

JEFFERSON CARTER
IN A JOHN WICK NOVEL

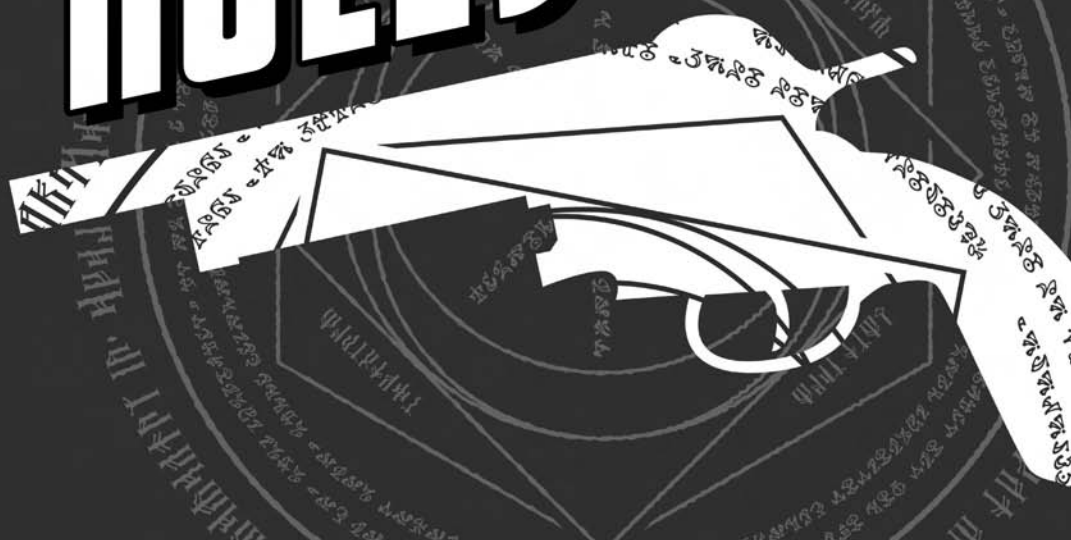
NO LOYAL KNIGHT



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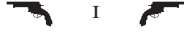
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NO LOYAL KNIGHT PART ONE: RULES



CASE #1

DEAD FRIENDS



A dead man sits on the other side of my desk and tells me he needs my help. “You owe me, Jeff,” he says. Problem is, he’s right.

I don’t know what to say, so I say something stupid. “Dave, what can I do?”

“Tell me how long I have.”

I take a good look at him and the rune burned on his forehead, written in the Old Tongue. Magical script. Expensive and illegal. You can get a sawbuck behind bars just saying it. “Tomorrow probably. I don’t know.”

There’s a long sigh. I’ve seen him do it before. He tells me about the boys they sent to his room, how they held him down and put a piece of paper on his forehead. Then, they said words in the Old Tongue and now there’s a mark where the paper was. Maybe tomorrow.

“Can you cure me?”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry Dave. If there’s a cure, nobody in the city knows it.”

“That’s it, then.” He looks at me. He mouths the word. Too scared to say it out loud.

I nod. “Yeah.” Not exactly one of those things you *like* agreeing with. “You could go to the cops.”

“Cops can’t give me what I want and you know it.”

I nod. “Yeah.” Again, not exactly one of those things...

He tells me what he wants while I strap the runegun on. I put my brown jacket over it and get my license. The license I may very well lose by tomorrow, dusk.

A small price to pay for a friend.



We walk down the dirty hall of my apartment building to the elevator. It's working today. I'm not the only one in the building, but I'm the only one on the floor. The shit that happens in my office makes a smell you can't get rid of. Everyone complains something different. This one lady complained about the orchids. There was a big man with a shirt too small, and he told the cops I was brewing hooch. Sergeant Schulson set them straight, with his badge and winning smile. Good old Detective Ben Schulson, who joined the force right when I was quitting. Right when I picked up my private license and went into business for myself.

The elevator objects to our weight, shuddering a little as it starts descending. Dave doesn't notice. Down three floors. I'd suggest taking the stairs, but every time I see grimy little Pock out cold on the stoop I have to drop him a nickel, and I don't have any change today. Pock used to be someone, but he pissed the wrong people off, and now, he's sleeping on the stoop of the second floor, the landlord too scared to move him. He should be. When Pock hit rock bottom, he found a black cat, kissed it, and twisted its head off, saying a few secret words as he did. Now, he gives you that black cat kiss if you don't give him what he wants. I can't risk that today. Not today.

Out the front door, into the city. The gray light of the sun drops down, hot. I take my jacket off and throw it in the back seat. Dave slumps into the passenger side and I find a parking ticket on my windshield. Another one. Three in three days. Pock must know I'm dodging him.

I pull the keys out of my pocket and politely ask my lady to wake up. She does, and sings me a song of diesel and oil. I know it's a cliché, but it's true. They just don't make any like her anymore. She's got curves. She's got a voice, the kind you can only make deep down in your throat. And she knows how to move.

We pull out on Venice and Dave coughs next to me. "You sure we need Jack?" he asks me.

"Can't do this by myself."

"Cashing in favors for me, Carter?" he asks. His smile tries so hard not to be sad. "I'm touched."

Yeah, well some people are worth it. Dave's worth it. Someone smarter than me once said that heroes are cowards, just like everyone else, but their conscience

gets in the way. I saw Dave run through a gunfight with Vincenzis on one side and Doyles on the other, firing bullets that had little or nothing to do with Newton and his rules, just to pick up a little girl screaming and crying. Right in the middle of it. Me, I've got to trick my way around the big guns. Dave, he just runs right in and doesn't even think about getting hit. And now, he's here, right beside me. His blond hair stuck to his wet, pale forehead, his blue eyes sunk deep in dark sockets. His long fingers are fat on the ends, just right for his job. And he's having trouble breathing. He won't tell me that, but he doesn't need to.

A man like Dave makes a lot of enemies in a city like this. But the rune they put on his head isn't easy or cheap, so we've got a place to start. Of course, if we're dealing with *that* kind of muscle, I'm gonna need some of my own. That's why we're going to Jack's place.

I called Jack from the office before we left, let him know we were on our way. He answered the phone in that funny foreign accent of his. I told him what the deal was.

"So you need more than that magic pea shooter of yours this time, eh Carter?"

"Yeah. I need your help."

"Loud, clumsy, crude thing."

"Are you talking about me or the runegun?"

"I'll let you figure that on your own. I'll be ready when you get here."

I hang up the phone and Dave looks at me funny. "Why did you call him?"

"You want me to give you what you want? We need Jack."

"You know what he is."

"So do you," I tell him. Me and Jack, we owe each other a lot of favors. The whole thing is kind of like a game — who can owe the other one more. Or maybe it's who can clear his debt first. I don't know.

"I don't like it," Dave tells me.

"You don't *have* to like it. If you really want what you told me, we need him. That's that."

And so we're standing outside Jack's place. I've been inside once. I never need to go inside again. We drove east, took a turn north, right up into his neighborhood. The hills look down at us, the houses high up there peeking

down. The mist is too low to see the Widow's house. The mist is always too low to see the Widow's house. But the other ones, built on stilts and stones, are full of money and beautiful people. I get a call to go up there every once in a while. I'm discreet, and that's what you want when you need blood cleaned out of your carpet. Especially when it isn't human.

Jack's apartment is in this tall, thin building that looks just like him, sitting straight up on the steep street. A perfect match. I ring the bell, his voice asks if it's me. I tell him it is. He says he'll be right down. I go back to the car, watching the neighborhood walk by.

There's a guy with one of those little black cigarettes. He's not wearing socks, and the make up on those red sores just below his ankle is streaking in this heat. There's a woman walking down toward the shops, her ass a little too wide for the skirt she chose this morning. But, just a little. I see a shirt in a window as she walks by has a tag on it that matches my rent. And then there's the cop who gives me a gander while I wait. Best looking cop I've ever seen. Then again, I don't get down to this part of the city too often. People here have a way of dealing with their own problems. I just drive on by, go straight up the hill, to the folks who've spent all their life counting money, and not one second earning it.

Jack comes out, all thin and pale, his eyes covered with dark glass, his brow hidden by a wide-brimmed hat, two tools to keep the sun off his face. He comes across the street, every step precise, like he's skipping over the cracks. What am I saying? There isn't a crack in sight. Not for miles. Not in the street, and not on Jack. But he's got creases in all the right places. Matching jacket and pants, his shirt silk, his tie blood red. A little gold chain keeps it in place. His belt is leather and gold, and I just don't want to know what kind of hide that leather came from. His shoes glisten as they *clip clip clip* across the street. His nose is long, and his chin is round and smooth. The pomade in his hair, the aftershave on his chin, he's got something else on his wrists. He's just his own little potpourri bag.

"Waking me up in the middle of the morning," he says. Shakes my hand. Even though the gloves, I can feel his skin, ice cold. Then, he looks at Dave, sitting in the car. Dave looks like a ruin. Jack, immaculate Jack, he walks around the car and stands on the sidewalk. The sidewalk gives him half an inch, but he doesn't need it. He looks down at Dave, watches Dave try to push himself up in the seat. Jack sounds sincere when he says, "Mr. Grate. Pleased to meet you. Sorry to hear about your condition."

"I'd rather have my condition than yours," Dave says. He sounds just as sincere. "Hope the light doesn't hurt too much."

I get between them before Jack can do anything. That's kind of funny. If Jack *really* wanted to hurt him, Dave would be dead before I could even *think* of moving. Jack's pearl white teeth gleam in the daylight. "If my services are not appreciated here...." He says 'appreciated' with a long *sssss* in the middle.

And there's me, standing between them. Dave, all crumpled in the front seat of my car, trying to be strong, and Jack, a full hand higher than me. More dangerous than anything I've ever known.

"Now listen here, the both of you," I tell them. "Dave, Jack is here on *my* account. He's not helping you, he's helping *me*." That's when I turn to Jack. "And you. You're always talking about honor and loyalty and all that crap. Well, here's an honest man done wrong. You can do something about it, right here and right now, or you can shut up." Jack hates it when I tell him to shut up.

That puts an end to the bickering. Neither of them apologizes. It almost makes me laugh; if they knew each other better, they'd probably wouldn't say shit like they just said. That's the funny thing about 'if.' A little word with big shoulders.



We're in the car now. Jack's in the backseat. Dave offered him the passenger side, but he shook his head and put a handkerchief over his mouth. "You must be joking," he says through those perfect teeth. "Your stink is all over that seat. I'll take the hindmost, if you don't mind."

A few miles down the road, Jack's heard the whole story and the plan. I'm heading down Western, heading for the water, heading for the bay. We see less residential every block, and the factories start taking over the scenery. Pretty soon, we'll start smelling the sea and hearing the ships. Big black clouds creep up from the factories, swallowing the sky.

"It's not the Vincenzis," Jack says. "If it were, you would have heard from me, not three amateurs with a curse."

"That's comforting," Dave says beside me.

"And it isn't the Doyles, either," Jack says. "Far too vulgar for them. The curses they use are far more subtle."

"I agree." I can see Dave next to me. Already, his skin is almost as pale as Jack's.

"Then it must have something to do with this disappearance you were talking about earlier. Mr. Pelton, wasn't it?"

Dave nods.

"Tell us about it," I say.

The facts are pretty straightforward. Bill Pelton was a security man on the docks. Always working late, always working alone. One night, the morning shift comes in and Bill isn't there. Dave gets assigned the story. He always gets shit jobs like this; it's because the guys at The Gazette don't want him looking anywhere important. He finds out Pelton's a working stiff who doesn't drink, doesn't gamble, doesn't go for ladies. He's married with two kids, trying to do the best he can, trying to keep his nose out of the dirty corners of the city. Then, he's gone. His wife's got no money coming in to the house and three kids to feed.

"So, I figure he saw something he shouldn't have," Dave tells us. "And I start digging."

What he finds out is there's more than just one case of Bill Pelton. About twelve people have disappeared in the last three weeks. He gets to talking to the families, putting a few facts together, and *wham!* he's hit with the curse.

Jack nods. "Yes, I think we can *definitely* rule out the families."

I make another turn, this time down Sepulveda. "They wouldn't take a few months to make a dozen people disappear."

"I know all this," Dave says. "But what I don't know is who or why."

"If they know how to use the curse on you," Jack starts.

I finish the thought. "Then they know how to use the curse on other people, too."

Dave shakes his head. "I *don't* get it," he says.

Dave's never had a head for this kind of stuff. He's too honest. "Dave, what they did to you isn't cheap. The paper they put on your head isn't made from mulched trees, it's made from mulched corpses."

He shakes his head. "So, we need to go to graveyards and look for body snatchers?"

"How vulgar," Jack says in the back seat.

I shake my head, pull into a sidestreet. My baby's got a wicked turn on her. I turn her all the way around, start heading north again. "No," I tell Dave. "That would take too long and really wouldn't tell us anything. Besides, there's better places to get bodies than graveyards."

Dave puts his hand on my shoulder. "So, where are we going?"

I pull back on to the street, hit a red light and wait. "The books used to cast your curse are illegal. *Very* illegal. Whoever did this needed to get them from outside the city."

"Which one are you thinking of?" Jack asks.

The light turns green. I push down on the gas and we start moving again.

