete sentence. I slowed as we got to Chicago’s harbor and spun around so that he was now leading me as I reduced speed.

A hundred feet from the shoreline, Julius let go and coasted the rest of the way in. Ferris hopped off, too, and padded up the rocky beach toward a small cluster of birds. The wind would have made it a chilly evening, but there were a few walkers holding hands and some joggers. One very ragged-looking guy with long gray hair was eating a sandwich out of foil. He was having a full-on argument with himself, so we gave him a wide berth.

Ten minutes later, we got to a bar on Clark Street called the Grind. Outside, I once again saw the big stone plaque that said “Oldest pub

on the South Side. Est. 1917.”

Thankfully, the place wasn't packed, but there were still enough livies around where it was going to be impossible not to pass through a couple. Not my favorite thing.

“Ho, ho,” a voice said from behind the rail. “Billy, you're back!”

Julius whispered to me, “Billy? That your real name?”

I half turned toward him. “He calls everyone Billy. Just go with it.”

“How you been, Handsome Dan?” I asked, but when he extended a hand, I sidestepped him and pointed to my companion. “This is Julius. He's new here.”

“Welcome to the Weird, my friend,” Dan said, his bushy eyebrows dancing. “Can I get you something?”

“Oh, my,” Julius said and rubbed his hands together. “I haven't had a good sherry in a long, long time. They never let me have it in the home.”

“Ah, the devil,” Dan said, snapping his fingers. “We just run outta sherry. Had a bingo night in here earlier.”

Before my friend could come up with another drink, I shook my head and said, “He's out of everything. Spooks can't drink, so...”

“That's true,” a voice said to my right. “But not all ghosts are created equal, it seems.”

Finally, I saw the guy sitting in the corner. Had it been dark, he would have lit up—as we do in the low light—but instead, he was “hiding” in the light. The cigarette with its red ember even looked like a real smoke. I remembered him.

“Lonnie,” I said, trying not to grit my teeth. “You still hanging around?”

The old barfly shrugged and tapped his cig, which did not smolder and left no ash. He’d obviously died while smoking, and all these years later, he still clung to that moment of death. One look at his face told me someone hadn’t liked it very much. Or at least, one half of it.

Briefly, that made me think about how quickly Julius had adjusted. He obviously hadn’t died in his tux, so he had come to terms with being dead impressively fast and reset to some image of himself from years earlier.

“Julius, this is Lonnie,” I said with a nod to the corner.

Julius looked at the man warily, which, to be honest, was really the only way to look at Lonnie. “He a friend of yours?”

I frowned. “Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

Lonnie smiled his broken-toothed grin and said, "Depends on which way the wind blows." He laughed and flicked his cig again.

The dead bartender cleared his throat. "You ain't gonna start no trouble now, Billy. Truth be told, you and me didn't part on the best terms."

"It was for a good cause," I said. "And I did help clear out some pretty bad spooks you got in the area."

"True, true. I will give you that," he said and moved his hand across the bar in what would have been a cleaning motion if he'd actually held a towel. "I don't expect you came here just to stare at my pretty mug, so what can we do you for?"

I looked toward the mirror and watched the livies moving around the bar for a moment. My eyes dipped to the other side of the rail, and I wondered if he ever got a replacement for what I'd taken.

"Last time, you mentioned a guy who came in here years ago," I said. "Tore the place up, clubbed one of your best patrons. A guy named—"

"Ah, ah," Lonnie said casually, taking a faux drag.

Nodding, I sighed. The man who'd been killed in the bar had been a popular regular named Billy Mitchell. This, I'd inferred from the last time I'd been at the bar, was the reason Dan called everyone by the



name. It was either some honorarium or some cog in his brain that wouldn't budge.

"Anyway, the guy was bad news. You said he was... different. You remember?"

"I do."

"A guy named Jimmy. Came in with his was-is bat."

Julius shuffled his feet and coughed. "Dunno if I ever heard of no was-is bat. That the National League? Always doing something foul, they are. I think the devil's in the National League."

"Will you relax?" I said.

"Billy, it's a big ol' club, nothing like you've ever seen. Both in our world and in the livie world," Dan said to Julius then looked at me.

"And as far as I recall, some horrifying friend of yours came here to borrow it."

"Gary," I said and smiled.

"Never got it back. You here to return it?"

I shook my head. "It's in a safe place. Too dangerous to be, you know, hanging in a bar anywhere."

Dan shrugged. "So you say."

"You said this Jimmy had crazy white eyes, no pupils," I said.

"Like hardboiled eggs. Yeah, I remember."

I snapped my fingers. “Yep, that was it. What can you tell me about the guy?”

It was quick, but I caught the snap glance between the bartender and his only customer at the moment. Lonnie then looked down at his hands.

“You have a way of bringing trouble to those around you, I reckon,” Dan said. “I’ve had my share over the past eighty-odd years. Don’t have no interest in adding to my toll.”

I leaned forward, my mouth a straight line, trying to keep my voice even. “If this Jimmy gets his way, all you’re going to have is trouble. Who knows what the guy’s planning but—”

“Jimmy Withy is probably trying to pick up where his daughter left off,” Lonnie said, blowing out a breath. He nodded toward the city. “That girl you sent off to the Next a few months back? That was his kin. Daughter or granddaughter, I think.”

“What? *Chandra*?”

A nod. “Mad Jimmy had learned the secret of the machines. The ones the Ghost Mob was planning to use for their big, ha, comeback.”

I shivered, remembering what it had been like to be trapped inside one of those power stations, draining energy from me—and all the

others around me. The Ghost Mob had been planning on using that power to wage its war on the living. Thankfully, we got lucky—that hadn't happened.

Yet.

"So, wait," I said. "You think this Jimmy is looking to start up the war again?"

Another shrug.

I thought about the machines. "How... How does he even know how to do that? I mean, he's able to create some Lovecraftian device of pure energy. Is he... Does he know voodoo or something?"

Dan laughed. "Ain't no such thing as voodoo."

*Actually...* I thought then decided that was a story for another time. "Fine, but how can he possibly know how to craft machines to harness energy off the dead?"

"Who knows?" Lonnie asked, looking bored.

Dan looked at Lonnie then gave me a sideways glance. I raised my eyebrows and waited.

"Maybe it could be..." Dan hesitated. "There was a rumor, just a rumor, that ol' Jimmy died."

"We all died, Dan," I said, exasperated. "That's why we're—"

“No, no,” Dan said, waving his hand, which I could see was trembling slightly. “Before the final bow. Didn’t, um, take the first time.”

Julius looked at me then between the two men. “What the hell does that mean?”

Dan, again, stared at Lonnie, who was keeping mum. He said softly, “But wasn’t no rumor. They brought him back, revived him after some *incident*.”

“Brought him back? You mean he was dead then revived?”

A nod. “So I expect he may have gotten a look at this world then was sucked back.” Dan rubbed his hand over the bar again. “I don’t know if I believe it now that I say it out loud. Sounds like hogwash.”

“Believe it.” Lonnie’s voice was harsher than it had been before.

“But,” the bartender said, nodding slowly, “what they say is the boy was gone for thirteen minutes.”

Lonnie said, “Thirteen minutes, twenty-seven seconds. When he came back, he was different.”

Julius laughed. “We got a bunch of ghosts telling ghost stories. Not sure if that’s ironic or just weird.”

I waved off my friend. “How do you know he was different? You knew him before?”

A shrug from Lonnie. "Jimmy was a petty thief. Always was going to end badly. Mainly because he wasn't very good at it. You know what he was before he died? The first time. Some kind of damn engineer!"

"What? He dies for thirteen minutes and comes back a crook? That's a hell of a vocational left turn."

Dan sighed. "I think he went mad in that time, Billy." The bartender lifted his arms and gestured around the bar. "Who wouldn't? You get a glimpse at a world on top of the world? That'd make anyone barmy."

Lonnie shifted his weight on the barstool. Given that he could sit there, I wondered who had died so violently that it made the seat solid to ghosts like us.

"You guys worked together." I didn't ask it as a question.

"No, no," Lonnie said, almost choking with a short fit of laughter. "Mad Jimmy was too crazy for even me. Even before... all that he told me..." He took another drag on his everlasting cigarette. "This woulda been, maybe 1955? '57? Hell, I can't remember."

"Doesn't matter."

Lonnie shrugged. "Probably matters more than you know. I was sitting right here, Jimmy 'round where you standing. Both drunk,

which was nothing new. Jimmy didn't talk about himself much, but he was in the gin that night. The stuff will give ya the tears. So he's blubbering about seeing his old lady. How he missed her and all that, but he'd *seen* her. Could wait to get back."

"I'm lost," I said, shaking my head.

"When he flatlined for that thirteen minutes," Lonnie said, staring at me hard and taking a drag, "he saw his wife."

"Couldn't have," Dan said with a huff. "She died proper, not murdered. She woulda passed right by this place."

A shrug. "Not according to Jimmy. He said she came to him. A glowing vision of white, more beautiful than he'd ever known. He was a man still madly in love, and when he died, there she was."

Julius said softly, "People will do crazy for the people they love. Anything. Everything."

Strangely, that thought tweaked something in my mind. But before I could hone in on it, Lonnie continued.

"So we're drunk as skunks one night, and he says she talked to him after he'd died. Said she'd had some big plan, and he was to play his part," Lonnie said. "Then she pushed him back here. *Pushed him.*"

Julius took a step back. "More ghosts telling ghost stories."

“He was alive then, and that’s how he came back from the dead,” Lonnie said, his voice flat. “And he was different and not just his eyes.”

“His eyes?”

“From brown to gray. It was like he was living and was still dead too.”

Dan huffed. “He couldn’t have seen his wife. She died proper, naturally!”

“You’re saying that like any of us really knows how the fuck this place works,” I said, remembering what Julius had said to me on the water. “That kinda thinking gets you into all sorts of trouble. Trust me.”

“I don’t trust ya, Painter Mann.” Handsome Dan looked at me. “You’re one of them folks who can’t leave well enough alone. One day, you’re going to bring this whole damn world down on top of us.”

I shrugged. “That’s the plan.”

Lonnie scowled at me. “Then maybe we need to find you a comfortable place to relax for a while. Take a load off.”

“Try it. Let’s see how you do,” I said and shot him my best tough-guy look. He smiled at me with his broken grin. “Time for us to go.”

“You stupid or something?” Julius looked at me, raising one of his big sausage fingers toward the bartender. “We came out all this way because you wanted to find out about this Billy guy—”

“Christ, not you too,” I said.

“Jimmy,” Lonnie said, chuckling. “Goddamn Mad Jimmy.”

“Painter, you got his name,” Julius said, whispering to me. “Now you just need one more piece, yeah?”

He was right.

“Yeah, okay,” I said and bent over at the waist. Jesus, I let my temper get away from me sometimes. “Right, when Jimmy died the second time—the time it, you know, *took*—who killed him?”

The bartender and barfly exchanged a look.

I asked again, “Who killed Jimmy?”

“Come on, now. This ain’t no pub quiz, simple question and answer,” my former Temp said. “You really want a spook like that tearing around this place? He’s dangerous, y’all!” Julius leaned forward, looking between them. “Any minute he could come bounding through that door and bring a world of hurt along with him. You want that?”

“No, of course not,” Dan said, wiping his mouth. “But no one knows who killed him.”



“Right,” Lonnie said with a tone that made me want to punch his cigarette into his face. “See, that’s why he’s here. That’s how it works in this place.”

“Screw you,” I shouted. “Julius is right. He’s a bigger threat to you guys here than the two of us. I just need the name of his killer, and the guy is gone.”

Another glance between the men.

“Problem is, Billy,” Dan said. “News came around here that they’d found ol’ Jimmy somewhere down in Mexico. In an alley behind a bar, his busted body stuffed between a few rubbish bins.”

“Jesus,” Julius whispered.

“And the local police didn’t want to bring down the wrath of American authorities, so he got dumped in a shallow grave.”

“But no one knows who killed the guy,” Lonnie said, eyes flat. “So if you’re looking for a name you won’t find it because only Jimmy knows that and I reckon he ain’t tellin’ ya which of them did it!”

I was about to say something—working up some vile rebuke as the prick just laughed in my face. But then I replayed the last thing Lonnie had said back.

*Hold on.*

“‘Which of them’? What does that mean?” I asked.

Lonnie's grinning face faltered, and he tried to hide it with his ever-burning cig, taking a long drag from a stub without smoke.

"What?" he asked, his face falling into a smirk. "I'm done talking to you." Lonnie stood up to leave, not even bothering to say goodbye to his barman friend.

"Seems like he's in an awful hurry all of a sudden," Julius muttered to me as the barfly whipped by us and passed through the wall.

Outside, I spotted Lonnie cutting through the crowd. I had an idea but didn't want to grab the guy and get lost in the whirlwind of his past, his death. That meant I couldn't touch him, but—

"Ow, ya goddamn cat!"

*Ah, yeah. That'll work.*

"Ferris," I shouted.

The heads of both Lonnie and the cat spun toward me.

"Get 'em."

My feline friend let out a low growl as the man began moving faster through the crowd. He didn't realize one of the patrons coming in was in fact not a livie, a fat guy dressed in a suit who looked soaked from head to toe.

He smashed into the ghost—"Get off me, man!"—stumbled to his feet, and a moment later, let out a howl. Ferris had gripped a spot between his shoulder blades, and Lonnie was spinning around, cursing, trying to get the cat off by swiping with his hands.

"That cat is a menace," Julius said, taking a step back. "I'm glad he's on our side."

"Wait here," I said and took a few staggering steps toward the spinning barfly. When he was facing away, I gripped my fingers into the fur of Ferris's back and started skating, pushing him forward as fast as I could go.

"Jesus Christ, leggo!" he shouted, trying to keep his feet.

He was reaching for me, a splayed hand over his shoulder, but I stayed clear of him, pushing him faster and faster and faster as we whipped through the parking lot, over a small hill, then eventually back onto the big lake.

"Stop! Stop!" Lonnie screamed at me. Ferris dug his claws in, and he cursed again. "Leggo of me!"

About a half mile toward the center of the lake, I complied, letting the spook slide across the water. As he left my grip, I tapped Ferris, who hopped down and stood next to me.

Casually, the cat licked its paw as we both watched the man slow, spin, then fall. He regained his feet, tried to walk, then fell again.

“What th’ hell is this all about?” Lonnie shouted, as I took a few strides in place, until I was skating again, which gave me purchase on the water. I passed Lonnie then came back to Ferris, putting him on my shoulder.

Then I stopped about twenty feet from the guy and waited. For the next two or three minutes, he tried everything: crawling, jumping, sliding... None of it worked. He was stuck in place.

Finally, he sat down cross-legged and drew on his cig.

“I assume there’s a point to this?”

I nodded. “I need something from you.”

Lonnie gave me a half shrug. “Forget it. All I gotta do is wait for some boat to come by and use a bit of juice to grip on and get back to shore.” He laughed. “Or just grab on to some spook already doin’ that. These ships are filled with ’em!”

“Maybe,” I said casually and pointed toward the west. “But the shipping lane is over there.”

“It’s not,” he said but didn’t sound convinced.

“And don’t expect a Jet Ski or fisherman to work their way out here either. Too far from shore and, of course, no one’s fishing in this

much.”

Lonnie looked around, closed his eyes, and cursed.

I added, “Which means you could be out here a long, long, long time, man. That would be maddening, I bet. Just watching the world go by with you stuck out here?”

He got to his feet and made another attempt to talk, slowly this time. Again, he just slid in place. Finally, he turned to me. “You are a right bastard, you are.”

“Sure, but I’m a right bastard that can get back to shore in about a minute. You’ve got to hope something you can grab onto comes within reach. Could take years. Could be much, much longer.”

Finally, he waved his arm toward me, red embers of his cigarette making a figure eight in the air. “Ask then.”

“What do you mean no one knows ‘which of them’ killed Jimmy?”

He laughed. “How is that statement confusing?”

“It’s confusing because you said you and Jimmy weren’t palling around after he died,” I said. “So how can you know?”

Lonnie nodded, thought for a moment, then said, “Fine, fine. I’ll tell you what I know once we get back to shore.”

I smiled and petted the cat on my shoulder for a moment. “Hey, man, good luck out here,” I said and started to turn.

“Wait, wait—” he shouted. “Shit! Jimmy Withy ain’t the sort I want to be on the bad side of. The man is bad news, and he *knows* things about this place no one else does.”

“I asked you what *you* know.”

The man sighed and plunked back down on the water, leaning back on his elbows. For a moment, he thought about it then shrugged.

“I had some dealings with the girl. Chandra.”

“Jimmy’s daughter.”

“Or granddaughter or niece, whatever. I never knew,” he said and smiled. “I heard you sent her to the Next. Ol’ Jimmy won’t be happy about that.”

“He’s made that very clear.”

“I bet,” Lonnie said.

“What did she tell you?”

Lonnie looked toward the city then out to the west. The manner of it was so familiar, but I couldn’t place it right away.

“When Chandra screwed Mad Jimmy over with the Ghost Mob, I’d told her she needed to find a way to clear him. Otherwise, no telling what hell he’d bring down on her. He’s got a mean streak in ’im that’s fatter than a sixteen-lane expressway. Kin or no kin.”

I chuckled. "Oh, so you were worried about her. So thoughtful."

"No, I was worried about him knowing I'd helped her out!

Watching out for my own hide," he said, and I waved him on. "She'd asked around south of the border and found out that there'd been five of them."

"Five?"

Lonnie nodded. My mind flashed back to the string of killings back in Atlanta—three supposedly random people. And, somehow, Jimmy had been involved.

*Three. Three of five?*

I'd made a promise to help the dead to move on. But that had come from another vow to do good things. Despite my obligations to the dead, I couldn't let two more people die.

After shuffling my feet for a moment, I was back up, skating again. I did a quick circle around Lonnie and slid past, my eyes on the shoreline, where I'd left Julius.

"Wait. Wait!" he called out. "Christ, you can't leave me here."

"But I don't trust you either, Lonnie," I said. "How can I know you won't go running to Jimmy and tell him what I know? To keep on his good side."

“Goddamn it, Painter,” he shouted as I left him behind. “I ain’t gonna say anything!”

Despite what a shit the guy was, I did feel bad about it. He sounded so desperate, so awful. With that in mind, I swung back, circling Lonnie again.

“Listen, there’ll be a boat by here any time. Just grab ahold—”

“No, wait! The boats don’t come by here. You said the shipping lane—”

I laughed. “What the hell do I know about shipping lanes? I look like a sailor to you? Come morning, there’ll probably be boats crisscrossing all over here.”

As I passed the one last time, he said, “You lying prick.”

He shouted it again as I sped up toward the shore. Of course, I didn’t know when the next boat or tug or Jet Ski might pass by. But I was damn well going to be done with Jimmy Withy before Lonnie hitched a ride back to cause trouble.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ellie fiddled with the video monitor, her frown deepening. The blacks were unnatural, the whites looked like sun-bleached bone on a forgotten beach.

“You won’t make it any clearer,” Officer Filoialli said.

On the screen, a young man who looked like he hadn’t eaten all year was fidgeting, rubbing the skin where the cuffs dug into his wrists. Even on the low-res image, she could see his jet-black hair was matted to his head.

“He don’t look much like a homicidal maniac,” she said.

Officer Filoialli laughed. “What do they look like? Might save us a lot of time tracking all these guys down.”

Barnes brooded in the corner of the white room. She squinted at the image of the man. *Arms folded, concerned look. As if he’s the only friend the boy’s got in the world. Kid’s not buying it.*

Through the speaker, they heard Barnes say, “You know they’ve still got the death penalty in Georgia? Brutal, horrible. Can’t imagine a society that thinks the solution to killing is more killing. Shame, really.”

The kid looked up, his eyes bloodshot. "But that wasn't me. I mean, you can't be—"

"Your prints were everywhere, Jeremy. You and Ray good friends?"

"I don't even know the guy. I mean, I make deliveries, so I don't remember but—"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear ya," Barnes said, sitting down opposite the boy. "But funny thing is, the prints, I mean, normally you've got to really dig around but yours were all over. Like you'd lost both contact lenses and you went around searching the walls, the table, everywhere."

"That doesn't, I mean," Jeremy said, shaking. "I don't remember being there, but it doesn't mean I—"

Detective Barnes leaned forward, tipping the chair on its front legs, and flipped open a red folder. Ellie winced.

Jeremy Talbot looked down at the photo on top and frowned, working his mouth. He looked away.

"No, no," Barnes said, tapping the table with two thick fingers. "I'm showing you something here, Jeremy. What do you see?"

The kid took a glance back then looked away again.

“That’s how you left the place, Jeremy. See what I’m saying? I mean, we didn’t even really need to use the dust, although we did, right? I mean, we need to build a proper case on you, but that was just a formality.”

“It wasn’t me!”

“Sure it was,” Barnes said, thumping the photograph. “I mean, you can see from here. Your fingerprints are there in blood, for crying out loud!” Barnes laughed. “Were you delivering magazines with a bloody nose?” The cop chuckled to himself.

The young man swallowed hard and clenched his jaw, blinking furiously. His eyes were watering as he sucked in a few deep breaths. “I think I need a lawyer.”

“Aw, ya see, that makes it sound like you’re guilty,” Barnes said. “I mean, sure, we’ll get a lawyer for you. No sweat. But the moment someone’s caught, then they want a lawyer.”

“I was never there!” Jeremy shouted, spittle flying across the photograph.

Barnes cocked an eyebrow, staring at the kid who’d come out of his seat, handcuffs rattling against the metal bar welded to the desk.

“I don’t care what your pictures say!”

“That’s fair. Fair enough.” The cop nodded slowly, then he leaned back this time, lowering his voice. “But you know who does care? People like judges. And don’t get me started on juries. They love stuff like ‘evidence’ and ‘fingerprints.’ I mean, they eat it up.”

Ellie blew out a breath. “Did he really do air quotes?”

“He did the air quotes,” Officer Filoialli said, arms folded, nodding. “Barnes loves the air quotes.”

“Don’t think the boy liked ’em much.”

Barnes looked down at the folder. On the monitor, the photos of the kitchen looked like they’d been splattered with black paint. Ellie watched as thoughts quickly played across the cop’s face. He closed the folder.

“Tell me where you were the night Ray Scones was killed, then,” Barnes said. “Let’s start with that.”

Jeremy lifted an elbow to his nose and tried to wipe it. “What night was that?”

Ellie nodded. *Well, score one for the kid.*

Barnes took a deep breath. “It was a Saturday, right? Sometime between eight and midnight, most likely.”

The kid closed his eyes then opened them again, searching the top corners of the room. Then he stammered, “I w-w-was playing

games, probably. Saturday, at home.”

The cop nodded. “Games. Games are good. Who was there?”

“What?”

“I mean, were you playing Risk? Clue? Monopoly?”

“No,” Jeremy said. “N-No!”

“Good, good. Monopoly is a terrible game to play with friends. Takes too long. Always ends in fights. I remember one time wh—”

“Games, man!” Jeremy shouted. “On my PC. At home!”

“Right,” Barnes said then snapped his fingers. He leaned forward and grabbed the dark folder again. After fingering through the photographs, he came out with a sheet of white paper. “What is Steam?”

The kid frowned. “Steam? That’s... That’s the platform where all my games are. You log in, and you’ve got—you know, your games are there.”

“Right. Gotcha.”

“That’s what I do every Saturday night, all night,” Jeremy said, his words coming faster now. “You can check. There’ll be—”

“Ah!” Barnes held up the sheet of paper. “Here it is. Now, I’m not as savvy as you are in this whole computer thing, but... when I look

at this, it says you logged on to this Steam thing at around half past four in the afternoon.”

“Right, right!”

“And, whoa, you didn’t log off until sometime the next morning,” Barnes said, squinting theatrically at the page.

“See, that’s what—”

“But, but... and again, apologies, I’m not a computer guy. But we’ve got a team of computer guys, right? And they’ve been all over *your* computer! Found all sorts of stuff.”

Jeremy mumbled, “Whatever, man.”

“See, though, the important bit, I think, but again”—he pointed at himself with a thumb—“not a computer guy, but the important bit is how you log in... and there’s all this activity on something called Counter-Strike.”

“Yeah, I play old-school stuff when, I dunno, when I’m lonely and shit.”

“Right, I get you,” Barnes said. “But, I mean... You’re going to have to help me, because I don’t know this stuff.” He slid the paper in front of Jeremy. “Your account. So what does all this stuff mean at the top? Packets?”

With a sigh, Jeremy looked at the paper, brow furrowed. “That’s... I think that’s the data between my computer and the server.”

Barnes smiled, waved a hand over his head and made an airplane sound.

“It’s... When you play, that’s the information coming from them to you, and then what you’re doing gets sent back.”

Barnes nodded. “You got a good connection?”

“Connection?” Jeremy gave him a weary smile. “Whatever, yeah, I got a good *connection*. Not killer—” He paused and was met with a raised eyebrow from the cop. “I mean, not top-shelf or nothing but good enough.”

“So you can play all night? No interruptions?”

“Right.” A shrug.

“But, and I’ll need your help again...” Barnes tapped the paper. “All this stuff at the top, those are pretty big numbers, right? Gigabytes of data, I’m told.”

“Well, there’s maps and fit-outs, and—”

“Right, right, but then sometime around seven thirty-five... you’re still logged into the Steam, but it gets turned off or something.”

“No, no,” Jeremy said and shook his head. “There’s no Steam, man! That just means there’s no data being sent from my comp...”



The young man stopped and swallowed hard. His eyes locked on the paper, unmoving.

“Right, so what you are saying, Jeremy, is that you’re logged in, but nothing is happening on your end. I mean, the game’s right there! All your virtual friends running around shooting virtual guys, looking over at your virtual guy, going, ‘Come on, ManiakSkinz97! Let’s go. We got guys to shoot!’ But you’re not helping out. Why not?”

Jeremy shifted his hard stare toward the cop.

Ellie nodded, staring at the video image. “The kid flinched a bit when he said the Maniac bit.”

“His handle. The name he goes by in the game, I reckon,” Officer Filoialli said. “Rattled him. Barnes showing him that he knows more than he’s saying.”

“Could spook ’im,” Ellie said.

Back in the room, Barnes stood up and leaned against the far wall. “Why aren’t you helping your team out, Jeremy? For hours and hours, you’re doing nothing as your guys get slaughtered, yeah? Do you like watching people die, Jeremy?”

“No!” the young man said then slammed his lips tight. “I was there!”

Barnes lunged forward, and when he pounded on the table, Jeremy jumped, the chains around his hands jangling. “No, you weren’t! This says that for nearly three hours, you did nothing on your end. My computer guys say you were AFK. Dunno what that means, but you’re the computer guy. You tell me.”

Jeremy shook his head. Now there were tears coming down his reddening cheeks.

“What does AFK mean, Jeremy?”

“It means... away from keyboard.”

Barnes nodded. “Right. Right,” he said. “AFK to KRS?”

“What?”

“Away from keyboard to kill Ray Scones.”

Jeremy squeezed his eyes shut tight and shook his head. Then he tensed, flexing his arms, the chains rattling and shaking. He said, “Lawyer.”

\* \* \*

Ellie sat blowing wisps of steam from her tea cup as she waited in the cafeteria, reading the newspaper. A small write-up about Helen Dorsey revealed only that she’d been found dead in her garden. The article, just four paragraphs, was on page eleven of the Metro section.

Seven decades of life, a witness to wars, toppled governments, the births and deaths of great men and women, and it amounted to less than two-hundred-fifty words, ten pages after some story about a local socialite getting re-upped for a reality show.

“Jesus wept,” Ellie muttered, eyes no longer seeing the words on the page. “End times. End-bloody-times this is.”

“You reading your horoscope again?” Barnes clanked down two diet sodas, one of them already opened. The one he’d been drinking from had indentations on both sides.

“You mad at your can?”

“Don’t start,” he said and flopped into the plastic seat, briefly scraping it across the floor. “What a waste. What a goddamn waste.”

Ellie let the man brood for a moment, steeping her fingers.

He grabbed his soda for a quick sip, caught her expression, then banged it back down again. Across the cafeteria, a young clerk jumped.

“Get it out, then,” he said, crossing his arms.

“No, no. You did what you could.”

“That doesn’t help!” he said, his voice shaking. “Because that sounds consoling, as if to say, ‘Ah, that was all that could be done,’

but really, you're saying, 'Given your level of skill, Barnsey, it's all you could have hoped for. Absolutely nothing!'"

Ellie smiled. "You could have used that sort of insight about ten minutes ago."

He couldn't help it either, fighting a smile back. "You're a horrible person."

"Listen, you've got the lad dead to rights," she said with a shrug, not looking at him. "He's literally got his bloody fingerprints at the scene. His phone! He's cooked. What more do you need?"

"I need him to tell me why," Barnes said, finally taking a slug of his drink. "I mean, why does he get up from his shooting game to go kill a perfect stranger?" He then popped his eyebrows. "Maybe that's it? Games turning our kids into killers."

"No, no. There's no evidence of that, none a t'all."

"Come on, have you seen what these kids play? Sniper shots to the skull, sneaking up with daggers to the ribs, and worse. It's a wonder we don't have a generation of homicidal maniacs running around after training sessions like that!"

She stared at her hands. "You're wound up now, aren't ya?"

He huffed. "Don't you start with me, Ellie. I'm..." He caught himself then carried on, a bit lighter. "I'm working myself up to a full boil of

righteousness. These games are making kids killers. Making my job harder.”

“You know they said the same sort of shite about Shakespeare? That all the killing and lusting was making the youth of the day horny, if eloquent, murderers.”

“Never say that word around me again. Makes my stomach jump.”

“Eloquent?” she asked and raised an eyebrow. “And did it? Did the plays of the Bard fill the streets with blood?”

“I wasn’t around back then,” he said. “What was it like?”

She pointed at him. “You’re just mad at yourself, Barnesy. Don’t take it out on the boy.”

“It’s probably some covert military thing.” He crinkled the soda can between his fingers. “CIA black ops training kids to be killers.”

“Then later on, it was jazz music, comic books, the songs of John Osbourne, and now video games. I reckon it’s those sorts of distractions that *keep* the youth of the day from murdering all of us old farts!”

Barnes leaned back on his chair, the front two legs coming off the ground. “Did you just call Ozzy Osbourne ‘John’?”

She shrugged. “He’s John to his friends.”

“Shut up,” he said. “You don’t know—”

“He lived in Birmingham for a while. I lived in Birmingham for a while,” she said. “I wasn’t always an old tea granny, Barnes.”

The cop shook himself. “There’s the taste of vomit in my mouth right now.”

“All right, enough,” she said, reaching over and taking a sip from his soda. “What do you think you accomplished in there?”

“What do I need to accomplish? We’ve got his fingerprints—bloodied fingerprints—at the scene. Got a warrant into his telco provider to show the route he took to get there, and no question, it’ll show a neat little trail right to Ray Scones’s house.”

“I expect as much, yes.”

“And that much blood? His entire wardrobe and laundry are being tested. We’ll find Ray’s blood somewhere on those, unless the boy did it stark naked. But even if he did, we’ve got hair samples, skin samples, and scrapes from under his fingernails!”

Ellie turned her chair toward Barnes and put her soft frail hand on his shoulders, which slumped at her touch.

“Good, you’ve got him,” she said. “We’ve got him. He’s locked up.”

“With no reason *why*, Ellie!” he said, his voice cracking. “I mean, there’s no motive here, far as I can tell.”

She sat back and folded her hands, placing them in her lap. The old Irish detective could see the guy was hurting. She'd been there herself over the years. She knew the one thing that could tear a cop up inside and stomp on the bits until their guts were pulped red mush.

Doubt.

"Like you say," she offered. "Maybe he just flipped."

Bleary-eyed, he shot her a look. "You don't believe that, do you?"

She only shrugged. When he didn't speak for a full minute, she finally said, "What's bothering you? You've got all you need for a conviction, Barnes. Slam dunk, as your lot likes to say."

Barnes lifted his hands to his face, rubbed it for a moment, then put his fists to his eyes.