"I'm thinking of a book Mr. Vincenzi would be very unhappy to see in the city," I tell him. "I don't think he'd ever allow it in. That means it was smuggled in."

Jack smiles. "I think I know who we need to talk to."

I nod. "So do I."



The name above the door reads *Bill's Used Books*, and when I walk in, Bill's all smiles,

"Hey Carter," he says. "How ya doi...."

Then, he sees what I'm bringing in with me.

"Oh *sweet Lord* what the *hell* you bring *that* into my store?" He's pointing at Jack, of course.

Jack just smiles and hangs back by the front door.

"Hey Billy," I say, walking up to the desk. "You know, usually, I'm pretty polite with you. But today, I just don't have the time."

Jack just smiles and closes the door.

The store smells like books. Dusty dry air, not a single drop of moisture anywhere to be found... except in the bottle Billy keeps behind the desk, and that ain't exactly water. The books are old, some older than others. He keeps the *very* old books out of sight, because you never know when one of the Black Boys is gonna come by to make sure you aren't selling the *wrong* kind of books. The kind of books you can go to jail for just *looking at*, let alone selling to others.

Bill is all sweat and shakes now, quaking in his very quiet, very still shop, disturbing dust that hasn't moved in years. His words come out like burps. "What do you need?"

"I need some answers, Billy. About a book. A very specific book. A very *special* book."

Jack just smiles and pulls the shades on the door.

"And so you brought one of *those* in here with you? Carter, you're nuts!"

I take a deep sigh. "You know, usually, he'd need an invitation to be in here. But since Old Man Vincenzi cast the Nocturnum Ritual, folks of his type can go just about anywhere they please."

"Yeah..." Bill's run out of sweat. Now, he's moved on to tears.

Jack just smiles and turns the sign on the door from 'Come In! We're Open!' to 'Sorry! We're Closed!'

"*You* provided Old Man Vincenzi with the Ritual, Billy," I tell him. "Everyone knows that. That's why he lets you stay open. And that's why you're still the only place in the city to get books nobody should have."

"Please don't kill me, Carter. I got a wife. I got kids."

I grab his shirt and pull his fat belly halfway over the desk. His little moustache is full of sweat and snot now. His little lips and fat chin shaking. "Your wife left ten years ago," I tell him, "and took your kids with her. Just after she found out what kind of crap you peddle out of here."

"You can't touch me!" His spittle hits my face. And then, he's got a sudden spark of bravado. "I'm on the Old Man's list!" Like he just remembered. He probably did just remember. Billy doesn't have a whole lot of space in his head for more than one thought at a time. Maybe if he *read* one of these books, things would be different. But things *aren't* different, and so Billy's just what he is. A stupid, cowardly, little fat man.

"The old man's list?" I ask him. He nods quick, telling me all about protection circles and wards and shit he doesn't really understand.

"Maybe," I tell him. "But, that really doesn't bother me, Billy. See, I don't think he'd have too much trouble finding someone else just like you to fill the spot. Maybe someone with a better figure."

He starts blubbing again and stops making sense. I keep talking.

"Someone in town is doing bad things, Billy. Making walking dead men. Now, only a couple of books have the right know-how to teach someone to do that."

He knows where I'm going. He tries to back up, tries putting as much distance between him and me. I don't let him go.

"One book in particular, Billy. I think you know the one I'm talking about."

His crying eyes go wide. Wide with red veins and whites.

"That's right, Billy. You got someone Von Junzt's book."

He almost falls, right there, but I'm holding him up. "No! It wasn't me! I swear on my mother's urn it wasn't me!"

"Come on, Billy. Don't lie to me. I don't care that you did it. I just want to know who you sold it to."

"Carter! You gotta believe me! I'd never even *touch* that book!" His eyes dart over to Jack.

I shake him. "Look at *me*," I yell in his face. "You look at *me*." He does what he's told. "I know you wouldn't, Billy. Because if Old Man Vincenzi ever found out you brought that book into the city..."

He's almost screaming. "It wasn't me, Carter! I fucking swear! Oh *shit piss fuck!*"

"Your momma's urn know you talk that way, Billy?" He doesn't get it. They never do. Stop entertaining yourself, Carter. Get the job done.

"Don't lie to me, Billy," I tell him. Then, I turn to where Jack's standing. "I got my friend right over there..."

"Sweet Jesus, Carter! I can't! If the Old Man ever found out I got that book into town..."

That catches my interest. Billy shouldn't know what's *in* the books. "Why?" I ask him.

"All that shit they say that's in it? Well, it does. It's got stuff in it. Stuff for... with... with..."

He's looking over my shoulder again. I turn and look at who he's looking at. Then, I turn back at Billy.

"Really?" I can feel my smile creeping up on my lips.

"I swear, Carter. I can't tell you. If I tell you, it's gonna make it's way back to the Old Man. And I can't let that happen."

Jack's talking now. "It's already happened, Mr. Banning," he says. All focus leaves me and goes right over to him. He's standing at the door, the sunlight behind him making him a shadow with a halo.

"You know who I am," he says. "You know for whom I work. You know where my loyalties lie. The least you can do is tell us now to whom you sold the book. At the very least, such a show of integrity will get you a bullet through the brain rather than... well, a visit from *me*."

Bill looks at Jack, then he looks at me. His lips shake. His eyes shake. There's a smell coming up from behind the counter, and I'm sure it isn't his lunch. He starts blubbering again, and between the blubbers, he tells us the whole story.



And we tell it to Dave.

He's shaking as bad as Billy inside, but the difference is, he's got no sweat to make. Sooner or later, all his fluids will find their way out in one massive rush. I've got to get him out of the car before that happens.

"Ramirez is his name," Jack tells him. "A small time hood on Mr. Vincenzi's watch list. He owns a small club on the East Side, and his disparaging remarks about my employer have not gone unheard. He peddles all kinds of nonsense out of there."

I'm thinking, *East Side? That doesn't make any sense*. "What's he doing snatching dock workers down here in Southbay?"

Jack shakes his head and checks his manicure. "I do not know. But I *do* know just asking him won't get us anywhere."

Have to agree with that. "Let's go back to the office. I have to make a couple of phone calls."

"As do I," Jack says, putting his note pad and pen back in his jacket.

"Me, too," Dave says from the passenger seat. We both look at him. "Hey. I've got a whole newspaper of reporters. They may not like me, but I'm still one of them."

I shake my head. “No, Dave. If we let this out, the Old Man will hear about it. And I guarantee you, we’ll never see Ramirez again.”

Jack’s smile flashes. “Wait a minute, Carter. Maybe we *do* want Mr. Vincenzi to hear about it.”

“Why?”

“He’ll send *me*.”

I shake my head again. “No. That leads right back to Billy.”

Dave leans forward, and for a second, I think he’s going to lose it all in the front seat of my car. He recovers after some wet coughs. “So what?” he asks.

I give him a long look. I’m sitting here, watching my friend melt away. He’s lost three fingernails since we went inside. Just fell right out of his fingers.

“I said, ‘So what?’”

I blink. Just realize that he’s talking to me. Keep focus, dammit.

“Back inside the store a few moments ago,” I tell him, “after Billy spilled his guts, I made a promise.” I look at Jack. “So did you.”

Behind the dark glass in front of his eyes, Jack makes a face. “Yes. I suppose I did.”

Dave doesn’t understand. “So?”

“Men in our position can’t afford to break promises, Mr. Grate,” Jack says to him, turning back front, settling in his seat. “It’s against the rules.”

Dave turns to look at Jack in the backseat. “What rules?” Dave’s getting mad now.

“Big rules,” I tell him, trying to pull his attention away from Jack. “Big rules we can’t break.”

“Rules of honor,” Jack says. I’m watching Dave while Jack’s talking. He’s swallowing this like a castor oil pie. So, he says something about it.

Loudly.

“I’m sitting here,” he says, sitting up, finding strength somewhere in the anger that’s festering in his gut. “I’m sitting *here*, turning into a fucking corpse and you two are talking like you just stepped out of a fucking King Arthur story!”

I’ve never heard Dave say ‘fuck’ before. The curse is getting into his brain. We’re behind schedule. I look at Jack to tell him, but I see he’s already figured it out.

"Dave, just sit back, relax and rest. We're the people you wanted. We'll get this done for you, all right?"

It takes a second, but Dave's eyes fade from wild to bewildered. "Yeah," he says, all soft. "Yeah. I'm sorry. Don't know why I did that."

Jack looks at me. Something is different in Dave's eyes. Something about his voice. Maybe the apology. I don't think anybody's ever apologized to him before. I mean, he gets a lot of begging, but no apologies.

"We have less time than we first thought," Jack tells me. And, for a second, I think I hear something. A quiet, quick noise in my ear. No, it's gone.

I don't linger on it. I start up the car. "Then we'd better get moving."



We're in the office waiting on a few phone calls. Sick on my couch, Dave's looking at Jack. His teeth chatter while he talks.

"S—so, how's it work?" he asks.

"How does *what* work, Mr. Grate?"

Dave isn't fooled. "You know what I'm talking about."

Jack smiles. Not the special smile. That comes later. "You mean, a vendetta?"

Dave nods. "Yeah. Tell me."

"Why in the world would a man in your condition want to know that little secret?"

Dave doesn't hesitate, doesn't miss a beat. "Because I want to know as much as I can before I die."

Jack's smile turns into a grin. "Well said, Mr. Grate. You've earned yourself an explanation, then." Jack stands up and turns his chair so it's pointed at Dave. He makes even the littlest things look like ballet. Then, he explains.

"Quite simple, really," he says. "The family declares a vendetta and sends one man to claim it."

"J—just one?"

Jack holds up a gloved finger. "Just one. If the assassin (that's me) accomplishes his task, the vendetta is over."

"And if he d—doesn't?"

"The same answer, Mr. Grate. If the assassin fails, the vendetta is null and void."

"So they send you?"

Jack shakes his head. "No, Mr. Grate. Not so much anymore. There's a new boy in town they're very fond of. I believe Carter knows him."

"Blockhead," I mutter under my breath.

"The two had a tangle a bit ago. Carter came out on the rough end of it."

"Sucker punch," I tell Dave.

A door opens. Everybody looks. It's the door to my apartment; the one that's attached to my office. I forgot to lock it. A little girl with green eyes and long, black hair is on the other side of the door. She's wearing boy's dungarees, a loose shirt and a baseball cap. Her hair is like silk, wrapped in midnight. Her skin is almond. Her eyes are wide and curious.

"It's okay, Pearl," I tell her. "We're just talking in here."

She doesn't say a word, just shuts the door. Dave looks at me, his eyes confused. Jack's eyes are laughing. Dave's about to say something, but that's when the phone rings. All conversation stops and all eyes turn to the phone.



That call gives us more than we wanted to know, leading us straight to the night, when Jack's smile shines like a star. The shades don't come off. Not yet.

The phone call tells me Ramirez owns more than just a club in the East Side, he also owns a warehouse in South Bay. That's where we start.

Night doesn't creep up on the city. She knows he's coming, there's just not a whole lot she can do about it. We use the night to move close to the warehouse. Dave's not getting any better. His skin looks and feels a whole lot like October leaves. I'm almost afraid to touch him. This is going to be bad, him turning. Normally, you use spells to control the dead. If you don't, they get rabid and start eating. And they don't stop eating. Not ever. There's a word for it. *Gaki*. The hungry dead.

"I'm all right," he tells me. Jack's on the fence, breaking the lock with those hands of his. I'm looking at Dave. I'm not convinced. "Trust me," he says. "I'm ready to see this through."

I help him. It's tricky now. I can't let his teeth get too close to me. His gums have pulled back, making his mouth look like a trap. I've always had nightmares of my teeth rotting and falling out, and watching Dave's mouth doesn't help.

"The lock's broken," Jack tells us. "Let's go."

We move as fast as we can with Dave. Jack didn't like bringing him with.

"He'll slow us down," he told me in the car as Dave slept in the passenger's seat.

"Yeah. We'll just have to deal with it."

"What do you owe him? What did he do for you?"

I keep quiet and make a turn, giving him the chance to ask me again, to show me he really wants to know. He keeps his mouth shut. Smart man, our Jack.

I pull the car over, lights out, coasting the last bit. We jump out of the car, leaving the doors open. The runegun is heavy at my side, getting heavier. She knows it's almost time.

Looking at the warehouse district, you see it's all made of fences, concrete and rust. There are lights high above us, but only half of them work, making long, tall shadows for us to move through. I can smell the water, hear the waves moving against the land. Everything is damp and covered in salt. The warehouses are old and rusted, the paint peeling, the windows dim and thick. Cheap glass. Nobody needs to see in or out. I'm surprised they put any windows in at all.

The ground between the warehouse and us goes quick. Dave is all but coughing up blood by the time we get there, but he keeps up the pace, and keeps his coughs quiet. Jack does the same magic he pulled on the lock at the gate here at the door and we're inside. Everything's dark, everything's quiet. A small room with a small desk. Another door that takes a moment from us and we're inside.

All we see is old dirty plastic tarps and no light. Jack pushes away the tarps and I pull Dave along behind him. We're on a balcony that rushes all the way around the building. The floor is as treacherous as a siren. Down below us are corpses of tables and chairs. The glass in the windows is old, twisting the moonlight into spangled patterns on the broken floor. The only other light is a single naked bulb, dropping its halo down on a figure sitting in the one chair standing upright. I stop, but Jack doesn't pay it any heed.

"A mannequin," he says. "Look again."

I do. As naked as the light above it, the thing sits in the chair. Its arms rest at its side in contorted angles, its dead stare trying to see something in the darkness.

"To scare the kids, I'd guess," Jack tells me.

"That makes sense," Dave says, his hoarse voice only a whisper. "Scared the hell out of me." He almost laughs. Jack even smiles, just a bit.

We work down to the cellar floor, passing empty rooms all along the way, filled with dust, dirt, moonlight and memories. On second thought, not empty at all. And then there's the things I *can't* see. I keep my eyes forward.

Down on the main floor, we find a stairway behind a pile of chairs, spiraling down.

"Someone added this," I say. "This isn't part of the building."

"I knew I brought you for a reason," Jack smiles. We head down, Dave holding back his coughs as best he can. It's when we reach the bottom we find what we came for.



About two dozen of them, all with marks on their foreheads to keep them at their assigned tasks. Marks that look a whole lot like the one on Dave's head. They shamble here and there, their arms and hands full of work. A few are naked. For most, clothes are an afterthought. None of them are wearing shoes, and their feet are covered in oozing wounds that can't close. Dead flesh can't heal.

We see them from the bottom of the spiral staircase, hiding there behind it, watching them walk by, their eyes full of milk, their bodies slowly falling apart. I feel Dave's heart pound fast next to me. He shouldn't have to see this. Nobody should.

"A walking dead work force," Jack smiles, sounding like a schoolboy who just figured out long division. "And here I thought I'd seen it all."

The dead can really only handle one action at a time. That's what makes this little operation so brilliant. Mass production. Each a cog in a bigger wheel. Each a piece of an undead machine.

I see shovels and picks and spades. Wheelbarrows and dirt. There's living men down here, too, but only a few. And you can just tell how much they like working next to dead men. We keep to the shadows, and they aren't looking for anybody living, so they don't see us.

"What are they doing down here?" Dave asks. I've just figured it out myself. From his laughter, I hear Jack's figured it out, too.

“Subway tunnels.” Jack turns to look at me, his eyes still hidden behind dark glass. “Oh, Carter. You really put your foot in it this time.”

The foremen stay far away from the dead men. But the dead men don’t seem to mind.

“That means city contracts.” Dave coughs out the words as quietly as he can.

I know where they’re going. “It wasn’t the families that sent those men, Davey. It was the city.”

It all makes sense to me now. Somebody high up hires Ramirez. Ramirez gets von Juntz’s book. Dead men work cheap. The subways get done on schedule and under budget. Well, at least under budget. Last I checked, nobody involved in city planning ever cared about time. And dead men have nothing but time.

Dave coughs again, blood and flesh in his teeth. This time, the cough is loud enough for someone to notice. A foreman looks up. I pull out the piece. Jack takes off his shades. He looks at me, the darkness of the tunnels making his face blank. All I see is the silhouette of his face and his eyes, shining as bright as his teeth. Shining like a star.

“You two get to the street,” he tells us. “I’ll take care of this.”

I don’t doubt it. Walking dead men aren’t known for their speed, and they don’t call him Jack Flash for nothing. I pull Dave back, keeping the runegun at eye level, and Jack goes to work. “I’ll bring one of the warm ones back to your office!” he shouts after us. We manage our way back to the ladder, but Dave can barely keep his fingers wrapped around the iron rungs. He has to pause twice, just to catch his balance.

“I don’t—I don’t—know which way is up.”

The brain is a delicate thing. I hear one of the first things to go is your balance. I hope that’s true. That means he’s still got a lot of brain left to lose.

We hit the street and get into the car. I’ve got things in the trunk that could help Jack, and for a second, I’m thinking about grabbing them and running back in. But then Dave coughs again and I remember the promise I made him. So little time left.

I’m thinking now. Ramirez. City planning. Subways.

I don’t know how far this thing goes up.

But, I bet Ramirez does.



Back in my office, Dave's on my office couch, hacking into a bowl. That white porcelain bowl has held most of Dave's blood and a good part of his guts. On the other side of the room, that little girl sits, watching him with her wide eyes.

"Nothing we can do, Pearl," I tell her. She looks up at me, her eyes wet and sad. I kneel down and she hugs me hard. Quiet little Pearl. Right now, all the pain that Dave's got coursing through his system — she can feel it. Right down into her little bones. I look at her, and she knows I feel it, too. And there's nothing either of us can do about it.

There's a knock on the office door. I send Pearl into her room. The door opens, and Jack's back. He's brought a friend.

I look at the friend, his eye bruised shut, his lips broken, his left wrist held at a strange angle. "Hello Donny," I tell him.

He was born Domingo Ramirez. He likes being called "Domino." He hates it when I call him "Donny."

Donny tells me to fuck off.

Jack smacks the back of his head, but doesn't say anything.

"You workin' for the bleeders now, Carter?" he asks me. His accent makes his voice sound soft. His lisp is as thick as his black hair.

I shake my head. "Nope. Working for my friend here." I point over at the office couch. You know him, right? The one you put the curse on."

Donny looks to the bed, and I watch him. Either Donny's been taking acting lessons, or he has no clue who Dave is.

"Never seen him before."

"David Grate. Reporter. Investigating disappearances down on the docks."

Donny shakes his head. "No."

I look at Jack. He's got his shades back on. He frowns.

"Somebody did this to him, Donny. Just like somebody did it to the boys you got downstairs."

"I ain't got the juice for none of that," Donny tells me. He isn't shaking like a fat bookstore owner. He might be telling the truth. Might. He goes on. "You know me, Carter. I ain't in all that shit. *Mi madre*, she'd kill me."

I cross my arms, look down at him. "But there you are," I tell him. "Down there, with all of them. And you did *buy* the book, didn't you?"

He nods. Guess he doesn't see any use in lying to me. "Yeah, I bought the book. But I ain't the one who used it."

"Who did, Donny?"

He doesn't answer me. I look at my friend.

"Jack, go throw him back. The control spells they've got on the dead boys needs to be refreshed every night. It should be running out about now." I look back to Ramirez and lean close. "And you know what happens when those control spells fade, don't you Donny? You know what they start looking for?"

I tap his skull, just so he gets the point. That's when he starts to get scared.

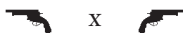
"I tell you the name you want to hear," he says, "and you gonna run. Trust me, *punta*. This thing I know."

I smile. "I've got notions, Donny. I just want you to confirm them."

His jaw shakes. He looks at both of us. Then, he says the name. When he tells me, Jack shakes his head, his frown even deeper.

"Thank you, Donny. I suggest you forget all this. In fact..."

I go to the trunk and open it up. The herbs I get make Jack's face go even paler. By the time I'm done, Dave isn't the only person Domino won't remember.



Jack goes home. He's already got plenty of trouble helping me this far. I owe him big.

"Don't worry," he tells me. "I'm sure you'll find a way to make it even."

He's gone, and all that's left is Dave and me. In two hours, midnight strikes. In two hours, Dave's mind will go completely, leaving nothing but a rabid dead man.

We're in the car again, driving. North. To the hills.

“You won’t know what’s happening,” I tell him. “Everything will fade out.”

“You’ll take care of it, won’t you, Jeff?”

I put my hand on his forehead. His dry, cold forehead. “I’ll take care of it.”

A half-hour later, we pull up outside a gate. The spells on the iron are simple to bypass. The idle rich are always overconfident about such things. They hire fancy, flashy amateurs. Fellow celebrities who walk in the same circles. I’ve done security for a few folks up here, and I know what they expect. I know what they’re willing to pay. Our friend inside doesn’t think much of men in my trade, and thinks he can get by with simple runes. Tonight, it’ll cost him.

Dave can barely walk, but somehow, he manages. A moment later, I have a quiet and violent moment with a guard. He’ll live.

The window opens just as pretty as you please, and the safe isn’t too hard to find. Another rune, this one a bit more complicated to say. It takes me five minutes to figure it out. Inside, among the bank notes and other papers, I find a small black book with a broken binding. It creaks when I open it, but the words inside match the description I read about in seminary school.

Von Junzt’s book. Bindings for things not-quite-dead. This should come in all kinds of useful. I find the spell I need and cast it. Just before I do, I look at Dave.

“I’m sorry this is all I can do for you.”

He nods. Smiles. “I wish I could be there to see it.”

That’s our goodbye. Better than most.

I stick the fleshy rune on his forehead, read the words, and my friend is gone.

An hour later, I’m upstairs in the master bedroom, standing in front of a chair. Sitting in the chair is an older man wearing red satin pajamas. His hair is all a mess. What hair he has left. He can’t move because I’ve tied him to the chair, which means I don’t need the runegun anymore. At least, for him. I keep it out anyway.

“Who the hell are you?” he asks me for the fiftieth time.

This time, I give him an answer. “I’m a friend.”

“I don’t know you.”

“I didn’t say I was a friend of yours.” I go to the bedroom door and open it. Dave is standing outside, a piece of flesh on his forehead.

"I'm a friend of his."

The red satin pants turn dark. "What... what is..."

"I'd like you to meet my friend, David Grate."

The old man blinks in the dim light. "The reporter?"

I nod. "The one you had killed."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You should have taken acting lessons with Donny."

He's confused. Too bad for him.

"You're a dead man," he tells me. "Whoever you are."

I shake my head. "No, sir. My friend here. He's dead. You're *going to be* dead. Very soon now."

"You're going to kill me?"

I shake my head again. "No." I push Dave forward until he's standing right in front of the old man, foot to foot, knee to knee. "But in ten minutes, midnight hits. And that holding spell I have on Dave's head, that will fall off." I kneel in close for effect. "And you know what zombies without holding spells go for, don't you?"

I tap his skull, just to make sure he gets the point.

He doesn't know what to say, so he keeps talking in cliches. "You aren't serious."

I step back to the bedroom door and lock it tight with a whisper in the Old Tongue. Nobody's coming through that door until dawn.

On the mantle next to his bed, we can hear the clock *tick tick tick*.

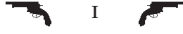
Ten whole minutes.

I watch them both. Dave standing still and the pajama man screaming. I said a few words and made sure no guards can hear us; he'll be screaming louder in a few minutes.

When the clock chimes midnight downstairs in the foyer, I watch the rune on Dave's forehead fall to the ground. Then, I watch what he does to the old man. And when I can't watch my friend anymore, I use the runegun.

CASE #2

DROWNED KISSES



Baker's Bluff sits about an hour and a half north of the city, and no, it didn't get its name because of the geography. Baker was a con man, and a good one. But he died poor, the only thing he owned was the name of the place, and even that gave away his best secret.

The woman who hired me for the job wasn't much of a looker, but she had those coy eyes a man could look into and see just about anything he wanted. When she looked up at me from the chair on the other side of my desk, all I saw was a desperate woman who wanted answers. More importantly, she wanted help. She just wasn't the type who was used to asking for it and the words didn't come easy.

"There's something wrong in Baker's Bluff, Mr. Carter," she told me. The coffee cup in her hands shook as she spoke, but I wasn't too worried. It was cheap. The coffee and the cup. "And I just don't know where to begin."

She didn't know where to begin, but I was already almost finished. From the looks of her, she didn't have much money. The dress she wore seldom saw the light of day; it stunk like mothballs. When she walked in I knew she didn't know how to use those heels she was wearing. Almost no woman does anymore. The bag dangling on her wrist didn't have a single stain on it and the clasp was crisp and unworn. She bit her lip. My twelve-year-old niece knows more about make-up than this "Ms. Richardson."

"I read about it in the paper," I told her. "Two drowned girls."

She nodded. "Yes."

The page was still on my desk, the story circled with a red pen. "One of them a friend of yours?"

She shook her head. "I knew them. It's a small town."

"The second drowning in two days." I put the paper away. "I'll be up-front with you, Ms. Richardson. This is a matter for the local police. I don't think they'd appreciate someone like me showing up in their jurisdiction."

"I've done some research, too, Mr. Carter. I think you are much more capable of handling this problem than the police. And there isn't much time."

I sat back in my chair, listening to the old wood creak. Never underestimate the power of dramatic pause. "I'll take the job."

I reach in my desk, flip through a few folders, and bring up a contract. The words aren't written in ink and the paper is worth more than you'll see in a year. "This is pretty standard, Ms. Richardson. It's an agreement. You keep it until I fulfil my obligation or you release me from it."

She nods, starts signing it.

"You should read it, first," I tell her.

She shakes her head. "No," she says. "I trust you."

"Then I'll be up tomorrow mor..." I start to say.

That's when she stops. The pen lifts off the paper and she looks up at me. "Tonight, Mr. Carter, if you please."

I try to lie. Try to tell her I don't have a car.

She stops me. "I drove in mine. We can take it up."

I shake my head. "No. I can't work without a car. Even in a small town like Baker's Bluff."

This is the first time she looks up and meets me. Those coy eyes of hers that always get her what she wants sink into me. "Promise me you'll be there by *tonight*, Mr. Carter."

"I'll do my..."

"*Promise me.*"

Dramatic pause.

"I'll be there by tonight."

She drops that gaze of hers. "Thank you," she says. Then, she signs the contract. She hands it to me and I fold it three times, dropping it next to the phone. She extends her gloved hand and I take it. Her hand is strong. She's a woman who's had to work. It fits with her coming from the Bluff.