"What is it, then?" she asked, trying to keep her face neutral. He started to speak, but then stopped. Then she spoke, and it was almost a directive—a tone Barnes couldn't remember ever hearing her take with him. "Come on, Detective. You've got to say it out loud, or it's not real."

"It..." he said, obeying like he had no choice. "I mean, you *heard* the kid, right? Saw how... You saw him, right? The way he was... what he was saying... and..."

“I was listening in the other room, yes.”

“I mean,” he said then laughed darkly. “Blood-soaked evidence and no alibi to contradict it. Any of it! Got him *dead-to-fucking rights!* But...”

“But.”

“I... Shit,” he said. “Jesus, Ellie.” He looked at her with hard eyes, unblinking. “Christ, I... I don’t think he did it.” A wipe of the mouth. “I mean, it’s batshit crazy, right?” He grabbed the soda and glugged down the rest of its liquid, half of the can, then blew out a damp breath. “Christ, I do not think he did it.”

Ellie stood up, straightened her sweater, folded up the newspaper, and tapped him on the shoulder. When he looked up, she said, “No. No, I don’t think he did either.”

“But...?”

“Or,” she said, dropping the paper on the table. “Or, at least, he doesn’t think he did.”

Barnes put his head in his hands and groaned.

“Hey, you get anything on that mosquito blood from the shed?”

The cop lifted his bloodshot eyes to her. “Clever that, but no. A mix in there of several people, including yours and our guys on the



scene. There was another one they couldn't ID," he said and blew out a long breath. "But coulda come from anywhere."

"Ah, damn."

"Hell of an idea, though, Ellie. Never thought of that one." He then noticed the article that she'd been reading and tapped it with a finger. "Oh, and it gets worse. Helen Dorsey, death by knitting in the garden?"

"Right."

"They found two sets of prints on the sewing needles"

Ellie said, "Hers and her husband's. Alfred Dorsey's."

"Hers and—" he said then nodded. "Yeah. How did you—"

Ellie shook her head. "Did you see the man?" she asked. "He was destroyed..." The former detective looked out the windows of the cop café. "There's no way."

"Who knows? None of this makes sense," Barnes said. "They're questioning him now." Barnes leaned forward in his chair, wearily lifting his body to stand, but then he sank back down when he saw Gabrielle Morgan at the door of the cafeteria. It wasn't just that she stood there, but the expression on her face...

Paper still in hand, Ellie stood and walked up to the girl, who had mascara-stained tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Gabby, Gabby, dear,” the old Irish detective said, bringing the girl next to the wall. “Good Lord, what is it? You’re shaking.”

The young woman had put her hands in the pockets of her jacket to steady them, arms nearly straight. The coat flared out in such a manner that if she were to raise her arms and flap, she just might take flight.

“What’s wrong?”

Ellie caught sight of Barnes raising again, and almost imperceptibly, she gave him one quick shake of her head. He stayed at the table.

The trembling woman pulled her hands out of her pockets, clutching them together, and Ellie wrapped her own old fingers around them in a comforting embrace. But then the Irish woman felt something damp in her hand.

Unfurling the small rectangular piece of paper, damp with sweat or tears, she tried to read the smeared ink. “What... what is this?”

Ellie desperately wanted to pull out the reading glasses she’d stuffed into her inner coat pocket, but with one hand on the paper and the other on the girl’s hands, she instead squinted to see the fine print. “It’s a receipt.”

Slowly, the girl nodded, her eyes wide as she stared at the older woman.

“But what’s it for, Gabby? I can’t—”

“I don’t remember... I mean,” she said and sobbed. “I found it in my pocket, but I just don’t remember ever... but I must have. I mean, I don’t...” she said, stammering, then slowly slid down the wall to the floor, wrapping her arms around her knees. Rocking.

Transfixed on the receipt, Ellie finally reached for her inner pocket but looked up, and Barnes was there, snatching the damp paper from her fingers.

“Kelsey’s Hardware on Roswell in Marietta,” he said, his words coming fast now. “All this coding, shit, it’s hard to... It looks like three items?”

From the floor, Gabrielle said, her voice nearly a whisper, “The top. The first one.”

Barnes looked closer, half growled, then his fingers began to grope into his own pockets. Ellie handed him her glasses, cat-eye black frames with thin lenses. She didn’t need to see anymore. She knew what he would find.

He read: *Mck Clw Hmr - sku# 9652148 - \$16.99*

The cop rolled the letters around in his mouth for a moment, then it came to him. Slack-jawed, he looked at Ellie.

“A claw hammer. She bought a claw hammer.”

At the bottom of the receipt, he could see an asterisk and four digits. “Is that a card number?”

Gabrielle shrank back and closed her eyes, fresh tears falling to her cheeks. She nodded slowly and said in a small voice, “Mine.”

Ellie closed her eyes.

“Well,” Barnes said, voice a raspy whisper. “It’s the same... you know.”

Leaning against the cold tile wall, Gabrielle’s shoulders slumped. “It’s the same hammer that killed my dad.”

“But—”

“Look at the...” She waved languidly with her red raw hand. “Look at the time.”

Barnes said, “This was bought the day before William Morgan was killed in his backyard.”

Ellie laughed, but there was no joy in it. “Sure, there’s... I mean, of course, there ain’t no way—”

“I think,” Gabrielle said, sniffing, staring down at her trembling fingers. She choked on a sob then swallowed it down. Gritting her

teeth, she said, "I think I killed my dad."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When I got back, Julius was waiting on the shore. He waved and blinked quickly as I skated up. He eyeballed Ferris on my shoulders, keeping an armlength back.

“Thought you might be leavin’ me here in Chicago,” he said. “Fine town, but, uh, got some pretty awful memories from back in the day. Was stationed here for a while. Camp Grant.”

I looked at him. “You a war hero, Julius?”

“Nah, never went over,” he said, looking across the bay. “Saw plenty of young men go, though. Kept my head down, worked on the skill set that would keep me alive.”

“Sniper?”

Julius shook his head, stone faced. “Laundering.”

Laughing, I said, “Yeah, Germans had little defense against crisp white linens.”

“Germans! How old do you think I am?” he said. “Go on with your giggle fit, but I *stayed* at the camp, never sent over, because I kept the infantry’s clothes clean. It was like doing battle, though. You ever see a pile of two thousand pairs of underwear?”

“Gross. Maybe you shoulda gone over.”

“Cleanin’ part was easy,” he said and sighed. “You had to separate them out, getting back to the right man. Everyone had their names written in their clothes, so stuff wouldn’t get mixed up, but digging into the shorts of a thousand other guys?” He finally looked at me. “Maybe I *should* have gone over.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Maybe that’s why I was a bit worried,” he said. “I know what it’s like to be left back.”

“Nah, man, I’m not the type to, you know, leave anyone behind,” I said and told him to grab onto Ferris’s tail again.

“Hold on a moment,” Julius said and touched my shoulder.

*My eyes flashed for a moment as I saw Julius as a young man, laughing with a beautiful woman, both lying in a field of—*

I broke away. “Dammit, Julius!”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, rubbing his fingers and eyeballing my cat. “I’m so sorry. I forgot.” I ran a hand over my face and nodded, waving a hand gingerly to tell him it was no big deal. He continued: “You said something in there. About Mad Jimmy’s wife.”

It would take about an hour or so to get Julius to Minneapolis, then another hour to get back down to Atlanta. Yes, I could go faster,



much faster, but if I lost Julius along the way at top speed—whatever that was—I might never see the guy again.

After I got back to the ATL, it would be my turn to chase my chaser.

I realized that Julius had asked a question.

“Huh? Sorry, what?”

“You said something about the man’s wife.”

“I dunno. Something just, you know, rang a bell.”

“Oh, I rang a bell or two in my time, now,” Julius said with a huge grin, running his fingertip across the brim of his hat.

“I don’t wanna hear it.”

“Hell, I rang a lotta bells. My younger days sometimes it was dingin’ like a five-and-dime with a revolving door on a Sat’d day afternoon.”

“Please stop.”

“You know, because they useta have a bell above the door, so if you got a revolving—”

“*Dude*, I got it!” I laughed. “How is it you scored such a beautiful wife with an attitude like that?”

Julius’s mouth dropped open. “Y-y-you saw Caroline?”

“Just, you know—”

“You saw my Caroline when I...” He looked at his hand, which was now shaking and held it up. “Can you show me? I would love to see my dear wife again.”

“No, man,” I said, raising my voice. “It doesn’t work that way. And it’s not her, just your memory of her through your eyes.” I softened. “I’m sorry, I don’t make the rules here, a woman named Voodoo Cher does. Or did. I’m not exactly sure.”

“What does that mean?”

“When *she* was killed, she somehow found a way to hold on. Stop herself from crossing over and had the power to create all of this.”

“Like slamming on the brakes left some sort of skid marks.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Sorta. I guess.”

“And now we living in the skid marks?”

“You do have a way with words, man.” I laughed again. “Voodoo Cher is, well, God here. In a way. Or at the least, the architect.”

“Why?” Julius said, his mouth hanging open. “Why would any soul wanna create this abomination?”

I sighed. “She felt she was wronged by her death and wants to punish the living. I think she wants to, you know, end all life.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.”

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” Julius said and crossed himself.

“Right,” I said. “But we got her fury here. Whole place is built on her desire for revenge against those who killed her. Which, I suppose, she blames everyone for.”

Julius nodded. “Those weird machines that you and Gary smashed up a while back. You told me about them—the ones the Ghost Mob made to trap other spooks, use their power.”

“She was behind all that,” I said, looking up. “But for now, the sky is clear. No tendrils of energy crisscrossing the heavens. You see that again, and that means she’s gearing up for another shot.” An image came back to my mind: Voodoo Cher trapped in the basement of the Cajun’s house, unable to leave. Until I inadvertently set her free. “She’s not all powerful, though. She does have limitations.”

When I looked to Julius, he was staring down the shoreline. Down past the wharf and a handful of boats sat a tiny stone church, the only structure without any lights burning inside. Several of its windows had wisps of black soot trailing up toward the spire, as if the shadows within were trying to make a slow escape.

“You know, with all the work He got, even God has angels and archangels. Prophets and priests.”

“Right.” I smiled. “Everyone has staffing issues.”

“Maybe.” Julius looked off for a moment, his eyes glazing. For a moment, I thought he was thinking about his Caroline. “Remember, one of those guys in the bar said Mad Jimmy had been some sorta engineer. So, maybe...”

I wasn’t following. “Maybe what?”

“Maybe,” Julius said. “He’s staff.”

“Oh shit,” I said and snapped my fingers without any sound. “He worked out some part of the physics of this place. That’s why Voodoo Cher wanted him. To make those machines, they were *his*.”

“We get rid of him...”

“And no more machines,” I said. “Julius, you are brilliant.”

“I won’t argue with that,” Julius said. “I was a math teacher. High school. Mainly went off the syllabus, but ol’ Julius has a bit of voodoo himself. Math voodoo!” He laughed, a big barrel-chested sound.

He was still chuckling by the time Ferris had resettled on my back, Julius holding on to the cat’s tail. As we again passed over the big lake, over ships’ horns and crashing waves, and Lonnie yelling at us in the distance, I heard him giggling.

“Math voodoo, man!”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

When we got back to Minneapolis, the building that always looked like a giant electric razor was lit up and shaving the sky. As fast as we'd been going, I might have whizzed right by had Julius not been yelling like he was on fire.

I eased up and slowed as we passed Lake Hennepin, finally stopping by an old ABC liquor store that had either shutdown or run out of booze.

"I think I mighta got windburn," Julius said when we finally stopped.

I turned around and let out a breath. It was nice to be home again.

Ferris hopped off my back and gave Julius a quick swipe before landing on all fours in the middle of the blacktop.

"I don't think that cat likes nobody but you," he said, rubbing a spot on his arm. "How'd he lose the ear?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe it looked at him funny."

This brought a chuckle from my friend.

I put my hands on my knees for a moment, which was odd. Usually, skating gave me a bit of a trickle charge of energy, and I'd never felt like Ferris was much of a factor, but it seemed dragging

Julius along did sap a bit of my strength. Not much, but if I were about to get into a brawl, I would be at a disadvantage.

Not that I was planning one of those anytime soon. *Then again, who does?*

“I gotta keep movin’,” I said. “You okay out here by yourself?”

“Yeah, I’m all good. I may have a wander around then mosey on over to the home for a bit. Always wondered what Miss Abigail looked like nekkid.” When I shot him a look, he laughed again and raised his hands. “Nah, nah. I’m joking. Not going to turn into one of them pervy ghosts I expect we got around these parts.”

I frowned. “Maybe I should take you to Shady Hills. The night isn’t completely safe for us.”

“I hear ya, but I’m already dead, so I reckon things can’t get too dangerous even for an old fart like me.”

“There are worse things than dead, Julius,” I said.

Julius watched me for a moment then nodded. “I’ll take your word on that, but... hey?”

I spun around.

Julius said, “Hey, hey! *Hey!*”

His voice got loud and panicked, and I spun back, not yet able to see what he was reacting to. I looked around, and Ferris had already

slunk away. Maybe he'd seen the trouble coming.

*Shit. See what happens when I don't plan on having a brawl?*

Finally catching his line of sight, I cocked a pair of fists at my hips.

Running toward us, no *lumbering* toward us, was a dreadful, horrifying creature, one that would give nightmares to nightmares. Nine feet tall, two muscle-twisted legs, four powerful arms, each tipped with bloodied claws, a mouth that jutted out from its head that took up a full third of its body.

The creature ran toward us, its arms raised, bloodied maw wide as it cried out, "Painter! Paaaaiinnt!"

I could actually feel the *bam, bam, bam* of its hulking weight shake the world around us—at least, our world—and this deadly, disgusting beast was coming right for me, but then, I suspected because he'd remembered, he stopped.

Instead of wrapping me in a bear hug—I could see on his face, that was his intention—he stopped about two feet from me, hopped once—*bam!*—and then waved.

"Hi!"

"Hi, Gary," I said and laughed. "You look like you could bench-press a bus. Two busses."



“Because I got four arms, right?” Gary shouted, raising them into the air. “Raarh!”

“Monsters don’t say ‘raarh,’ man,” I said, and more than ever, I really did want a hug from the guy.

“I been looking all over for you,” he said then wrapped his arms around himself. “You look well.”

“Now you’re trying to be all cool, yeah? And thanks for...” I raised both of my hands, palms splayed, moving them side to side in a small sweep.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. No touchy,” he said. “Fine by me. I’ve got secrets in my past, right? Real dark, dark shit that I don’t want nobody to know about.”

I smiled at him. “No, you don’t.”

Again, he raised his arms, shaking his head. “No, I don’t!” He laughed. “Good to see you. You know—”

“Uh, I’m here too, Gary,” Julius said. “If’in you somehow didn’t see me over here.”

“I just saw you a little while back, Julius,” he said then turned. “But, yes, very nice to see you. Painter’s back!”

“I’m not back.”

“Oh, Painter’s not back,” Gary said and rounded his shoulders. All four. “Come on, man, why don’t you stick around a couple days? I got a new thing.”

“What new thing?”

“Well, since you’re like the dead Perry Mason now, going around detecting all the time—”

“Perry Mason was a lawyer, man.”

Gary shook his massive head. “Nah, not in the new one. He’s a private investigator *and* a lawyer. Rebranding. It’s got that Irish guy from that other show about spies in the eighties.”

I laughed. “Gary, you know all that TV is going to rot your brain.”

“I don’t got a brain! I’m dead.” Gary smiled and a glob of spittle flew from his mouth. “There’s this nice old couple—she downs a bottle of wine and passes out, but he’s up all night long, watching the tube. I’m there most nights. I get to watch some shows, and he’s got company. I think he knows I’m there.”

“Gar’, have you seen yourself?” I said, glancing around at the livies walking past on either side of the street, oblivious to three ghosts standing right there: a PI in a hoodie, a tuxedoed army vet, and a ten-foot-tall nightmare. “If he knew you were there, he’d have a stroke.”

“I think he’s *had* a stroke. He’s old.”

“Not my point.”

“And half of his face is a bit slidey. That’s what happens, I think.”

Julius scowled. “I don’t think people say someone’s face is slidey, for chrissake, Gary. That’s rude, boy.”

Again, Gary looked dejected. “I didn’t mean it to be, um, mean. Just...” He looked back toward downtown. “I feel like maybe I should go apologize.”

“Uh huh,” I said. “Later. You said you were looking for me. You lonely? I’m working a case down in Atlanta, but I’ll be bac—”

“Ooooh,” Gary said, his enthusiasm coming back like a slap.

“What kinda case?”

“There all the same kind, man. Murder.”

Julius said, “Well, you got more of a stalker right now, Paint. Not really—”

“Oh, wow,” Gary interrupted. “That’s why I was looking for you! There was a guy up here a few weeks back. Asking around about you.”

That stopped me in my tracks. “Who was asking about me?”

“I tailed him for a while,” he said, “covert like you do.”

Julius sucked in a breath. “And just how does a Purple People Eater go covert?”

“I can go small, not just big,” Gary said, his lower lip—as massive as it was—pouted outward. He was a friend and would never hurt me, but damn, that expression gave me the willies. “Anyway, he was asking about you, trying to find out about the famous Painter Mann.”

“Who’d he ask?”

“Well, he was in the old Blind for a while,” Gary said, referring to the Blind Spot, which wasn’t really around anymore. It was like a bad neighborhood in the InBetween. Most of them—they’d been in big cities and small—had broken apart after the machines were destroyed. I smiled and remembered how much Gary had been a part of that.

I couldn’t have done it without him. Or a brilliant dead reporter named Brenda.

“Then he was zipping around, place to place, and I kinda... uh... lost him,” Gary said. “I’m not so good at tracking, like you.”

I shrugged. “Takes practice.”

“Maybe you could show me?” Gary said, and some spittle flew onto my chest. “I ended up in Colorado. Wasn’t paying attention, I

guess.” He scratched his head. “At least I think it was Colorado. Might have been Mississippi.”

Julius tsked. “Man, Colorado ain’t nowhere near Miss’ssippi. You didn’t never take geography in school?”

Gary frowned. “No, I hate math.”

“It... what?” Julius blinked.

“Gary, focus here,” I said then shot a glance at Julius. “When was this?”

He sighed and closed his eyes. “Um, a few weeks back, I think. Had to have been.”

“Did someone tell him I might be in Atlanta?” *Is that how he found me?*

A shrug. “I don’t know. I was in Mississippi.”

“Or Colorado,” Julius added.

I shot the old guy—who was looking less old by the hour, to be honest—with another look, wanting to keep Gary on track. But Julius wasn’t picking up on it. I needed to work on my looks one day.

Before I could open my mouth, Julius stepped in. “What’d he look like?”

“I dunno.” Gary sighed. “About five-ten, medium build. Brown shoes, tan slacks, blue coat that had those flaps on them like an old

army jacket, but more tweed than wool. Had a tiny scar on his left cheek, barely noticeable, one eyebrow was slightly shorter than the other, and his ears hung a bit too low on his head, like maybe Eastern European descent. Dark hair split down the middle, kinda like that guy who used to play that old detective on black-and-white TV—”

“Sherlock Holmes,” Julius said, nodding.

I scowled at Julius. “What?”

“Sorry,” he said, waving a thick hand. “Uh, Charlie Chan?”

“No-*wah*!” Gary said, turning the two-letter word into two syllables, rolling his eyes. All three of them. “I didn’t say he was Japanese.”

I put my hands to the sides of my head. Before Julius could correct him, I said, “You both need to stop talking, it’s making my brain hurt.”

“Oh, and his eyes were all white,” Gary said, smiling again. “No pupils. Like cue balls.”

We were all quiet for a moment.

Julius looked at me. “You woulda thought he’d have led with that.”

I threw my hands up. “All right, okay.” I walked in a tight circle as a cab whipped past us. I motioned over to an empty bus-stop stand,

one that I knew had a history. In this part of the city, there was a lot of violent history. Sitting down, I tried to collect my thoughts.

“Mad Jimmy came to Minneapolis, searching for me,” I said. “I wasn’t here, but someone told him to look in Atlanta.”

*Did I used to live there? Maybe that’s why I’ve been gravitating to the ATL for the past year.*

“So,” Gary said, talking slowly, eyes going from me to Julius, who’d taken a seat on the bench next to me. “What does that mean?”

“It means he’s after me for something,” I said. Then I thought about the old was-is bat I’d taken from the bar in Chicago. It had been Jimmy’s originally. Maybe he wanted it back? “I gotta go, man. Ah, dammit.” My heart fell. “I wish... I wish I was better at this.”

“At what?”

“Being, you know, a private investigator. I’ve been following around this old Irish detective the past few days, trying to pick stuff up,” I said and sighed. “I don’t think it’s helping.”

“Boy,” Julius said. “I reckon you are better than you know. If it means you gotta out detective the guy, then you’ll do it. I have faith in ya.”

I nodded but wasn’t feeling it.

“You know what it also means, Paint?” Gary was obviously keen to get in on the moment. “Like, if he knows you spent time in Atlanta at one time and you don’t?”

“That he’s way ahead of me.”

“Maybe,” Gary said and sat down next to Julius. I swear, I felt the bus-stop seat creak and lift me about an inch. “But it means someone in *this* town knows you. From before.”

*Wow. He’s got a point.* I said, “You’re right.”

“Maybe they know who you are,” Gary said. “Or, you know, *were*.”

Julius leaned toward me. “Time for that later. We gotta stop this Mad Jimmy before he gets up to some real mischief.”

“*We*? No, no, if I’m—”

“Yes, we,” Julius said. “Because one thing that crazy bastard don’t have that you do is friends. And you need every advantage right now if we’re going to beat this asshole.”

He was right.

“It’s just,” I said. “This... is what I’m supposed to be doing, for whatever reason. This is my function or destiny or whatever. Am I so bad at it that I need help?”

“Sherlock Holmes had help,” Gary said. “He had Watson. And even that dumb inspector guy.”



“Charlie Chan, hell, he had a whole mess a’ kids,” Julius said.  
“Which makes me think maybe he was Catholic. Those families have lotsa kids. Chan don’t sound Catholic, though.”

“All right, all right.”

Julius rubbed his face. “Maybe Baptist. They have a lotta kids?”

Gary stood up, putting his hands on his hips—well, two hands on his hips and the other two just above them.

“No man is an island, and no Sherlock is without Watson,” he said, smiling a terrifying smile. “And you got double the Watsons right here, man. So you’re even better than Holmes!”

“I prefer that to being Number One son, Number Two son. Those are terrible names for boys,” Julius said, then saw both Gary and me staring at him with stupid smiles. “What? One kid sounds like piss, the other like shit. Who’d name their boys that?”

I gave up. They were both weird, sure, but they were right. If I was going to start trusting anyone but myself, it should be my friends. And I had two sitting right there.

*I am a lucky man.*

“Okay,” I said and stood up. Almost on cue, Ferris padded up and rubbed against my thigh. “Don’t think any famous detectives had a cat, though.”

Ferris waddled toward Gary, who bent down to pet him and, in a casual manner, was treated to a set of claws across the shin.

“That ain’t no cat,” Julius said. “That there is a demon creature.”

“Alright,” I said, looking south. “Time to go to Atlanta. Mad Jimmy is planning to kill two more people.”

“Two *more*?” Gary said, taking a shaky step back.

Julius said, “He’s killed three already. Was livies, now they’re spooks.”

“Why? Painter, why is a ghost *killing people*?”

“It’s the nature of this place,” I said, trying to swallow my anger. That would only cloud my thoughts. “It slithers through every fiber, every shimmer, every flicker of the InBetween.”

Gary stared at me, wide-eyed. He then looked to Julius who filled in the blanks for him.

“Revenge, Gary,” he said.

Slowly, a smile twisted to his large, monstrous face. “And we’re going to stop him!” Once again, my friend was brimming with excitement, hopping from foot to foot, making the ground tremble.

I said, “Gotta go, but it seems I lose a bit of energy dragging people with me.”

“Oh,” he said, deflated.

“No, no,” I said. “You’re coming. But it’s time to get small.”

Gary gave me a grin so large, he could have bitten a building in half. “Oooh, I *like* that! That could be my new catchphrase! Time to —”

“Ah, ah,” I said, raising a finger. “One rule. Nobody has a catchphrase. Anybody starts using catchphrases, and I leave them in Mississippi.”

Julius said, “Or Colorado.”

“You’re on thin ice there, Julius.” I gave him a devilish grin. “Dangerously close to a catchphrase.”

At that moment, Gary began to tremble and shake, his form shifting and pulsing. His voice warbled, “You’re gonna wanna step back.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Hefting her bag under her arm, Ellie left the umbrella in the back seat of Paul Barnes's car, twisting the silver band on her finger so that the tiny sapphire stone faced toward her palm. *Blue for brolly*, she thought, cementing the association in her mind. In recent years, she'd often relied heavily on her rings to remember this and that.

However, since the morning in William Morgan's backyard, she was forgetting less. Her mind, sharper. *Does this old woman need death to feel alive again?* She stared at the ring on her pinky, which always faced inward. A few weeks ago, its emerald had been looking cloudy, milky. It was now clear and brilliant again.

She tapped that band and allowed herself a small smile. Touching the ring with its diamond pressed against the flesh of her palm, she offered a silent prayer.

Ellie turned slowly to see Barnes leaning on the car's roof, the driver's side door pressing against his back.

"Doesn't make sense," he said. "None of it."

"Hoping a cheeky fingerprint or tearful confession will clear it all up?" she asked and stared at the nearby homes, each looking the

same as the other, differing only in the color of their paint. “It’s never that easy.”

“Sometimes it is,” Barnes said. “Gabrielle’s basically confessed even if she still claims not to remember anything. Maybe she just hasn’t come to terms with it.”

“And Ray Scones’s murder? You’re holding Jeremy Talbot, *another* suspect who might have done it but doesn’t recall it? How is that—”

“We’ve got his fingerprints, El,” he said, then quieter, “At the scene.”

Ellie walked back toward him, nodding her head toward the house they’d parked in front of.

“Now Helen Dorsey? Her *husband*, really?”

As she rounded behind him, he leaned more heavily on the car’s roof. “Well, I guess we’re about to find out.”

“Come on,” Ellie said, grabbing his arm and spinning the man around to face her. “Three people laying on slabs gettin’ a chill, all done by three separate people who appeared to have no motive? None?”

Barnes sighed and rubbed his face. “There’s a motive, El. We just haven’t found it yet,” he said, and she half smiled, because, despite

having known him for only a few days, she knew he was trying to convince himself more than her.

“Rubbish. We’re missing something here.”

“Maybe it’s like that Hitchcock movie where strangers plot murders and all that.”

“Sure, if the conspirators murder one another’s target.”

The Georgia detective screwed up his face. “Is that how it went? I only know it as pop reference. Never saw it.”

She let go of his arm and turned away. “You’re probably too busy watching all them superhero movies.”

“Sure,” he said, following her toward the house. “Super-strength, super-speed? One guy has eyes that shoot lasers. Who wouldn’t want that?”

Ellie frowned. “His optometrist.”

She raised her fist to knock, but the door opened before she could. Helen Dorsey’s husband looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

“We’re so sorry to bother you, Mr. Dorsey,” she said as Barnes’s mouth hung open. “I know you’ve had a terrible time of it, and the last thing you need is our ugly mugs darkening your door.”

Alfred stared forward, slurring his words. “I was just going through Helen’s stuff.” He then looked at the woman in his doorway like he’d

just noticed her. “For the, um, the funeral.”

In the living room, both detectives sat, leaning forward on the edge of the couch, as if out of deference, worried they might wrinkle the furniture. Barnes flicked through his phone while Ellie traced her eyes around the room. Each picture, vase, and figurine had been placed in the perfect spot, angled just so, by a woman no longer here.

A few minutes later, Dorsey came in with a tea service and put it on the small table in front of them. He lifted his own drink off the tray, dropping into an old chair and tightening his grip on the half-empty glass.

“I’m not much of a tea person. That was Helen,” he said. “But I learned to make it for her, and it would bring out her Helen smile. She liked the peppermint one. I hope you don’t mind. Herbal.”

Ellie smiled sweetly. “That’s lovely, but you didn’t have to. Very kind.”

The old man took a deep pull of his drink and ran the back of his hand over his mouth. When he blew out the breath, it filled the room with the smell of sweat, sorrow, and single malt.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m ready.”



The two on the couch looked at each other. The cop said, "Ready for what, sir?"

Alfred blinked. "You know who killed my Helen, don't you?"

Barnes said, "Actually, we have a question for you about—"

Ellie shot him a look that would have melted diamonds.

"Ah, well, we are working on that, sir," Barnes said, avoiding her eyes. "Getting closer by the day, but we were hoping if you might show us something. Something that belonged to Helen."

The man's shoulders fell, and he nodded slowly. Words wouldn't come to him, so he lifted a hand toward them, palm up.

Ellie said, "There was a photograph on the wall. You mentioned it earlier."

A nod.

"I was hoping we could see it. Might help us, you know, with the case."

Alfred looked between them, eyes bloodshot. Ellie saw rage there, buried but not deeply. He said, "What? You want to look at her photo?"

"Yes, sir," Barnes said, flicking his eyes toward the woman sitting next to him. "You said she'd taken it down, you know, after... what happened at the fair."

“Wasn’t a fair. Chili contest. Not rides or balloons or face-painting, Detective Barnes. Just hundreds of people, maybe thousands, all there for free spoonfuls of goddamn chili.”

Barnes asked, “Can we see it?”

Alfred laughed darkly. “Didn’t you listen to me before? Every time Helen walked past that photo, a little bit of her died inside. Like that... b-baby. She told me to take it down and destroy it.”

The detective sighed, rubbing his belly. “Alfred, I’m so sorry.”

“Why does it even matter? That was a year ago! What would that have to do with someone hurting my Helen? In her *garden*, that was her place, you know. How could anyone...”

Ellie could see all that despair, heartbreak, and anger deep inside Alfred Dorsey desperately trying to claw to the surface.

Barnes raised his hands, standing slowly. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. It was just... you know, something. We’ve got to check all leads and —”

“A lead?” he asked and finished his drink in one swallow. “You must be desperate if you’re digging into an old woman’s photo album.”

“We’re very sorry for disturbing you,” Barnes said and tapped Ellie on the shoulder.

“She told you to destroy it,” she said.

“Because it reminded her of a dead child,” he said, new tears on his cheeks quivering. “Don’t you understand that?”

Closer, closer to the surface.

“I do,” Ellie said, placing her damp palms on her knees. “How did she, um, do in the contest, Alfred?”

“What? What does—”

“Did she win?”

The man sat with his mouth hanging open for a second, his rebuke snagging on something in his throat. His eyes softened. “Third. Which really,” he said, “was totally off. Hers was amazing, the best. She should have won. But...” His voice trembled. “That didn’t matter to Helen. She couldn’t have been more proud. She was so happy. Beaming.”

Ellie smiled, nodding slowly. “Which is why you kept the photo.”

The face of the man sitting opposite her went through every expression she could name. “I said she told me to destroy it!”

“Yes,” Ellie said soothingly. “But, Alfred, that look on her face, the lovely smile, I bet that was the one you fell for all those years ago. Her ‘Helen smile,’ as you called it. I don’t think you’d ever destroy that.”

Alfred folded his hands in his lap, closed his eyes, and began to shake, weeping.

Barnes tapped her again and threw his eyes toward the door. Ellie shook her head.

“Wherever you hid it from her,” she said, her voice quiet and even, “can you please go and get that for us? Then we will leave you with your grief. With your memories of a fine, fine woman.”

Slowly, Alfred’s blubbering dwindled into a stony silence.

Barnes finally said quietly, “Come *on*, Ellie.” This time, he grasped her elbow to lift her from the couch. “He doesn’t—”

“Sure, okay,” Alfred said, his voice phlegmy. “My tool shelves.” He stood, stumbling as he regained his feet. “She hated the smell of them, the grease and dirt, so I knew she’d never nose through there. I’ll grab it.”

He shuffled from the room and up the stairs.

Detective Barnes let out a sigh and slowly sat back down on the couch, leaning back and staring out the window. Ellie stared into the palms of her hands, her brow furrowed.