“Thank you, Mr. Carter,” she tells me. I nod. Then, she turns and almost falls on her backside as she leaves my office on six-inch heels that are about seven inches too tall for her feet. I look back at the newspaper on my desk at the story circled in red.

Bad thing agreeing to come out there. I don’t know what I’m getting into, don’t know what I’ll need. I can pack up the trunk with supplies, but unless I know what I need, I’m just shooting in the dark. So, I go to the bookshelf and tug on the right book. There’s a *click* and the bookshelf pulls open to a little niche in the wall. My hideyhole. Everything that would get me put in prison for about a hundred years. Each little thing, that is. That’s a whole lot of hundred years.

I grab a few things, toss them in a suitcase, grab the runegun and some ammunition. I take both the silver and iron bullets, just in case.

I’m just about ready to leave, walking out the door, when I remember what I forgot. I step back in through the door, walk over to the desk, and each down for the contract, sitting right next to the phone, when the phone rings. My hand is right there, fingertips touching the paper.

The phone rings again.

If you pick that up...

And again.

If you pick that up...

I pick it up.

“Carter?” A woman’s voice. *The* woman’s voice.

“Sam,” I say.

“I need you.”

I’m looking at that contract, sitting right there. I made a promise.

“Carter,” she says on the other end. “*You* need *me*.”

I almost drop the phone. Using that voice of hers. She knows better.

“I do know better,” she says. “What are you going to do about it?”

Dramatic pause.

What difference does it make if I show up tonight or tomorrow morning? I can still show up tonight. Spend an hour or two with Sam...

“It won’t be an hour or two,” she says over the phone.

I nod, slowly. I'm remembering what I told Dave about promises.

"You're making me wait, Carter."

"I'll be right over," I tell her. "And it *will* be an hour or two."

She almost laughs. "No, it won't."

I hang up the phone, grab the contract, and head out the door.



I'm behind the steering wheel, staring at the sunrise, making the long drive up to Baker's Bluff. The morning paper sitting on the passenger seat has a story circled in red, but it isn't the story I was reading yesterday. Yesterday told of the drowning of Mrs. Alicia Keane. This morning, the girl's name is Richardson. Cecile Richardson.

Her face looks up at me from the paper. Her eyes. Those desperate eyes, all full of fear. She begged me to show up last night. Made me promise. I promised her I would. A man like me doesn't break promises. Not without consequences.

Last night, right around two in the morning, I smelled something burning. Sam's body was warm, the bed was warm, and the pillow was cool. I didn't want to move. But, something was burning. I lifted my head, looked around. There, on the table. A fire. A black fire. No smoke.

I ran naked across the room, found what it was. My jacket. The inside pocket, right where I put the contract with Cecile Richardson's name on it. Burned up in black, smokeless fire.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked, lifting her head from the pillow, her eyes still half closed.

My chin is almost at my chest.

"Something wrong?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Nothing I can fix now," I tell her. I start to get dressed. I look at the jacket. It looks like the fire hasn't even touched it, but I can't ever wear it again. I'll have to stop by the office and change. No hurry. Not now.

Sam's asleep when I leave. I whisper a word as I do, and the door locks behind me. Seven locks, if you really want to know. The landlord only knows about the one with a chain. He can't see the locks I just shut.

Outside the office, I pick up the morning paper. I see her name and face, circle them in red.

Baker's Bluff is coming up on the morning horizon. The last time I didn't keep a promise, I almost got myself killed. This time, it was someone else.



I eat breakfast in the same place the sailors do, and the place stinks of the sea. The smell is in the eggs, the toast, and the bacon. It's not a smell I like. I have to be honest. I hesitated coming out here because it's so close to the water. I don't like the water. I don't like anything that I can't see the bottom of.

It's a small joint, just off the wharf with booths and a bar. A little blackboard has the menu. I don't think it's changed since the place opened. You don't need a menu in one of these places. Eggs, bacon, steak.

The woman who runs the joint has a smile as sharp as a hook. She has her father's hands and her mother's eyes. Her hair is jet black and pulled back tight with just a few strands sneaking out to fall down to her chin. She laughs when she sees the license.

"What are you doing here all the way from the city?" she asks me. She turns her back on me, works on some bacon in the frying pan.

"I'm fishing," I tell her.

"What for? Not yellowtails, I think. Or swordfish."

"Not that kind of fishing."

She flips a strand away from her eyes and turns to look at me. "I knew that when you flashed the *eye-dee*, Mr. *pee-eye*."

"Cecile Richardson hired me," I say. That stops the joint flat. There's only about four other people in here, all of them look like they spent the last year on a boat, but all of them are looking at me.

A moment or two later, the popping sound in the skillet reminds her what she's doing. "She's dead now, you know."

"Yeah, I know. And I promised to help her."

"A lot of good you did." She takes the eggs off the heat and slides them on a plate to keep the bacon and toast company.

I get up and toss a coin on the bar. “Yeah, that’s right. Looks like you’re gonna do me just about as much good.”

I hit the door when she tells me to wait.

“What is it you want to know?”

I turn slow, walk back to the stool slower. “Three girls dead in three days. Three girls *drowned* in three days. Not a good sign.”

“Yeah, well,” she starts, but then she stops. “Look, maybe up in the city you’ve got all that fancy mumbo jumbo to protect you from bad shit, but up here, all we got is each other.”

I nod. “Yeah. And a lot of good that did her.”

She raises her hand for a smack and I catch it. I almost sprain my wrist. She does have her daddy’s hands, after all.

“Look sister. I’m a P.I. from downstate. You know the kind of power a guy like me carries in his pocket. Cecile came to me for a reason, and you just don’t come to guys like me without a reason. There’s something bad here. Something *real bad*. Something cops don’t know how to handle. It got to her. Don’t you stop for a second to think it can’t get to you. You want to help? Fine. You don’t want to help? That’s fine, too. Just don’t waste my time with this small-town girl with the big-city attitude crap. Tell me what I need to know and I’ll get out of your place faster than you can say Baker’s dozen.”

She looks hard at me for a long while. Then, I feel the tension in her arm let go. I do the same. That’s when I hear a voice behind me and she smiles all pretty, just like she did when I walked in the door.

“Hey Jim,” she says.

And before I turn, I already know Jim’s wearing a badge.



My runegun is on the counter along with my license and the straightedge.

“What’s this for?” he asks, his fingers on the straightedge.

“Cold iron,” I tell him. He shrugs as if that means something to him. He puts the blade down. He’s a big man with a bigger gut. I knew the local PD wouldn’t like me here. If I had listened to Cecile, if I had kept my promise, I’d have her to back me up. Instead, I’m flying solo. Bad place for a man like me to be.

“A PI here, in Baker’s Bluff. Now that’s somethin’ that don’t happen ev’ryday.”

His deputy is a small, squirrelly man with a pug dog’s nose. Ol’ Jim here calls him ‘Willy.’

“Willy,” the Sheriff says. “Why don’t you take Mr. Carter’s possessions and escort him t’the station while I prepare t’ask him questions about his bein’ in our li’l town at such an auspicious time.”

“That’s a big word for small brass,” I tell him.

The Sheriff looks at me crooked. “Here’s something you aughtta understand, Mr. Big City. Small town don’t mean small mind.”

I nod. “All right.” Put my hands up. “I’m here about the drowned girls,” I tell him.

“I believe I told *Willy* to ask you that question,” he barks me. It’s sudden, and I’m taken aback. Then, he turns all smooth to his deputy. “Willy. Make sure Mr. Carter is comfortable. And don’t let him have his things back until I get there.”

“When’s that, Sheriff?” Willy asks.

“When I’m done with breakfast, of course.” He sits his big self down in the chair and it creaks the way the chair in my office creaks. The chair in my office is old. The chair in the diner doesn’t have the same excuse.

So, I sit in a cell for near on three hou — wait a second. I can’t believe it. I’m talking like the sonofabitch.

So, I’m sitting in the cell for three hours, waiting for Sheriff Jim to show up and ask me questions. In the meantime, I con Willy into getting me a deck of cards. I’m on my fifteen hundredth game when the Sheriff makes his appearance. I don’t look up, hoping to find a black ten or a red seven.

He unlocks the door. I don’t move. He tosses my piece, my license and my blade on the bed.

“Get lost, PI. And don’t never come back now. Ya hear?”

I stack the cards up nice for Willy and put my things where they belong. “I’m afraid I have to resort to cliché and tell you ‘I can’t do that, Sheriff.’”

“That’s a real shame. I’d hate to hurt you good and send you back to the city without that pretty face of yours.”

I shake my head. “See, I made a promise to Cecile and a man in my trade can’t afford to go back on his promises.”

“’sthat right?”

I nod. “That’s right.”

He scratches his thick chin and puts his other hand on his wide hip. I don’t like the look of the gun on his belt. “Well see now, I have a problem, Mr. Carter.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m the law ‘round here.” He says those last two words as one word, making it sound like *round cheer*. “Folks trust me. I don’t think they’d like me letting an armed man run loose ‘round the town.”

“I see your point.”

“On the other hand, I’d have to be pretty dumb t’think that what’s happenin’ here is somethin’ that occurs regular an’ natural.”

He slurs that word until it sounds like *nachurul*.

“So, what’s a man ta do?” He sits down behind his desk and looks at me. I stand in the cell, looking at him.

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “What are you going to do?”

He looks at me for a long while. Quietly.

“Seen my share of your kind,” he says. “I’m just a little town sheriff is all. You big city boys feel you got the right to do as you please.”

“Some of us,” I tell him.

“I hear you got yurself some kinda contract. Gives you some kinda connection t’the client.” He chews on something in his mouth, his big feet up on the desk. “’sthat right?”

I nod. “That’s right.”

He makes a sound that’s something like “Uh huh.” Then, he sits and thinks for a while, still watching me.

“You got one o’them contracts?”

I shake my head. “I did.”

“What happ’n to it?”

“It burned up when she died.”

He makes that “Uh huh” sound again.

“Well, why’re you here, then?”

I take a deep breath. Patience is the way to win here.

“I’m here,” I tell him, “because I made a promise.”

“Man like you keeps his promises, is that it?”

I put my hand on the door of the cage. “That’s it, all right.”

“Why?”

“That’s a complicated...”

“Liars make things complicated, Mr. Carter,” he tells me. “The truth is always simple.”

All right. Fair enough. I walk over to the desk and pull up a chair. I sit down. He keeps his feet on the desk, the bottoms of his boots all muddy. When you’re near the ocean, the ground is always wet.

“Sheriff, I’m here because I made a promise. That’s it. Just a promise. No voodoo or hoodoo or witchy sorcery stuff. Just an honest promise. And just because Cecile is dead doesn’t mean I’m going back on it. That good enough for you?”

He looks at me for a long time. Then, he pulls his feet down off his desk.

“Here’s what I’m gonna do,” he says. “I’m gonna let you help us in our investigation. But I ain’t gonna give you your weapon back until you leave town.”

“Unless you’ve got a safe place to put it...”

“We’ll store it right nice in the bank. Got me a safety box there.”

I nod my head and hand him the runegun. He holds it in his hands.

“Heavy,” he says.

“Ought to be,” I tell him.

He looks at it, turning it over and over again. “I heard a man has to sell his soul to make one of these.”

I shake my head. “Nah.”

The sheriff looks at me. “You still got your soul, boy?”

I shake my head again. “Right now, *you* do.”

His eyes almost pop out of his head. Then, he sees me smile. He puts the gun

down. "You're a funny man, Mr. Carter." He pushes it toward me. "Why don't you carry that on over t'the bank for me now?"

"All right." I'll be without my pistol, but I won't be without protection.



The bodies in the morgue are bloated and smell like the sea. I hate that smell. I almost lose my breakfast when we walk in the room, the smell is so thick. It's a dark little room with two tables and two coolers. This little town never expected to have three corpses at once. One more, and they'll be piling them up on the floor.

"You all right there?" the Sheriff asks me, looking at what must be my pale color.

I nod, covering my mouth. "I'll be okay."

"You never seen a corpse before?"

I shake my head, keeping the handkerchief handy. "I've seen plenty." It's hard not to pick up his accent. "I was in the War. It's the smell I can't take."

The Sheriff nods. We step over to the corpses. The first is a blonde, very pretty. The second is a brunette, plain but strong. We have to pull out the cooler drawer to look at the third. I don't see anything I recognize. Except Cecile.

"Any clue what caused this?" the Sheriff asks me. He's got his hands on the belt keeping his belly up.

I shake my head. "No. Where were the bodies found?"

"The first in her bathtub."

"That makes sense. She looks like she was in there all night." I take a closer look. There's no sign of a struggle, except her lips. They're torn up. "Your tap water is sea water?"

The Sheriff nods, takes a step back. "For some."

I point at the first corpse, the one found in the tub. "How about her?"

"I'll check it out."

I go to the second corpse. "How about this one?" The brunette.

The Sheriff shrugs at her. "Yeah. The second was by the beach. Naked."

I look her over. No bruising. No broken fingernails. Her lips are broken.

“Was she...?”

“Doc says no. But her lungs were filled with salt water. Same as the first.”

“And Cecile?” We step over to her body, just as bloated as the first two.

“Where did you find her?”

“In her car, sitting in front of her house,” he tells me.

Her eyes are shut, but her mouth is open. Frozen in a scream. Her bottom lip is shattered like an orange hit by a jackhammer.

“And she was like the others?” I ask.

“That’s right. Water in the lungs.”

I look closer, trying to hold my breath as much as I can. “She looks like she’s been underwater for a month.”

The Sheriff motions at her dead body. “And you say she came to see you yesterday?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

He shakes his head. “Came to see me, too.”

I’m looking at their lips again. It’s hard to check for discoloration when the bodies have been drowned, in the water for so long. Their eyes all white, their skin purple. But there’s something about the lips. I check out something. Then, I go over to the second one. And the third.

“You’ve found something,” the Sheriff tells me.

I nod. “Each of them. A dislocated jaw. One of them has a broken tooth.” I look at him. “Did the coroner notice this?”

“We ain’t got a coroner, Mr. Carter. All we got is a mortician.”

I nod quickly, go back to examining the bodies. “Did he find anything else?”

“He didn’t look. He was too scared t’even touch them.”

I leave the girls alone. Walk back to the door, my stomach ready to wretch. The Sheriff looks at me. “All done that quick?” he asks.

I nod, *Yes*.

“Ain’tchya gonna look for more clues?”

I shake my head. “No. I’ve seen everything I need to.”

He covers the two bodies and slides Cecile back into her drawer.

I step outside and get a drink of water from the cooler. It tastes like the sea. I spit the water into a garbage can and throw away the little paper cup. The Sheriff comes out and locks the door behind him.

“What did you talk about?” I ask him.

“What’s that?”

“What did you talk about? With Cecile?”

“Oh. The two other girls.” We walk back outside. The morgue is like a little shed behind the Sheriff’s office. Not a long walk at all. Wasted some time dropping the runegun off at the bank. The manager didn’t even want to touch it, let alone leave it in his vault. Superstitious small towners. The Sheriff keeps talking.

“She was worried,” he tells me. “Said she was going into the city to get help. I told her that was probably a bad idea. Didn’t want no outsiders showing up in the middle of two murder investigations.”

I nodded. “I told her the same thing.”

“She wasn’t much for listening. Not t’any man.”

That springs something to mind. “Was she seeing anybody?”

“Nobody really. Dating Joe Proctor.”

“Who’s he?”

“Fisherman. Works Danny Burke’s...” he pauses “...boat.”

I catch where he’s going. “The other two girls?”

“Alicia Keane’s married to Bill Keane. Mary was engaged to Justin Rowe.”

“All on Burke’s boat?”

He nods. We both get moving.



Burke is a big man. Not big like the Sheriff, big like Nebraska: wide and thick and square. His beard and hair are both longer than they should be; you can barely see his lips and teeth under the whiskers. His hands are huge and his shoulders are so big, they’re in two different zip codes. This is a man who lifts nets for a living. The sea likes her men like this, and they oblige.

"So they're men are on my boat. What the hell does that have to do with me?"

"Plenty," the Sheriff says.

The smell is everywhere. I must be green, because Burke keeps giving me the eye. The "landlubber eye." I saw it when I was on the boat going across the water to the War. The marines kept laughing about it. I hate marines.

"Mr. Burke," I tell him, "all three victims had relationships with men on your boat. You can't tell me that doesn't strike you as strange."

"It don't strike me as nothin' but coincidence. And before you start askin', I was with my wife last night. You can go talk to her."

"We aren't saying you did anything Mr. Burke," I tell him. "All we're saying is that all of them work your boat."

He stops loading shrimps and turns to look at me. Hard.

"You wanna know what else they got in common? They all come from Baker's Bluff. Alicia and Cecile were cousins. Me and Joe dated all three of 'em in high school. In fact, I bet you can find ten other guys who dated all three of 'em in high school. It's a small town, big shot. You can throw a rock to the other side."

His breath is tobacco and fish. I've got to get out of here.

He goes back to packing shrimps and the Sheriff gives me the sign to back down. I do it. Quick. Walk away and let him talk the hothead down. The other men watch with cigarettes in their mouths. The sea and tobacco: two lousy smells that don't smell great together.

I try to ignore it and go over what I know.

Three dead women. Their lips torn, jaws dislocated. Looks like they've been in the water for a month. One of them found in her car. I think I know what's going on here, and it doesn't have anything to do with Burke. At least, he didn't do anything that...

Or maybe...

After a while the Sheriff comes back. "He don't know nothing."

"More than he's telling," I tell him.

"I can't push too hard."

"You don't push him, we'll find another one tomorrow morning."

The Sheriff gives me a hard look. I give him some hard words. “All I’m saying is this. Cecile came to me for help. She was scared. I didn’t need any fancy college degree or private practitioner license to tell that. Two girls were dead before she came to me and now there’s three. You want to tell me the odds of us finding a fourth tomorrow? Or that she’ll be related to Burke’s boat?”

He takes a deep sigh and nods. “I know. But it ain’t Burke that’s killin’ ‘em.”

“I believe you. But what I *don’t* believe is that he doesn’t know anything about it.” One of the fishermen walks by and smoke gets in my eyes. Bastard. I take off my glasses and I wipe them clean with hands that are starting to smell like seaweed. Everything in this city smells like that. Fish, salt water, seaweed.

I look down at my hands, holding my little round, iron-rim glasses. *They smell like seaweed.*

“Seaweed...” I say it out loud. Sometimes you have to do that, just to hear the idea, see if it sticks.

“What’s that?” the Sheriff asks me.

“Jim, we need to talk to the mortician.”

“What for?”

“I need tools he’ll have. I want to take a look in the girls’ throats.”



Back in the Sheriff’s office, I put the phone back on the cradle. Sam looked it up in the nook, and all the signs point in one direction.

So, I tell him. “I think I’m right about this.”

He sits back in his chair that creaks like mine. “You sure?”

“I’m not sure. But if it is what I think it is, we need to do some snooping.”

“I’m the law ‘round here, Mr. Carter. It ain’t snooping’ when you’re the law.”

It’s dark. We stop for something to eat. Burgers at the diner.

“The regular, Lucy,” the Sheriff tells the looker behind the bar. She looks at me. I tell her I want mine medium-well. Burke’s there in a booth in the corner with nothing but a coffee to console him.

"How many men on his boat?" I ask the Sheriff.

"Five, including himself."

"Three dead girls. When did the deaths happen?"

"All at round the same time. Sixish."

Now I'm thinking. What happens between six and seven? It's fall. It's cold. Sun goes down earlier than that, around four thirty.

"All women involved with the men on Burke's boat," I say out loud.

A burger finds its way in front of me and Lucy answers my question before I get to answer it. "Don't be looking at Burke. He's been here every night from five 'till close."

"Every night?" I ask.

"Every night."

"Why doesn't he just go home?"

The Sheriff coughs just then and cuts off the answer. She gives me another one.

"Don't ask me," she says. "All I know is he's here from five 'till close. There's a pinball machine and a pool table in the back. He plays all night, switching between coffee and beer. That's all."

I keep my trap shut until we're out of there. When we're done, I drop a coin on the table. "On me," I tell the Sheriff.

Jim says, "Much obliged. Sheriff don't pay much these parts." We head out. The sea wind is cold. The sky is dark. "How's the private end o'things pay?" he asks me.

"Less than you'd think."

The streets are wet, the little pools near frozen. We get into the Sheriff's cruiser.

"How much?" he asks again.

"Turn the heater on and I'll tell you."

Jim does as I ask. "That's how much it pays," I tell him.

He looks at me sideways. "I don't getchya."

"I don't make any money. I make favors. You do something for me, I do something for you."

“How do you make rent?”

“I don’t.” He’s looking at me across the dim cabin of the car. “Two years ago, my landlady’s brother went missing. I found him.”

“You ain’t paid rent since?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“Nice life,” he says, puts the car into drive and we start moving. Then, a little way down the road, he asks, “Where do you get cash, then? The whole world don’t work on favors.”

“Every once in a while, I take a cash case.”

He turns the corner. We’re heading down to the docks. Shit.

On our way down, the Sheriff answers my question before I get a chance to ask it.

“The Burkes haven’t been playing nice lately,” he says. He stops the car, we step out and walk across the old wood. It creaks under our feet. We walk up to a tall warehouse door, a padlock hanging there in the center. While he unlocks the door to the warehouse, he tells me more. “I had to stop by the other night and break ‘em up.” The lock pops open for him.

“Where’d you get a key?” I ask him.

“I’ve got a key to all the warehouses down here. In case of emergencies.” We lift the heavy door. “Besides, we don’t want to go lookin’ through here while the boys are around.”

We step inside the place and I almost lose my burger for the smell. “People could have moved stuff around since this morning.”

“That means they’d *all* have to be involved. I don’t buy that.”

“They don’t all have to be murderers,” I tell him, “but they can all be friends, covering each other.”

He leads me back further and we find the lights. I have to shut my eyes for a second.

“I don’t buy that, neither,” he says. “Coverin’ up a crime — I mean *crimes* — ain’t an easy thing to do. Even if they did try it, ‘tween the both of us, I figure we’ll find a mistake.”

I’m thinking about the chances of the Sheriff leading me on a wild goose chase

when I remember that I forgot something.

“What time is it?”

“Nearin’ on six, I recon.”

“And the other murders happened at or around six o’clock?”

“Yeah.” He stops. “*Yeah.*”

He rushes back to the car for his radio. But when he gets there, the deputy’s already calling for him.



Her name was Julee Lynch. When we open the car door, a rush of water floods out on our feet. Sticky salt water. A little bit of seaweed is in her throat, her lips shattered, her jaw broken, and her eyes look like somebody tried to squeeze them out.

There’s crying on the edge of the street. A little boy, a little girl and a brave father holding them both. He says she pulled into the driveway at around six or a little after. He says he heard her pull up. He says he was making dinner and got worried when she didn’t come in. There’s three other houses that could have seen what happened. Nobody did.

The Sheriff finds the footprints. They’re on the other side of the car. Wet, naked footprints walking away across the pavement into the grass. Walking west, toward the water. Where they walk, the soil is mud.

I now know what we’re dealing with. I tell the Sheriff.

“I reckon you’ll want your weapon back,” he tells me. His eyes look like someone tried to squeeze them out, too.

“I reckon I will,” I tell him. Damn that accent. He says the deputy will fetch it for me. Tells pock-faced Willy to get the bank manager down there and open up his security box for him.

It’s the little details that seem so important when you’re standing next to a dead body. Wet, naked footprints only make them more important. I kneel down and put my hand next to one of the footprints. Then, I didn’t know why that struck me as important. I do now.



“A kelpie?” he asks me.

I nod and say the word again. He does the same thing.

“What the hell is a kelpie?”

I’m loading the gun with iron bullets while I answer his questions. “A kind of mer-man.”

“A mer-man? Like a mer-maid?”

I nod.

“And it kills women?”

The gun is loaded and back at my side. It’s heavy. The runes make it heavy.

“Not like this. I’ve never heard of anything like this before.”

“Then how do you know...?”

“It makes sense. Kelpies can shed their tails and walk on land, but only for a short time. When the tide is high, they can come on land. But they have to return to the water before the tide goes back out again, or they die.”

“I don’t believe this.” He’s sitting down, pulling a bottle out of his bottom drawer. I chuckle. Clichés may be clichés, but they all come from somewhere.

He takes a swig and offers me one. I take it and keep talking.

“This is going to be tricky. Kelpies are like other fae. Cold iron and rowan wood. Fire helps, too. Water is their element. Fire counters that. We’ll need torches of rowan wood if we can get them.”

“There’s rowan trees in Dalley’s Wood just up the road.” He looks at me skeptically. “What we need the wood for?”

“We may need to drive a stake through its heart.”

“You serious?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

That makes him shudder. He’s thinking of the Vincenzi family from down south. I don’t like thinking about them, either.

“We’ll need a lot of wood. We can’t make manacles; there’s no time. We’ll have to make rowan torches. Make a circle around the house. In the dark, there’s a chance it won’t notice. Then, when it’s inside, we’ll set them on fire and trap it in the house. When it can’t make it back to the water by low tide, it’ll die.”

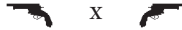
He stops me there. “I don’t understand. Is this thing like a shark or something? Why’s it here? Why’s it killing women?”

“He’s not just killing women. He’s killing *specific* women. All women on Burke’s boat. Burke must have done something to make it mad.”

The Sheriff stands up. “We’ve got to talk to him. Find out what it was.”

I shake my head. “He won’t say. But if the pattern fits, our kelpie will be after his wife tomorrow night. We don’t need to know what he did. We know what it’ll do. Then, when it’s all over, we can ask him.”

That settles the Sheriff down and he takes another drink in his creaky chair. Later, it’s a long night with flashlights and hacksaws. Lucky for me, the forest is far from the water, and I get to smell oak, pine and rowan. A nice change of pace.



Mrs. Burke is a pretty woman. Not stunning, but far from average. Age hasn’t been kind to her. Living by the sea is a hard life, even if you spend most of it at home. The salt gets into everything. It’s hard to keep your good looks when you have to wash salt out of your hair every morning, when it gets into your pores, when it gets into *everything*. You spend your whole life washing it out. It’s a hard life.