“You don’t have to be smug about it,” he said.

“Aye, I’m not being smug.”

Barnes waved his hand in the air. "I can see the fumes of smugness wafting off you."

Ellie chuckled. "That's probably just the Bengay."

He leaned forward, eyes boring into her, as if willing the woman to turn to him. She didn't.

"It's..." he said, casually clasping his hands together. "How'd you know he had it?"

Ellie smiled and lifted her shoulders.

"That," her friend said, "was a smug shrug."

"Oy, let it go. Maybe you just don't know what it's like to be in love, deep-rooted into every part of ya'."

"What's that supposed to mean? I've been married for seven years!"

The old Irish detective shook her head, finally accepting his gaze. "Come back to me in thirty, and you'll have your answer." Alfred was now descending the stairs, tenderly holding a picture frame to his chest. "There was no chance a man who cared so deeply would have thrown that photo away. None."

"But you couldn't have—"

Ellie turned and fixed him with a hard stare. "See what others don't, keep it close, and drop it when ya need it."

Barnes nodded.

Alfred entered the room and nearly tripped on the foot of his chair, his eyes locked on the photo in his hands. Using his sleeve, he rubbed away a smear of grease. Smiling distantly, his eyes were damp.

“She was so happy, so proud of her third place. Then... well, then she wasn’t. You know, she stopped cooking.”

“Oh dear” was all Ellie could say.

“Ah, she’d boil some water for pasta. Heat up sauce... but after that b-baby... no more,” he said and fell back into his chair. “She fell out of love with cooking.”

“It wasn’t her fault, Alfred,” Ellie said.

A shrug. “No one’s fault,” he said flatly, as if he’d said the words a thousand times before. “God’s will.”

She waited for another moment, her hand extended. “Alfred, may I see it?”

The widower passed it over, his eyes never leaving the image beneath the glass. Barnes’s eyes locked onto the picture, unblinking. Ellie was pretty sure he was holding his breath.

“Do you mind if we borrow this, Alfred?” she asked, standing. Barnes saw that her hands were trembling. “I promise I will take

good care of it. We just need to make a copy.”

The old man, slumped in his chair, nodded.

Finally, Barnes spoke: “Do you know any of these other people in the photograph?”

Alfred, lost to his memories, only shook his head then said, “Never before, never after.”

They said their goodbyes and left the man to be comforted by his misery. Ellie tucked the photograph under her arm. She waited until they got into the coolness of the car to take another proper look at it.

“Jesus, El,” Barnes said, slamming his car door closed and firing up the engine in one fluid motion.

She reached out and put a hand on the gearshift, her eyes still on the photo.

They both stared for a moment, not a word spoken.

Finally, Ellie said, tapping the picture with each name, “Helen Dorsey. Ray Scones. William Morgan. They’re all here. All of them dead.”

“What the hell is going on?” Barnes shifted the gear into drive and pulled away. “Someone’s targeting everyone in that photo?”

“Seems like, yes.”

“Let’s get back to the station and get that circulated. It’s a hell of a lead, whatever it means.”

Ellie lifted the photo closer, as if it might finally whisper the truth to her, masked by the moaning of the car’s eight-cylinder engine.

“Two others in the photo,” she said. “This man and this woman. Do you recognize either of them?”

“No,” Barnes said. “They could already be dead.”

“If not, we need to find them before that is indeed true.”





## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

By the time we returned, night had wrapped itself around Marietta Square. It was still hot, and the humidity blanketed the park as if to stifle any voices that might betray its secrets.

In the sunlight, this was a happy place, bustling with activity—lovers holding hands, teens riding bikes, and children pushed by parents on swings.

In the evening, it was quiet. The theater had cut its nine o'clock shows, and the bar began closing at a respectable time, sending the few remaining drunks who'd kept the place in business to float through the empty streets.

I knew the clock was ticking on those responsible for Mad Jimmy Withy's death. There had been five. Somehow, he'd taken out his revenge on three already.

Of course, I had no idea how he was pulling that off. *How does a ghost kill three people?* Every second we stood there doing nothing, the world around us seemed to grow darker, more menacing.

And it wasn't just because of the two chimeras swirling around the fountain.

"Are they dangerous?" Julius asked, his voice uneven.

“Very,” I said. “But ever since their, um, master has gone, they’re a bit aimless. They get agitated around strong emotions. Harmless until that happens.”

“What happens when they’re agitated?” Gary asked, once again looking like one of the monsters he favored. Shorter than before, he was merely seven feet instead of nine or ten. I wondered if that was some leftover from being small enough to fit into Julius’s hand on the way down from Minneapolis.

“They may chase you around for a bit,” I said. “But if they touch you, you’re pulled into the depths of oblivion for eternity and end up wishing you were in hell.”

I hadn’t meant to make it sound quite so dramatic.

However, the effect those words had on my friends told me otherwise. They both stared at the creature, seemingly unsure what to do with their limbs.

“Don’t worry about them,” I said. “They’re a bit like mean dogs. If you don’t bother them, they basically don’t bother you.”

“Me and you knew different kinda dogs,” Julius said, his eyes locked on the chimeras.

“Listen,” I said. “Jimmy’s knocking off the people who killed him. If we want to save whoever’s left, we have to find out who they are.”

“How?” Gary asked.

For a moment, I stared at the swings in the square twitching in the light breeze. “He killed William Morton, and when I went to find William, he’d disappeared from his home.”

“Oh Jesus,” Gary said. “You think Jimmy’s building another machine? All that shit’s going to start up again?”

I watched the chimeras swirl around the dry fountain, the one I’d crawled out from under only the day before.

“Could be, but I don’t see any streaks across the sky.”

“Maybe he’s, you know, puttin’ them in cold storage,” Julius said. “He knows you’d try to come tear it down again, so he’s got some spook warehouse where he’s stocking up.”

That actually ticked something over in my head.

When I was down in New Orleans, I’d been on a case where hundreds of ghosts had gone missing. Vanished. It took some time, but I’d discovered them trapped and hidden away.

That had been Voodoo Cher’s doing. Looking back, it’s obvious her machine-maker had been a part of that. This was all about getting the power stations back up and running to finally get her revenge on the living. Wage war, kill everyone.

But Mad Jimmy had a revenge all his own. Settle an old score with those who had killed him.

I said, "If we can find one of these three Jimmy's killed, they may have the answers we need."

"How do we go and do that?" Julius asked. "You said William Morton is missing."

"Yeah." I stared up at the stars for a moment. "And I'll wager Gary's monster balls it'll be the same for Helen Dorsey and the first guy, Ray Scones."

Our huge friend cleared his throat. "I don't have, you know, those." When we just stared at him, he clarified. "You know, it felt gross making privates on..." He stammered for a moment, then just raised his massive arms. "Rarr!"

"Good to know," I said. "Gary, go check out William Morton's place. Maybe you can work out where he is now."

"How? I mean, I'm not an investigator, Paint."

I nodded. "Just look for stain. It's dark now so you might be able to see a trail. Just look around."

Gary nodded, and some spittle flew off and hit the ground.

"And maybe, um, dial down the monster a bit? If we do find William, we don't want to scare the bejesus out of him."

The elder of our group didn't want to be left out. "What should I be doin'?"

"Julius, there's a woman named Peg at the police station," I said. "Tell her what we've found out so far. Maybe she knows who Jimmy's after."

"How will I know which spook over there is this Peg?"

"Uh, it'll come to you," I said.

I gave both of my friends the addresses and had them repeat them back to me a few times so I knew they had it right. We agreed to come back to the square in two hours.

"Where you going, Paint?"

I sighed. "I just... I don't know enough."

Gary said, "You get used to it." He smiled.

"He's in town killing these spooks, so why's he giving me so much grief? I didn't kill the guy."

"How would you know?" Julius asked. "You don't remember anything before you died."

"True," I said, kicking at a stone. When I felt a slight jolt, I thought for a moment I'd connected, but it was just Ferris leaping to my shoulder. "I'm going find out anything I can about those he's already killed. It might help prevent the ones still alive from joining them."

\* \* \*

When I arrived at Ellie's house, I wasn't surprised to see her lights on. Sure, as a former cop, she wasn't scared of much, but Atlanta, even the 'burbs, was bipolar—smiling while staring into the sun; baying at the moon at night.

"No, Rufus," she said, sitting at her small circular table by the window. The little dog was swirling around her ankles, and she likely assumed he was begging for a treat. However, the way the little mongrel would bob its head in my general direction suggested something different.

The dog could sense my ghost cat. It was unnerved by something it couldn't see, which I expect delighted Ferris immensely.

"Rufus, you've been fed," she said, louder. She finally looked up from her legal tablet, pointing the pen at him. "If you don't settle ya self, you'll go in the cupboard."

The dog chuffed and shot another glance toward us, head bobbing from side to side.

Ferris swished his tail and lazily strode over to an opposite wall. Clearly, he was planning to further torture little Rufus. He wasn't a bad cat; this was just their nature.

I gave the dog a wide berth and went to get a peek at her notes. I couldn't help but chuckle—most of what she was writing was unreadable. Not that she had bad penmanship, just the opposite.

On her pad were a series of swirls, loops, dots, and crosses. The old cop had apparently created a coded shorthand long ago to keep sensitive material away from any wandering eyes. I wondered if her thoughts, the words in her mind, were similarly disguised.

Floating in the middle of the page's paisley sea, there were a few words written in plain English:

William Morgan.

Helen Dorsey.

Ray Scones.

*Why hasn't she written those names in her secret code?* Then I knew. "You want them to be real to you," I said and looked at her face. "Not hidden from sight."

Next to William, she'd put a dash, along with another name: Gabrielle, his daughter. Next to Ray, the name Jeremy Talbot. Next to Helen Dorsey, Alfred.

Each name that came after the dash carried a question mark.

"This is bollocks, Rufus," she said and muttered a curse under her breath. "If I was asked to scribble down the names of three who were



definitely not the killin' type"—she tapped the pad with her finger —"I'd have written Gabby, Jeremy, and Alfred!"

She sat for a moment, brooding, lost in thought. Staring at her, I wondered if she could really look at someone and tell they were a killer. Or a would-be killer.

Rufus was scanning the corner of the room, where Ferris sat casually licking a paw. When the cat caught the other animal looking toward him, he hissed. Surprisingly, the dog took a half step back and let out a whimper. It cowed and pressed itself to the woman's leg.

Ellie laughed. "You see something out the window worth chasing? You ever catch one of those critters you scrabble after in the backyard, I don't think you'd know what to do with it. See, *you* don't have the killin' eye."

I said, "What's the killin' eye, Ellie?"

She crossed her arms and stared off, her expression unreadable. *Even her face is written in swirls and loops.* On the outside, she seemed like some affable old lady I might see at the grocery store with a wire basket full of those vegetables no one else ever bought. The truth of it? This woman had seen things over her long life I could not imagine.

“You know, it’s not even in the eye itself, I don’t think,” she said, and her dog was rapt. So was I, and I sat on the floor to listen. “It lurks just behind, like something’s crawled in there, some intent staring out the eyes, using them like windows. You look hard enough...”

“And what?” I asked, knowing she couldn’t hear me.

“It’s like lust in the young—eyes are the same color, same shape, but there’s that thing lookin’ out.” Her smile faded. “You can see something in Alfred Dorsey’s eyes too. The moment his girl with her Helen smile was taken from him, something crawled up inside, and now it sits there and stares out through the glass. That’s a pain you can’t fake.” She stared down at the pad, her voice now just a whisper. “That’s how I know he didn’t do this.”

*Alfred is Helen’s husband. They think he killed his wife?* The thought pinched a spot in my chest.

“But the killin’ eye,” she said, leaning over to a sideboard and reaching into her massive purse. She checked her phone, frowned, and stuffed it back. “Maybe women are more in tune with it since back when we were livin’ in caves. When it got dark and the fire was out, you had to know if the man in there with you was looking to make babies or slit your throat. *Survival*.” She nodded to herself. “A

powerful mentor. It's a look in the eye that will darken you each time you see it. You realize something nobody talks about: we are all capable of it."

Her words tickled something in my mind. As Ellie scribbled on her tablet, I did a quick sweep of the downstairs rooms. Then I hit the steps leading to the upper floor.

As I quickly searched the home, I could hear her talking to the black screen of her phone. "Come on, Barnsey. Give us a ring."

Upstairs, I'd discovered the same as the floor below.

Ellie had no mirrors in her home. It could have been that the house had never come with them for whatever reason. Or maybe she didn't want to be reminded she was old. But after what she'd just said, I wondered if she didn't want to see her own reflection for another reason.

When I got back downstairs, she was just talking to her dog once again.

"—no sense. No way three people in the same photo get murdered and it's not somehow connected."

"Wait, what? You've got a *photograph* of the victims?" I couldn't help but join in my half of the conversation.

“There’s a chance one or both of the remaining two are already dead,” she said, tapping the page. “Or... one of the other two is...”

“Behind the murders.”

I walked over and saw a picture frame now lying flat on the table. She’d pulled it out when I’d gone upstairs. William Morgan hadn’t been smiling when I’d met him. Here, he beamed like the other four in the picture. Frowning, I thought, *I don’t recognize any of these... wait. Wait! I know her!*

Closing my eyes, I tried to think of where I’d seen her. *Recently. But definitely not smiling. Face... distended somehow. Agony or anger.* Then I knew it. Leaning closer, I stared at the face of the woman I called the Screamer.

She’d been the one terrorizing the police station. Another victim of Mad Jimmy’s or, rather, some proxy. The silver-haired woman would be Helen Dorsey, leaving two men I didn’t know. One near the back with slick dark hair, his flannel shirt with one too many buttons open. The man in the front wearing a white t-shirt with some writing on it held a trophy between himself and another winner.

One of those men might still be alive.

A strange angular shape caught my eye, right on the edge of the image, but Ellie turned a page on her large notepad suddenly

blocking it out.

“Dammit,” I said, which prompted a low growl from my cat. “Hush!” When I looked over, I nearly burst out laughing. Ferris had a look on his face—and sure, I’m anthropomorphizing here—that seemed to say *The fuck you just say to me?*

Ellie stood up from her scribbling, which got Rufus to his feet which, in turn, prompted my cat to take a few steps toward it.

The dog perked up its ears and tore off up the stairs.

“Rufus, ya skittish kir,” Ellie said, half laughing as it disappeared from sight. In the kitchen, she filled a kettle with water from the tap. Staring out the window, she muttered to herself, so I leaned in closely, trying to hear what she was saying.

A moment later, the sound of water overflowing the kettle snapped her attention away.

“Ah, damn!” She snapped her head back, giving me a horrifying look into her skull. If I’d had a stomach, which I didn’t, it would have emptied into the sink.

I know, at the very least, I was never a doctor when I was alive. I couldn’t stand to see the insides of people. Or inside stuff coming out, blood, brains, any of it. Well, most of it.

With the kettle on the stove, Ellie twisted the knob and leaned back against the counter.

“Okay, could some nutter have seen the picture and decided to kill ‘em?”

I said, “No, murderers don’t choose victims from photographs. That sort of shit only happens in bad movies.”

Ellie opened her eyes, pulled out a candy from her pocket, and popped it into her mouth.

“Why had they been together?” she mused.

“They’ve got little trophies, looks like some contest.”

“A cook-off. All of them contestants,” she said as she paced the room. “Maybe some bugger is pissed he lost, taking it out on the competition.”

I considered explaining that these were the five who’d killed Mad Jimmy and his ghost was now enacting his vengeance, plucking them off one by one. But she’d never hear my words.

“Some of these poor souls are all old as dirt, though,” she said, staring at the steam beginning to drift from the kettle. “If one had been a homicidal maniac, that probably would have come up by now.”

“It did,” I mumbled. “One time, years ago, in Mexico.”

Four were dead, and Mad Jimmy Withy would soon be coming for the last one, if he hadn't already.

I wondered aloud, "But how is he doing it?"

Rufus slowly peered into the room, looking left and right, then earnestly at Ellie.

"Rufus, at this point, we've got three different people fingered for three different murders. Could they have gone in on it together?"

"No," I said, wishing more than ever I had a voice in the living world once again. "Jimmy's doing this! His revenge!"

Ellie bent down to the trembling dog and cooed. "Oh, dear, what's gotten into ya, lad? Why ya shaking?"

Now sitting on the floor and holding the shaking dog close, she rocked it as if it were a baby. She then held up one of Rufus's paws and said, "William Morton's daughter thinks she killed her dad because she bought a hammer." Then, she held up the other paw. "The video game kid, Jeremy Talbot, left all sorts of evidence behind at Ray Scones's place. And the only other prints on Helen Dorsey's sewing needles was a man who will never stop missing her, never be whole again."

"Can't you see?" I said. "That doesn't make sense."

"Don't make sense."

Sitting on the floor opposite her, I laughed. “At least we agree on that.” Thinking about the murders, I knew Jimmy could have pulled off a “cab ride” to kill them. I’d seen that before.

Basically, that’s a ghost possessing a person, but the, well, *host* had to be complicit in some way—even if they don’t entirely know it. They had to open themselves, offer themselves, to something out there. Lost, depressed people looking for something to fix some hurt. Then after a few weeks, even months of ghost whispers and manipulation, a spook could slip inside.

“And with a living body, do what they please,” I said and looked over, trying to find Ferris. Maybe talking to a pet helped people think. But was Ferris really my pet? Were cats anyone’s pets?

But it didn’t fit.

“He could possibly pull off a cab ride with one person to kill another. It would take a long while, but it is possible. But *three* different killers?” I looked over at Ellie. “*Three* different cab rides? That would take ages, so what’s the point?”

“Okay, so maybe William Morgan’s daughter and video game kid were working together?” she said, petting her dog’s scraggly head. “Can’t be. Gabrielle came to us and basically confessed.” She held



the dog's tiny face to hers. "Not really the criminal mastermind way, doggo."

"You've got the wrong criminal mastermind. And this one's got a serious advantage, lady. Prick's already dead. Good luck catching him."

The kettle began to whistle, so Ellie reached up and flipped off the stove, still sitting on the floor. Rufus was now up, his jitters gone, and he was staring at the pantry door. Ellie sighed and stood slowly.

Her hand on the door's knob, she leaned forward, slumped slightly.

My heart ached as I saw how much the case troubled the woman. On her face I could see the concern she had for the victims and the frustration that if she didn't work it out, there would be more death. She put a hand on the wall, as if to steady herself, the weight of this responsibility—

"Oh, damn, I thought I had a fart," she said.

*Ah well.*

"But I don't trust them anymore, Rufus," she added, opening the pantry and fishing out a treat. The tiny dog-bone-shaped kibble fell to the floor. "Feels like gas, but you commit, and you've got trouble. The sort that requires laundering. Fine at home, but give it a go in

public, and it goes bad. Might be you gotta smash a lamp or start a fire, because to cover shitting your pants up, you need a very good distraction.”

Ellie’s eyes lit up. She walked backward to the sink and leaned back. “Okay then, go there. Let’s say it’s not three randos.”

The dog sat, its tiny feet shifting on the tile floor.

“Doesn’t matter. Once Jimmy’s done, you’ll have five stiffs, and I’ll have five spooks I gotta clear.”

*That still troubles me. Where are those new spooks floating around?* Well, the Screamer was at the cop shop, but still, the other three...

Ellie snagged a towel from the drawer, wrapped it around the iron handle of the kettle, and poured the liquid into the waiting cup. Not looking, she reached up, slowly opened a cupboard, and fished around in a small box.

“What if it’s one killer?” she asked as she slipped a tea bag from its box and held it over the cup. “Improbable and goes against all evidence, but those are... the best...”

“The best? The best what? Board games? Pick-up lines?” I asked, finally spying Ferris wandering through the living room.

“Oh, Rufus.” At the floor in front of her, the tiny dog was trembling as it stared at the biscuit. “Go treat!”

The command given, the dog burst forward and snapped up the dog treat, devouring it like a drowning man sucking down a gulp of air.

Still, I was stuck on the idea that there were new murder victims wandering around a neighborhood, and I hadn’t stumbled onto them.

“Mad Jimmy could be storing them away,” I said, getting a perk of my cat’s ears. “To start up his machines again. A killing spree’s a fine start, but three different cab rides, three different killers? That’s a hell of a lot of extra effort to—”

Ellie said, watching her dog snuffle after crumbs, “So what if there was just the one?”

*It must have something to do with firing up his machines again.*  
Just like New Orleans and those hundreds of missing ghosts.  
Voodoo Cher’s endgame.

Ellie watched Rufus licking the floor, getting up every last crumb. She blew out a deep breath. “If it is one killer, maybe they’ve got a grudge against everyone in that photo, everyone from the competition.”

She scratched a spot on her head. "One of them was holding a bigger trophy than the others. Best Bean Chili, Best No-Bean Chili, whatever. They all won a trophy, so it all musta been damn good chili. But we will never know their prized recipes, will we, Rufus? They are all gone, and the dead do not give up their secrets." She gave a playful wink to the dog.

*Wait.*

I repeated her words aloud.

"The dead do not give up their secrets." I felt an electric bolt crack through me and jumped to my feet. "Oh Jesus. Hold on," I said, my thoughts coming fast now. "What if this were more than just getting even, getting revenge? Only one of them could have struck that final blow, the killing strike, but all five would know which of them had! *All five know the name of Jimmy Withy's killer.*"

That was it. The final piece of the puzzle.

"Ah hell." Ellie sighed and crossed her arms. "Let's say it was somehow one guy, they've either got a grudge for all five, or, and I've seen this before fuzz-face, there was *one* target, *one* real murder—"

I said, "How could I have missed it?"

She said, "And all these other killings—"

"This isn't just a killing spree. Jimmy Withy's murders—"

“—are all about hiding the secret of a madman.” Ellie laughed. I looked toward her and slowly nodded.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, that’s it.”

She finally dipped her teabag into the hot water, bobbing it up and down. She continued to mutter to her dog, who was now back at the pantry door.

When I’d stumbled into the next room, Ferris looked up at me, mid-lick of his paw.

“Ferris,” I said, “I think Mad Jimmy is trying to protect his secret. Permanently.” I sat down in the middle of the living room.

For the first time I could ever remember, Ferris actually meowed at me.

“He’s not getting revenge,” I said.

Two names—Jimmy’s and his murderer—once the living world knew them, it was over.

“Jimmy Withy is trying to erase the one thing, the only thing, I could use to finally banish him from the InBetween.” I looked at my cat. “The only five people who know the name of his killer.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After sitting and thinking for a few hours, I left Ellie's place in a bit of daze. No, that wasn't entirely true. I was angry with myself.

As I skated toward Marietta Square, the morning sun sizzling in the eastern sky, I called back to Ferris, who was getting the hang of wrapping around my shoulders.

"Ferris, I shoulda known," I said, talking to my cat as Ellie does with her dog. "Mad Jimmy's got plans. I mean, sure he's a homicidal nutbag, but he's a homicidal nutbag with an agenda. Of course. *Of course.*"

How could I have been so blind?

The cat on my back rattled a bit. Hard to tell with Ferris if that was annoyance or some sort of purr. My best guess—it was a little of both.

If I could find any of those he'd killed, or had killed by someone else, they would have the answer. But for as much as the shadow world mattered, the living world was more important.

"There may still be one left alive. We've got to get to him before Jimmy does," I said as I spotted a strange-looking man in a zip-up

sweater waving at me in the square. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him right away.

"Paint!" the man said. "Glad to see ya again!"

*Okay, whatever.* I skated a quick circuit of the square—around the bandstand, past the wall of shrubs on the north face, past the dry fountain—and then skidded to a stop ten feet from the friendly stranger.

Ferris hopped off and sat next to me, licking his paw, oblivious to the threat in front of us.

Sure, the guy looked harmless—genial smile, middle-aged, a hairstyle straight out of a 1950s *Popular Mechanics* spread. Grinning from ear to ear, he stared at me, then his smile turned into an almost-wounded expression.

Then, I recognized him.

"Ah," I said. "Gary."

The smile was back.

"You never told me you could do, you know..." I motioned toward him. "That."

"Whattya mean? I don't hafta be a monster. I can be almost anything."

"Almost?"



He shrugged. "It takes a lot of effort, Paint. And usually a few weeks or so to get it right."

I laughed as I walked around him in a circle. "Wait," I said. "You mean you worked on this? This is in your, um, catalog of—"

"Cloaks!" he said with a warm smile that made me want to ask for a bedtime story. "Such a good word, *cloaks*. Like I'm a spy or something."

"Uh huh. I've only seen you as a bunch of horrifying monsters, man. Never an actual, you know, person." I fought the urge to caress his fuzzy cardigan. "Although, who knows, he could have been a monster too."

"Painter, no!"

"You gotta watch the quiet ones, man," I said and laughed.

"Mr. Rogers was a gift, not only to the children of the world, but humanity itself," Gary said, his hands on his hips.

I had to admit, it was funny to hear Gary's Midwestern twang come out of Fred Rogers's mouth.

"Hmm," I said. "Too nice. Too perfect. I bet when he died, they went into his basement and found a bed with a long rusty chain in a hidden room filled with Barbies. All their limbs burnt off, covered in candle wax."

The Fred Rogers lookalike frowned at me. "I... I don't even know exactly what that's supposed to mean."

"Forget it." I shrugged. "Hey, I told you not to scare William Morgan and you pulled out your Fred. You did good."

"Thanks!" Gary said. "Oh yeah, I found him! Almost left but then he came outta hiding when he saw Mr. Rogers! But he's still very sad."

"Well, he died, so..."

"I tried to cheer him up, but the only thing that got him to crack a smile was the song."

"The song?"

Fred Rogers grinned at me then shot me a wink and a wave. "You and me should be... good neighbors!"

"That's not what he used to say, man." I hated it when people got catchphrases wrong. It was triggering. I looked around and saw some livies on a bench sucking down massive cups of coffee, hoping it would kick-start their brains. A few kids played with toys on the band shell's stage. "Where's William now?"

Gary-Fred smiled at the children. "He wouldn't leave his house. He's waiting."

"For what?"

“His daughter.”

I frowned. “She ain’t coming. Listen, William knows who killed Jimmy Withy. I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah? Dude, with that, you clear him, and our troubles are over!”

“Right, but Julius is one of us now. I need a new Temp to get both names out to the living world.”

“Right,” Gary-Fred said and nodded. “We can cruise the old folks’ homes around town, that’s where you usually recruit, right?”

“That’s where I *recruit*, yes,” I said. Much better word than grooming.

“I saw at least two of them from here to William’s house. There may be someone there who can hear us.”

We needed to get William first. If Mad Jimmy found him again, we’d lose him. We got a few looks from the local spooks as I skated by with an orange tabby on my shoulder and *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*’s lovable host holding the cat’s tail. If there had been phones in the InBetween, someone would have taken a picture, and we would have been trending in ten minutes.

We found William Morgan inside his home. Newbie spooks were usually in one of two states of mind. All were a bit shaken and stirred, but they were either very sad or very angry. It only took me

talking with him for thirty seconds for William to pass from one state to the other.

“God-*damm*it!”

I have that effect on people sometimes.

“Hey, man,” I said, my hands outstretched. “Take ’er easy. We’re here to help.”

“Help? *Help*?” The old man’s ghost skull looked like it was about to burst out of his ghost face. Angry spooks, especially out-of-control angry spooks, are dangerous.

Peg had reminded me of the word: *poltergeist*.

Ferris had tottered off looking for other victims to torture, while Gary checked the perimeter to make sure that no one was watching the house. I didn’t want to be walking into a trap. I’d done that far too many times in the past year.

“No, seriously—”

“No, *you* seriously,” William said, advancing toward me. I took a half step back. He pushed a finger into my face. “You said you’d come back and help! I was all alone!”

“I was, man. I was going—”

“Instead, your partner rolls in here, gives me that same spiel, and he’s dragging me away from my home, but when I blow up at the guy

and finally shake him, I get chased by goddamn monsters.”

*Monsters? Oh, right.*

“Took me half a day to get them away from me!” he continued on his rant. “Snarling and teeth clacking and—”

“Calm down, man.”

“I don’t want to calm down. I’m pissed,” William roared. “Pissed at you, pissed at your partner, pissed at—”

“Listen, listen,” I said in the most soothing voice I could muster. “The chimeras, those monsters, are attracted to emotional energy. You want them back, keep ranting. You don’t? Cut the crap.”

William rose onto his heels and looked like he wanted to punch me. He then cut his eyes to the window, blinked a few times, and gave me a half-hearted flick of his fingers. Then, it was like he deflated, all the air suddenly leaking out of him.

When his head fell forward, I saw the cheap hammer sticking out of the top and wondered if he even knew it was there.

“You said you’d come back,” he said. “I trusted you to come back.”

“I’m sorry, William. Listen, I can help you—I swear it—but I need your help first.” That got me a look. “You’ve got a very important piece of information in that thick skull of yours—hopefully not the bit

with the claw in it—and it can get rid of a very bad guy. You give me that, and you're my number-one case. I'll get you sorted out."

William looked at me, squinting. He then gave me an unpleasant smile. "That again? Not falling for that twice."

"Twice?"

"Your partner Jimmy said the same thing... 'Just tell me this thing, and you're my best friend. I'll help.'"

"Mad Jimmy is no partner of mine," I said. "What did he want?"

"He was taking me to..." William said, then his expression changed. "Oh no. I'm not giving over anything for free. I want something."

This man had info I needed, but I wasn't sure if I could trust him. He'd been one of the five who'd killed Jimmy Withy, but... *Why is he lying to me?*

"You act like you don't even know Jimmy. Why?"

The old man crossed his arms and gave me a wicked smile. "Wouldn't you like to know?" He pointed, jutting his finger with every word. "Wouldn't you like to know!"

"Billy-boy, this is no time to mess around," I said.

He held his arms tight around his chest. "Not before I get what I want."

“There is no time!”

“Make the time!”

I was tired of playing games. “Fine,” I said calmly. “Have it your way.”

If he didn’t want to tell me what I needed to know, I was just going to take it. My arms spread, I leapt at the old man, and once I touched him, his shocked face melted away.

*Whoosh—*

My vision swirled and roiled, shooting my stomach into my throat as I saw images flying past, sounds and smells, sensations under my fingers and on my tongue. I had to focus. The life of William Morgan was playing out in front of me like a video set on high speed, backward, then forward, then faster backward again.

I was sitting by a lake house, watching a balding man using iron pliers to pry bent nails out of a birdhouse. Bits of rubber from the pliers’ handle, small flecks of green, tumbled down from his palm like spring leaves in a storm. I loved him and never wanted the day to end.

He said to me, “Bill, hand me the Phillips over there, will ya?”

I jumped up, thrilled, searching the wooden toolbox as a panic set in. *Which one—*

*Whoosh!*

I was in a schoolyard. My face is stinging, and there were shadows above me, playing in the sun, which cut into my eyes. Laughter, but not mine. Then a blow to my face and another to the side of my head. I shouted, "Get off!" Then my voice wavered. "Please, please, stop." Again, I heard the laughter of boys. Two? Three? Another voice, nearby, was squealing, and she was laughing too. Beneath the ringing in my ears, I could hear chanting: "Spike the kike, spike the kike!" Another fist split my—

*Whoosh!*

I saw the face of a beautiful woman, and my heart was racing as I stared out over the water. It was nighttime, and shame rippled through me because I'd hoped to be on the boat. It would have been so perfect, but I didn't realize the fare had been raised. And I'd spent a week saving up! *She hates me, she hates me, she hates me.*

But when this woman looked at me, I didn't see hate. Her cheeks were flushed, and her fists in tiny balls, she swung her arms back and forth. In a moment, they would stop behind her back, and her mouth would open. I loved when she did that, one of her quirks.

*Jesus, I love her.* When her lips parted, my heart was already ready to burst. Pushing away the shame, I was now in full panic, and her



lips parted with one word. *Did she say..?* I stared at her lips again. She smiled. Louder, she said the most beautiful word in the world: “Yes.”

I was so happy—

*Whoosh!*

Sitting at a picnic, some family affair, not mine but hers, I stared over at her brother, who appeared to be taking a break from boasting about his law practice in Chicago. He would be on about it again soon enough, and it's times like this where I'm glad I can't hear it.