All told, she takes what I tell her pretty well. I tell her the kelpie probably already knows where she is and how to get to her. The safest place is in the house. She asks questions. I answer them.

No, it can’t fly.

No, it can’t come through the pipes.

Yes, it has to come through the door or a window.

And yes, once it’s in the house, we’ll light the sticks and it’ll be trapped inside.

“So let me get this straight,” she says. “You want me to sit in my house and wait for this thing to show up. Then, once it does, I run outside and your burning sticks will keep it from following me.”

I nod. The Sheriff says nothing.

She shakes her head. "Well, I don't know what a kelpie is, but I know one thing for sure. You two have lost your minds."

Like I said, she's pretty good about the whole thing.

She stands up. "Get out of my house."

The Sheriff puts his coffee cup down. "Maggie, listen to me."

"No, Jim you listen to *me*. I don't know where you got this lunatic, or how he put all these notions in your head, but I am *not* going to let you chase *fairies* in my house, let alone try to burn it down." Dramatic pause. "*Faeries, Jim!*"

She's a sensible woman, I'll give her that.

I try to talk to her. She cuts me off like hangnail. "Listen buster, you may be a big shot voodoo man in the city, but this is Baker's Bluff. We don't get ghosts and ghouls out here in the country."

"I can appreciate that, ma'am. I really can."

I try, but she isn't listening.

"Get out of my house!" Here come the tears. "Both of you! And don't come back with your sticks or I'll call..." she looks at Jim. Then, her eyes go all soft and wet like tissues in a water glass and she falls down on the chair she just stood up from.

She sobs for a while. We let her. When she's done, she nods quickly. "All right. I don't care. He's made a hell of my life already. And now he's gotten my friends all killed."

"Mrs. Burke, do you know *what* your husband did?"

She shakes her head. "He came home drunk four nights ago. The night before all this started. He didn't want to talk about it. He doesn't talk to me anymore. We never talk anymore."

She tells us only a little more. "He's more nervous every day. But once he saw its only women who end up... like *that*, he calmed down."

A real customer our friend, Mr. Burke.

"He's probably laughing, thinking of me dead."

"You and Danny are going through a hard time, Maggie," Jim tells her.

For such a big man, his voice can get very small. “But I can’t imagine him bein’ glad you’re dead.”

She snuffles some more. We say a few more comforting words and we’re out of there, standing by the Sheriff’s car. Mine’s parked right behind him, and I’m going through the trunk.

“What you got in there?” he asks me.

Nothing much, really. Re-loads for the pistol. A crucifix. A David’s star. Garlic. A spell or two. Nothing to help with all this. It’s been a long time since I’ve been on the bad end of one of the fae. If I was back in the city, I’d call in a few favors and have the thing taken care of. Here, in the middle of nowhere, all I’ve got is me, the Sheriff and a few sticks.

It’s noon. In six hours, somebody dies.



At four, the house is surrounded with rowan branches half-buried in leaves. There’s places for the kelpie to walk by: the front door, the back door and the ground floor window. As soon as he goes in, Jim and I run out of the car, set the torches upright and light them.

We’re in my car. The Sheriff’s car is back at the station. We’re watching.

“What will he look like?”

“He’ll probably be barefoot. Maybe naked. He won’t be green, but he’ll be pale. Light hair. And he’ll smell like a fisherman.”

“That’s half the population of the city, you know.”

“I know.”

A teenager with that description comes around the corner. Except, he’s got shoes on.

“That’s Sam Walker. My kid plays ball with him.”

We wait more.

Another man. Black hair. He’s got a suit and he’s carrying a suitcase.

“Ever see him before?” The Sheriff shakes his head. Our man walks on by.

“Maybe one of us should wait inside?” the Sheriff asks.

"She'd feel more comfortable with you."

"Yeah, but you've got that fancy shootin' iron. And you know what to do."

I nod. It'd be better for me to be outside to light the torches. But he's right. We've got to get the thing inside, and once it's there, someone has to keep it there long enough for someone on the outside to get the torches lit.

"All right. I'm on my way."

Besides, it's cold out here.

Inside, on the other hand, I've got coffee and cake.

"What's a kelpie?" she asks me. "I wasn't really listening before."

"It's like a mermaid, but a man."

"And it kills women?"

I nod between bites of cake. "Drowns them with a kiss. Leaves water and seaweed in their lungs. It can only leave the sea at high tide and has to be back into the water at..."

"Why is it killing us?"

I shrug. "I'm not sure. It has something to do with your husband and his boat."

She's quiet. Very quiet. I look up and she wants to tell me something.

"It's not a kelpie, Mr. Carter."

I've got cake in one hand and coffee in the other. I'm very still. "How do you know that, Mrs. Burke?"

"Because the body my husband put in the cellar is a man, not a woman."

I almost drop my cup. I don't think she cares.

"Would you like to see him?"

We go down. The cellar stinks like the corpses in the morgue. She walks to the long, wide ice chest. She opens it up and shows me the body. I've never seen one before. Scales and skin. Lips and gills. The smell makes me sick and she gets me a towel. As soon as I can walk, I'm out the front door. Jim's running toward me trying to get his lighter started. Not in this wind, buddy.

"What is it? What is it?"

It takes me a second to tell him between the dry heaves.

“Damn it, Carter! What is it?”

My stomach pushes, trying to get something out, but there’s nothing there.
“Burke killed him. The men on his boat.”

“What? What the hell are you talking about?”

One knee on the cold ground. It’s starting to snow.

“The kelpie,” I manage to get out.

“I thought you said this thing was a man.”

I choke again. I can’t answer him.

“Is Maggie all right?” He uses one hand to grab his gun as he turns to shout at the house. “Maggie! Maggie, are you all right?”

I shake my head, grab his shirt to keep him from leaving. Finally getting my stomach in line, I tell him, “No, Jim. Kelpie didn’t do this.”

Now he’s confused. Maggie’s at the door, her eyes as wet as the footprints walking away from the car. “Who did then? Who did this?”

I look up at the Sheriff.

“His lover did.”



It’s coming on six. We’re probably too late. Jim’s driving my car, driving like a moonshiner.

“He’s in the basement,” I tell him. “Burke and his crew caught him in the nets.”

“How do you...”

“Maggie told me. Burke told her. He was drunk. Scared.” We’re turning the corner leading down to the diner. Two minutes away. We may already be five minutes late.

“If the kelpie is dead and in Burke’s cellar, then what’s killing the women?”

“His lover.” I wrap up the rowan sticks we salvaged from the yard into a bundle. “The body she showed me looked like a sailor. A very old sailor.” The kerosene is almost as bad as the fish smell. Funny, it’s almost a relief. “I’m only guessing here. But if they caught the kelpie, his lover must be here for revenge.”

We have to stop for a brown cruiser driven by a man older than the gun strapped to my chest. The Sheriff says three little words I really shouldn't repeat. I keep explaining.

"She's an *undine*. Sailors give their humanity to them to live forever. Become their lovers. Become kelpies. He's not as powerful as she is."

"Can I shoot her?"

"Probably not. That's why I brought the rowan wood."

"And why are we driving to the diner?"

"Because the undine wants to take away from Burke what Burke took away from her."

The Sheriff looks at me, asking a question he already knows the answer to. "What's that?"

I tie off the bundle and watch the car pull up to the diner.

"Love, Sheriff. She wants to steal the woman he loves."

We get out of the car. I hand the Sheriff the bundle and he sets it to flame. I pull out my pistol. The diner is dark. Sign says 'Closed.' The front door is locked, but a quick hit with the butt of the gun through a glass pane takes care of that.

The Sheriff calls out his name.

"Burke! You here? It's Jim Simpson, Danny."

There's no reply.

"Damn it, we're too late."

"Don't say that," Jim whispers. "We're not —"

Sheriff Jim Simpson is frozen. Still. Silent. He's looking at a naked woman with hair all golden and green, her skin as pale as whale skin. She's walking forward quickly, her eyes black and shiny as a shark's eyes. She opens her mouth, and I see eyes aren't all she shares with sharks.

She moves fast. A big man like Sheriff Jim Simpson doesn't move fast anymore. He tries to use the torch, and catches some of her hair as she sinks those shark teeth into his flesh. She screams, rips away from him, taking some of Jim Simpson with her.

The Sheriff goes down fast, his blood hitting the ground before he does. Some of his flesh is still in her mouth when she turns to me. Her hair smolders. I raise the runegun and speak the Old Tongue.

“This is the burning metal. Come no closer.”

She stops. I have no idea what the bullets in this gun will do to her. I have a hope, but holding on to that’s like holding on to fishing wire. If I squeeze this trigger and the shot goes right through her — like I think it will — both me and the Sheriff will be dead.

He’s still alive by the way. Kicking himself across the floor, trying to get to the torch. He’ll die in minutes if I don’t get to him to a hospital. She speaks. Jim can’t hope to understand a word of what we’re saying.

They took my man, she tells me.

I nod. “I know.”

The last one. She dies tonight.

I shake my head. “I can’t let you.”

She smiles. **Save her. Save him. You cannot save them both.**

“The woman is innocent. The man should be punished.”

Killing her punishes him.

I nod again. “I cannot let you do that.”

You cannot stop me.

I smile now. “If you believed that, I’d be dead. But here I am, with my weapon.”

Your weapon is useless.

I pull back the hammer. “Then come and take it.”

She watches me long enough for me to get worrying about the Sheriff. Then, she snarls and she’s moving toward the door. Problem is, Jim’s there, holding his bleeding neck with one hand and a batch of burning sticks with the other.

Tired old man, she says. Jim can’t understand anything she says, but he nods anyway.

“Fuck you,” he says. She understands that.

She pounces at Jim and I pull the trigger.



Long story short.

Jim and I made it to the hospital in time. I ended up giving him some of my blood. He'll regret that later, but for now, it saves his life. The gun hurt her enough to get her away from him and away from me. We found what may have been the remains of a dead porpoise on the beach, but it was torn beyond recognition. I read one book that told me undine shed their tails when they come up from the water at high tide. But I have lots of books.

Daniel and Maggie Burke are no longer Daniel and Maggie Burke. She's taken her mother's name and moved to Idaho, far from high tide. Danny, I heard, moved to Alaska. Guess he didn't get the hint.

Jim Simpson and I keep a kind of correspondence. I don't like writing letters. He tells me his wife makes a mean salmon and I should come down and try it some time. I told him I'd take his word on it and stick with the city's cheeseburgers.

That pretty girl from the diner disappeared two weeks ago. She was last seen on a pier, overlooking the water. A fisherman said he thought she was drunk and holding a photograph. Guess love can make a woman do things. Even stupid things. Even deadly things.

I didn't call Sam for a long time after that, and she didn't call me. Women have a sense for things like that. She knows something's wrong, that I'm not safe. She doesn't call. All I do is sit at my desk, watch the phone, and miss her. She'll call. She'll call. Sooner or later. Even sooner isn't soon enough.

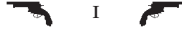
I helped bury Cecile. It was the least I could do. I broke a promise.

Like I told everyone else, I'll tell you, men in my profession really can't afford to do that. It comes back to bite us in places we never expect.

It bit me a month later.

CASE #3

OLD GHOSTS



At three A.M., I'm standing outside my building, looking at a corpse in a car. The trick is, he's got my name in his mouth.

Ben Schulson introduces himself with a badge that looks a lot like the one I used to wear. In his other hand is a steaming plastic cup.

"I wouldn't have called you if it wasn't important." He sips. I see the coffee sting his lips. "This looked important."

Ben is the guy you knew in high school, the football guy, the baseball guy. He wanted to be an actor, but that... Stop it, Carter. Just *stop it*. You're letting yourself get distracted because you don't want to look at what's in the car. Get focused. Get back on track.

I look at the body. His hands tied to the wheel. Long slice across his throat. I half expect to find caskets full of soil in the trunk. The man's eyes are wide open, frozen.

"Besides," Ben says to me. "Nobody would touch it."

"Not even the bunco boys?" I ask him.

He shakes his head, takes another sip. "When I told them the details, they told me this was homicide's rap. Pricks. Two weeks ago, I find a stiff in a bookstore and they're on the scene in two shakes of a black cat's tail, confiscating everything in sight. But if all I get is a body, nothing for them to add to their little collection, it's 'Fuck you, Schulson, it's *your* problem.'"

"And people wonder why I quit."

Ben smiles, sipping his coffee. "I don't."

Ben's a good guy. A good cop. Just made detective a little while ago, transferred in from out of state. We didn't get much of a chance to talk. I was moving out, and he was moving in. He's got an almost naked head. The hair he's got left is shaved. He's young. Went bald young. His arms are still big and strong. Not a man you'd want to mess with.

Of course, I'm being all cocky and off-subject on purpose here. What's in the car is ugly and I don't want to look at it. My name in a dead man's mouth. That's serious. Sooner or later, Ben will ask me if I know who did this.

"So, can you help me out? Any idea who might want to put your name in a dead guy's mouth and leave it on your doorstep?"

"Sooner rather than later," I say, more to myself than him. He doesn't answer me.

I should lie to him. I should tell him I don't have a clue. I should handle this personally, so if I screw it up, I'm the only one who gets killed. But, in the end, I'm a coward. I need help. I need to stay alive. I'm not afraid of dying, but I don't want to die like the guy in that car, and if I do this alone, that's exactly what will happen. So, instead of doing the right thing, instead of lying to him, I tell him the truth.