I saw my beautiful wife, who gave me a wave, urging me to come and join in the game they were playing, but I had no interest. I was the happiest man in the world right then, and I never wanted the moment to end.

“Daddy,” the girl's lips declared, wrapping her tiny pink arms around my neck. “My daddy.” She kissed my cheek. Then she pressed hers to mine, and the coolness of her arms at the back of my sunburned neck warmed every part of my soul. I felt vibrations in my chest and knew she was singing. A children's song about the sun. She licked her finger. *This is her favorite game.* The tiny digit headed toward my ear, and I pretended to pull away, but didn't. I never would. I lov—

*Whoosh!*

We were arguing again, and I'd already said more than I wished I had, but, dammit, I was allowed to speak too. *Chrissakes, I'm her father!*

I was scribbling on the pad, tearing pages as I did. She threw it back at me. I wanted to make it all stop, but I was stubborn, always too goddamn stubborn. I couldn't help myself and said something I didn't want to say. She crossed her arms, defenses up, grabbed the pen, and hit me with "Maybe we should take a break for a while, huh? A holiday from each other."

The words were coming, and I couldn't stop them. *I get to talk too!* But I couldn't stop the words from bleeding onto the page, a mind of their own. "How about a permanent vacation? Finally get some peace around here."

Then I watched her leave. All I wanted to do was shout and scream and tell her I was sorry, but my lips were clamped shut. Not that they would be of any use anyhow.

I wanted to scream, "I'm sorry. Please come back, my daughter, my whole heart," but she was gone.

She was gone.

—*Whoosh!*

The world tumbled end over end, and the floor hit me on the shoulder blades, my eyes hurting, ears ringing. My face felt wet.

I looked up to see Fred Rogers standing over me. “Are you okay, Paint?”

“I’m... I’m fine.”

“You look like you’re crying,” he said, his words soft. “No tears but...”

Across the room, William was slumped on his side, his head and shoulders through the wall. I told Gary to help him, so I had a moment to find myself again. I’d never felt such dark, heart-wrenching sorrow.

I’d seen into the life of William Morrow. That insight was either some charm or curse left over from my time in New Orleans. Right then, it felt like a curse. The knot in my chest wasn’t going away anytime soon.

But as my head cleared, I realized that in all those images—not just the ones I’d relived but those that had pushed themselves through the din—there had been one thing I did *not* see.

“I was wrong,” I muttered. “Shit. I was wrong.”

Gary pulled William back into the room and helped him sit up. The man’s face was dark, fallen. He wouldn’t have seen any of what I

had; the moment would have passed in a flash, just some asshole knocking him down.

The old man caught my expression before I could clear it, and then he blinked and nodded, all anger seeping away from him. I never asked, but I suspected he recognized the look on my face as his own.

“You never knew Jimmy Withy,” I asked, “did you?”

William raised his head toward me again then slowly shook it. Gary looked from William to me then back to the other man.

“Wait,” Gary said. “You killed a man you didn’t even know?”

William’s head snapped up. “What in the blazes are you talking about, Fred?”

I waved my hand, as if trying to push away a small cloud of gnats. “Don’t bother with all of that. But to be clear, not you or anyone you know... ever knew Jimmy?”

The old man sighed, staring at his hands, his voice a whisper as he muttered quietly to himself. His mind was on something else. Someone else.

“But, Paint,” Gary said, looking at me, eyebrows raised. “Why would they kill someone they didn’t know?”

“Dammit, Fred,” William said, rising up from his funk just slightly. “Where did you get such an idea? I never killed nobody in my life. Hell, I only went to college to stay outta the war,” he said, staring into the middle distance. “Got no taste for killin’.”

I thought about what Ellie had said about the killin’ eye and wondered if I did or did not see that in William Morgan.

“So what did Jimmy want from you?” I asked, still reeling from the emotional roller coaster I’d just taken. “What did he show you?”

“A photo of me and four other people. He wanted to know—” he said, then stiffened and clenched his fists.

Now my head was clear.

Crystal.

*Jesus, what the hell does Jimmy want with it? How could all of this be about some damn photo?*

“I’ve already seen the picture, man,” I said, cursing myself for getting all of this so wrong. I felt stupid. Like I’d shown up to a costume party dressed as a giant pink bunny and everyone else was in tuxes and ball dresses. “What am I not seeing here?”

“Not until I get what I need.” He looked at Gary. “I’ll tell you what I know, but only after I get what I need from him.”

I sighed and nodded. I'd seen through the man's eyes and felt the beating of his broken heart.

"Okay. Okay." Slowly, I stood up. "Gary, head over to those retirement homes you mentioned. Find us a Temp, someone who can hear."

My friend nodded, and William said, "Why are you calling Fred Rogers *Gary*?"

"Nickname," I said, trying to keep on track. "Once you've got someone, get them over to the police station."

Both of the men, in unison, said, "Police station?"

I called out for Ferris and headed toward the door, waving the old man with me. "Come on, William. Let's go see your daughter."

Gary shouted from behind me and, when I turned, I saw the old man's hand a few inches off my shoulder. "No, no, William! Don't touch Painter. He's... uh... got a skin condition."

"What?" William asked. "He's dead."

"Yeah, it's a really *bad* skin condition."

The old man sidled up next to me, staring at my face. We passed through the door, and I looked around to get my bearings. I said, "Let's go see Gabrielle."

William asked, "How did you know?"

My emotional hangover trilled through me, and fighting the urge to weep, I said, "Let's go talk to her one last time. Make things right."

The old man choked on his words for a moment then nodded rapidly. "Yeah," he said, his lips trembling. "I would like that. I would like that very much."





## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ellie sat across from Barnes at his desk, watching his eyes as he read an email off his screen. She could only see the top half of his head, above the stacks of paperwork, folders, and cheap plastic shelves, because the detective had a habit of sliding down in his chair the longer he sat at his desk.

“Your home must look like seventeen-year-old-boy’s room,” she said, pushing a small stack aside. Several folders tumbled to the floor. “You one of them hoarders?”

“My house is immaculate, I’ll have you know,” he said, his words crisp. “And if I told Monica you accused us of anything different, she’d come up here with a rolling pin and bean you with it.”

“Rolling pin?” Ellie laughed. “Have you ever been in the kitchen? This century?”

“Yeah. That’s where the fridge is.”

The Irish detective got up and rounded the desk. She squinted to see her partner’s computer screen, an email from the forensics department, but the words were too tiny. She didn’t really need to see them anyhow—Barnes muttered while he read.

“Nothing... from the Morgan home, unfortunately.”

“What about inside the garden shed?” Ellie leaned in then scoffed. “Ah, even if we did find Gabby’s prints in there, it’s her dad’s place. Wouldn’t be a surprise.”

Barnes scanned then slowly shook his head. “Nah, nothing,” he said.

“Ah well.”

“No, you didn’t hear me,” Barnes said and turned. “There are no prints inside the garden shed. Not even William’s. Clean.”

She nodded. “Wiped down, then. Might be useful.”

“Usually, the *absence* of evidence isn’t filed under ‘useful.’”

Ellie shrugged. “Someone may be covering their tracks. Doesn’t sound like some young girl who gets a bee in her bonnet to put a hammer through dear ol’ daddy’s skull.” She looked down at the copy of the photo they’d borrowed from Alfred Dorsey.

“Anything more on these two others?”

Barnes continued to mutter, trailing his finger down the screen.

“Barnsey,” Ellie said, flicking his ear. “Nothing?”

“Jesus, El, I’m trying to read this. And please stop calling me Barnsey!” he said and glanced at the photo, his words clipped.

“We’re checking on the cowgirl.”

“Bull McGraw?” Ellie said and chuckled.

“‘Bull’ is likely a nickname.”

“Has to be. That hat is pink leather, so a poser if I ever saw one. Maybe she’s a Betty. Or a Beatrice.”

“Officer Filoiali is going through the public records, but there are *hundreds* of McGraws living in the state.”

“Don’t hold your breath. I think there was a cartoon horse by the name years ago, so could be made up too,” she said. “And nothing yet on the whereabouts of this other fella?”

Barnes sighed. “You think I’m keeping stuff from you? You’re on me like a tick. When would I have—”

“I’m only asking,” Ellie said and took a step back, raising her wrinkled palms. “We do have some serial out there looking to punch at least one more card.”

“Don’t... Don’t say that word too loud,” Barnes said. “People around here would love to drop a dime to some hack at the AJC for a hundred bucks, and then we’ve got a city in panic.”

Ellie sighed. “Just frustrated.”

“Have a candy.”

“I’m not in the mood,” Ellie said and then smiled. “Oh, was that your way of saying *you* wanted one?”

“No, what?” Barnes said, theatrically eyeballing Ellie’s purse.

“Lemme try one of those green ones you covet.”

“I do not covet,” she said. “I like what I like, and if you touch my green lollies, I’ll take your hand off at the shoulder.”

“How ’bout a red one, then?”

The Irish detective dug into her purse and held out the crinkled white bag. Barnes slowly reached toward one of the greens, and she lifted her eyebrows. “Try it, and you’ll have to learn how to wank with your weak arm.”

“Jesus, don’t say shit like that.”

“You’ll probably sprain it.”

“Yellow! Yellow, then,” he said and started to reach, but Ellie pulled the bag back.

“Don’t trust ya,” she said with a wicked grin as she pulled out a small red candy and held it in her palm in front of him.

“I said yellow.”

Ellie, still smiling, closed her hand, and when she opened it again, the candy was now yellow.

Barnes looked at it and shook his head. “Nice trick. That another you learned from your mama?” He popped it into his mouth, then tapped the picture with his finger. “So, our boy in front disappeared a

few years back. Might be a bit shady, so best guess, he's most likely somewhere at the bottom of Lake Lanier."

"Lovely thought."

A shrug. "That's what happens when you mess around with drug dealers. They don't make the best of pals."

"Yeah, but I bet you get a good deal on dope. Friends-and-family discount."

Barnes frowned, then he flicked his eyes over to Ellie.

"Hey, I wanted to ask you something," he said. "Might be a bit personal."

She tucked her purse next to the cop's desk. "Totally straight. Always been men, but I suppose ya get a bit of whiskey in me and —"

Barnes interrupted her. "What's with the rings?"

"What rings?"

For a moment, he studied her, then said, "When you got outta the car, you spun the blue one around. When you got back in, you spun it back."

"A reminder, that's all," she said, twinkling her fingers. "The sapphire reminds me I left one of my things somewhere and when I get it back—"

“You twist it around again, I gotcha. I also noticed when we left Alfred Dorsey’s place the red one was spun inward. You leave something in there?”

Ellie stared at him for a moment, unconsciously rubbing her fingers. “It’s to remind me Helen is one of mine.” She looked down at the ruby, facing her palm. “I hold her in my hand. When we solve this, I set her free.”

He started to ask, “What about the—” when a patrol officer called over to Barnes, holding up a file. As she walked to the desk, she gave Ellie a wry smile.

“Monica know you’re hanging out with another woman?”

“I’m too old to be another woman, Officer Glover,” Ellie said. “He couldn’t handle me anyhow.”

Glover said, “I reckon he can’t handle Monica either.”

“That’s probably true.”

“I’m right here! Sitting right here!” Barnes said, snatching the file. “Why do *you* have this? I thought Filoialli was working it.”

“Yeah, but I recognized one of the women and went back to look at my case files,” she said. “I thought she looked familiar, and I was right.” She pointed at the file in the senior detective’s hands. “Our

cowgirl's name is Charlotte McGraw, and apparently, she adopts a nom de plume at cook-offs."

"So," Ellie said, staring at the file in Barnes's hands. "Not a real cowpoke."

"Not if riding a twenty-thousand-dollar Goldwing motorcycle on the weekends makes you some kinda ranch hand," Glover said. "She was a paralegal and had real cheap rent, so had dough to blow."

Ellie looked up. "Was?"

"Yep."

"She another vic, then?" Ellie said.

"Maybe not," Barnes mumbled as he read. "Seems she wrapped that big ol' bike around a tree doing a hundred through the Cartersville subdivision, just north of here."

Officer Glover said, "Right, that's why it seemed familiar—I'd been at the scene."

"Jesus," Ellie said, offering her small white bag of candies to the officer. Glover shook her head. "I suppose it could be part of this case. If someone had been chasing the woman down."

"Maybe," Barnes said, tapping the file. "But the timing doesn't seem to fit."

Ellie leaned forward to see the page. "How so?"

Barnes said, "She died of her wood overdose ten months ago."





## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Gabrielle sat in the cell, counting the cracks in the wall just opposite her.

*Thirty-four, thirty-five...*

Even the monotony of it was better than the alien thoughts worming their way into her frazzled mind. This would be her life now. Jail, trial, prison.

*Would I have a roommate? Do you keep the same one the whole time? Would they let me paint and hang the pictures in our cell? At first, there had been a bizarre, cold comfort in that thought. She should learn how to paint.*

*Forty-one, forty-two...*

At first, those musings about prison life had been the only way she could push out the conversation with the two detectives. It had replayed over and over in her mind like a pop music station with only one song, driving her mad. *What was I thinking? Could I really have...?*

The uniformed cop outside the cell was talking to her again.

When prison decorating began to steal her sanity, she'd resorted to just counting cracks. But the distractions weren't working; those

fortifications to block out the words that ended her life had begun to crack. They were now crumbling.

*Fifty-six...*

"I think I killed my dad," she had said.

*Fifty-seven...*

Erupting from the pit of her stomach, a fist of bile punched at her throat, and she jumped up to the metal toilet and retched.

Gabrielle slumped against the wall, her hairline buzzing with a cold sweat just under the surface of her skin.

"Don't worry about it. They'll put it on a charge here," Officer Glover said. "If you're, you know, worried about paying for it."

"Um," Gabby said. "It... what?"

"You need to eat. They've got a pretty good soup and sandwich set up in the canteen," the cop said, fiddling the pen in her hand. "I can order Uber Eats or something. The food's much better, but that's harder to keep under the radar. However, if you're a vegan or something..." The cop smiled. "I'm sure I can make it work."

The woman sitting on the cell floor shook her head slowly. "No, I'm not a vegan."

Pen poised over the clipboard, Officer Glover shifted her weight foot to foot. She said, "Um, lemme run that past you again. The food

here is not great but since we do not currently offer vegan alternatives, we would have to order, you know, out.”

“Okay.”

“So, you get much better food, some nice fancy café, right?” The cop smiled. “If you were hankering for, say, a mushroom-and-lentil vegan spaghetti Bolognese.”

“What... What is that?”

“Well, that’s what the fancy café calls it, but turns out spaghetti Bolognese is just spaghetti. Looked it up once, and Bolognese has to do with a city in Italy, Bologna, so you might think they just threw some crappy lunch meat in there. Really, it’s like when people say french fries when, really, fries will get you there.”

For the first time since she’d been there, Gabrielle cracked a weak smile. “Okay, great... Let’s have the bolo...”

“Bolognese,” the cop said. “Gotcha.”

“That come with meatballs?”

“On *vegan* spaghetti?” Officer Glover looked at her watch. “If it did, they’d probably be made out of bean curd.”

“Got it. No meatballs,” Gabrielle said, then her face softened.

“Thank you for being kind. Means a lot.”

Glover scribbled something on her clipboard and tapped it with a pen. She dropped her voice and said, "I got a confession to make."

That earned another small smile. "Thought that was my job."

"Food here sucks, so if you order then I can get something that won't give me nightmares tonight. So, let's keep it on the downlow... but I'm gonna tack on a mung-bean-sprout-and-avocado sandwich."

"Bleh." Gabrielle lolled out her tongue. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."

"Nah, it's not bad," the officer said. "And some good chow breaks up a day of writing up incident reports. Some witness ended up with a broken finger. That'll be half my day. Party drugs missing from evidence, which means I probably missed out on a hell of a Friday night around here. There's another few hours of paperwork. And one of our cleaners has been accused of lifting those industrial-sized rolls of TP to take home."

The young woman gave her a serious look. "Sounds like a crime wave, Officer Glover." She stretched out, leaning back against the cold concrete wall.

As Glover made another note, she shifted her eyes toward Gabrielle. "You look comfortable. Not the first time in a cell." A statement, not a question.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “Had a boyfriend once. You know those guys who come into your life just when you need them, just when you think all guys are shit, and they make everything right?”

The cop smirked. “Sounds like a fairy tale.”

“It was.”

Glover offered a warm smile, turned away, then spun back. “Oh, forgetting my head. You’ve got a visitor.”

\* \* \*

The officer helped the frail woman into the adjoining room. A small chair was put just outside the cell door, and Gabrielle watched as the woman lifted her walker, inch by inch, toward it.

A very thin man dressed in whites stood at the door, arms crossed, watching as the cop struggled with his charge. “You all right, Enid?”

“That’s Mrs. Kapelsen to you, Nurse Ratched!” she said as she lifted the walker forward, put it down, and repeated the process across the floor. “And I don’t want you listening in on my conversation, so why don’t you go and help the officers with their cavity searches. You like that stuff.”

The man at the door frowned. “I’m not a nurse, Mrs. Kapelsen. I’m a registered health care facilitator.”

“You’re the damn grim reaper, is what you are,” Kapelsen said, and she sat heavily in the plastic chair and pulled a tissue from her giant handbag. Wiping her mouth, she said to Gabrielle, “He’s poisoning me, you know?”

“I’m not,” the registered health care facilitator droned and looked at his nails.

“Get out of here! I don’t want you around!”

The man at the door sighed and left. Officer Glover looked between the old woman and Gabrielle and seemed to be considering something. “Your aunt said she wanted to talk with you, so…”

“My aunt.”

“And I’m not supposed to leave you with anyone, you know, unattended,” the cop said. “But I’m going to call in that phone order, so, um, please don’t pass anything between you, all right?”

The old woman mopped her brow with another tissue.

“You think I’m here to break her out? Baked a file into a cake?”

The officer couldn’t help but grin. “That purse? You could hold a bandsaw in there. Who knows what you’ve got?”

Mrs. Kapelsen held up the bag, her fleshy arms trembling slightly. “You wanna check it again?”

“No, I’m still recovering from the first time,” the uniformed woman said and then looked to her prisoner. “You okay?”

Gabrielle nodded, her eyes on the seated woman.

After the cop left, the woman began rummaging through her purse and finally pulled out a large perfume bottle. She uncapped it, took a large sip, and offered one to Gabrielle, who stared for a moment then shook her head, eyes in a squint.

Mrs. Kapelsen took another quick swig and winked, putting the cap on the bottle. Reading the label, she tapped it with a finger. “Coco Chanel, top-shelf. But you can’t go for the ol’ Number Five, because the color’s a bit off.”

“Ma’am, are you sure you’re okay? I don’t get why—”

“Oh dear, please don’t call me ma’am,” she said and wiped her mouth. “Call me Aunt Enid.”

“Right,” Gabrielle said. She lifted herself from the floor and sat back down on the cot again. “But I don’t have an Aunt Enid.”

“Fine, and I don’t have any siblings, so we’re even. Only child, and my parents are long dead, of course, and in about two months’ time I’ll be joining them. I’ll die alone.”

Gabrielle sat up and saw the officer on the phone in the next room. She hoped she would get back soon. “I... um, Auntie Enid.



Are you sure you're in the right place?"

The woman held a frail hand to her chest for a moment. "Oh, that is lovely to hear." Her eyes dampened. "I've never been called Auntie. Oh my, I didn't think... I wish I had been an auntie. I do like the sound of that so much."

"Maybe you should—"

"No, no, just settle down. That nurse will be back here after he's worked out some other way to kill me, and we don't have much time."

Gabrielle crossed her arms. "You won't have much time if you're going around slugging perfume."

"Ha, that's all right. They don't allow spirits in the home, so this here is..." she whispered, "a bit of contraband. Same color as Coco, but they won't take it off you. Single malt out of New Zealand, very nice stuff."

The woman in the cell stood up and paced the room.

"Mrs. Kapelsen, I'm not whoever, you know, you think I am."

"Oh, so we're back to 'Mrs.'?" The old woman clinked a fingernail off the perfume bottle. "Fine. You know, when they first made this whiskey, down in some place called Otago, it was terrible. Failed

venture by some New Zealanders back in the 1950s, just looking to get by.”

“Maybe I should call the officer back.”

“Sat in barrels for years and years and years,” Kapelsen said. “In a storehouse, it sat there forgotten until someone came across the stuff, cracked open the barrel, and realized they had a gold mine. It took half a century before they realized that, um, it wasn’t worth forgetting about. There was value there. Just took someone... to notice.”

Gabrielle sat back down, listening closely.

“Like an old woman in a rest home, waiting to die. Waiting to be poured down the drain when they want to use the room for something else,” Kapelsen said. “But... then a voice is calling out, ‘Please help. I need your help.’ So,” she said and straightened up, smiling. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Okay.”

The woman nodded slowly, appearing to be thinking. Her head cocked to one side. Gabrielle looked up to see if she could flag down the officer.

“Your father was so terrified when you were born,” the woman said, tears forming in her eyes. “He hadn’t expected children despite

his wife being nearly ten years younger than he was.”

“Wait. You knew my mother?”

“So, when they told him he could hold you, you were just born minutes earlier, he gave all sorts of reasons not to. He wouldn’t touch you that whole first day.”

Droplets began to fall to Gabrielle’s flushed cheeks, and her voice hardened. “How do you know that?”

“But, dear girl…” Mrs. Kapelsen sat forward. “He wasn’t trying to *not* hold you.”

“He didn’t want me!” the young woman said, surprising herself with the ferocity of her own voice. “From the start, *that’s* why he didn’t hold me. My mother said it took him a week before he finally picked me up!”

Kapelsen shook her head slowly. “He was afraid, dear.”

“Afraid! Of a baby?”

The old woman sighed, cocking her head again. After a moment, she said, “He was afraid he wasn’t good enough. He’d been a selfish man, in part, out of fear that anything he might give someone else—kindness, care, love—might be rejected. So he kept it close.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“You need to hear this, Gabby,” Kapelsen continued. “When you were a kid, you fell on the playground, and they had to haul you away in an ambulance. The school administrator called your father.”

“Ha!” Gabrielle said, pointing a shaky finger. “You don’t know what you’re... He didn’t show up for *two hours*! I was alone in there, a kid all by herself. This is bullshi—”

“He’d beaten the ambulance to the hospital, despite the plant being twice as far away as the school. Blew through stoplights, driving so fast, it’s a wonder he didn’t put anyone else in the ER.”

The young woman shook her head. “That’s... That’s not true.”

“When he arrived, he was screaming and yelling at the emergency room staff to be ready for his daughter, but he’d also been chased down by two patrol cars. When they arrived after him a minute later, he was arrested.”

A strange look passed over Gabrielle’s face. “I... I do remember the police. I can’t—”

“He would have been in earlier, but they’d been debating on arresting him after he took a swing at one of the officers.”

The girl nodded slowly. “Actually, that part does sound like Dad.”

Kapelsen stood and walked to her cell door. “He always wanted to be there for you. He was there for you, but like he says, he just

wasn't very good at it."

Gabrielle rose and took one step toward the door. "Why are you here?"

"I am here because while I was waiting for my life to finish up, nearly there, someone asked for my help. He told me his name is Gary, but I don't think he's here anymore. A very nice man."

"What do you mean you don't *think* he's here?"

"I could hear him," Kapelsen said. "Like I can hear your father. I know how that sounds, but there's something going on in this city, and it seems you're caught up in it. He's promised to help but wanted one last moment with you."

"What... What are you saying?" Gabrielle choked on a laugh. "That you can hear my dead father?"

The old woman nodded once.

"You're crazy, lady. You need to go."

She watched the girl sit back down on the bed. "He says he wants to tell you something that he never had the courage to say when he was alive. Words he never once uttered to you but owed it to you a thousand times."

"Oh? 'I love you'? How trite, and my father did actually say that to me, despite what a shit he was."

“No,” Kapelsen said and went back to her seat. “He says ‘I’m sorry.’ He never said those words to you, not once, but wants to say them now. That and so much more, but he’s run out of time.”

Kapelsen looked up at the clock. “The officer said I’d have to clear out at half past, so we’ve got about ten minutes.”

“Jesus.”

“Nine minutes. Will you listen?”

Gabrielle’s vision blurred as she looked up, and she wiped her mouth. Slowly, she nodded, and the tears fell.

“He’s here, Gabby,” Kapelsen said. “I can hear him because I’m dying.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t actually know, but... there it is. Would you like to talk to your father one last time?”

“This is crazy.”

Enid Kapelsen smiled. “The best things in life sometimes are.”

Gabrielle Morgan stared for a long, long moment. Then her body slackened, and she leaned back against the wall again.

“Can I have a belt of your perfume first?”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Gary and I were waiting outside, across from the police station. My eyes were locked on its front doors. In the grassy area behind me, there were a handful spooks milling around, some of Peg's cuzzies. A few livies too.

The park itself had long fallen off the city's maintenance records and was now more of a place for those at nearby businesses to sit and eat the lunch. Its rotting benches had dividers that split it into three areas. Ostensibly, they were armrests, but really, it was to prevent the homeless people from thinking they might make a good place for a nap.

It hadn't stopped one grizzled old guy from propping his legs up on one of the arm rests, his head lolling off the back of another.

"He looks dead," Fred "Gary" Rogers said, pointing at the guy.

"Why are you whispering?" I asked. "He can't hear you."

"He can if he's dead."

Finally, the doors of the police station opened, and the feet of two people seemed to interlace as they struggled to exit. A moment later, the woman Gary had found at the home burst out. Mrs. Kapelsen



was followed by her carer, who was shouting something, his arms raised in the air.

Dressed in whites, he took the stairs quickly and reached out to hold her arm as she shuffled down the street toward an awaiting car. She shoved him off but, a moment later, the old woman did indeed falter in her step, and the young man strode forward and helped her. This time, she didn't push him away.

When I looked back toward the door, I saw William Morgan coming toward me. He looked angry.

"Shit," I said to Gary.

"What?"

Slapping on a plastic smile, I gave William a wave. "Hey, how'd it go?"

"Fine at first," he said as he crossed the street. Then he looked up and nodded to himself. "It was enough. More than I deserved, actually."

"Good," I said. "Glad it worked out."

"T-Thank you, Fred. Thank you for finding... the help," William said, his eyes downcast. This was a man not used to expressing gratitude. I wondered if death had taught him one of the most important things about life. Albeit, a little late.

“Glad to,” Gary said, still dressed as the genial television host. I preferred his monster. “Always happy to be a good neighbor.”

I scowled at him. “Don’t... Don’t start talking like that. It will not be good for our friendship.” I looked at William. “What happened?”

The old ghost waved a hand back at the station. “Ah, just some asshole started yelling and causing a ruckus. But I made my peace, and I think Gabby’s going to be okay.”

I hesitated. More than anything, I wanted to get back to the case, but if William thought his daughter was going to be *okay*?

“You know she’s confessed to killing you, right? That’s not so ‘okay.’”

William smiled weakly. “She didn’t do it, and I told her so.”

“Uh huh,” I said. “Except the part where she confessed, right?”

“So she found a receipt in her pocket and... woke up with a bit of garden mud on her shoes. Doesn’t mean she killed me.”

Gary said, “Except for, you know, the part where she confessed.”

“Listen,” William said, agitated. “The person who put a hammer through my melon was taller than me, and I ain’t no runt like you two.”

“Heeyyy,” Gary said.

“Right, fine,” I said. “But were things, you know, good with you and Gabrielle?”

“Yeah, yeah. Despite that crazy woman in there cursing up a storm—I thought she was coming at Gabby at first but then realized she was, you know, like us.”

“Dead?” Gary said.

“Yes, yes. Dead,” William said.

“Well, it’s a police station,” I said, trying to move things along. “I bet there’s plenty of dead around the place.”

“But there ain’t nobody in there like the Screamer,” a voice behind me said. “We get spooks that come and go, mostly go. But that chick just keeps coming back, and for a dead woman, ol’ girl has got some lungs on her. Most of us just scatter until she moves on again.”

I turned and saw the one-legged spook come up behind me.

“Heya, Peg,” I said. “She one of your cuzzies?”

“Hardly. But I keep an eye on her because if she’s gonna go for poltergeist, I don’t want my people to be around,” Peg said. Her face softened. “And she’s hurting. Sad and angry all balled up inside her, busting out at the seams.”

“Oh, why is she so sad?” asked Gary.

Peg laughed. “What is every spook mad and sad about?”

“For me, it’s that I can’t write anything down. Infuriating,” I said. We were wasting valuable time. “Ghosts, right? No pen and paper.”

“And I can’t play my music!” Gary said, his face twisting—a very troubling expression to see on Mr. Rogers, actually. “And nobody plays the good stuff anymore.”

“Maybe you guys been here too long,” Peg said, shaking her head and laughing. She looked at William. “Everybody’s here because somebody killed ’em and got away with it. Screamer is mad because the cops wrote her murder off as an accident, which means she ain’t going anywhere anytime soon.”

I smiled. “Not necessarily,” I said. “I’ll put her on my list.”

“Good, because she’s a pain in my ass,” Peg said and slid away again.

“Paint, that meant a lot... to me,” William said, struggling for his words. “I expect most people don’t get that, you know, opportunity. I owe ya.”

“To that point, my turn now,” I said. “I know about Mexico. And I’m not sure what happened, but I know what you did. Or what you all did. Or what one of you did. But knowing who did that could be the key—”

“Wait, wait, wait!” William said, sliding backward. “I’m lost. What are you talking about?”

“You and your friends! These other people who were murdered. The ones in the photo!”

William put his hands to his head. “What? Those people in the picture aren’t my friends. I don’t know them. What are you talking about?”

“No, no,” I said. “Years ago, in Mexico, you and—”

“I’ve never been to goddamn Mexico,” William shouted. “Why do you keep saying that?”

Gary looked at me and shook his head slowly. In a flash, the little ground we’d thought we’d gained fell from under us. I spun away, trying to think.

“What did he want from you, then?” Gary asked William.

“He dragged me out to show me that photograph, hanging in a record—”

“Yes, yes.” I spun back and pointed a finger at him. “You... Wait. Why would he show you the photo?”

William looked at Gary hard. Then it seemed like he just wasn’t looking at me.

“William?” I said.

Gary stepped forward, tugging on the lapels of his sweater. "What did you see in the photo, neighbor?"

"Stop that," I growled at Gary.

"For one, I think I saw that woman in there," William said, pointing back to the station. "Your Screamer. She was in the photo. Took me a second, because she burst through the wall and face was all contorted, but I recognized her from the photo that your Mad Jimmy showed me."

Gary nodded. "Is he trying to find, uh, the Screamer?"

William went quiet for a moment then shook his head.

I tried to process the new information, looking around for my cat. Then I started babbling, trying to make sense of it. "So, four people in that photo are dead. Helen Dorsey with sewing needles. Ray Scones with his own gun, and you with a hammer to the head, then the Screamer. Could you tell how she was killed? How did she... appear?"

The old man shook his head. "I dunno. Bruised, mangled a bit. An arm was dangling like a long empty sock. But I don't—"

"Jesus, it doesn't make sense!" I shouted. "If Jimmy's not trying to kill all of you—"

“Oh, that,” William said, taking a deep breath. “That part I think is right. Not sure how. But he’s very keen to see all the people in that photo dead.”

Gary asked, “Why?”

William started speaking then stopped. Then he said, “Same as he tried with me. I think he wants to talk with them when they end up in this place.”

“That’s bullshit!” I yelled.

“Well, Paint,” Gary said. “It does get lonely around here. I didn’t see you for weeks, and you’re my best friend.”

“Gary, stop talking,” I said then softened. “Sorry, sorry. I don’t mean that, but please don’t say anything for a moment. And, yes, I’m sorry about... you know... not hanging out more. We’ll go to, you know, Bermuda or something maybe. Chill out.”

“That would be so great!” Gary beamed.

I turned back to William and calmed myself. “Okay, okay,” I said. “So what did he want from you?”

“Well, there was a... man in the photograph,” the old man said, looking down at the ground. “He was asking about that guy.”

“Right, right,” I said. “He may be the only one left alive.”