"Yeah," I tell him. "I know who did this." I stand up. Take another look in the car. Ben's waiting on me.

"The man's name is Victor Sarzo," I tell him.

He points his cup at the corpse. "The man in the car?"

"No. I don't know who *he* is. But Victor Sarzo is the guy you're looking for. Problem is, you won't find him."

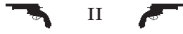
"Why's that?"

"Because he's dead." All the other blue suits look up from the scene at me. Some of them even know what I'm going to say.

"How do you know that?" Ben asks me.

I take a deep breath. Put my hands on my hips. *Here we go. You say it, and there's no turning back.* Deep down, we're all cowards, so I say it. I tell him why I know Sarzo's dead.

"Because I killed him."



We're in his office, drinking coffee I haven't tasted in a long time. It hasn't changed. On Ben's desk is my file on Sarzo. Had a helluva time getting it away from the bunco squad. They wouldn't even let me near the office. Can't say I blame them. What did Groucho say about not joining a club that would accept him as a member?

"What kind of ghost?" Ben asks me. "A specter? A shade? A poltergeist? What?"

"That's all bullshit," I tell him. "All that categorizing crap. Amateurs trying to sell books, make themselves sound important." I drink more coffee. "You know those people who say they can see ghosts? Talk to them? They're full of it. They stay *far* away from *real* haunted houses, because they know better."

Ben nods. "All right, then. Educate me on the facts."

I sip more coffee. "Every ghost is unique. What they can do, what they can't do all depends on their life and their death." I point at the case file. "Sarzo was a murderer. Worse than that, he was a devourer."

"Yeah, I saw that word." He's going through the file now, looking for my notes. "What's that mean, though?"

"It means he kills people who have qualities he wants."

"I don't get it."

"All right. Give me the file." He puts it in my hands. It's thick. Heavy. Sixteen lives in my hands right now. Seventeen if you count Sarzo. Eighteen if you count... shit. Stay focused, you prick. Stay on the job.

"Linda Jaster," I point out the color photos. One with her pretty face. The other with her face not-so-pretty anymore. "He liked her eyes. So he took them."

"You mean he cut them out of her head?"

"No, I mean he *took* them. He was walking around with her eyes. It's a pretty serious ritual, involves a lot of pain."

He doesn't know what to say. After a long moment, he starts talking. "So, he *stole* her eyes? With some kind of spell?"

"A bad one. Used it on sixteen people before we caught him."

"Why'd you have to shoot him?"

I shake my head. "That's something I can't tell you."

"Yeah, I figured. It's not in there," he said, pointing at the file. "You and your friends over in the bunco office sure know how to keep a guy in the dark."

"They aren't my friends. And, sometimes, it's better that way."

"Sometimes."

He wants to say more. So do I. We both know he shouldn't, so we leave it at that.

"So, he's a ghost now?"

I nod. "Yeah. And like most ghosts, he's anchored."

He smiles and lights a smoke. "I know this one." He offers me one. I shake my hand and my head. "When he died, his spirit fixed on to something to keep him from moving on."

"That's the theory."

"So, what is it?"

Damn it. I have to tell him. Lying to an honest man isn't the kind of luck I'm looking for. Not with Sarzo around.

"Come on, Carter. What's he anchored to?"

I swallow hard on the stale coffee and tell him.

"My partner."

And I watch that smile sink right off his face.



There's a reason the precinct kept the whole thing quiet. There's a reason the file is really half-empty, no matter how fat it may look to anybody who doesn't know what happened. But there's the truth, right there. In the open. Some alarm goes off in the room across the hall. I made a promise that involved fire and blood. They should be bursting through Ben's door any sec...

"Goddammit, Carter! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Oh great. They brought the Chief with them.

Three men enter the room. Two of them look almost identical with their black suits and hats. The third man is the chief. He's a big man. He's got scars on his

face and a glass eye. I was there when it happened. Fired the silver bullet that saved his life. Now, twice a month, they have to lock him up in a silver cage. I saved his life, all right. Sometimes, that isn't the right thing to do.

He picks me up by the collar, straight out of the chair. "You made a blood oath, Carter!"

I can feel the toes of my shoes dangling on the hard wood floor.

"An oath on blood and fire! That mean anything to you, pal? That mean *anything* to you?"

I talk very quietly. Very slowly.

"Not really. Not when you feed Schulson here to Sarzo without any kind help or warning."

I didn't think it'd be possible for the Captain to turn white, but you really do see something new every day, don't you?

"Sarzo?" he asks me.

"Sarzo."

"Hell's bells."

I don't recognize the two men standing behind the Chief, but I do recognize the black suits, black ties and dark glasses. They're not smiling. They never smile. They also don't talk. They never talk.

I lean past the Chief. "I said 'Sarzo.'"

They still don't talk. One of them chews gum. Damn, I almost ended up like that. Amazing what a good woman can do to a bad man.

The talking's over. The bunco boys knew Sarzo's was town and they didn't tell the chief. There's a lot of things they don't tell the chief. He doesn't ask, so its partly his fault.

They won't help. The Chief really can't order them to. If they don't want the case, they won't take it. But if they do, you'd better back off. They don't want a piece of Sarzo. Hell, they don't even want him to know they exist. That means its down to Ben and me.

I can't say I'm disappointed.



We're at my place now. And Ben has questions.

"The first one is simple," he says. "Why's he here?"

"What do you mean?"

He sits back in the leather couch I shoved in the corner, just across from the door that leads to the bathroom. I'm in the make-shift kitchen, cooking flapjacks on my burner.

"I mean, we know who he is. *You* know who he is. The bunco squad knows who he is. He even sends you a little card to let you know he's back in town. Why? Why let us know he's here?"

That's a good question. Ben's good at this. Like I used to be. When I wasn't distracted. I'm losing focus again. I'm not looking at things the way I should. At least Ben's got his eyes open.

"I don't know. He wasn't a show-boater when he was alive."

Flip the flapjack. The smell drifts across the room to the couch to my desk in front of the bay window. A little shelf there holds the few books I own the public can see.

"Got anything to drink?"

"All I've got is milk. You're welcome to that."

He gets up, walks across the wood floors that creak. It's an old building. Almost as old as the city itself. Almost.

"Smells bad," he says, standing in front of the little ice box.

"Then we'll have to do without."

He puts the milk back in, then stops. "Didn't you use that milk for the flapjacks?"

I look down. Nod. "Yeah. I did."

The flapjacks flop into the garbage and we're across the way ordering blue plates and strong coffee.

"Didn't you own a house once?" he asks me, shoving eggs in his mouth.

"Yeah. Now *she* owns it."

He nods, smiles and sips the coffee. "I see." He eats a little more. "You know, I heard all about you. Never thought I'd actually meet you. Figured you'd be dead before I got the chance."

"Why's that?"

He puts down his fork, using his hands for emphasis. "Big bad Jefferson Carter. Meanest voodoo cop that ever was. Then suddenly *Bam!* you're gone. And you've got a private practice license, taking cases the buncos won't even touch. Even got connections with the Vincenzis I hear."

"You hear a lot of things."

"Yeah, and I've *seen* a lot of things. Nothing like you've seen, I bet."

"Never can tell."

He starts eating again. "Never can tell. You mean like what happened to your partner never can tell?"

I stop eating. I give him a hard look. "Look, Ben. I respect you. I even like you a little bit. And if you need to know something, I'll tell it to you. I promise. But if you don't need to know something, you won't hear it from me. There is shit in this world you just don't want to know about. You know why? Because once you've seen it, you can't *stop* seeing it. You can't put it away. You can't even take little pills to make yourself forget it. It sticks with you like a stink. And it stinks everything up. Even bad eggs in a dive diner."

I empty my cup. "Even good coffee."

The speech is over, and the obligatory moment of silence passes.

"I didn't think the coffee was that bad," he says, half-smiling.

The waitress walks by. "That's because you're a cop, sweetheart," she says to him. She smiles with all seven of her teeth, her blue hair shining in the bad light. She fills his cup back up. "You don't know shit from shinola."

Then, she winks at me. Like I said, some things, once you've seen them, you can't *stop* seeing them.



Walking now. The streets are wet, the lights silver in the morning. Sun will be up soon, peeking over the piers and water on the West Side of town. When he

goes back down, the last to see him will be the houses in the east, high up in the hills.

"I've only been up in those hills once," I tell Ben. "Long time ago. On the Sarzo case, in fact. A rich man's hands is what he wanted."

"Randalsini," he says to me. "The painter."

"Yeah, that was him. Took his hands, left him with things that looked like withered tree branches. Two pints of black label later I still remembered them."

We just walk a while, him listening and me talking.

"He was re-making himself in his own image, the image in his mind. I remember finding where he was hiding out, the collage he made from pictures out of the society pages. The hands, the eyes, the lips. He wanted to be perfect."

"And now he's a ghost," Ben says. "What could he want? I mean, he doesn't even have a body of his own, right?"

We walk further, into the downtown. Water trucks rush by. The night chill's breaking, the warm rays of the sun creeping across the wet streets, making them steam.

Newsboys running as fast as their little feet can fly, not even worried about slipping in the puddles. Hell, little kids can suffer just about any injury, get right back up and start running again.

"He replaced broken bits, too. Me and McCulcheon, we almost got him this one time..."

"That your partner?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah," I tell him. My voice gets so low, I have to say it again. "Yeah, Thomas McCulcheon. Macky."

His thick accent. His plaid vest. "Bastard made me eat that haggis crap once. Got me good and drunk and fed it to me without telling me what it was." I laugh, Ben smirks.

Back to business. "I broke his hand trying to get the cuffs on him."

"Sarzo?"

"Yeah. The hand, I broke it. Smashed a couple of his fingers. This is before we knew what he was doing."

I can smell the bakers now, opening their windows, letting the smell of bread they've been baking all night rush out onto the wet streets. It's morning all right.

"His hand got broken and he went out looking for new ones. That's when he got Randalsini. To replace his hands. Took me a week to make that connection. Macky pulled out the files and put the rest together."

"So where'd he learn this spell? He a pro?"

I nod. "Yeah. He's good. Better than most. Most of the bozos make big deals with little fish and get squat for it."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, sell their souls for sausages is what we'd say. There ain't nothing more dangerous than a man who *thinks* he knows what he's doing. And dealing with this shit is pretty tricky. You don't pay attention, you miss little details, you lose. Big time."

"Lose what?"

"Everything. Family, friends. Everything. But Sarzo, that sonofabitch knew what he was doing right from the start."

"So, he knows the spell. He know other stuff, too?"

"Yeah. The spell he used was rare, found in only a couple of books. We never found his stash, so I don't know which book he..."

I stop. Right there. Ben knows why and he says it.

"His stash."



We're back in my office, the contents of the file strewn out on the floor in a pattern only Ben and I can understand.

"Can't you use a spell to find him?" Ben asks me.

"Yes... *and* no. Ghosts do weird things to... I mean..." Shit. Now I have to stop what I'm doing and explain. Do it quick.

"Ghosts create interference. Distortion. That's why they don't show up in photographs or recordings. That's why your radio goes weird for no reason at all. There's a ghost in the room and you can't see it."

“So a spell won’t work because the ghost screws it up?”

“That’s right. Besides, I’d need a thing.”

“Thing?”

“A thing of Macky’s. Like attracts like, you know? I’d need a thing of his to find him. And I don’t think I have any souvenirs.”

“But if you did?”

I take a deep breath. “Don’t you think I’ve tried this? Sarzo’s ghost causes too much interference to find Macky. Besides, I’d need something of his, something powerful.”

“Powerful like what?”

I’m losing my patience. “Ben, this isn’t helping. We have to find Sarzo the old fashioned way.”

“We don’t have time. If he’s here in the city...”

I’m running out of patience, and I know it. I’m not letting myself think straight.

“If he’s here and he does something,” I tell Ben, “we’ll know about it.”

He leans back on his hands for a second. “But we have to catch him *before* he does something.”

“Which is why we’re *here*, on the floor of my apartment, going through old pictures, looking for something we haven’t seen before.”

He’s quiet for a while after that. Then, when the tension is over, he says, “I’m sorry, Carter. I just thought maybe you could whammy up something...”

I nod. “It’s all right. I tried before. Trust me, I tried. But we’d need something of Macky’s that’s powerful. Even then, it’d only give us a rough idea. Maybe a direction.”

He’s thinking again. “You said that before. ‘Powerful.’ What do you mean by that?”

I go back to the words and pictures on the floor, answering his questions while I look. “Some things, like possessions are good. Things the person owns. The longer he owns it, the better. Sentiment is strong.”

“What else?”

He’s trying to help, so I’m trying to keep calm. “Bodily fluids is better. Blood, sweat.”

“Saliva?”

“Yeah, saliva’s good. Because it’s directly from the body, it’s very powerful. Not as good as blood, but just as good as sweat.”

“So, would this help?”

I look up. He’s holding an envelope he pulled from the file. An envelope with Macky’s handwriting on it. An envelope sealed with...

“Damn,” I hear myself whisper. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Ben smiles. “I don’t know. But I’m glad *I* thought of it.” He hands me the envelope. “Let’s just hope he didn’t use a blotter.”