Slowly, William shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” William said. “I’m pretty sure that guy’s dead too.”

“What? What would the—”

“Whoa, wait! It makes sense finally,” William said and spun in a slow circle. “Some kid asked me about it about a month ago. Young fella came to my door. Damn, it should have clicked before, such strange name.”

Gary stepped forward. “So, you *knew* the fifth person?”

“Not before,” William said. “But I do now.”

“Cryptic,” I said, exhausted.

“Painter,” William said, finally looking at me. “The guy in the photo he was asking about was, well, you.”

*What? What did he just say?*

Gary said, “Whoa.”

“I think that’s why he killed me. He showed me the photo, pointed at a guy, and asked if I recognized him,” William said. “And I told him, ‘Yeah, he was back at my house,’ but he already knew that. He wanted to know about you *before* you were dead.”

It all made sense.

All of it suddenly made sense.



I had gotten cocky. Convinced that the “best private investigator in the world” had worked it all out. *He’s getting revenge on his killers.* Wrong! *No, wait... he’s killing them to get rid of the true name of his killer.* Wrong again, Painter!

As usual, the truth was far worse than I imagined.

William said, “You are the fifth person in the photograph, Painter. Sometime before you died, you were at that chili contest. Giving out the award, I think.”

While I was searching for a name that could evict Mad Jimmy from the InBetween, he was searching for mine. My *actual* name. Hell, I didn’t even know it and, by now, he might already have it.

Gary said, “So all those people died just so Jimmy Withy could find out Paint’s real name?”

“I think so.” William nodded. “Although, seems like a brutal way to go about it. What’s the point?”

“Once he’s got Painter’s name, my friend would be in real trouble,” Gary said. “Jimmy would be halfway to clearing him.”

I sat on the ground and put my head in my hands. There was so much I’d gotten wrong, always two steps behind. I had to face reality.

“Unless, he has the other half already,” I said.

Gary crouched down in front of me. “You think he already knows who killed you?”

“Good chance,” I said and looked up to Fred Rogers staring at me. I couldn’t handle the pitying look on his face, so I stood. “He’s been at this for weeks, maybe longer. Someone here might have known how that went down.”

My friend looked into the distance. “Maybe that’s why he’d been asking around in Minneapolis.”

“Then, I think,” William said, stepping closer to me, and I took a step back. “You’ve got a problem. Yesterday, your Mad Jimmy caught sight of me in the Square, so I got the hell out of there. But he didn’t chase me down. I don’t think he needed me anymore.”

Gary turned toward me, his shoulders rounded. “Aw, Paint. That doesn’t sound—”

“He’s got it,” I said and frowned. “Might have been any of them—Ray or Helen or even the Screamer—one of them recognized me. That prick’s got my real name.”

“So, all this time,” Gary said, shifting from foot to foot, “*He’s* been investigating *you*?”

“Seems like.”

“Wait, wait.” My friend turned to William, his voice taking a hard edge. “You said you saw him yesterday and that he might’ve know Painter’s real name then.” The old man gave him a nod. “If he knew who killed you, Paint, you’d be gone by now!” Gary stood straight, threw his shoulders back. “I don’t think he knows the name of your murderer.”

That thought twinkled in my brain. I had always loved his positivity, but what Gary said did have a ring of truth to it. I grinned at him. “Maybe. But if that’s the case, I’d wager he’s looking into that right now.”

“Then,” Gary said, gritting his teeth. “We’ve got to find him. Stop him.”

“What happens if he finds out?” William asked.

My friend balled his fists. “Not going to happen.”

“Yeah,” the old man pushed, “but what if he did?”

“If he figures out who killed Paint, and makes that known to the living world Paint clears out,” Gary said with a fierceness I’d never seen before. “He’s gone. My friend will disappear from the InBetween in a blink.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY

Using her phone for a light, Ellie scanned Barnes's notebook as they rolled down the bumpy road leading up to the Pine Valley Manufactured Home Community.

"It's a trailer park," Ellie said.

"I don't think people call them trailer parks anymore," Barnes mumbled as she flipped through his pages. "Got an unfair rep for causing tornadoes. Filled with shyster psychics and pedophiles, that kinda shit."

Ellie closed the ringed pad. "Shouldn't even be roaming free after what they do. Got evil in them through and through. Best to dig a hole and cover it up."

Barnes said, "Well, the pedophiles aren't much better."

The Irish detective gave him a hooded glance, then with a flick of the wrist, she threw his notebook at him. "You're a troubled young man."

Barnes, now chuckling, said, "I'm probably going a bit senile." He took a quick look at Ellie. "Been hanging around you too much, maybe. You think senility is contagious?"

This time, she laughed. "Jesus, you're in a right mood, aren't ya?" Her smile fell. She knew too well why he was hiding behind jokes. "You're worried we're too late to stop all this."

"Here we are. I think," he said, passing a bent wooden sign. Kids had stripped away the last three letters of the first word, so it read "P Valley." Barnes rolled his eyes.

Fifty feet down the gravel road, Officer Monica Glover was waving a long flashlight like she was trying to land Barnes's Buick Skylark in the dirt. As they rolled up, she leaned back against her cruiser parked in the dead grass.

"You're putting in a long day, Officer," Barnes said. "Didn't I see you puttering around when I came in this morning?"

Glover shined the light into his face, and he flinched. "I don't putter," she said. "Joseph is with his wife at the hospital. Getting another baby scan. They'll fill a damn photo album even before that kid is born."

"Hi, Monica, nice to see you." Ellie leaned over. "I like your hair."

The officer smiled. "I've got a date."

Barnes frowned. "With *who*?"

"My date," Glover said and shined the light in his face again. She nodded toward one of the trailers. "Your man in there. The one with

the faded bird on the side.”

Barnes held his hand up to block the flashlight and scanned the nearby trailers. “Half these have faded birds on the side of them.”

“Ah,” Glover said, tapping her notebook. “Those are the OG park residents. You stay here ten years, you get a bird. They even take the number down, so your address is just Red Bird or Green Bird.”

“Which ones is Miles Bridges?”

“The blue one.”

“Then why didn’t you just say the one with the blue bird?” Barnes frowned.

“Because it’s a bird that’s blue, not a bluebird,” the officer said, sliding the flashlight into her belt. “Bluebirds are squat. They’ve got sort of a burnt-orange plumage. Very cute. That’s just some sparrow-looking monstrosity painted blue.”

“Uh huh.” Barnes squinted at the home on wheels.

“Bluebirds can have three or four broods in just one season.”

“Helpful.”

“They’ll kill any bird that comes near their nests,” Officer Glover said. “But in the winter, they’re friendly with other species, foraging in the woods and thickets.”

Barnes popped his eyebrows at Ellie. “She said ‘foraging.’ Never heard anyone actually say ‘foraging.’”

“And ‘thickets.’” Ellie leaned over from the passenger seat. “Monica, when this is all over, we gotta hit the clubs and get you some action.”

The cop laughed. “I don’t think you and I go to the same clubs ’cause we ain’t hunting the same thing.”

Barnes put his face in his hands, which tweaked the corner of the old Irish detective’s lip.

“Oh, honey, I ain’t hunting anything. My bear trap’s rusted shut by now.”

“Jesus!” Barnes shouted with a half-smile, covering his ears. “Can you two have this discussion another time? Like when I’m not here?”

“Barnesy, she needs a wingman.”

“Or wing-woman, as it were,” Glover said.

“Wing-*lady*,” Ellie said. “I’m proper classy. Use a straw and everything.”

The cop leaned into the window. “See, I’m not really into *straws*. I just—”

“*All right* already, the two of you,” he shouted, pulling his hands down and dropping the car in gear. “Thank you, officer. Helpful.



Some of it.”

Ellie spun back, looking out the rear window of the unmarked car, and shot a finger gun at Monica, who shot one back.

“Feel better?” she asked.

“What?” Barnes asked, easing the car next to a picnic table loaded with machine parts. He then sighed. “Yeah, yeah.” With a small smile, he reached out and squeezed Ellie’s hand. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said as they exited the car. “People are like those old Etch-a-Sketch toys. Sometimes you gotta shake ’em to get ’em back into the game.”

Closing his door, he said, “No one understands you. And I don’t think it’s because of the accent; you’re a very confusing woman.”

Barnes knocked on the metal door, and a voice told them to come inside.

“Lovely,” Ellie said. “He’s expecting us.”

Despite the shambles outside, the inside of the manufactured home was immaculate. A small wraparound couch at its front held two sets of pillows in matching sizes. A bench-style table was hospital clean, with a single flower in a vase in the middle of it. Next

to it, the stove shined in the dim overhead lighting like it had never been used.

They both sat on the couch, and a moment later, a man with eyes older than his face came out, carrying a large book under his arm. In his other hand was a glass half-filled with something that looked like red snow.

“Sorry, we sat ourselves,” Barnes said. “Hope that’s all right, Mr. Bridges.”

“Yeah, totally. You want a daiquiri?”

The detectives looked at each other and politely declined.

“You sure? I got fresh strawberries.”

“No, thank you,” Barnes said.

“Well,” Ellie said, “if you’ve got fresh strawberries, maybe a small one.”

Barnes shot her a frown, but she ignored him. For the next half minute, they watched the man sway slightly as he put together Ellie’s drink. After giving it a quick ride in the blender, he handed it to her and sat on a small fold-down seat next to the couch.

“Clever,” she said, taking the drink. “Never even saw that there.”

“Thanks.”

Ellie dug her small white bag out of her pocket and held it out.

“Would you like a candy? They come from home, much better than the lollies you’d buy here.”

Bridges lit up and reached forward.

“Not the green ones,” Barnes drawled. “She likes the green ones.”

The man plucked out a purple candy, dropped it into the pocket of his robe, then tapped it gently. “Your lady officer told me you were looking for info about an old cook-off I’d organized,” Bridges said, opening the book on his lap.

Barnes dug into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper that had been folded twice. He opened it and showed the photo to the man in the robe.

“Oh,” he said. “Oh right. That was just last spring.”

Barnes asked, “What can you tell us about it?”

“Well,” he said slowly, flipping pages in the photo album. “I can tell you everything I told the police the first time.”

“You got a visit, then?” Ellie asked.

A nod of the head. “Just casual, clearing up some things. Wasn’t much call for”—Bridges nodded outside—“you know, a cop parking on my lawn in the middle of the night. Thanks for that, by the way. My neighbors won’t let that go for a long, long time.”

"It's important, sir," Barnes said. "You said you were questioned before."

"Just looking into whether the disease, whatever it was, came from one of my stalls." He sighed, stopping on a page. "But they tested everything. Well, anything that hadn't been cleaned up already, which, frankly, wasn't much."

"Nothing came of it?" Ellie asked.

"You mean other than a woman losing her baby?" Bridges asked darkly and shook his head. "We always had high standards; everything was clean. Now we do spot checks, test the pots for bacteria and the like. Always comes up negative, by the way."

Barnes held up the creased photograph again and tapped his finger on it. "Do you remember any of these people?"

A shrug. "I took the photo, but I didn't know any of them. They were *enthusiasts*; that's what we get. Some homebody thinks they can do chili better than anyone else and finally gets up the courage to put it to the test. But people are fickle. The best one doesn't always win. In fact, it usually doesn't, by the way."

Barnes sighed. "Can you tell us *anything* about this day?"

The man pulled a pair of glasses from his robe's pocket, held them up without unfolding the arms, and looked down at his copy of

the photograph. “That was lot 42c. So then the four means it was turkey chili; the two meant medium heat. ‘One’ was no heat and ‘three’ was melt your face off.”

“What did the C mean, then?” Ellie asked.

The man shrugged. “Chili.”

“Did any of these people know each other?” Barnes asked and was met with an exasperated look. “I know it was a while ago.”

“Aw, man, I set up ten rounds of trophies last year. That’s fifty of these stupid little plastic things I’d get made up from a place in town,” he said, taking a small sip of his drink, a dribble of red hanging from his lower lip. “But I don’t talk to the contestants. Need a degree of separation so nobody can accuse me of any sorta malfeasance. People ’round here take their chili—and winning—very seriously.”

“So you don’t mingle with any of the—”

“Hell no!” Bridges said. “Part of the ad buy each year. It’s co-op, so most of it’s paid by whatever sauce company’s involved, but they get a bunch of commercials on the radio, and the station has its people host the contests.” He took another swig. “I’m hands off. Cleaner that way.”

Barnes nodded, tapping the photo again. “So you can’t tell us the whereabouts of this man here?”

“The guy handing out the awards?” Bridges asked. “No. He do something wrong?”

Ellie smiled. “We don’t know. But it seems he may be the only one still alive in that photo.”

“What?” Bridges stood up quickly then sat back down. “What... What are you talking about?”

“What Detective Walsh means—”

“Did they get sick?” he asked but was met with blank expressions. The man in the robe leapt up again. “What’s going on? Am I in danger?”

“No, no,” Barnes said, holding up his hands. “Not that we know of.”

“What?” Bridges asked and took a few steps away. “Listen, listen... I knew—shit!—okay, okay. I *knew* the winner, okay? She was a friend of mine.”

Ellie looked at Barnes. “Well, that’s new. What do you mean?”

“Oh shit. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!”

The Irish detective stood slowly and put her hand on the arm of the trembling man, leading him back to his seat. Sitting back on the couch, she kept her hand on his arm, slowly caressing it. “There’s no

reason to think you're in any danger, Miles. How did you know the winner?"

Bridges squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them, he was looking at Ellie.

"Didn't know her well, but... she was, you know, in Yellow Bird." Bridges tilted his head toward the door. "Um, it was harmless, so I thought—"

"You split it with her," Barnes said, leaning forward. "The prize money. How much?"

"A thousand bucks," Bridges said, trembling again. "I mean, people around here got nothing. So sometimes, you know, some of my neighbors get into the contests and, you know..."

"Win?" Barnes offered.

Bridges looked at him through red-rimmed eyes and nodded once.

"But, you know, Charlotte, the woman from Yellow Bird," Bridges said. "She... I mean, she had a good job but was terrible with money and blew it all in a few days. Bars, drugs. Got lost coming home, going way too fast, and wrapped her motorcycle around a tree."

Barnes nodded. "We know about that." He sighed.

“Is...” Ellie said, looking down at the photograph but something twitched in her mind when she saw it this time. She shook the thought away and asked softly, “Is that her?”

A nod.

“Nice smile on the lass.”

Bridges looked down at the photo. “All these people are *dead*? What does—”

Ellie said, “Your friend seems like a good sort.”

“She... She, um,” Bridges said, his voice shaking. “I don’t think... I mean, if she hadn’t won, she wouldn’t have had all that cash to blow like that. I mean—”

“Shh, shh,” Ellie said and softly squeezed the man’s arm. “Not your fault, mate. We all make our own choices. Nobody makes ’em for us.”

Bridges squeezed his eyes shut. “I should have known. Shoulda known...” The man sat muttering, lost to the world.

Ellie looked over Barnes, and he gave her a nod, mouthing, “Nothing. We got nothing.”

Barnes stood, thanked Bridges for his time, and headed for the door. Ellie went with him, watching as the man stared at the photograph as if one of them might speak next.



“You’re not...” Bridges called to them at the open door. “I mean, I don’t make a habit of putting friends in contests. I mean... not... not anymore. That doesn’t, I mean—”

“It’s not important to our investigation.” Barnes sighed again. “If it does become important, that would be a different matter. For now, we’re looking into other matters.”

Ellie stepped off the last rung of the steps, but then that thought she’d had stirring in her mind finally wiggled to the surface. She leaned out of the dark night back into the mobile home.

“Miles, you said you handed out fifty trophies that year.”

“What?” he asked, pulling his eyes from the page. “Uh, yeah. I get a discount for fifty of them at the trophy place.”

“Right,” Ellie said. “Ten lots, fifty trophies. Five winners?”

“Yeah. Been that way for years.”

Barnes slowly turned back and looked at Ellie. “But if one of them in the photograph is the guy handing out the awards, who’s the fifth?”

“What?”

Ellie climbed back into the trailer, went down on one knee, and looked at the photo: five people smiling, four holding up trophies. The young guy in the white t-shirt was handing Bridges’s friend,

Charlotte “Bull” McGraw, the larger of the trophies. Both had big smiles.

“Four trophies in this,” she said. Then she saw a shoulder and elbow on the far left of the photo. “Who is—”

“So I’m not a great photographer,” Bridges said and half laughed. “I got his elbow. I bet he still hangs it up in his garage next to the trophy.”

“Who? Is this guy the fifth winner?”

Bridges looked at Ellie then toward the door, where Barnes was standing.

“You guys already know this,” he said, his voice clearer now. “That’s... um...” Miles pulled the picture out of his book and flipped it over, tracing his finger down the back of it. “Aaron Wolfe.”

“Aaron Wolfe?”

“Yeah,” Bridges said. “He lives in Acworth, I think. About ten, fifteen miles up the road.”

Barnes asked, “You knew him?”

The man in the robe shook his head. “No, never heard of the guy. I told you—I didn’t know any of these others.”

“I’m sorry,” Ellie said. “I’m confused. How do you know where he lives, then?”

“I didn’t,” Bridges said. “The other cop you guys sent a few weeks back. He was using his phone to look up the names I’d given him and said, ‘Aaron Wolfe in Acworth?’ and I said, ‘I guess,’ and that was it.”

Barnes gripped the door, the metal squeaking under his fingertips. “What was that cop’s name again?”

“Oh man, I don’t remember,” he said. “Actually, I don’t think he told me.”

“He didn’t leave a card?”

A shake of the head from Miles.

Ellie asked, “What’d he look like?”

“Big guy... um, oh wait,” Bridges said. “Wait, I did see his name on his lapel. Only remember it now because it was so unusual. Filly-lily or something.”

“Filoialli? *Officer* Joseph Filoialli?”

“Yeah,” Bridges said, nodding. “Yeah, that’s it.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I didn't remember how I was murdered. Or by whom.

Nor did I remember anything before. My living days are a pitch-black room in a forgotten house. Oh, there's the occasional creak or thump, some hint at who I was, but nothing more.

For the past year, I'd dismissed that as some common quirk of the InBetween, but it seemed I was unique. Everyone I'd met remembered their living days—old, young, fat, tall, city slickers, bootlickers, cowards, heroes, and lonely gurus who sit on mountaintops. Hell, one time, I'd even met a Persian emperor named Cyrus the Great.

He'd told me how he'd led armies across Asia, conquering lands from the Mediterranean to the Indus River, wherever that is. One night, as we watched zoo animals lope around in the dark, he boasted how he'd amassed the largest empire in the world.

"They thought me dead in battle along the Syr Darya," he said, as his eyes sparkled. Then he frowned like a child. "But I'd been betrayed, and the world had never known. Although," he mumbled, laying back on the concrete slab beneath us, "I suppose dying in battle is a better legacy for Cyrus the Great."

I didn't like the guy. No one did, far as I could tell. But you had to admire his insanely massive crown, as big as his head and twice as ugly. And, believe me, Cyrus the Great had a face that could make babies cry, women weep, and men punch it. Actually, I expect women would have punched it as well. Babies too.

But like everyone else, he had his story to tell.

My story began the moment I died. But not knowing who I'd been or who'd killed me had given me an iron-clad protection—those two pieces of the puzzle, while hidden, meant I was safe to do my job in the InBetween. Untouchable.

However, now Mad Jimmy had one of my pieces. And, if he didn't already have it, he'd be looking for the other.

It was funny in a way. Without a past, I was free to be anyone. I didn't remember when I'd chosen to help others as I did, or when I'd decided the best way to do that was to become some sort of spook detective, but I'd always held a romantic notion I could be some sort of lone wolf. A private investigator in the mold of Sam Spade or Jim Rockford. Or Miss Marple.

Although, I wasn't very good at it. But maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to need help. Frodo needed Samwise. Thelma needed Louise. Hell, King Leonidas had needed 299 other Spartans!

Standing outside the police station amongst the ghosts milling around the dilapidated public park, I'd come up with a loose plan. A very loose plan. So loose it could technically be called "not a plan." Either way, I needed help.

I waved Peg over and turned to Gary. "Okay, man, I've got a bit of a plan."

"Great! I knew you'd work it out."

"No, no," I said. "Not worked out. Just the early stages of a plan with the goal of not being shot out of here onto the Next."

"Cool," Gary said. "How you going to do that?"

Peg slid up next to me, and I said, "I don't... really have all the details yet."

"That's not, you know, much of a plan."

*Right.*

I pointed over to William Morgan, who was sitting quietly and staring at the police station. "Gary, get him to go over everything Mad Jimmy did or said from the moment he met him. There may be some tiny detail that could give us leverage." I called over to Julius, who was arguing with Paris, sitting next to a dead bush.

Engaged in some verbal battle, he hadn't heard me, so I went over. "Hey, Julius, I need your help. Can you—"

“Can *you* tell this lady that bushes don’t go to heaven?”

“What?”

Paris growled. “Plants are God’s creatures too, and all are welcomed in his kingdom! A never-ending sandy beach with crashing waves and not a cloud in the sky.”

I shook my head. “We don’t have time for this. Listen—”

“No, no!” she said and thrust a finger into Julius’s chest. “Saint Peter of plants here is deciding who goes up and who doesn’t. I expect he’s too busy to help you with all that judging!”

“Jesus,” I said.

“You trying to tell me every fern, every flower, every juniper weed that has died is living the life ever after?” Julius said.

Her smile was white and gleaming. Except for where it wasn’t. “Sounds like Heaven to me.”

“Not if you got allergies,” Julius said, his lips in a straight line. “How about deadly snakes?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Them spiders as big as your hand?”

“All of them! Every *one*!”

Julius took a step back. “A holiday resort filled with the deadliest spiders and snakes you can imagine. Don’t sound like heaven to



me.”

“No, that’s Australia,” I said and held up my hand before they could get back into it. “Julius! I need to you do me a favor. You can take Jane Goodall of the Redwoods with you.”

“What d’you need?”

Paris swooned. “Oh, I love the Redwoods!”

“Go talk to the Screamer in there. Bull McGraw was the first person in the photo to die. Not an accident but murdered, that’s why she’s here,” I said. “If you can calm her down, she might know something useful.”

“What?” Julius looked back to the police station, then got a queer look on his face. “Never talked to no one named Bull before.”

“There’s a first for everything,” I said, growing impatient.

“Don’t think you can believe anything a woman with a name like that says.”

“Please, just go—”

“Know what I mean?”

“Yep, yep, I know what you mean.”

“Someone named Bull sounds like the sort, when they tell ya something, it’s probably—”

“*Julius!*” I shouted and instantly felt bad about it. “Sorry, man. If you can... hey,” I said, a grin growing on my face, “were you trying to be funny? The whole ‘bull’ bit?”

The man smiled, chuckled, and shrugged like I’d busted him.

I said, “You’re a weird dude.”

Julius jumped up, putting an arm out to help the woman stand.

“Painter Mann, we’re ghosts. We’re all weird!”

We laughed. Paris didn’t. “I’m not weird.”

“Lady”—Julius put a friendly hand on her shoulder—“you’re weirder than waffles.”

As they walked toward the big gray building, they picked up where they’d left off.

“Now, you think waffles go to heaven too?” he teased her.

“Oh, I hope so!”

Standing there, I could faintly hear Bull McGraw hollering inside the police station. When I’d seen her that first day, I’d written her off as some uber-crazed loon. Now my heart hurt for the woman. She was in agony and all people did was run away. *If I can figure this out, you’ll be okay too. Promise.*

I could see Peg waving at me, so I turned but then had another thought and spun back for one last look.

*All that screaming... why doesn't she attract the chimeras?*

It seemed important, but I had no time to work it out now. Walking back to others, Peg threw a nod toward Julius and Paris.

"I think they're sweet on each other," she said, arms crossed.

"Gross," I said. "You got something?"

"Maybe. You said your boy is a mean-looking son of a bitch, yeah?"

I rolled my fingers into fists. "Someone spotted him?"

"Maybe. I got a cuzzy who hangs around an elementary school up by Peachtree Battle down in the city."

"I don't wanna know."

"No, not like that," Peg said. "I don't hang around weirdos!"

I glanced at the park and saw one of her crew arguing with a busted water fountain.

"Yep."

"My cuzzy got done on the monkey bars back in '82. They said it was an accident, but—"

"You said someone might have spotted Mad Jimmy."

"Yeah, he says he sees a guy that passed through there he never seen before. Skinny white dude with greasy hair and scruff who looks like he died while trying to escape Alcatraz."

“A strangely precise description, but I mean, that could be anyone.”

“He also said the guy shot him a look when cuzzy shouted at him. Didn’t like the look of him, so, you know, he was just calling out to make sure the dude knew that was his territory.”

“What did he say?”

Peg smiled. “He said, ‘Hey, dude, you look like you died while trying to escape Alcatraz!’”

I blew out a breath of air. No question, I was dead. Or, rather, the next level of dead. Whatever that was going to be. I rolled my hand, urging her on.

“So, the guy doesn’t say nothing back, but when he turns,” Peg said, a smug look on her face. “Cuzzy says ol’ boy has no dot on his eyes.”

“No do—” I said then nodded. “Got it. All whites. Like boiled eggs.”

“That’s right.”

\* \* \*

Normally, if I was going to trek into Atlanta, I’d head along some road east then south down the interstate to avoid crossing through neighborhood after neighborhood because the chances of smashing

into some spook haunting their old house or workplace or schoolyard monkey bars is pretty high.

But I was running out of time, so I started skating and beelined straight to the ritzy digs of Peachtree Battle. I did keep to the roads as much as possible, but I had to swerve a half dozen times to avoid some ghost stuck in some same old routine.

Then I just started to circle the area, skating—past the upscale supermarket with its garden center, the shopping mall with valet parking. I crossed between restaurants with names that made a point not to disclose what kind of food they served. I knew if I just kept going, aimlessly, eventually, the familiar of Mad Jimmy—despite the man being no friend of mine—would draw me to him.

Thankfully, I got very little abuse along the way, except for one short spook who'd spotted me while arguing with a livie waiter—who of course couldn't hear him, so I had no idea what he was doing—demanding to be seated in the private section of the restaurant.

When he caught sight of me, he shouted, "Hey! *Hey!*"

I shot past, not interested in being the next abusee on the asshole's list. On the next pass, I went around the other side of the building, but once again, he barked at me, this time leaning through the wall. At least it looked like he'd gotten into the private seating.

Finally, I began to feel the pull, and after a few minutes, I slowed and found myself on a beautifully manicured street with homes like luxury hotels and perfect lawns I could putt on for a week and never cross the same spot twice.

That's when I saw him—or rather, heard him. He was yelling at someone.

At the side of a massive, garish house, Jimmy Withy was arguing with a spook easily twice his size. Had they been alive, the man, who looked like he'd been carved from a side of beef without many scraps left behind, would have easily beaten the other guy to a pulp. But in the InBetween, strength had nothing to do with physical size.

With all the yelling back and forth, I saw movement in the shadows. I couldn't see them fully, but I knew what they were.

*Chimeras.*

"That's not enough, asshole," Jimmy shouted, craning his neck upward so he could face the dead thug. "I want your assurance!"

"Ha, I don't know you and don't owe you nothin'."

Jimmy cackled and thumped the huge man on the chest. "Man, you don't wanna get on my bad side."

Standing in the driveway of the neighboring property, I was only about twenty yards away from the two of them. I was too easy to

spot. But there was no use trying to hide in the shadows—spooks glowed in the shadows, so the safest place was in the light.

Before I could work out what to do, it happened.

The Big Thug spook popped his head up in the middle of Jimmy's threats and stared at me, unsure. I sighed theatrically, looked toward a woman out for an evening jog in her Lululemon spandex and waved at her. I caught a bit of luck. She looked up just as I did.

Then I did a big, silent laugh, bopped the heel of my palm on my head, and pointed to the car.

As she passed, I turned toward an Audi and pretended that I was digging through my pockets searching, exasperated. Sure, I was no actor, but I had “central casting dumbass guy” down pat.

Big Thug went back to his argument with Jimmy, assuming I was just a dumbass livie who'd lost his keys.

“You got what you need, so get the fuck out, asshole!”

“You better—”

The two of them went on and on like that as I kept up my act and headed toward the neighbor's house, but once I was out of sight, hidden by a thick row of hedges, I cut across the impossibly green lawn toward them.

Their voices got louder as I approached, and just before I made my move, I had a sudden realization: I had no move.

What was my plan? Rushing up and *demanding* Mad Jimmy tell me who killed him?

Sure, I could steal his energy by getting in the first shot and keep wailing on him until he couldn't move, but the moment I touched him —

*Ah. Of course.*

Pressing my head through the bushes—enduring flashes of woodgrain, leaves, bugs, and weird yellow goo—I saw Big Thug was turning to leave. When Jimmy reached out for him, I raced forward.

The big fella caught sight of me and backed away so that whatever the weird madman racing toward them was planning, he didn't get caught up in it.

“Hey, you're *dead*.”

When Jimmy turned to see who he was talking to, I leaped at him, wrapped both arms around the guy, and—

*Whoosh!*

The world of perfect lawns and shiny homes twisted away like someone had yanked a plug and it had gotten sucked down into the ground.



Darkness.

The only sensation was the air that clung to my skin. There was a horrible stench of rot, body odor, sweat, and what I was sure was piss. When I tried to look up, the side of my face exploded in a burst of pain, light, and crackling. In a broken mirror next to my bare mattress, I saw a large man hovering over me, his hairy arms raised above a T-shirt so dirty, it looked as if it were made from a dead man's skin. He was yelling at me again, screaming my name. "Fuckin' Jimmy the punk!" and all I could think of was "I hope Mom is okay."

*Whoosh!*

I was running from the house, and I could feel a cold dampness on my face; ahead was a massive wall of flame. I laughed because I was happy, and it was such a strange sensation, so I laughed again. When I got to the edge of the neighbor's massive bonfire—it was leaves-burning season—I held up the three potatoes I'd stuffed under my shirt.

I only got them because he passed out, and with Mom gone, he'd never noticed I'd taken them. I handed one to the pretty girl standing there, then the kid with the dirty face from down the block saw me.

The spuds were small, so I was hoping for two myself. Instead, I tossed one to the kid, who smiled like I'd given him a gold nugget.

We laughed again and all pitched them into the fire. When the fire burned out, we could have our treat. From the house, I heard:

"Fuckin' Jimmy the punk, you fuckin' thief—bring 'em back."

I cringed, afraid to look toward the house. He shouted again, "Bring 'em back, or by God, you little punk..." I didn't hear what he said next as I got down on my knees, the dampness on my face sizzling as I reached into the fire...

*Whoosh!*

I saw the cold steel notch of the gun centered over the guy's face. My finger was taut, flexing at the trigger. He was scowling, this guy. The woman with him had ribbons of mascara streaming down her cheeks like her eyes were melting, and I wondered if that's how it really would look if eyes actually melted. I don't think so.

*What's he saying? Christ, she's gorgeous, how does a shlub like this... well, of course.* The guy was loaded, but even while he was digging in the pocket of his suit, my gun in his face, he was crabbing about handing over his wallet. *I bet he's got millions in the bank.*

I couldn't stop staring at her dress, wondering how it would look on the floor of my apartment. Well, wasn't my apartment—it had

belonged to the guy stuffed in the fridge, but he didn't need it anymore.

Rich Guy's face was all twisted, talking shit. "Big man with a gun —"

*Who does this fool think he is?*

"Why don't you get a job, instead of—"

I could smell smoke now, and there was a hole in his cheek just above the other hole that was making all the noise. She was screaming and screaming and screaming. Then, poof, more smoke, and she wasn't screaming anymore.

*Jesus, that was so easy. What was I so worried about? Solves everything, pop, pop, better.* I grabbed the wallet. He was staring at me with wild eyes, this guy. He thought he was better than me. I wondered how it would look if his eyes melted, so I raised my arm again—

*Whoosh!*

The ceiling was turning red. *Why am I on my back?* People leaning over me were yelling and screaming, but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

I blinked, and then I was standing. The people in white were now in front of me, their backs turned away, waving their arms around,

and it *looked* like they were yelling. So *why are they so goddamn quiet? Is it because I'm lying in a bed?*

I looked down at my body. Gray skin, stubble, rumpled old clothes. *But why are my eyes open like that? Is that supposed to be—*

“Hey there, Jimmy,” a voice said. I turned away from my body and saw her. I couldn’t believe it—my wife (well, ex-wife, technically) was right there next to me. *This must be a dream.*

“How... How are you here, baby? Am I sleeping?”

“*Baby?*” She got a queer look on her face, then it softened as if she’d just recognized me. I *had* been letting myself go. “Yes, yes, I’m your baby. Of course.”

Nervous, so nervous, like that first date all over again, I reached up to run my fingers through my hair, but something was wrong. Hair didn’t even move. Must be dreaming.

I asked my wife, “Why are you here?”

“Silly,” she said and smiled. “Don’t you want to be with me?”

There was a crackle behind me, where the people in white were, like a radio station trying to grab in the signal. I heard their voices now, low and fried, panicked.

When I began to turn and look, she took a step forward. “I miss you, Jimmy. Don’t you miss me?” I wanted to say something cool or

smart, but only nodded and blubbered out a yes.

“Only... only thing I want.”

When I reached for her, she held up a pale hand. She was still smiling, but it was strange. It didn't look like how I remembered. So *what? She's here, she's really here!*

“You are different, Jimmy. Special. So special!” she said. “Oh, what we could do together! What fun we will have. Do you want to have fun with me?”

My own laugh was queer too. It was a sound I hadn't heard in so long. Here she was, my beautiful wife. *But she's gone, so how... No. NO. I don't care!*

“I miss you, baby” was all I could say and then “I'm so tired.” She put a hand to the side of my face and closed her beautiful eyes. Then she whispered to me so softly I couldn't make out the words.

“What?” I asked, trying harder to hear. But I couldn't. And I felt strange. Finally, she looked at me, and my heart sang.

“I want you to go back, baby,” she said at my body on the bed, surrounded by the people in white. “Just for a while.” Yes. Yes, *anything!* She was the only woman I'd ever loved. Had she forgiven... all that? All those years before?

I told her okay and nodded, but when she smiled again, she looked different—only for a second, an impossible burst of dark curls and skin—but then she was back again. My love. I said: “Tell me what you want me to do.”

*Whoosh!*

I hated feeling scared, so weak, but I wasn’t afraid of these people. This was our plan, mine and hers. They’d all hidden their faces, the cowards, but it didn’t matter.

But, goddamn it, this was going to hurt, and I don’t like pain. Never have. I’d already had more than my share.

“You just going to stand there?” I said, but the words were all twisted up and jumbled. I think my jaw was broken.

Then they each raised a barrel toward me, and I braced because it was going to hurt. *This is the plan. This is our plan. This protects me. This is the plan. This makes me invincible. This is our plan.*

Time to die. *Again.*

The muzzles flashed, all around me, and I jumped, startled by the sound, so much louder than I’d imagined. My ears rang and, good Christ, it *did* hurt!

*But I’m going to my baby now. Time to have our fun.*

—*Whooshhhh!*

The world came rushing back and, falling, I flinched at the sight of the massive stone planter, but, of course, I slid right through it and tumbled to the ground.

“Jesus... oh Jesus,” I said as I got back up.

Mad Jimmy wobbled to his feet. I’d stolen a bit of juice off him when I lunged, but he was ready for a fight, his fists curled at his sides.

“You wanna get into this?” he shouted at me, raging. “You want to finally get into this?”

I sighed. *It’s screwed.*

“Look,” I said weakly. “Calm down. You’re attracting the chimeras.”

“The what?” he asked then swallowed. His eyes darted to the shadows and arms dropped about six inches. “That what you call them?”

“Yeah,” I said and sat down, covering my head. I had a million questions but only one mattered right now. “Why? Why did she choose *you*?”

Mad Jimmy looked down on me, and a huge grin pulled to his face.

“I know you, Painter,” he said, ignoring the question. “But it’s not ‘Painter,’ is it? I’ve got what I need, so kiss all this goodbye. You’re about to take that final rocket ride, and I’ll be rid of you. We will be rid of you!”

Slowly, I looked up. “This was her plan, getting you here. To the InBetween. Goddamn madness.”

“*Our* plan!”

I chuckled at that, couldn’t help it. “You set up your own death,” I said. “Well, the second one. The one that took.” My laugh dissolved into a weak smile. “You don’t know who killed you, do you? Not even you.”

It was his turn to laugh. “No! No one does—got shot, Painter Mann, and it hurt like a bitch. All of them fired at the same time, so could be one of them, could be two, could be all. So, I’ve got permanent residency here, but you, Painter,” he said, his teeth large and gleaming, “Oh, I’m almost sorry you’re going to miss what happens next. Our plan will be a horror the world has never seen *and it deserves every bit of it!*” He looked up to the dark sky. “It will be glorious!”

“Right,” I said and stood. “You and your wife?”

His gaze fell back down to me, his mouth hanging open.



“What? How did... How could you possibly kn—”

“I saw it all, Jimmy,” I said. “And listen to me, you are a pawn to her. Nothing else.”

“You’re so wrong! She’s going to make sure this world pays for all that pain, all that fucking misery it poured into us over and over and over again!”

Raising my hands in truce, I stood up. “Listen, man. She’s using you. That’s not your wife. That’s someone else—”

“I saw her!” he said, and the grin was back. “You’re actually lucky you’ll be gone, because what’s coming? She knows things about this place no one else does. My wife is a goddess in the InBetween!”

*You’re close. Not just a goddess. Think bigger.*

“No, she’s not your wife,” I said, keeping my voice low. Nearby the chimera were snuffling and snarling. “I’ve met her before, in New Orleans. Her name is Voodoo Cher. She appears to people as they wish to see her. You wanted to see your wife, so that’s what you saw. When I see her, she’s... uh,” I said and looked around. “That’s unimportant. But she’s using the love you’ve got for your wife against you. To use *you*.”

“You know nothing,” he said, then his body relaxed. “But I know who you are.” He slid closer. “And I know who took you out. You

wanna know? 'Cause man, it's a heartbreaker!"

He stared at me with those cue-ball eyes, and I could see, no matter how nuts the guy was, he was telling the truth. Mad Jimmy had the two pieces of the puzzle he needed to end me. So I did the only thing I was ever good at.

I was a masterclass bullshitter.

"Ah, do your worst, man," I said. "You don't have a temp, I bet, so how are you going to tell anyone?"

"Temp?"

"Temp. As in temporary helper, because you know—" I stopped because... maybe he didn't know?

"Your big reveal? I can get someone to put it out in the world, easy," he said. "I find some schlub who's screwed up enough, crack 'em in a week or two, and get myself to a computer. Tap, tap, tap, gone."

"A week?" I laughed, then I kept laughing for maximum effect. And because I didn't know what I was going to say next. "A... week?"

"Yeah," he said, his smile wavering. "Enjoy the time you got left. Maybe go to Key West and hang out in the changing rooms or something."

"Well, first off—that's nasty. You're a horrible person."

“Screw you.”

“Second, you—” I said and waggled my finger, trying to make my brain work faster. “You’ve got eyes that look like albino ball sacks.”

“Screw... *you*.”

“Third, I’m going to get you a book of comebacks, because you need to study. Very singular,” I said and waited for the words, and when they didn’t come, I just started talking. “And fourthly... which, I don’t know if that’s grammatically correct. Might be... But while you are taking your week, I am going to do... it... um, now.”

“What ‘it’?”

“You’re joking. ‘It’ it. The only ‘it’ we’re even talking about.” I had no idea what I was saying. “The biggest ‘it’ of all the its, ands, or buts.”

He waved a hand in the air. “You’ve got nothing.”

Then I had it. Julius. It had been something Julius had said to me. I forced a smile. “You showed me your killer when I touched you.”

“Bullshit,” he said, his mouth twisted into that wicked grin. His eyes, though, weren’t so sure.

“I know it like I know that your second-grade teacher’s name was Mrs. Buttermen, you cheered when your father died, you married a

girl you fell in love with when you were eight, and one day you gave a penniless kid a potato so he wouldn't feel left out."

Slowly, Mad Jimmy's grin melted, those egg-white eyes going wider and wider.

"How is that poss—"

"When I touch people, I see them. Their past. All the moments of the life that made you *you*, Jimmy Withy," I said. "And you're not a terrible person, Jimmy. You are—"

"You're lying," he said, his face flaring with anger again. "Even if you could see my past, even I don't know whose bullet it was!"

"Here's the thing," I said, pushing my BS skills to the limit. "Some of us have skills. You can make the machines Voodoo Cher needs to power her ghost army. Me, maybe I was an old AV guy or something, so when I'm inside scrolling through people's darkest secrets, I can shuttle time backward and forward. Zoom in and out." *Man, how cool would that be? I wish that were true.* I took a step toward him. "So I saw which slug hit you first. I know who made the kill shot."

"No way," he said but didn't seem so sure. "You'd have a face but no name. Worthless."

"The guy who shot you, my guess, was maybe a solider or veteran."

Jimmy got very quiet.

“Because, just like they do in the military,” I said, “this joker had written his name on his boxer briefs! Funny habit.”

“Fuck you!” he shouted and leapt at me, but I’d been waiting for it and dodged him.

In three strides, I was up and skating and knew he was close behind.

He had everything he needed to end me and, once I was gone, Jimmy and Voodoo Cher would be unstoppable.

They’d gather a ghost army, fire up the machines to make them whole again, and march across the world. A bloody campaign against the living world. Until none were left.

I had nothing. She’d made sure no one would ever know the name of his murderer to make him unstoppable.

Except for one thing.

I had only one option, but it was a very, very, very bad option.

I raced toward Marietta Square with Mad Jimmy close behind.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Don’t call people when you’re driving like a nutter!” Ellie said, one hand gripping her seat belt as they sped toward Aaron Wolfe’s home. “Hand me the phone.”

Taillights burned the night air like a pack of demons watching their every move. Another opened its red eyes in front of them, and Barnes jerked the wheel again, tires squealing.

“I got it!” shouted Barnes. He thumbed the keypad as he swerved around another car, held the phone to his ear, and threw it back down. “Straight to voicemail.”

Ellie stared at the map display on her own phone. They were four minutes away. She said a silent prayer, *Be alive*.

“Makes no sense,” Barnes muttered. “Joseph’s a good cop. I’ve never even seen the guy raise his voice. Makes no sense!” He chewed on his lower lip then leaned on the horn as he swerved around a Volkswagen and into oncoming traffic. A truck’s horn blast rattled the windows.

A bread truck’s brake lights bled across the dashboard as it jerked across the lane, moving out of the way.

The desk sergeant manning the phones had told them Officer Filioalli had left a few hours earlier, saying his wife had been admitted to the hospital. When Barnes called her number, she picked up. She was watching television at home.

“It can’t be,” Barnes said, twisting the wheel so fast, Ellie banged her head into the window.

“Let’s just survive long enough to get there,” she said, gripping her seat belt with both hands. “There’s nothing to tell us—”

“You know that bug blood you got? We threw it out because it had picked up a cop on the scene, so we assumed it had been contaminated. Joseph’s blood.” Rubber whining on asphalt, Barnes took a hard turn. This time they both leaned into it. “But the only ones who’d seen inside the shed was me and you.”

Two minutes later Ellie pointed at a two-story house just up the street. “The one with the light above the garage.”

The man grunted then drove past, toward the end of the cul-de-sac.

“Barnsey, you missed it.”

He scanned the street. “I don’t see his car anywhere.”

Nearly every vehicle was tucked up into the long driveways. Only two were in the street—a minivan and a fifteen-year-old silver



Saturn.

“This is a nice neighborhood,” he said, gripping the wheel tightly.

“*That* shitty car—”

“Calm down, detective. You’re going to have a coronary.”

A few houses down, Wolfe’s house looked dark. Barnes parked in the street and checked the minivan. Nothing in the seat or on the floorboards. On the back seat was a small plush rabbit.

Running to the Saturn, he stopped a few feet away and called back, “There’s someone in it. I think he’s dead.”

Ellie climbed out of the car as he pounded on the window. Whoever was inside wasn’t waking up. Barnes reached into his jacket and pulled out his revolver, holding the butt toward the glass.

“Try the bloody door before you smash that!”

He tugged on the handle, and it popped open. Barnes holstered his gun.

Ellie watched as he tried to wake up the sleeping passenger. When she looked back to the house, she saw it wasn’t totally dark. A light inside was casting thin gray blades into the canopy of trees in back.

“We need to go knock on Aaron Wolfe’s door,” she said, chewing on a nail.

Barnes slammed the car door and started toward the house.

“Come on,” he said, huffing. “The kid in the car is passed out. I think he’s drugged.”

Ellie nodded, trying to keep up his pace. She had to watch her step, because both streetlights in front of the home were out. They were the only ones that were.

Running up the sloped driveway, Barnes peeked into a white van with a long scratch down one side. A banner across its flank read Aaron’s Pool Supplies, Service & Repair. He found the handle and yanked it open.

Ellie slowed to a walk, breathing heavily. Inside, she saw a strikingly neat and orderly setup of shelves, bottles of every size, and snaking hoses that ran along the inside interior roof. No one was there.

She said, “Let’s go!”

At the front door, Barnes first tried the bell, but before the chime stopped ringing, he began pounding on it with his fist.

“Police,” he shouted. “Mr. Wolfe, can you please answer the door?”

Ellie peeked through the tall vertical glass, trying to tease out the hard edges—tables, chairs, *people*, anything—in the dim light. Then,

near the back of the home, she saw a shadow pass across the floor.

“There’s someone in there,” Ellie said, shouldering her handbag and stepping down from the raised concrete. She crossed a thin stretch of white-washed river rock, then tramped through the dirt bed surrounding the house, crushing flowers beneath her shiny black shoes. “In the back.”

Barnes took a step back and growled. Only then did he notice her. “Wait, we’ve got to—”

“No waiting,” she said, climbing over a prickly bush. “He knows we’re here.”

“Ellie, don’t go runn—!”

Darkness wrapped around her, every step on the uneven ground threatening to snap an ankle or send her tumbling down the steep hill. She was forced to slow and cursed. *Can’t help anyone if I get my head smashed in.*

At the door, the cop was moments away from following her when he heard a crash inside. If Aaron Wolfe was in real trouble, whoever was sneaking around in the dark would be the one delivering it.

He assessed the door. He might be able to kick it in, he’d done it before, but last time he’d damn near put his hip into his shoulder.

Joseph was *big*. He wasn't going to get into a dance with a man like that with a bum leg.

Barnes took another step back and looked up at the house. Six windows ran across the top, the middle covering one half of a two-story vestibule, the front door making up the lower half. Another window capped the two-car garage.

"There's no way I'm getting up there." His eyes lowered to the massive door, then cut to the white van. Barnes leapt down the front step and ran across the stone path back to the driveway. The panel door was still open, so he hopped inside and leaned between the two captain chairs in the front.

"Gotcha!"

Reaching up, he grabbed the remote and held it to the light. Six buttons on the front, two more on its sides.

"How many goddamn buttons do you need to open a goddamn door?" He pressed all of them and inside the two-car garage, the light winked on, and the door began to rise.

At the back of the house, Ellie walked as fast as she dared, arms outstretched so far darkness had swallowed her fingers. *Panic within you is the most dangerous weapon wielded by your foe.* Her father's voice.

“Yes,” Ellie said, forcing herself to take slow, deep breaths.

“Right.”

If someone was looking to kill Aaron the pool guy, smashing away the last few years from an old woman was not out of the question.

A dense, leafy rotting smell caked the air, and when she looked up, beyond the house, she saw a thin fog swirling through tall branches. Strangely, the lawn twinkled in the dim light.

Her eyes adjusted a little, and she moved forward, quietly opening a wooden gate. In front of her was a staircase leading to a long wraparound deck. Below that, some sort of maintenance room was humming away. Farther back, the yard was half-covered by a long lap pool. That was what had been glimmering.

Her eyes beginning to pull more angles and details out of the darkness, she headed for the wooden staircase, conscious that any sound, any creaking, would alert someone in the house. Halfway up, she peered across the floor of the deck above, running her eyes along the base of the first floor. A yellow bulb over the stove was shining, the only light she could see in the home.

Someone, someone *large*, burst through the kitchen into another room. She’d only seen them for an instant, and her heart sank.

“Joseph,” she whispered. “Son, what are you doing?”

She hesitated on the step—Officer Filoialli would be armed.  
Running inside through the sliding glass door was not an option.

Then something flashed through her mind.

*A gardener killed with a tool from his shed.*

*A knitter killed with sewing needles.*

*Ray Scones with his own gun.*

Ellie blinked. “How would you kill a pool man?”

She ran back down the steps.

\* \* \*

When I skated up, the dying lights of Marietta Square were losing their battle against the twin foes of darkness and fog. Mad Jimmy wouldn’t be far behind me, so I had to act fast.

I saw my old friend who’d ditched his children’s-daytime-TV-host cloak for one that suited him much better.

“Gar!” I shouted as I wheeled up next to an eight-foot beast with skeletal wings, four sinewy arms, legs of a gorilla, and a face like a month-old pumpkin with razor-sharp teeth.

“Paint!”

“No time to chat, man,” I said and slid to a stop. “You need to clear out, and if you see Julius or any of the others, keep them away from here.”

“Wha? Why?”

Jimmy would be there any moment, but this would be the last time I ever saw my friend. I owed him, if nothing else, some sort of explanation.

“Mad Jimmy has been, um, I guess the word is bewitched by a powerful woman.” I scanned the tree line around the square. “She made this, all of this.”

Gary’s eyes got wide. “I don’t understand.”

“Voodoo Cher made the InBetween to wage war on the living. Remember the Ghost Mob when we smashed up their machines?”

“Of course, our first big adventure,” he said and smiled. “I was good, wasn’t I?”

“You were great. And that war is her endgame—we stopped it, for now, but they won’t give up. Mad Jimmy is key because he’s the only one who knows how to make the machines that power the dead.”

“Jesus, Paint,” he said, and tears formed in his horrible eyes. “You’re scaring me, man.”

“Listen, it’ll be okay. After I take Jimmy out, it’s up to you. You need to find people, good people, and bring the fight to her!”

“I don’t—I can’t—”

“You can.” Then, I heard yelling and cursing in the distance but getting closer. I spoke quickly. “Go down to Stone Mountain; there’s a woman who’s there. She’ll help you. It’s all up to you.”

“To do what, Paint?”

“This whole place,” I said, waving my arm around. “It’s not supposed to be here! The InBetween is this *abomination* created from hate and rage and revenge.” My head was filled with buzzing fireflies, but I focused on my friend. He needed to understand. “You have to end it. Destroy it.”

“B-But...” Gary took a half step back then moved forward again. “I don’t want it to end, Paint.”

“Gary, it’s all wrong!”

“No,” he said, shaking his monstrous head. “It’s not all wrong.” He looked up at the sound of Mad Jimmy cackling with laughter, just outside the tree line. “When, you know, when I was alive, it wasn’t so good.”

I knew this about Gary. He’d had a tough life, voices in his head, conflicting agendas that made him crazy. He’d been schizophrenic but suffered from an even worse affliction in our world: he’d been broke. So his condition had gone untreated. I couldn’t imagine what that had been like.



“But here, Paint,” he said excitedly. “Here, I’ve got you, Julius, and people who like me. I may look like a monster here, but I was a monster back there. At least that’s how everyone saw me,” Gary said, paying no attention to the threat growing louder and louder. “For the first time in my whole life, I’ve got real friends. It only took, you know, dying.”

My heart hurt, and I shook my head. “Sometimes, we’ve got to put aside what we want, give it all up, to do what’s right.”

“Is that what you did?”

I started to speak, but it got caught in my throat. “What?”

Mad Jimmy came sprinting out of the bushes, arms flailing as he ran. I spun to look in his direction then quickly back to Gary. “Just please do this for me. You’ve got to go!”

Gary held his ground. “I won’t leave you to fight this alone!”

“You’re my best friend, man,” I said and felt a tightness in my chest. “And I love you like a brother. Please just do as I say and get out.”

Gary then settled into the strangest calm. He looked at me and said, “You know Julius says a lot of weird stuff I don’t get.”

“Gary, you gotta—”

“But one thing I do get. He says, ‘You don’t play chicken with crazy ’cause crazy don’t swerve.’”

I swallowed down a lump in my throat and said, “I know, man,” then took another look at Jimmy, who had doglegged to the left and hadn’t seen us yet. “Please!” I said and cut toward the band shell. “Go!”

My friend gave me one last wave, then launched himself out of the square and, thankfully, out of the way and out of danger.

Finally, Jimmy caught sight of me, cut his stride, and headed my way.

*Okay, this is going to suck. Time to play chicken with crazy.*

\* \* \*

Barnes trained his revolver on the door to the house as he slipped around tubs, buckets, and more and more hoses stacked neatly inside Aaron Wolfe’s garage. Forty-pound bags of pool chemicals were piled high all along the walls like beach fortifications bracing for an invading enemy.

There were actually two doors. One led to a room off the foyer. When he opened the other and jammed his pistol inside, he found only more storage.

He looked toward the first door. Whoever was inside—and really, he *knew* who was inside—would have heard the garage door rattle and bang open. They would be waiting.

\* \* \*

At the base of the wooden staircase, Ellie held her breath as she stared into the pool. She'd seen her share of dead bodies over the years. She saw them again when she closed her eyes at night.

Cairbre Byrne, who was killed on his way back from the post office, beaten to death for one month's pension. Ruhi Gopalani, who'd fled to her family to get away from an abusive husband, only to die in their cellar. Eoin Quinn, the boy found in the bog. And so many others over the years. Twenty-seven names she would never forget. Twenty-seven families torn apart. Twenty-seven ghastly faces that filled her dreams.

And when she looked in the mirror. They were there, standing behind her. So she'd gotten rid of the mirrors.

Ellie had no desire to add another face to that dead-eyed crowd.

*Are we too late?*

Behind her, the pool works hummed away, so she moved toward a wood-slatted area under the deck. In the black void, she put her

hand on the interior wall, trying to steady herself as she crept in, and her fingers came to rest on a switch.

When she flicked it, the dome lights of the pool burned a bright burnt amber beneath the surface. Ellie spun back and steeled herself for what she might see floating in the water.

But he wasn't there.

*Were we wrong?*

The water was as calm as an inland pond, so much so that it didn't even look like water, more like pale-green glass. The old Irish detective walked to the edge and looked down.

Aaron Wolfe was not in the perfectly still pool.

*Still?*

If the pumps behind her were churning away, wouldn't she see bubbles, ripples, swirls, or something?

She caught sight of a large angular mound on the far side of the pool. There was a small wooden deck in front of it, some kind of smoke drifting from its edges. Casting her eyes up, she realized what she had seen earlier wasn't fog. It was steam.

"Jacuzzi."

She ran toward it.

\* \* \*

Mad Jimmy cackled as he raced toward me. *Jesus, he's fast.*

"Maybe I can't keep up to you Painter Mann, but you can never get away. Not anymore."

Lifting a leg to climb up onto the stage of the band shell, I turned and faced him. Twenty feet from the performance area, he slowed to a strut, watching me closely.

"I ain't running anymore, Jimmy," I said. "You want a fight, let's do it."

"Sounds good to me, and I like the odds. The way to tell it, you'll be swinging at the ghosts of my past instead of me."

He was right. Getting sucked into that strange dream state would make me a worse brawler than I'd been before. But this was the only way.

"I figure," he said and stepped up onto the stage. "I bash you until you can't move no more, toss you in a hole somewhere, and before you got enough juice to climb out, you'll be long gone."

Well, if I *was* going out, I was going out in a bit of style.

*Showtime.*

"James, there are great evils in this world, and you are a part of that malevolent assemblage who align for thine own purpose at the expense of the good and innocent of the world."

Mad Jimmy raised his fists, shaking his head, and shrugged.  
“Man, you ain’t either of those things.”

“Well taken,” I said, raising my voice to fill the band shell. “But sometimes you need a rat to take out the deadly snake. And I am such a rat.”

“Enough of this,” Jimmy said, leaping forward and slamming his fist into me.

*Whoosh—*

My eyes blurred, and I looked up and saw the grizzled face of a man, half of it in shadow, his hand blocking the light from the bare bulb in my room. The hand rolled into a fist, and pain exploded in my belly. “Dad, stop!”

*—Whoosh!*

I looked up and saw Jimmy standing over me, laughing. “Christ, this is going to be so much easier than I thought.” I tried to sit up, feeling woozy after losing energy from the blow, but then was met with a boot upside my head.

*Whoosh—*

I lay in bed next to her, watching my wife sleep. The thin curtains on the windows did little to dampen the night sky, bathing this beautiful woman in moonlight. I reached out to caress her face but

then pulled back, worried I might wake her. Then the light blinked as a large shadow passed by the window.

—*Whoosh!*

Dizzy, I saw Jimmy laughing as I finally rose to my feet and lifted my fists, my arms feeling like they'd been molded from wet cement. I knew what I had to do, but a black ball of fire in my belly nearly doubled me over.

It wasn't from the punch.

I was terrified.

\* \* \*

Inside Aaron Wolfe's home, Officer Joseph Filoialli leveled his gun's sight on the door next to the garage. A minute earlier, he'd heard someone call out, identifying themselves as police. But there were no cars out front, no lights flashing.

So who was creeping around the garage?

It didn't matter. He needed to finish the job he'd started, and Wolfe was the last of them. The thought of it made his stomach clutch and spasm. But once he'd been put on this path, he knew, something told him, nagged at him, he must finish this to the end.

Joseph gripped his pistol with both hands and waited for whoever was behind the door to open it. The handle began to turn.

\* \* \*

Ellie's tiny fists slipped again, her fingertips ghost white with the struggle, as she desperately tried to pull at the hot tub's massive damp cover. Her breathing was ragged, and the billowing steam was sapping her strength.

"Come on, ya bastard!" she growled as one part of the lip came up, but when she tried to yank it, it was like a puzzle piece locked into place. She groaned as she put all of her strength into it, but it would not move.

With one hand still under the lip, she punched at it. But when she did, the lid bounced.

"Crease," she wheezed, breathing so hard, she was seeing stars. "There's... a crease."

Trying one more time, pulling up instead of outward, the lid relented, and opening like a dragon's sleepy yawn, it coughed out huge plumes of vapor.

Her arms trembling, she folded one half of the cover onto the other, and it fell with a wet slap.

"There it is!"

Even though Ellie knew the air jets were causing the bubbling within the tub, she hesitated to put her hand down into that darkness.



It looked like the water was boiling.

When she did reach in, she instantly snapped her hand back. Ellie had been in a hot tub only once in her life, many years ago, but it had been nothing like this. This water felt like it could cook pasta.

“Aaron!” She leaned in and cried out, breathing heavily, “*Aaron!*”

No answer.

Once again, she pressed her hand into the scalding water. If the man was in there and wasn’t yet dead, without question, he soon would be.

She yelped in pain, waving her arm around, trying to feel for a—

*There!*

Tight skin. And what might be a bend in a joint. *It’s someone’s knee!*

Ellie shook the person down in the water, but whoever it was did not respond. She traced her fingers up the man’s body—she knew it was a man’s now because he wasn’t wearing swimming trunks—and got to the halfway point, where his head was covered by the remainder of the lid.

With the little strength she had left, she grabbed the middle crease and, after what felt like an eternity, slowly slid the lid to the

grass. Aaron Wolfe lay submerged to his neck, his head lolled to one side.

“Aaron!” she cried, but again got no answer.

The Jacuzzi had a skirting around it, but it was too skinny to walk upon. Taking the damp wooden steps as quickly as she dared, Ellie went around the back of the tub, stood in the dark grass, and hooked her hand up over the side to feel for a pulse. She let a soft prayer escape her lips, sliding her fingers up and down the man’s slick neck, searching. *There!* A faint heartbeat.

“Hold on, boy!”

Ellie hobbled back around to the short stairs again and climbed onto the deck. Her arms ached, but even if she were twenty years younger, Aaron Wolfe was just too big for her to move. She needed help.

Turning to the house, she shouted, “Barnes! Bar—”

But her voice was cut off by the sound of a gunshot.

Then another.

\* \* \*

When Barnes burst through the door, Joseph fired wildly and a puff of grit burst out, sending something like sand spitting into the air. As the small hard grains rained upon the floor, a second muzzle

blast lit the dark room like a flash of lightning. A bullet whizzed past Joseph's head.

The large man leapt to one side, keeping his pistol trained on Barnes, who was gripping a large white bag to his chest like a medieval shield. The detective tried to spin around for another shot, but the bag was heavy, making him too slow.

Joseph's second shot connected.

\* \* \*

"You were a better man once, Jimmy Withy," I said, sitting up on the band shell's stage floor. I was too weak and had to put a hand out so I didn't fall over again.

Jimmy's face slackened for a moment but quickly it folded into a snarl. "That man is gone," he said. "Wronged by the living from birth to death. Payback time." The snarl bent upward. "Starting with you. I earned this."

"Earned?"

"After that tussle you had with my little girl, I saw what you could do. I knew you had to go, but it's not easy to find a ghost," he said and smiled.

"Little girl?" I tried to focus on him, but everything had grown fuzzy. Then I remembered my conversation with the guys at the bar.

“Right. Chandra.”

She’d partnered with the Ghost Mob back in Minneapolis months ago, trying to help them create an army of the dead. I knew now all of them had been pawns in Voodoo Cher’s plan. Jimmy’s part had been crafting those dreadful machines that gave, if not *actual* life, physical form in the living world.

“You showed me my machines could do so much more,” Jimmy said, shuffling toward me. He took a knee and leaned in. “But it also showed me you had to go. You’re a scrabbling, sneaking, festering menace, Painter Mann. But of course,”—his grin was back—“*not* Painter Mann, right?”

“You think you’ve got it all worked out, don’t you?”

I hated the guy’s smile. He ignored my question and said, “Took me ages to find you but then, ah well, your stupid little skating trick, you’re too fast.” Jimmy leaned in further, his face inches away from mine. “But you can’t outrun your past, Painter, no matter how fast you go. I tracked you to the police station, but you split. And there, oh, I found this lovely, horrifying woman. So beautiful in her rage.”

*The Screamer. Charlotte “Bull” McGraw.*

“A ghost who’d twisted her mind with anger,” he said and smiled. “But she recognized you from some stupid contest in town sometime

last year, and I had it! My first real piece of the puzzle—a whole list of people who could tell me who you were.”

*A list. He’s talking about Ellie’s list.*

Jimmy stood and looked around the darkened square. “Took some young wannabe poet on a cab ride and tried to get it out of William Morgan but... too slow. The only way I was gonna be able to grill anyone about who you really were was if”—he spread his arms —“they were here.”

“You killed them,” I said, gritting my teeth. “For a *chat*?”

“Not *me*.” He shrugged and turned away from me. “You know, it had been Charlotte the Screamer’s idea. That big cop had chased her down on her motorcycle, and she’d smashed it into a tree. He killed her, so, a bit of quid pro quo, I poisoned his mind. Muttering in the night, as he slept—or rather as he tried. I slithered doubt and rage into his brain: ‘*Sure, she was the big winner, but it could have been any one of the others! Any one of them could have killed your sweet, darling baby boy. Maybe all of them!*’” He turned back with a horrible grin. “For a tough guy, he’d always struggle when it was time to do the next one but... I can be so very convincing.”

I had to focus on what I needed to do. The longer I waited, the harder it would be. It had to be done, but... *Jesus, I am so goddamn*

*scared.*

“It was Helen Dorsey who remembered you. After I got what I needed, I tossed her in a well a few miles up the road. I think Ray Scones was happy to have some company! But, you know, it’s funny.”

Scanning around, I started to doubt my plan. No turning back now. “None of this is funny, Jimmy.”

“It is! That big cop is still on the rampage I put him on! Total autopilot now.” He knit his eyebrows, putting on a faux expression of concern. “I think that guy has issues.”

I leaned up on my palms, using the little strength I had. “You know what? I was wrong.”

“More than you can imagine.”

“You were never a better man,” I said, wobbling to my feet. “You’re a monster.”

He flexed his arms and walked toward me again. “You have no idea.”

“Wait, wait!” I said, trying to shout, but it came out hoarse. I put my hand out. Then, just beyond Jimmy, I saw a large, beastly creature hovering by the curb across the park.

Gary stood there with his six arms flexed. He looked like he was chewing something as he shifted from foot to foot. I didn't want Jimmy to notice him, but in my heart, I smiled at him. With my head, a very tiny movement side to side, I told him to stay put. Stay safe.

"A final request," I said to the man in front of me.

"No," he said then hesitated. "What is it?"

"A song."

He nearly buckled over laughing. "I ain't gonna sing to you, asshole. But I'll make your head ring. How's that?" Again he lunged, but this time, I slid out of his way, edging to the corner of the stage. For a moment, I listened but heard nothing.

*Come on!*

"A dead man's last wish, my wish, is for a song from the heart. A song of heartache and joy," I said then raised my voice to near shouting. "A song of love and regret."

"Shut up," Jimmy lunged forward, and this time, he did connect, knocking me to the boards of the band shell. The ghosts of his past fluttered across my eyes then vanished.

His last hit nearly drained all the energy I had left. The juice he'd stolen from me was giving him a sickening glow. He'd taken so

much, I could actually see my own energy dripping off his body and pooling at his feet.

Above me, Mad Jimmy was a watery blur bubbling with laughter. Roiling, horrible cackling. But then I heard it.

*Lift every voice and sing,  
Till earth and heaving ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty,  
Let our rejoicing rise,  
High as the listening skies.*

I tried to focus on the hazy image of Jimmy, which was now snapping left and right. He was looking around, trying to work out where the singing was coming from, but there was no one to see. He turned back to me.

“The fuck is this?” He balled his fists. Then he laughed. “I’m not a sap! Oh, oh! Do you think some old song is going to warm my heart and all will be forgiven? You’re dumber than I thought!”

“I’ll give you that,” I muttered. “But I do know something you don’t.”

Slowly his features grew sharper to me again as my head cleared. I could see his eyes now, darting around the square trying to spot the singer.



*Let it resound loud as the rolling sea,*

*Sing a song full of faith that the dark past has taught us.*

*Sing a song full of hope that the present has brought us.*

Again, he laughed. "You're wasting my time. Is that all you got? Your big move was some shitty old song? *That* was your plan?"

"Not the song," I said.

*Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,*

*Let us march till victory is won.*

"Them."

Bursting through the hedges from all sides, there were a dozen of the manic, frenzied creatures drawn by the soulful song ringing through the square. They charged toward its source then turned like a whipcrack when they caught sight of me and Mad Jimmy, glowing in the night with my stolen energy.

His face dropped. His voice was raspy, like a dusty cry from the grave: "What have you done?"

"It's the only way."

Three of them struck Jimmy all at once, and in a wink, he was gone. He didn't even have time to scream.

Mad Jimmy Withy was now lost in the All Time. It was a hell I'd been in for only a moment, and that moment lasted an eternity. As I

heard the snarling come up behind me, I knew it was coming for me again.

It didn't matter.

My heart—even a ghost heart made of gossamer threads—was content. Mad Jimmy would no longer help lead an Army of the Dead to take revenge on the living. There was still Voodoo Cher, but now that was no longer up to me.

My part was done.

The chimeras surrounding me snapped their teeth, curled up on their haunches, and gnashed about. I could only lift my head slightly, my strength gone. But I had enough to smile at them, just the one last time.

“What's up, dogs?” I said and laughed. Not a full belly laugh, but if I was going to be thrust into an endless blackness worse than hell, I should probably go with a grin on my face.

A shadow passed over my head.

Then they were on top of me.

\* \* \*

Ellie stood, frozen.

She'd glanced back up at the house and caught the second flash of gunfire. But there was nothing she could do about what was

happening up there—Aaron Wolfe lived or died by whatever she did down here. Now.

But there was no way she could drag the man out of the roiling, steaming water. He was too heavy for her.

*Come on, lass, get it together!*

She'd seen the tools in the cramped room beneath the deck and could *maybe* smash the pump, but if the jets of air did stop, that might only make the water hotter.

Then one of the implements that had been hanging there popped into her mind.

Ellie ran back across the cement skirting the pool, water drizzling off her limp arms onto the bone-white pavement, and reached up again for the switch box. Flicking the pump room's interior light on, she saw what she needed.

Ten seconds later, she was back at the hot tub, gripping the hardwood handle between her fingers. She lifted her arms back at an angle and brought the ax down against the side of the faux wood.

*Craaack!* The first shot spat splinters of plastic into the air and toward her face, but she lifted again and landed another blow. This time, the ax-head got stuck, and she yanked hard trying to pull it out again.

“Ugggfff!”

She gripped the handle tighter, pulled again, pulled, pulled, pulled, and it finally came free. The old woman was wobbly on her feet, black spots appearing at the edges of her vision. She shook it off, lifted the ax, and drilled home again.

“Come on!”

Water began to leak out, spilling down and casting off an angry trickle of steam as it wound around and off the deck.

*One more.*

All she had left was one last blow, and when she pulled the ax back, her arms were shaking and her legs were wobbling so violently, she felt she might pass out. Ellie gritted her teeth, squeezed her hands, cried out, and smashed the side of the tub. The water came gushing out around her like Moses turning away from the Red Sea.

“Jesus!” Ellie had to spin away to not get knocked over and carried into the pool. She landed on her backside in the soft grass, tossing aside the ax so it didn’t plant itself into the meat of her thigh. She took a deep breath and sat up, watching a torrent of water burst out of the side of the Jacuzzi.

Stumbling back up the three short steps again, her feet slapped through the steaming black water. Her whole body felt heavy; she leaned forward and climbed into the drained tub.

“Aaron,” she wheezed and slapped his face. “Come on, boy, wake up.” She gripped his shoulders and cried out. The man’s skin was almost too hot to touch, like grabbing a Thanksgiving Day turkey straight out of the oven with bare hands.

Ellie shook him, calling out his name, a desperate plea that was both for Aaron Wolfe and for herself. Staring at his red swollen face, she wondered, would this be another that she saw in her nightmares? Every time she looked in a mirror? Another face she’d failed?

“Aaron!” she yelled, and then slowly, slowly, the man opened his eyes and groaned.

She cried out again but this time with joy. She leaned in, kissed him on his hot cheek, and then kissed him again.

“Good man, nice to have ya back,” she said, her voice hoarse. Staring at her dumbly, lying naked with steam pouring off his skin, all he could do was nod. “Rest here. And if you can, keep ya head down.” She looked up to the house. “This isn’t over.”

\* \* \*

For a moment, I blocked out the rageful soundtrack of chimeras surrounding me. A chorus of snarling, growling, snapping.

Instead, I drank in the beauty of starlit heavens above me, then closed my eyes, savoring the last few seconds of sensation. The feeling of the stage floor beneath me, my flex of my fingers and then, yes, even the sounds of the hateful creatures pressing closer. These would be my last memories of this world for an eternity.

But no.

“Oof,” I said and lurched upward as the weight hit my chest. Then I heard the strangest sound.

*Hsssst! Hsssssssssssst!*

Cracking my eyes open, I saw a creature missing half of an ear, flexing its entire body like a hairy bicep.

“Ferris?”

The cat’s eyes were wild, his body clenched, and in that tiny beast, I could see his apex predator ancestors all howling in unison.

*Hsssst!*

The chimeras, just inches away, now hesitated. Unsure about the creature clawing at my chest and baying at them, they’d halted their attack. Suspended. *Thinking?* My vision slowly cleared, and as it did,

I noticed something about the tiny cat defending me from the most horrible creations in the universe.

He was glowing.

“What’s...” I said, strangely feeling some strength trickle into me.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you—”

But before I could finish, the cat wheeled back on me, his face fierce. He lifted his claws—“*What are you doing?*”—and slashed me across the chest.

Everything around me burst into light, and I felt a rush of power like I’d swallowed the sun whole. I felt the energy coursing through my ghost body, raging rivers of it flowing from the gash in my chest, filling my legs, my arms, and my hands. My entire body now alight, I stood, and nearby, I heard a scream.

A woman, a livie, who’d been simply taking her two kids for an evening stroll through the park, pointed at me, gripped her children tight, and then dragged them away, running.

There was so much energy coursing through me, I could be seen in the living world.

The chimeras encircling us roared and flexed up on their haunches, preparing to strike, and Ferris took his cue, clawing up my

chest and gripping on tightly around my shoulders. He hissed again as they leapt toward us.

But even with all that unearthly power, I couldn't get away, and three of them landed at once. Light turned to darkness, and I was being dragged into it, deeper and deeper. The eternal nothingness of the All Time. My vision tunneled around me, and the band shell grew smaller—half-dollar, quarter, dime, pinprick, as if I were being sucked into a black hole. A hole I would never crawl out of. And one that lasted—I knew—millions, *billions* of years.

No light. No sensation. No gift of death. Just emptiness.

At my neck, I felt the tiny creature, now drained of the energy it had gifted to me, grip tighter, and then there was a tiny, tiny rattle.

I realized Ferris was purring. Not happy. Not content. Something told me the cat had some idea of what hell lay before us, and in all of that, it seemed to be at peace with it.

Because in that darkness, neither of us would be alone.

We would be going together.

Tears rose in my eyes, and for the first time, I conceded that I'd kept the ragamuffin creature at arm's length since he'd come to me. In the weeks since he'd become mine, I'd never wanted to care too



much about him since I knew at any moment, he could be taken away.

The only true currency in the world is love. But the despair of losing it can be too much to bear.

But that sort of fear was for fools. And in an instant, I decided it was time to stop being a fool, so I allowed myself to love the stupid, one-eared, mangy hanger-on in the final moments before we were both swept away. That way, I could take that love with me into the dark.

I opened myself to let it surround me, fill me and flow through me.

Then something shifted.

The three chimeras were pressing against me on all sides, but when I turned through the torrent of darkness battling against the light, on my left, I saw one of the creatures shimmy and twist, bend and fold.

*Whoosh!—*

A woman was playing with her children at a playground. My baby smiled at me as I lifted him from the swing, his first ever time, and my heart was singing.

*—Whoosh!*

When I looked again, the chimera crumbled into dust. As the ash fell away, it left behind a red-haired woman looking around with wild eyes, panicked and scared. The darkness pushed harder down upon me, but despite the force, I turned to my right and saw another chimera, also twisting and flexing. I caught sight of its horrible, yellowed eyes.

*Whoosh!—*

An old man was laughing. He smacked the hood of his car, and it was hot to the touch. But I was proud of the ol' girl. It'd taken years of hard work, a lot of money, and a little love. I looked up; there was a long line of other fine, fine cars. A few of the other collectors had come by and were admiring my little beauty.

*—Whoosh!*

Above me, the darkness began to fray into oily tendrils, snapping in the light. Casting my eyes back to the right again, I now saw an older gentleman staring at his hands. He put them to his chest and began to weep, then his fingers groped at his smiling face.

In front of me now, the final chimera gripping me was a swirl of oil-black flesh and—

*Whoosh!—*

A waitress was laughing with her sister as the sun streamed into the seaside bar. The air smelled of stale beer, and I never wanted to be anywhere else. I put my hand on my sister's arm, and she covered it with hers. She nodded outside to my boyfriend, and my heart soared.

—*Whoosh!*

The blackened husk of the chimera crumbled away, and a young woman in a party dress stood in front of me, staring at her arms in the brilliant starlight all around us. She got it faster than the others and burst into a beautiful smile.

"Thank you," she whispered and moved toward me, but I put my hand up to stop her. I'd seen enough and more than another should. And I recognized her face.

I said, "I think there's someone waiting for you, Andrea."

"What?"

"A guy I met in New Orleans, Brandon. He'll be very happy to see you," I said, smiling. "Go!"

And she did.

The other two spooks stared at me, slowly shaking their heads as if coming out of a dream. Or nightmare. The older man was still weeping, smiling. He nodded a few times and saw the other chimera

at the edges of the band shell, which had moved back and away from us. He shot off quickly in the opposite direction.

A moment later, he disappeared into the trees. But I could hear him laughing loudly, and it was one of the most beautiful sounds I'd ever heard.

The remaining woman, a red-haired beauty, smiled and stuck out her hand.

"I'm sorry, I can't really touch people," I said. "Things go a bit... weird when I do."

She laughed. "I noticed. Thank you."

I nodded, my vision blurring again. This time, though, it was the good kind of blur. The nice kind.

The woman went in the same direction as the man, but then turned back before she disappeared through the trees. "Can I at least know your name?"

I smiled. "My name is Painter Mann," I said. "And I'm the world's best private investigator."

She actually laughed so hard, she bent over for a moment then said, "I can't imagine that..." She nodded toward the remaining chimera. "*That* is in your job description."

"I'm kinda making it up as I go along," I said and then shrugged.

She threw me a wave and was gone.

\* \* \*

Barnes was pinned to the floor with the heavy bag of pool tablets on his chest, his shoulder trickling blood into the plush of the white shag carpet beneath him. In the dim light, his eyes shone like two glass marbles, locked on the man standing over him.

Joseph's face was twisted in anguish. The barrel of his gun bobbed up and down, as if keeping time to some frenetic dance tune. It was pointed at the detective.

"Joseph, you don't want to do this."

"I don't!" he cried out. "But I have to protect my family. I'm doing this for my family."

Barnes let out a groan and said, "I don't understand. Were these people threatening your family?"

The big cop shook his head violently, sucking in breaths through damp, racking sobs. He gripped his pistol with two hands, trying to steady it.

"Shit, man," Barnes said, shifting his weight. He howled in pain. "Damn. You shot me."

Joseph wrapped one arm over his eyes, saying, "I'm so sorry."

Then he peeked above his elbow and pointed the pistol at the man's head, his voice muffled by the fabric of his sleeve. "*I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—*"

"Joe, don't, man!" Barnes said, his voice shaking. "I got a family too. And we're—" The detective's eyes flashed to the door behind the big man. Joseph spun around.

Emerging from the dark, a small figure was slowly walking toward him. "Aye, lad." Ellie panted, breathless, as she spoke. "There comes a moment when you realize one more mistake ain't going to make it all right."

"Ms. Walsh?"

She took another step forward, coming into the dim light from the garage. He saw she had something in her hand, holding it in front of her.

"Officer, we're all friends here, remember?" she said, taking another step, but stopped when Joseph pointed his revolver at her. The old woman smiled. "Aw, that won't make this any better."

"I have... I have to protect my family!"

"Of course, lad. You're a good man," she said. "That's what men do. They protect. But they don't go around killing innocent people. And they don't kill their friends, yeah? Not proper men."

“Shut up!” the big man said, his fear and sorrow turning to rage.  
“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Let’s all take a moment,” Ellie said and smiled again. She pushed the object she held in her hand toward him, into the light. A small white bag with tiny colored spheres. “Have a lolly. It’ll make you feel better.”

Joseph shook his head. He pulled the hammer back.

“See, I like the green ones,” Ellie said and when she opened her other hand, in the center of her palm lay an emerald-colored crystalline ball. “Bit larger than the others.”

“I’m sorry.” Joseph moved his finger to the trigger.

“These ones, they’re my favorite,” Ellie said and lifted it to her mouth. But then, moving so fast it was only a blur, she threw the candy at the floor.

Time froze the instant the flash exploded at his feet, filling the room with a *crack!* and blinding white light. Ellie dove to the floor as she heard hard metal clank, the rest of the candies in her bag tumbled and fell, bouncing on the ground, blue, purple, red, yellow, and...

...green. Another flash.

*Green.* Then another.

Ellie had shielded her eyes to keep her night vision sharp, expecting at least one more candy to explode. Joseph was wailing, both hands covering his face.

She focused on where she'd heard the pistol drop, picked out its hard metal edges in the dark, and flailed at it, finally connecting with a swipe of her frail hand.

The pistol spun, skittering across the lacquered wood and only stopped when it hit the white shag of a throw rug. On his back, Barnes grabbed it, lifted it, and fired.

Joseph let out a shriek and collapsed to the floor. And, once again, this time curled in a heap on the cold floor, he began to weep.

\* \* \*

For a long moment, I stared at the spot where the woman named Andrea had disappeared through the trees. When I turned back, the other chimeras were still all around Marietta Square. Waiting. From my shoulder, Ferris let out a howl, which tweaked a few of their heads in our direction. But then, slowly, they began to swirl again, moving. But instead of moving forward, they were slipping away. Leaving.

After a few minutes, they were gone.



Ferris jumped down off my shoulders, his feet padding across the band shell's floor, but this time, I heard no sound. Didn't matter. I'd long given up trying to understand the nature of this strange little creature. Casually, he turned toward me and began licking a paw.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I said. "You did fine."

He didn't even look up, couldn't care less.

"So that's why you've been going around swiping at people all this time? I promise I won't curse you out for it again. How about that?"

The cat simply turned, flicked his tail once, and then slowly walked toward the street, where Gary was now standing, a concerned look on his face. At least, I thought it was concerned. Hard to tell on a monster.

When I got close, his shoulders, all six of them, dropped slightly.

"You okay, Paint?"

Gary hadn't said that. I turned and saw Julius, his head poking out of an old record store, and gave him a wave. Then he looked up and down the square.

"Mad Jimmy gone, then?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "I feel awful for the guy, though. He's in the worst of places, and it's, I mean, indescribable."

"He deserves it."

I shook my head. “Nah, man, nobody deserves that. But I had no choice.”

Gary frowned, his eyes sharp. “And you were going to let them take you too.” It hadn’t been a question.

“Like I said, I didn’t see any other choice.”

Julius looked at me and shook his head. “That’s because you are dumb, boy. You got us to take care of things!”

Gary turned toward him. “Yeah? I see you were hiding in a store during the whole ‘take care of things’ part.”

“I’m the lookout, man,” Julius said. “Watching out for you, Gary, so you didn’t get snapped up by those weird dogs.”

“They’re not dogs,” I said and chuckled.

“Forget all that. Come ’ere. You’ll wanna see this,” Julius said, waving us inside the store.

“Hold on,” I called back and walked toward the band shell. In the distance, I could still hear the snarling of a few of the chimeras that had not yet fully cleared out, chasing the remnants of the emotional display.

When I got to the stage, I stepped up and saw a splatter of stain. All that was left of Mad Jimmy in this world was a residue of energy

from his desperate fight to not be taken into the All Time. Soon that would be gone too.

My chest hurt at the sight of it. “Sorry, man.” Then I surprised myself by making a silent promise to one day bring him back. “Jesus, I’m so sorry.”

“Ah, now you singing old-timey hymns.” A deep, echoing voice came from below me. “That sounds like a new one. Maybe you’ll teach me a few bars. I ain’t heard a new one in, oh, ’bout a hundred years or so.”

Smiling, I looked toward my feet. “Thanks, Houser. I knew you’d come through.”

He was quiet for a moment then said, “That something to do with doing the right thing at the wrong time, yeah?”

“Yep. Something like that,” I said. “Listen, I got friends over here. Maybe it’s time you came up?”

A laugh bubbled up from below me. “Ah, yeah, well... maybe one day. I expect those things a-stirrin’ about now, so you be careful.”

“I will, man,” I said. “Thanks again.”

When I hopped down off the stage floor and turned to leave, the man in the tunnel below called after me once more.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Hell of a thing you risked, son, being sucked into the hellacious world,” he said. “Why would you do that?”

“Because... I am here,” I said and shook my head, “to do good. I think. And that was—”

“*Dumb*. Really dumb,” Houser called up and laughed. “You’re a good man, Painter Mann.”

“Trying.”

“Hey, since I been down here, I was thinking about something.”

I laughed. “My friends are going to wonder why I’m talking to my feet, man.”

“Let ‘em wonder. Keeps people guessing,” he said. “So, I got a lotta time to think.”

“Okay.”

“See, it’s a funny thing,” he said, his voice hitching slightly, and I could envision him leaning his head back against the dark, damp walls. “You told me that you don’t remember who you are, but—and here’s the funny thing—that when you touch folks, you see everything about their lives.”

“Yeah, I can’t really expl—”

“Nah, nah, not all that,” he said. “A man who can see others’ past by laying his hand on ‘em, but you don’t know nothing about yours?”

That's a hell of a thing. Irony, sure. But that's a hell of a thing."

I sighed. "Well, touching myself doesn't do anything."

"Don't I know it," Houser said and laughed again. "I been down in this tunnel alone for hundred fifty years. Don't think I haven't tried!"

I laughed. "See ya, Houser. Thanks again, man. I owe ya."

"I'll hold you to that."

Looking up again, I saw Gary's monster hopping from foot to foot, and instantly, my bad feelings evaporated. Most of them, anyway.

"Paint!"

I smiled and walked toward them. I'd only seen one glimpse of Gary's past, but if he'd let me take another look, I would. He was so unlike me in so many different ways but sometimes friends are. Even best friends.

"Paint!" he called again. "You gotta see this!"

As I approached, he got more and more excited, and I had to stifle the urge to just burst out laughing. Picture if the creature from *Alien* and Brundlefly had had a kid together and roused it from bed on Christmas morning. That wasn't a great description of what I was looking at but as close as I could come.

"Check it out," Gary said, waving me over and looking at Julius.

I sighed. "Guys, I'm tired."

“You wanna see this,” Julius said, but mentally I was just drained, hearing only every other word. He caught my attention when he started saying something about his conversation with the Screamer.

“Bull is what she says her name is,” Julius said. “But that sounds made up. Wasn’t sure if I could trust anything she said.”

“Fine,” I said.

“So Mad Jimmy says to her—”

“Hold on,” I said, trying to cut through the fog in my head. Then I remembered. “Right. Jimmy said something about that after he knocked me down.”

Julius looked between Gary and me. Gary shrugged. “Uh, yeah,” Julius said. “So when everyone was running away, he settled her down some for a chat. And she ain’t easy to settle down. Me and Paris, we’re in there, and she’s rantin’ and rav—”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “When did Jimmy talk to her?”

“Oh, she reckons it was a few weeks back now,” Julius said.

*Just before he started chasing me.*

“She was going on about being killed and nobody carin’ and then the subject of, uh, some old deejay comes up,” Julius continued.

“Sounds like that’s all Mad Jimmy wanted to talk about, and after he promised he’d help her out... bullshit, as you know.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Well,” Julius continued, “she tells him about a photo.”

“Right,” Gary said. “William brought it up too. Remember how Jimmy was showing the dead people some picture?”

I nodded, not sure I wanted hear what he was going to say next.

“He took ‘em *here*,” Julius said, nodding toward the rundown record shop. “They got it up on the wall in here.”





## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Ellie shuffled into the gray room, the paper cups of coffee in both hands trembling slightly. She was exhausted after being up all night, and the aching muscles in her arms were screaming for a warm tub back at home. But despite dawn setting the dark horizon ablaze, this day wasn't over.

"Thank you," the officer said, her voice crumbling through the remains of a bad night's sleep. After she'd gotten the call, Monica Glover was back at the station in less than fifteen minutes.

Ellie eased herself into the plastic chair, her eyes never leaving the video feed into the nearby room. She watched Joseph as he sat, dead eyes lost in a void somewhere above Detective Barnes's head. She barely recognized the man. He'd always been so kind, always smiling.

*Was that a mask? Or is this?*

"Why do you have the sound so low?" Officer Glover asked, standing next to Ellie's chair. "Can barely hear it."

"Sometimes you do the best listening with your eyes, Monica."

She heard a stifled sniff from the woman standing next to her and knew the exact words that were coming next. She'd heard them

dozens of times, maybe more. But she couldn't remember them being spoken about another officer before.

"I just can't believe it," the officer said.

Ellie nodded, staring intently.

Barnes was switching up his techniques. Standing, sitting, leaning forward arms apart, leaning back with them crossed. Anger, sympathy, disappointment, understanding, and on and on.

Of course, even as a beat cop, Joseph knew the techniques as well. And so far, none had drawn a single word from him.

"He's accepted it," Ellie said. "He knows it's over and that nothing he can say will change that."

"But *why*?" Glover asked, her voice cracking. "I mean, all those poor people..."

"Yeah, that's the question, isn't it?" The Irish detective looked up at her. "That's the only question."

When Ellie looked back, Barnes had disappeared from the screen, leaving the big man alone in the small room. A moment later, he came in the door, let out a long breath, and sat heavily on a wooden bench at the far wall. He winced as he adjusted his injured arm in its sling, then stared at his hands.

Ellie said, "He's turned to stone."

Barnes looked at her with heavy lids and shrugged. "Isn't that what happens when you look at them?"

"Them' who?" Ellie asked.

"Monsters," Barnes said.

Officer Glover flipped through her small notebook, reading aloud. Aaron Wolfe was recovering from his near-death experience in the hot tub. He would be in the hospital for another day for observation so they could determine if there was any long-term damage.

"They think he may have had a mini-stroke, but I mean... he was being cooked," the officer said and stuffed the notebook into her rear pocket. "He's asked to see you, Ms. Walsh, if you're up for it."

Ellie only nodded, still staring at the screen.

"Says you've got free pool cleaning for life." Glover chuckled. "At least, I know now where I'm spending the summer."

Ellie said, "I don't have a pool."

The officer grabbed the handle on the door to leave. "He's putting one in next week." She left without another word.

Ellie leaned in again, squinting, and saw a twitch on the large man's lips. *Is he praying?*

Sitting back, she slowly turned toward Barnes. "How's the arm?"

"No."

Ellie smiled. "Ah, don't be a candyass. Bullet went right through."

"No, Ellie."

"Probably need another shirt, though. Good, you needed to update your wardrobe. Ya dress like a fat toddler."

Barnes finally looked up, and his hard face melted a little then became a small smile.

"When I die, I don't want you anywhere near my casket," he said, his eyes twinkling slightly. "You'd stand over me, going, 'Get up, ya lazy bastard. Stop lyin' about.'"

Ellie laughed softly. "I don't sound anything like that. What is that? Scottish? Australian?"

"I don't do Commonwealth accents very well."

"Obviously."

Barnes pulled himself from the chair, crouched next to her, then tapped the tiny image on the monitor with his finger.

"His wife is in the waiting area," she said, trying to get him to meet her eyes. "Wants to see him when she can. She's pretty wrecked."

Barnes sighed. "No, Ellie."

"Why not? Once you've got what you need, be good for the lad to see a friendly face."

Finally, Barnes turned toward her. He sighed and said, “You *can’t* talk with him, El. You know that.”

“Why would I want to talk with the man? He’s a killer. Dangerous.”

He tried to stand, gave up, and then just sat on the floor. Barnes scooted back to the wall and, again, let out another deep breath.

“It just doesn’t make...” His voice trailed off.

“I know.”

“Only thing he said he was sorry for was shooting me. Only thing.”

Ellie sighed. “Well, I expect there’s heaps of evidence tying him to each scene, if you look hard enough. They’re already searching his home, his car, his computer.” She nodded toward the door. “His desk here is considered a crime scene, of course.”

The man on the floor shrugged.

“I just... you know?” Barnes said, trailing his fingertips across the gray concrete. “I mean, I don’t understand why, you know, *this*.”

She turned and leaned forward, folding her hands between her knees, and waited for the right words to come to her. When they didn’t, she spoke anyway.

“We may never know,” she said and blinked slowly. “Boy’s locked up like a vault.”

Finally, Barnes said, “Fine. Okay, fine.”

Ellie stood up.

“But I’m going in with you.”

She sat back down. “He won’t talk to me if you’re in there. The boy looks up to you, and I think... he doesn’t want you to dislike him.”

Barnes said, “I hate him for what he’s done.”

“He knows that. He can see it in your eyes.”

“You go in there alone, and even if he spills his guts, you’re not a cop anymore—we can’t use any sort of confession he gives you!”

She started to speak, but he held up a hand.

“I know, I know. We can use your testimony, I get that.”

Ellie stood again and went to the door. “Barnes, you won’t need it.”

The man looked at her. “You called me Barnes.”

“That’s your name. Says it on your tag.”

He glanced down at his shirt, where, of course, there was no name tag. “Usually, it’s Barnsey. I was actually getting used to it.”

She opened the door. “Well, then, Barnsey, I’m not looking for a confession,” she said. “I’m looking for a reason.”

\* \* \*

Joseph shifted in his chair as the door opened, but he eased when he saw Ellie walking in.

Sitting across from him, she dug around in her purse for a moment. She said, "I'd offer you a lolly, but I'm already in enough trouble for being in here, so don't want to press my luck."

Joseph nodded once, a vacant expression in his eyes.

"And I think I'm out of my green ones," she said, grinning.

Slowly he looked up, the skin around his eyes loosening. "Where did you get those?" he asked, his voice cut with gravel. "Can't imagine you can buy stuff like that around town."

"Oh, my da was a cop, yeah? But my ma, she was a showman," Ellie said with a warm smile. "Or show-woman, as it were. Had a whole bag of tricks, like those little flash snappers. She taught me how to make them as a girl, and I'd load her up before she hit the road. So many years ago now."

Joseph nodded and then seemed to fold into himself once again.

For a few minutes, she just sat there and waited. Weighing. Finally, she spoke, and at first, he thought he hadn't heard her right. So she repeated it:

"How long do you have?"

Joseph squinted. "What?"

“To live, Officer Joseph,” she said. “How long do you have to live?”

The man looked toward the camera and shifted his weight. “How do you know about that?”

She shrugged. “I’ve seen it before. I’m old, so I’ve seen a lot of people dying in my time. Cancer?”

It took him a moment, but then he nodded once.

“How long?”

He shook his head and was quiet for another minute more. After she again repeated her question, he finally answered. “Months, maybe. Not long.”

“So this was tying up loose ends, or...?”

Joseph stared back at the cuffs around his wrists, their connecting chain silent and slack within the iron loop drilled into the table.

Ellie looked at the man, then nodded to herself. Slowly, she lifted her left hand to the table, and with her right, she twisted the diamond and ruby on her fingers back into place.

Of course, Joseph had been watching her do this. “What’s with the rings? Some tick you got?”

“The diamond is William Morton,” she said, caressing the two stones. “The ruby is Helen Dorsey. Now that we have their killer, I can set them free.”



With that, the light in his eyes faded and disappeared. She tried a few more questions, but the man was now back in that dead place.

After a few moments of digging around in her purse, she came up with a necklace. She clicked open its clamshell medallion and placed it face up on the table.

“That’s my mam and da,” she said, nodding at the tiny black-and-white photo inside. “I don’t always wear that around because it turns colors when you’re sweaty, and this time of year, all you are is sweaty.” She caught Joseph steal a glance at it then turn away.

She leaned forward and held it up, and its chain rattled on the desk.

“Family,” she said. “My mother was killed on the road, somewhere up in Killarney. That’s Northern Ireland, and at the time, it was supposed to be quite safe. It wasn’t.” She turned the picture to herself, kissed two fingers, pressed them on the picture, and snapped the charm closed. “She had been training me to be a performer like she was. Hated the idea of another cop in the family.”

Ellie put the necklace back in her purse and gently slipped the bag on the floor. “Dad was wrecked, of course. Worked on the case for years until he died, and then I picked it up since, after that, I’d joined his profession instead of hers.” She looked toward the man

sitting across from her. He looked smaller than before. “Irony, don’t you think?”

Joseph said nothing.

“Everything she did to keep me away from being police, yet it was her who’d inspired me to join up. But,” she said and grinned slightly, “as you’ve seen, I still got some of what Ma taught me all those years back.”

Ellie could see his breath quicken.

She said, “My father had gotten into his share of scrapes over the years, and, oh, back then, it was a lot more loosey-goosey than it is today. But, no, he died as he should. In his own home, visits from friends and family.”

Joseph shifted his weight, his chains dragging slightly across the desk.

“He was sick for years, actually. Still worked through most of it, but in the end, just in the bed. I’d read to him at night because he hated the television,” she said. “You know, in those final weeks... he said something to me I will never forget. For as long as I live. Took me years to believe it.”

Joseph turned toward her and finally spoke. “What did he say?”

“Ah, ya can’t take a dyin’ man at his word, with his brain going a bit soft,” she said. “But he told me that he could hear voices. Not like devils or angels but people he knew. Most were kind; at least that’s the story he told. For the most part, it seemed to comfort him a little. But every now and then, they weren’t so kind.”

Joseph tensed.

She continued. “You see, he would be screaming and hollering, and I would come racing into the room, and... he’d stop. He was very close to the end, then. He was convinced a man named Fred Bewley had spoken to him. That ol’ Fred was angry he’d given up on him.”

“Given up?”

“He’d been a construction foreman, murdered in my old town. Da and the others couldn’t never pin it on anyone. Trail ran cold,” she said. “I thought maybe it was, you know, a regret the man was carrying. That’s all the dying have left: love and regret. In the end, you can only hope the scales tip toward love.” She waited for a moment, then continued. “Before he died, he made me promise to reopen Fred Bewley’s case. Of course, I said I would. You do that with people dyin’, right? But he said something so odd.”

This time, she waited until the man spoke. Nearly a minute passed before he did.

“What did he tell you?”

“It was oddly specific, which is why it stuck with me.” Ellie smiled. “He told me to go back to the home of an old worker of Fred’s named Alex Keen. Told me something was hidden there. They’d searched the place. I knew that, and he had too, but Da insisted I do that. He died not long after.” Ellie nodded and then dragged a finger across her eye. “But a dyin’ man’s wish and all, had to do it. Don’t want them to haunt you now.”

Joseph stiffened.

“Had to get permission from the new owners, but dig we did, and sure enough, there was what they’d been looking for all along.”

“What?”

Ellie gave him a dark smile. “A rusted old nail gun and the burnt remains of a man’s cock and balls.”

Joseph winced, which had been the desired effect.

“The rantings of a dying man who claimed he’d learned it from a dead man in his bedchamber,” she said. “But with that, I’d solved it—my first big collar.”

Joseph nodded and stared off for a moment. He said, "I'll never have that. That feeling—"

"That's not my point, Joseph," Ellie said and leaned forward, her hands on the table. "What I think is that some do not leave here after they are gone. I believe there are... whispers. Whispers with a will. Give us a push in this direction or that."

She looked down and saw the chains rattling. The large man's hands were trembling, and she put hers atop his.

"I myself have not heard such things, but when I'm tired, and it's late, there are times," she said softly. "Maybe I have the same sort of madness my da did, but faintly, faintly... I believe I have heard the laughter of the dead."

With a start, Joseph sat back, snapping his hands away, his face twisted in agony. Eyes squeezed shut, bending to one side, he looked as if he were bracing against some sudden torrent of wind Ellie could not feel.

Tears began to stream down his cheeks, and he finally opened one eye. "I don't... I don't think," he said. "I didn't want to... yes, at first. But just the woman who'd... killed him."

Ellie said, "Charlotte McGraw."

“Hadn’t meant to. I’d just seen her riding and…” Again, Joseph winced, shrinking away from the invisible storm, then he calmed himself. “After that, though. N-N-Not what I wanted. I don’t, um, know.”

The old detective nodded slowly and just listened.

“But then it was. Like some idea taking root in my mind.” Joseph looked at her, his voice phlegmy. “It wasn’t just that she’d killed him. *They* had. They had killed him!”

Ellie nodded. “Who? Who did they kill?”

Joseph merely sat and cried, his massive shoulders shuddering up and down. Then it became clear to her.

“Your baby, the baby your wife was carrying. That was the one who died,” she said. “Helen Dorsey’s husband told us there had been a baby.”

The man scowled through tears. “Helen Dorsey was as guilty as the rest. I know it in my bones. They were all so proud, smiling like fools!” Then he slouched. “All I ever wanted was a family of my own. And they took that. They stole that from me.”

“But you have that!” Ellie said, standing and walking to the corner of the room. She spun back. “Your wife has a child now.”

“That’s why I had to protect them. I’ll be gone before the end of the year—they need to be cared for. Had to cover my trail so no one would ever know. That’s what I knew.”

Ellie sat back down. “Officer Glover said they had been looking into the accident last year again. When Bull McGraw, Charlotte, wrapped her motorcycle around a tree.”

His face damp and reddened, Joseph began to laugh darkly. “And who do you think put her on that path? Why would you investigate an everyday crash all this time later?” Again, he winced and shook, lifting his hands to cover his face, and the chain around his wrists rang out as it snapped taut on its hook.

“Somehow, she must have heard the screaming.” He leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. “The endless screaming.”

The woman leaned back in her chair. “You ran down McGraw. Chased her until she smashed into a tree. You blame her for your baby’s death, why wasn’t that enough?”

“That was before, an accident. I was just...” he said, eyes out of focus. “Then I had to protect my family, because it *wasn’t* enough...” he said, his voice trailing off. “He said it wasn’t enough. He said it wasn’t enough. My family was in danger, *my family*, and I had to...”

“Who?” Ellie swallowed, her mouth dry. “Who said it wasn’t enough?”

Once again, Joseph’s eyes went dead, his face slack. “The whispers with a will.”

\* \* \*

In the cafeteria, Barnes brought a coffee over and sat down next to Ellie. His face was sunken from the lack of sleep. And for a few moments, they just sat in silence with each other.

Officer Glover walked over, dropped a file in front of the detective, then turned away without a word. Barnes paged through it.

Ellie nodded to the file. “He’ll never make trial, will he?”

The cop shrugged and then closed it. “If he doesn’t, then there can’t be a conviction.”

“His pension, then, will go to his family. A conviction...”

Barnes nodded. “Would have stripped that away, yes.”

“As he says, some twisted idea, but I suppose he felt he was protecting his family.”

“By killing *four* people,” Barnes said.

Ellie tapped her lip. “Might be five. We never found that other fella.”

The cop sipped his coffee. “I would have... I never saw it.”



Ellie shook her head. "I don't think it was in him," she said. "I really don't." Then, as if coming out of a dream, she shot a look at Barnes. "So how was Joseph able to get us chasing Gabrielle for her da, Jeremy Talbot for Ray Scones? All that evidence?"

Barnes sighed. "The theory—and we can't prove it yet—is that he'd been the one who'd stolen some of the party drugs out of evidence. Stuff like GHB."

Ellie sighed.

"That would have been why we found the kid passed out in the car outside the pool guy's house," he said. "He's one of Aaron Wolfe's workers. It seems Joseph was dosing these people, and they'd be out for hours. From there, he could carry them in, leave prints around."

"Or stuff a receipt in a pocket."

"Right," the cop said. "It does explain why the computer kid, Jeremy, didn't remember anything that night when he was gaming."

Ellie nodded, her eyes coming into focus. "And when the officers were trying to wake up William Morton's daughter, they said they had a bugger of a time doing so."

"Exactly, she was still coming off whatever Joseph had given her."

Ellie caught Barnes staring at her. He said, "Was all of that true? What you said about your father."

Ellie smiled. "Most of it. A good story is always made better with a little embellishment, Detective. I suppose that's still of the showman Ma instilled in me."

"And thank God for that," he said and lifted his coffee cup in a toast. Then, for the first time since they'd been sitting there, Barnes cracked a smile. "So all that shit about whispers? I mean, come on."

She shrugged. "Isolation, maximization, minimization—they teach you lot that in cop school, I suspect."

Barnes nodded. "Reid Technique, of course."

"Ah, but what they don't teach ya, but say fifty years of coppin' does, is that when someone has sailed away from the seas of sanity, sometimes you've got to climb on board and go for the ride. Sometimes you take the rudder; sometimes you see where the wind takes you."

The cop laughed. "If you're trying to tell me that you're crazy, I knew that already."

She began to smile, then a strange thought struck her. So strange, she was actually embarrassed, her face reddening.

Barnes caught it. "What?"

“Listen, you have to do something for me.”

He shrugged. “Sure. Name it.”

“It’s a bit... unorthodox.”

“Everything about you is a bit unorthodox, Ellie Walsh, detective sergeant with An Garda Síochána, Wicklow.”

She was thankful for the light moment and grinned. “Former detective sergeant,” she said. “You need to, um, declare that Joseph killed those people.”

Barnes blinked. “Wha?”

“It must be known, *publicly*, that Joseph Filoialli murdered Charlotte McGraw, Ray Scones, Helen Dorsey, and William Morgan.” When he began to protest, she silenced him with her hand. “For chrissake, lad, please, please don’t ask me why. I don’t even know why it’s so important, I only know... I know that it is. It’s the most important of things.”

Half waiting for her to let him in on the joke, his expression wavered from humor to confusion to concern. Then, he drew in a long deep breath and held it.

After a half minute, Ellie couldn’t stand it. “You’re gonna turn blue.”

Finally, he exhaled, his eyes never leaving hers.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said, then nodded to her hand. “The ruby and diamond are back around again.”

“Well, we got our man.”

“Those other two are still turned around toward your palm,” he said, trying to sound casual. “You leave a favorite butterfly knife somewhere?”

“No, only the sapphire is for my stuff, so I don’t forget it,” she said and briefly hesitated. “The emerald is me, actually. It always faces toward my palm, so—”

“So you never forget yourself, I gotcha. What about the other one facing inward? The purple?”

She smiled sadly and lightly caressed the amethyst. “That, my boy,” she said, “*is* personal.”

Ellie leaned forward and rubbed the man’s hand. She grabbed her handbag and umbrella, strapped on her hat, and smiled. “Now, if you have to ring me up anytime, you know where you can find me.”

“We won’t need your testimony if there’s no trial, El.”

Digging in her purse, she said, “Wasn’t talking about this case. You know, if anything comes up and you want to talk it out.” She held out a small white bag. “Would you like a lolly?”

He laughed. "No, thank you. Bite down on one of those, and it could blow off a crown."

"Nah, those are just the green ones," she said and stuffed the bag into the pocket of her coat. "Green ones are my favorite."

Barnes watched the woman walk away until she was gone.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Even this early in the morning, there were a handful of people browsing inside the old record store on Marietta Square.

And by people, of course, I meant livies. I thought about the horror that had occurred just a hundred meters from where they stood: a man being ripped from this temporal plane and thrust into the bleakest, most horrible existence beyond imagination. And here these ones, just going about their day, flipping through stacks of mildewy dust jackets and looking for a rare vinyl copy of some old Pet Shop Boys album.

It wasn't fair to be angry with them, but I was.

The clerk behind the counter was talking to a balding guy, gut hanging over his belt, about someone named Billy Nicholls without a care in the world.

These livies had no idea how precarious their vacuous lives were hanging in the balance.

"Why do I even bother?" I muttered to myself, following Gary and Julius toward a wall lined with framed photos, old radio-station bumper stickers, and faded T-shirts held in place with a mishmash of pushpins, small nails, and yellowing Scotch Tape.

Above us—this was their idea of decoration, pathetic—a handful of apparently less valuable records spun lazily in the light breeze, hanging from black string stapled to the ceiling. Two dozen of the black discs twisted slowly. The early sun caught a few at the time, making a handful of them flash from black to deep yellow and back again.

“Paint! Paint!” Gary was beside himself, hopping and pointing.

I laughed. “Calm down, man. I’m comin’.”

Then something caught my eye.

Words.

Phrases.

No, *names*.

They flashed before me in the color of the rising sun—and I stopped and looked back.

“Wait... what?” I stared up at one of the spinning black records, one of the smaller ones, unsure why something there had stopped me in my tracks.

It was an old 45, with the green and burnt orange of Atlantic records. The band’s name—one that seemed familiar, but I couldn’t place it—was something called Boney M. *Boney M*? I tried to work out if it was some rude term.



*Maybe that's how I know it? I know a lot of—*

Then I saw it.

I blinked, but it was still there, two words slowly turning in the breeze. Even at the varying angles, though, it still made no sense.

I read the title of the song. Then read it again, out loud.

“Painter Man.”

For a moment, nausea swept through me, and I staggered. The floor looked like it was leaping up at me, and there were flashes, images of some person I didn't know. I jumped away to see what spook I'd bumped into, but no one was there.

I looked up as the record spun, the other side just coming around.

Somewhere far off, Gary and Julius were calling to me. But I was lost in thought. “That doesn't...”

Gary shouted at me again, his arms raised in some sort of triumph. “Painter, it's you! Look, it's you!”

When I looked toward him, he was pointing at a photograph of five people. All huddled around for the photographer. Unsteady, I stared at the faces of William Morgan and Helen Dorsey. There were two others and, it seemed, a sixth person, but only their elbow was caught in the shot.

In the middle, at the bottom, was a young man in a dark hoodie, with a painted-on smile. He was handing a tiny trophy to one of the people in the picture—*That's the Screamer. That's Bull McGraw*—as if he were handing out some award. There was writing on the shirt of the man in the hoodie, but I couldn't quite make it out.

"We found you! We found you!" Gary said, shouting and dancing in a circle. "Painter Mann, Painter Mann, that's the man!"

Julius leaned in, and I heard him say, "Now, it don't look exactly like Painter, but—"

"No, no," Gary said, his voice going up another octave. "That's what he looked like *before!*"

Dazed, I asked him, "What?"

"The first time I saw you, Painter!"

Confused by what he was saying, I looked up again to see the tiny spinning black disk. I had to see it again. *That... I mean, that doesn't make sense. Why would my name be on a record?*

I needed to see if I'd really seen what I thought I had. But by now, the 45 had spun too far. It was no longer showing the song title *Painter Man*. This now was the B-side. I mouthed the new title, and the wave of nausea rolled over me again. I staggered, moving away. "What the fu—?"

Gary was still yelling, nearly screaming now, so ecstatic, so happy for me, but I realized too late how dangerous this had been.

The chimera burst into the back of the record store, teeth gnashing, its wild red eyes furious. On its back were the remnants of its master, long since gone. But the chimera was raging, hungry after being denied a feast earlier, and searched for the source of the over-the-top emotion.

“Gary! Stop!” I shouted and was met with an instant look of hurt and confusion. “Don’t move! *Be quiet!*”

My friend looked at me, struck. He fell into a deep frown and said, “Aw, Paint, I’m only excited for y—”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the beast leap for him, and I shot forward, instantly skating to push Gary out of the way before it could strike. With every bit of strength I had, every ounce of energy, I exploded toward him and reached out to grab him.

I’d been too late.

Too late to save my friend.

I would never forget the look on Gary’s face. The shock, fear, and horror. His huge mouth fell open, and he said, “Pai—”

A thunderclap went off in my head, which filled with both the light of a thousand stars and total void at the same time. There was a roar

in my ears, and I tumbled end over end through the black of space, and all I heard was Gary's last utterance echoing around me: *Pai-Pai-Pai-Pai-Pai...*

A moment or eternity later, I was laying on the floor. Julius's face was in mine, and he was yelling something at me, but it was warbling and manic. I then felt like a freight train of electricity smacked into me, everything went black, and for an instant, I saw Gary surrounded by... all sorts of people.

As quickly as the sensation hit me, it was gone.

Strangely, everything was still black. No, not black, more like dark purple. With smudges. And lint.

"Painter, get up," Julius said. "I can't reach for ya, you know that, and you got your face in the carpet now."

Slowly I pushed up, got to my knees, then lifted myself upright.

Julius looked at me, his lips sliding across themselves as if he were chewing. After he blinked a few times, I realized he was weeping without tears. And I felt it too. My heart ached, and my body ached with total sorrow. Regret. Failure.

I tried to speak but couldn't make the words come out. Julius shuffled from the store, heading back out to the square and, like a

robot, I simply followed with no idea what to think, what to feel, what to do.

After a few minutes, standing just outside the store, he found the courage I no longer had.

“Gary got taken to that place, yeah?”

Slowly, without looking at him, I nodded.

“Fine, fine,” Julius said and cleared his throat. “Then we get him back.”

I looked over at him and was ready to tell him that wasn’t possible. That our friend was now in the All Time, lost to this world, and would have to endure a thousand lifetimes—a million!—totally alone.

Instead, I said: “Yeah.”

“Good,” Julius said. “We just gotta go find somebody who’s much smarter than the two of us to tell us how to do that. Shouldn’t be too hard,” he said and looked at me. I lifted my head toward him and met his gaze. “I mean, the part about finding someone smarter than us. There’s gotta be loads of folks.”

He forced a smile, grinning at me with those perfect, brilliant teeth. I nodded.

There was someone, of course. The smartest person I know in the InBetween. She might have an idea and, sure, we were going to ask her about it. But I had other questions now.

The Professor knew more than she'd been telling me.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“I’m so sorry, Painter,” the Professor said and some of my anger melted away because I knew she’d meant it. Some of the anger, not all of it.

She stared off to the west for a moment, as she did, as if in mediation or prayer. The sky was a deep purple over that way as light began to fail on Stone Mountain, Georgia. Below in the park, it seemed someone was trying to revive fusion jazz, but they were doing it more harm than good.

In the silence that hung heavy between us, her eyes drifted over toward Julius sitting about a hundred feet away. Ferris was at his feet, licking a paw.

“I think the cat likes your friend more than you,” she said, avoiding my eyes. “Maybe you don’t need to—”

“Cut the crap, okay?”

The Professor put her hands on her knees and slowly spun to face me. Squaring her shoulders, spine straight as a Redwood, she stared at me. But there was no malice, no judgement, no... nothing. Blank.

She said, “You have questions.”



I didn't even know where to start. So I just picked one of the queries racing through my mind and went with that. But I was in no mood for her vague guru speak.

"How do we get him back?" I said, boring my eyes into her, and the heat of it made her wince. She seemed confused by the venom, but that's only because she hadn't heard the other big question I had. That was coming next.

"You're still struggling with this concept, I think," she said. "The All Time is exactly what it sounds like."

"I don't want to hear goddamn riddles!"

"It doesn't matter if your friend is there for an instant or a thousand years," she said, her voice softer. "The experience is the same. It's experiencing the always, beginning to end."

I watched her gaze flicker down to my hands. I hadn't even realized that they'd been balled into fists.

"You've said it yourself," she continued. "There is one person responsible for this realm, so if you're looking for answers like that you need to speak with her."

"Voodoo Cher."

"Yes, but I can't imagine how she would help you to get your friend back. She has one goal, one plan. Little else matters to her."

“But she could do it?”

“She created this place.”

“She created the All Time too?”

The Professor hesitated, watching me. “There are things—” She stopped her guru speak when I began slowly shaking my head, trembling with rage. “I don’t know, Painter. I simply don’t know.”

That had given me an opening for my next line of questioning.

“But my name isn’t Painter?” I said. “Is it?”

The Professor moved so quickly, I put an arm up to protect my head from a blow. Without even getting up, cross-legged, she snapped away from me at high-speed and at first looked like she was, of all things, fleeing. But she stopped at the edge of the mountain’s plateau and then bolted at a right angle. I watched as she circumnavigated the edge, all the way around.

The entire time, she was shifting her head around like a bird, looking left, looking right. She didn’t even react to Julius giving her a wave as she rocketed past.

Then, she returned, sitting in front of me once again.

I said, “Had to get your steps in?”

“What?”

“Never mind,” I said, then waved my arm around. “What was that all about?”

She still hadn’t looked at me yet, staring into each direction intently. After half a minute, she finally faced me once again.

“I had to be sure no one was around. No one listening.”

“You need a guard dog,” I said, a bit annoyed with myself because I’d suddenly lightened the mood. I’d wanted to keep the angry up, but I just couldn’t sustain it. And she *was* a friend.

But my friend had been keeping stuff from me.

The Professor said, “What do you know?”

“What kind of question is that? Just ans—”

She put her hand up. “Please, I’ll explain as best I can. But trust me, this is the best way. So, what do you know?”

“I saw a name,” I said, wishing I had teeth to grind. “In a record shop and it affected me. And... and I think it’s my real name.” Her wide eyes were fixed on me, but she gave away nothing. “Rasputin? That’s even worse than Painter, but I know that it’s mine.”

She reached forward, but when I pulled back, she held her hand up, an unspoken apology.

“Painter is your name here,” she said slowly. “In this place. Before here, yes, your name was Rasputin Frewer.”

The revelation sent shivers through me, and as insane as it sounded, I knew it was true.

“When I’d been alive my name was Rasputin Frewer,” I said, making it real to me. “Raz. Raz to my friends.”

“Yes.”

“Why the deception? Why did you lie to me?” Behind me, I heard Julius call out, checking on me. I hadn’t realized I’d been yelling. Half turning, I said, “All good. I’m all right, man.”

“This here cat of yours has swiped me three times!” he shouted back. “I don’t believe in animal cruelty, now, but I am reconsidering my position on the matter.”

Even from that far away, I heard Ferris give him a low growl.

I turned back to the Professor. “Why? Tell me why.”

“You know you were right a while back,” she said. “When you said that I’d suggested you head to New Orleans because that’s where Voodoo Cher was.”

“So you sent me to her?”

The Professor nodded, again, her eyes scanning the horizon.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because that...” she said, then looked at me again. “That was the plan.”

“What? *What?*”

She shifted for a moment, then clasped both hands in front of her. “If you know who you are, if you know that truth, then you’ve put the plan in danger. You now appear as this creation, Painter Mann, but it keeps you safe. And if you’re safe...”

I stood, shaking my head. “That makes no sense! Safe from what?”

“From her.”

“Voodoo Cher?” I said, laughing unpleasantly. “How does being *this* keep me safe from her?”

The Professor waited for a moment, looking like she was weighing options. “Because if you appeared as Rasputin Frewer, she might recognize you.”

*Wait, what?*

*WHAT?*

“How could...?” I started but then realized it. Somehow the creator of the InBetween knew the real me. Knew Rasputin Frewer on sight. And that somehow I was a threat to her?

“The only way you can stop her, end this abomination of a world, is if she doesn’t know who you are. This is the plan, Painter! You need to stick to the plan!”

In all my time, I had never heard the Professor yell at me. Her face wasn’t anger or rage. It was fear.

“The plan,” I said. “Whose plan?”

My question hung in the air for a moment, and I knew the answer before she said it. So, I answered it myself.

“Our plan. Me and you.”

“Yes.”

“So you and Rasputin created Painter Mann to keep his identity secret. *My* identity. So I didn’t go around looking like Raz because she would see me coming.”

“Yes,” she said. “And the more you learn, the more you find out about your former self, the more you endanger all we’ve worked for. You can’t revert back to who you were. Not when you’re getting close.”

“Fine,” I said, then growled a little myself. “Fine. If she knows who Raz is, who is she to him? Ugh, to *me*?”

The Professor shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Is that also part of the plan?”

She nodded once.

“Okay, she knows me. Do I know her?”

“Painter, you can’t—”

“Stop calling me that.”

“No! You must remain Painter Mann if this plan is going to work,” she said, then stood before me, just inches away. “Do not investigate your former self. If we are going to finally stop this misery, this place, don’t even think about him. Please.”

So to sum up my two-item to-do list.

- 1) I had to rescue Gary from the hellscape of the All Time, impossible.
- 2) And I had to take down a voodoo-empowered demigod to destroy an unholy dimension of time and space. Also, FYI, impossible.

For a moment, I thought about it. Then, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Okay,” I said. “So, how do I go about finding Voodoo Cher?”

I thought for sure that I’d get a smile out of her with my tone, but she only sighed.

She asked me, “When did you last look up?”

“Look up? Look up what? Baseball scores? How to make gumbo? The living cast of *Full House*?”

Following her gaze upward, I saw it. Across the sky there were a half dozen faint tendrils of light crisscrossing the sky. Voodoo Cher was building her machines again. The ones that Mad Jimmy had come up with. He was gone, but the one-time engineer had obviously given her the secret of how to make them.

Machines that could power an army of ghosts to destroy the living. All of them. Everyone. This was her plan.

“She’s fired up Chicago again,” I said flatly. “Or in my hometown, Minneapolis.”

When I looked back, the Professor was shaking her head.

“Fine, where?” I hated constantly having to pull everything from her. “New Orleans? Orlando? Miami? I’m thinking Florida because it’s a very batshit up place. Even Floridians will tell you that.”

My guru on the mountain tossed her head to her right. “Farther east.”

“Farther east than Orlando?” I said and laughed. “That’s water!”

She pointed upward without looking. “See how faded they are? Those come a long, long way. Someone is restarting the machines far, far from here,” she said. “Before anything else you do, you must go there and take them down.”



I looked toward the east, at the faint lines across the sky. They looked like chem trails. The conspiracy nerds would love it if they could see them.

“So that’s where she went,” I said. “When she bolted from New Orleans, she went, *what*, overseas?”

The Professor nodded once.

“Great, then I’ll go over there and take her out,” I said. “New plan.”

She shook her head. “Voodoo Cher is too powerful.”

“How powerful could she be? The Cajun was able to lock her in his basement!”

“No, not alone,” she said. “He was aided by others using a Grand Pentacle.”

I couldn’t help it; I burst out laughing. Sure, I didn’t know what I knew when I was this Raz Frewer person, but I sure as hell couldn’t just give a thumbs up to whatever voodoo nonsense she was selling me now.

“A ‘Grand Pentacle’?” I said, full belly laughing, which I’ll admit was tinged with a vein of paralyzing fear. “What is that? A five-sized testicle?”

“Five who have abilities beyond the average person,” she said. “That’s how Voodoo Cher was trapped in that basement.”

“You’re saying that back in New Orleans, a group of people who hated each other held her at bay.” I counted it out on my fingers.

“The Cajun, his witch assistant. And, maybe, Madame Mini?”

She nodded. “The Cajun was above. The others formed the four corners.”

“That’s only three. Who were the two others?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, okay,” I said. “That’s the fastest you’ve ever answered anything. So there’s two other powerful spooks other there on our side.”

“Not necessarily,” the Professor said. “Being against Voodoo Cher is not ‘on our side.’”

I looked over at Julius who was arguing with the cat with one ear as he rubbed his shin. At least that was a relationship I understood.

“So, I gotta go,” I said, “to Europe?”

“Follow the lines of light,” she said. “Then... improvise. You’re good at that.”

For a moment, I thought about that. Sure, I’d crossed the Great Lakes, but an *ocean*. Could I do that?

Only one way to find out.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll skate thousands of miles of ocean and get right on it.”

“Stick to the plan, Painter. The new plan,” she said, her hands back on her knees. “Destroy the machines over there, trap Voodoo Cher, destroy her and the InBetween to save your friend from the eternal void.”

Slowly walking back toward Julius and Ferris, I said, “You make it sound easy.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Ellie Walsh sat with a pillow propped at her back, her reading light the only faint glow in the small bedroom. Her eyes drooped as she paged through a thick novel with yellowed pages. On her nightstand, there was a stack of at least another five books. I wasn't sure if these were the ones she was planning to get through or ones she'd already read, like kill markings below the cockpit of a World War II fighter plane.

I'd been there some ten minutes, unsure what I wanted to say. How do you thank someone who can't hear you?

"Uh, I just wanted to, you know, it was great..." *Jesus wept.* I tried again. "Thank you for everything. You're really good at this investigator stuff and, one day, I hope I can be half that."

I cursed under my breath. Maybe I just sucked at saying thanks?

Behind me, Ferris shuffled in and rubbed against my leg. I could feel him rattling so he was either purring or planning on taking a chunk out of my shin. Either way, time to go. I had a long journey ahead of me.

At the foot of the bed, the ball of dirty fur named Rufus stirred the moment my ghost cat entered the room. His little head popped up,

eyes darting around the room.

“Anyway,” I said, stepping toward the door. Ellie flipped a page in her book and chuckled softly. “Thanks again. I really wish I’d known you when I was alive.”

As I turned away, Ferris took that as his cue to take a running jump and land on my shoulders, wrapping his ethereal body at the base of my neck. I laughed wondering if I somehow looked like some portrayal of an aged New York socialite from an old black-and-white movie, with a fur stole to broadcast my wealth and privilege.

But before I could step away, Rufus, who’d apparently gotten the heebie-jeebies from all the ghost action swirling around the bed, burst from the room in a panic of gray-and-black hair and white-eyed terror.

Slipping from the light to the darkened hallway, I heard Ellie call out: “Good luck out there. Take care of yourself.”

When I turned back, the old detective was engrossed in her book. Whatever she was reading had bent her mouth into a tiny smile.



## EPILOGUE

The boy stared at the old man and frowned, thinking about poking him again with his toy to see if he was dead or not. He looked dead, but he was old. Old people looked dead a lot.

When the boat shifted, the boy reached out and grabbed the bulkhead to steady himself. The sleeping man slipped and banged his head lightly against a long pipe that went from floor to ceiling. Slowly cracking his eyes open, he saw the boy staring at him.

“You’re not dead.”

The man blinked. “Thanks for that,” he said and stood slowly. “Always good to get that sorted out before you start your day.”

Again, the boy gaped, but then, he frowned. “It’s *lunchtime*.”

The old man started out the rounded metal door, toward the rail of the boat. “Best time to start the day. You got two meals waiting for ya.”

When he turned back, he saw the boy had wandered away, probably to bother someone else or maybe to check on the mortality of the handful of other older passengers on the ship.

*Kids.*



He squinted in the sun and searched his buttoned sweater's pockets for his shades, but then remembered that he'd lost them somewhere between the ticketing booth and the boat earlier that morning.

A middle-aged couple was posing for selfies next to a lifesaving ring that hung on the rail, so he passed by quickly, at least as quickly as he could, and found an empty spot away from anyone else.

He'd always liked the sea—the gentle, rolling embrace of the ocean or, in this case, the lake. But it was a very large lake, so ocean-*like*. Looking toward the stern, he saw only blue sky and black water. In the other direction was the gleaming skyline of Chicago.

From here, the hum of the day-cruise boat's engines got lost in the wake, so the only sound was the light, soothing sound of the lapping of waves against the hull.

*How long did I sleep?*

It must have been a while, because it looked like they were heading back now, the tail end of a “four-hour tour of Chicago's twenty-six-mile shoreline on Lake Michigan.”

He closed his eyes but then felt sleepy again, so he settled for closing just the one eye, lest he doze and tumble right over the damp steel rail.

Then he heard it. Against the backdrop of the waves and the slight whistle of the wind, there was a voice. A dim, pleading voice. The old man couldn't quite make it out. Were they words or his imagination?

He closed his eyes, but this time, he listened intently. And he did indeed hear the voice, shrill and thin.

*"Can anyone hear me? I'm stuck out here!"*

The old man opened his eyes again and looked around. Was it another passenger? Someone who couldn't work out the stupid waist-high door that led to an upper deck on the bow?

Again, the voice called out. "He left me out here, the prick! Help me!"

The old man sighed, frowned, and shuffled slowly to the stern, where they'd been putting out the last spread of the day. The food wasn't very good, but then the trip hadn't been terribly expensive, so you get what you pay for.

"Help me!"

Maybe they'll have those little Salisbury steaks in the weird brown sauce. That's what they'd served up for the *Gangsters and Ghosts Tour* in Chicago when they got back, but he'd hated all that damn walking. Boats were better on the old feet.

The man chuckled. "Gangsters and Ghosts. As if."

"Goddamn it, somebody's got to get me out of here!" The voice in the middle of the lake was growing dimmer now as the boat was moving farther way from whoever was doing all the screaming. He heard one final plea, barely a whisper, but a shout all the same: "Help!"

Seeing the passengers lining up for the lunch, damp plates in hand, eyes wide with anticipation, the old man smiled.

"Nah," he said. "It ain't him."

<<<<>>>>

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author wishes to thank, first and foremost, the early readers of *Past Life*: Penny Noble, Michael Vinson, Kathy Bockus, and all the others—especially you Neil. You guys are so crucial and make every book I write better. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

And, as always, to my lovely wife Tiffany Wybrow, who tolerates me when I'm burrowed in the garage writing and still loves me when I come out. You are my favorite person.

## **DEAR LOVELY, GOOD-LOOKING READER...**

If you liked *Past Life*, please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon. This allows other readers to discover the novel (and helps the author as well).

## **FREE STUFF...**

We'd like to offer you a free copy of Book One of Dick Wybrow's humorous *semi*-apocalypse story *The Swordsmen*, which was NUMBER ONE on Amazon. You'll also receive Dick's newsletter. You'll get free stuff, updates on new writing, and pretty pictures of New Zealand.

[Click here](#)

***Book 7 of the Hell inc Series is coming in  
2022***