I grab the envelope, get on my feet and walk over to my desk. Ben follows me. I put it in the ashtray on my desk. (I don’t smoke, but a lot of my clients do.) Then, I go over to the bookshelf across from the kitchen. I stop for a second and turn to look at Ben.

“You’re about to see something I don’t want you to remember seeing.”

He smiles. “Can’t you *make* me forget seeing it? Hit me with some kind of mojo or something?” I’m not sure if he’s joking or not.

I reach up and touch a book. The words on the spine read, *The Book of Lies*.

“Yeah, I could make you forget it. You really want that?”

His lips crunch together in his funny Ben frown. “No. And come to think of it, why did I say that?”

“Because magic does that to you. Makes you *want* to use it.” He’s listening to me. That’s good. “You’ve gotten close to it, and you want to see it work. That’s how insidious it is. How tricky it is.” He puts his hands on his hips, and standing in front of the window, the new light of dawn shines around him like a halo. “Anyway, like I said before, I like you. I don’t pull that shit on people I like. Just remember, you didn’t see anything.”

“See what?” he asks. I smile and pull the book.

The whole shelf slides aside, revealing a small alcove that holds all the stuff I shouldn’t own. All the stuff those guys in the black suits would confiscate in a second... if they knew I had it. Inside, I grab a book, a candle and a silver bell.

“What’s all that for?” he asks me.

“Your suggestion.”

He looks excited. "We're going to try it?"

I put everything down. "*I'm* trying it. You're standing back and pretending you're not seeing anything."

He does that. "Right." Then, he goes to the ice box and looks inside. The milk's still there. He shuts it, a little disappointed.

I take the envelope and a quicksilver match. The smoke makes Ben plug his nose. He says something, but I don't hear him. Smoke swirls, fire eats the paper, tastes Macky on the lip of the envelope and sings to me.

"Warehouse district," Ben tells me.

I shake my head. I blink. The window Ben was standing in front of is almost dark. "What?"

Ben says it again. "You stood there all day. Didn't move once. Then, you said, 'Warehouse district.' Is that a lead?"

If I've been standing here all day, Sarzo's got a lot of wards on him to keep anybody from doing what I just did. He hasn't been sitting still; he's been learning. "It's a lead, all right," I tell Ben. "Best lead we've had. Might as well start there. Let's take your car."



"Tell me more about Sarzo," he asks, turning onto the interstate.

"What do you want to know?"

"Anything. Right now, he's a fucking boogeyman. The more I know, the less boogey he gets."

I shrug. "Imagine the worst thing you can imagine."

Ben nods, turning the wheel. "All right."

"He's worse than that," I say.

He chuckles. The lights stare back at us on the black freeway.

"If he's a ghost," he says, "there isn't a whole lot we can do."

I shake my head. "We can dislodge him from his anchor."

"That mean what I think it means?"

I pull out the runegun and make sure it's loaded. "Yeah. It sure does."

When we get off the interstate, I tell Ben to slow down. His car almost crawls down the wide roads, the ones with stop lights nobody even slows down for.

"Great," I hear myself mutter. "More water."

"What's that?"

"Nothing." I double-check the gun. The damn thing always makes me nervous. I've met men who rely too much on these things. They let it think for them, or at least, pretend it can think for them. Tricky trap. Can't let myself fall for it.

The building stands three stories tall. Three stories full of deserted. Well, not entirely. We leave the car, walk down the streets, making sure we only walk under the broken street lamps. When we're behind an adjacent building, sitting still, I stop Ben and shuffle into a friendly shadow.

"Can he tell we're here?" Ben asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know. Wards are tricky, but he's good. Damn good." I put the gun in its holster. "It still doesn't hurt to be sneaky."

I pull a black feather from an envelope. "Keep still," I tell him. I touch him in five places then whisper something soft. I see him open his mouth, but I shake my head. "Don't say a word. You say *anything* and the spell's broken."

I only wish Ben could do the same for me. I can't pull the trick on myself, so I have to go without.

Now we're ready to move. I can hear boats on the water and white birds looking for a meal. Huge mechanical cranes across the bay lift boxes bigger than my office while shore men shout and swear at each other. Lots of noise. I hope it's enough.

The front door is right out. I don't need to look close to see the runes he's made. But if he's done it with one door, he's worked them all. I mutter a curse and put up my hand. Ben's behind me somewhere, and I just hope he's paying attention.

They're complicated little things, the runes he's put on the door, but nothing I can't handle. Problem is, the moment I crack them, he'll know. In fact, he'll probably know its me.

All right then. He'll know its me. I'm only half his problem.

A few words in the Old Tongue and a flick of my silver lighter. The runes crack. I feel a cold rush of air and my tongue goes numb. No more magic from me for a while. I should have expected that.

The door swings open and I step inside.

Huge room, barred windows and dust. All these abandoned warehouses look alike. The floor is rotten and the air is, too. Me breaking the runes on the door lets him know someone's here, but he isn't showing himself just yet. I'm not worried about him having a gun; that's one of the rules he has to follow. I'm worried about knives. I'm also worried about Ben. He's around here somewhere. I just hope he's figured out I popped the door so Sarzo wouldn't know he's here.

I walk across the floor, find a smear in the dust. A word.

Upstairs, it says. I follow the instructions.

The stairs are as rotten as the floor. I search through the second story, but nobody's there. Up to the third floor, the stairs creaking a bit more than I'd like. On the way up to the fourth floor, the stairs give way completely. I catch the banister, but it breaks apart in my hands. I fall down, banging everything on the way. Just before I hit the floor, I wonder where Ben is.



When I wake up, there's blood in my eyes and paper in my mouth. He's grinning at me. I can't move at all. I don't know if it's because I'm paralyzed from the fall or because he's tied my hands and feet.

"Oh, don't worry," he says with Macky's voice. "You're fine. Just took a bump on the noggin is all."

I look up, and there he is. My partner. But, there's something wrong with his eyes. They shine in the dark like a cat's eyes. That's Sarzo. Mackey looks all right. Shorter than me. His dumb hair cut makes him look like a marine. I hate marines. His hands are slender, but strong, his belly a bit too big. Whiskey will do that to you.

It's Mackey's body, but not his clothes. He's dressed like Sarzo, which means, he's dressed like a hobo pimp.

I try speaking, but even that hurts. Like it'd do me any good. There's tape on my mouth. And a little piece of paper inside. Who am I kidding? It's not paper. I remember telling Dave the ward they put on his forehead wasn't mulched wood and I almost gag.

"Don't you choke to death, Carter," Sarzo says. "That'll ruin all the fun."

I somehow keep my stomach under control. He kneels down close.

“Wouldn’t you like to know who’s name that is in your mouth?” He gets closer to me.

If I could spit, I would. There’s a flash of silver light in his hand. Something you see in a barber’s shop, and it ain’t scissors.

“I thought you’d be smarter than this, Carter. I really did. I mean, are you getting old, or what? The Carter I knew would have never fallen for such an easy trick.”

I’d be witty right back at you, you fuck, if you just took this damn thing off my mouth.

“Too bad, though. I was really looking forward to killing you. Now, it just seems so... anticlimactic.”

I feel the cold steel against my skin. That straight razor he’s used on so many others. Not entirely unlike the runegun. The spells are so similar. Colder than winter, colder than ice, colder than just about anything. I’ve never been cut by a razor like that. I wonder if this is what it feels like when someone takes a round from the runegun. *Any time now, Ben.*

Sarzo starts whispering in the Old Tongue. I know the spell. He’s taking something from me. Just what I don’t know. He keeps it up, not stumbling on the words at all. Words I just don’t need to hear. I remember telling Ben about not being able to forget the things you see. Same thing’s true for the things you hear. And, once you hear a spell, it gets into your head. Keeps nagging until you use it yourself. Even if I get out of this... *Any time now, Ben.*

The blade draws blood. My blood. I feel it ooze from my body, and I feel something else ooze from my soul. He’s taking something from me. Taking...

Ben?

Then, there’s another voice in front of me, but behind Sarzo. “Stop right there, motherfucker.”

And, right on cue, darkness swirls and he appears right behind the ghost in Macky’s body. Just like I told him: you speak, you break the spell.

There’s a gun at the back of his head, but Sarzo just keeps on grinning. “If you were going to kill me, you’d do it.”

Ben doesn’t blink. “If you were going to kill Carter, you’d do it. I’m not going to kill you, Sarzo. I’m just going to arrest you and hand you over to the bunco boys and let them work on you for a while.”

There's a long moment. Then, Sarzo raises Mackey's hand. "Fine." He looks at me. "Good trick, Carter. I didn't think you'd involve the cops."

The cuffs go on, his hands behind him, on the other side of an iron post. Ben cuts me free with the razor.

"That was a close one," he says. "Thanks for the assist."

I pull the tape off my face, and the paper out of my mouth. "No problem," I tell him. "Thanks for the save."

"He was doing something to you, wasn't he?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"I could... *feel* it."

I look at him. "How'd it make you feel?"

He shakes his head. "Last time I felt that way was on my honeymoon." He rubs that bald head of his. "Except... no. It was different."

"It's different now," I tell him. "It always feels that way when the spell is done."

"I think I need a bath," he says.

"You do," I tell him. "You stink."

"If you two are done," Sarzo says from the pole, his hands locked behind him, "perhaps we could get on with the rest of the story."

Ben smiles. "Story's done, pal. You're locked up. Going away for a long time."

Sarzo smiles with Mackey's lips. "No, Mr. Schulson. Not quite yet. I have one more trick to pull."

Ben stops in his tracks. He looks at Sarzo, then looks at me, then looks back at Sarzo. "How'd you know my name?"

Name. Name on the paper.

"Oh, no," I hear myself say. But, I'm on the floor, looking for what Sarzo put in my mouth. It takes me a second. A second too long.

It's in my hand. I look at the name.

The name...

I look over at Ben. "What's it say?" he asks me.

I look at it again.

“Dammit, Carter! What’s it say?”

Next thing I know, I’m standing in front of Sarzo, the psycho inside my best friend. My partner. I show him the paper. “What the hell does this mean?”

Sarzo’s still grinning. “Watch and learn, Carter.”

“You sick fuck! What the hell...”

Mac’s eyes go back into his head, fluttering.

No. Shit, no.

I pull back, spinning on my heel, falling on my ass. I try to catch myself. No good. All I can do is shout.

“Ben!”

He looks at me.

“Ben! Put down the razor!”

It’s too late. Mac’s eyes are white. So are Ben’s. There’s a sound both of them make at the same time. A sound I’ve heard before. Once before.

I’m on the floor. I know what’s happened. And now, Ben’s gun is in my face. In his other hand is the scalpel.

I got it all wrong. Mac wasn’t the anchor.

“You’re so dumb, Carter,” Sarzo tells me. But, it’s Ben’s mouth that says it.

“That’s why you’re so fun.”

I keep back. Ben steps over to Mac, still cuffed to the post. Ben’s hand lifts Mac’s neck. Lifts it up high.

“Whu?” Mac asks. He tries to turn his head. Ben’s lips smile.

“Want to see your friend?” Ben’s voice asks him. He turns Mac’s face to me. Mac’s eyes fill with recognition. Ben’s hand puts the scalpel to Mac’s throat.

“Jeff?” he’s asking me. “Am I dreaming?”

“Tom, just be quiet.”

Sarzo grins at me, his hand ready to twitch.

Tom McCulcheon has confusion his eyes. “I dreamt I killed Laura, Jeff. That I cut her... oh, God. I cut her.” His tears start to flow, his lips trembling. “It was a dream, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Sarzo says. “It was a dream. Tell him, Carter. Tell him it was a dream.”

I nod. “Yes, Tom. It was a dream. She’s home right now. Waiting for you.”

Ben shakes his head. “A dream. And now, it’s waking time.”

“No! No, Sarzo! You have to kill me first! It was *my* name in that man’s mouth. I’m next on the list!” I’m screaming at him. “You can’t kill him until you’ve killed me. That’s the rule.”

The blade flashes and blood flows from Tom’s neck. There’s a sucking sound from the wound. I’m listening to Tom try to catch his last breaths.

“Rules,” Sarzo tells me. “Rules are meant to be broken, Carter.” He turns the gun on me. “And stop calling me Sarzo.”

He laughs, but he doesn’t pull the trigger. He just walks away, the gun always pointed at my head. I stand perfectly still. Listening to my friend’s life bleed onto the floor.



In the basement, I find the place where the books used to be. The bunco boys are in there now, confiscating everything for their private evidence locker.

The Chief isn’t happy. I can’t say I blame him.

“You could have called for back up.” He’s shouting in my face. “You could have told us you’d found him. Could have let me bring in a team. Could have done a lot of things. But all you did was let a good cop die, Carter. That’s all you did here.”

I’m not looking at him at all.

“Obstruction of justice is just the beginning. The DA wants manslaughter charges, wise guy. Reckless endangerment.”

I’m looking at the bunco boys taking everything away. All the evidence I’d need to find out where he’s going next.

“I ought to arrest you right the hell now, Carter.”

“You won’t,” I tell him.

He stops dead in his tracks. “Why the hell not?”

I look up at him. “You won’t,” I say again. “And you’ll tell the DA there isn’t enough evidence to charge me with anything.”

The chief looks at me with blank eyes. Then, he nods his head. “You’re right,” he tells me. “There isn’t enough evidence.” He walks away, shuffling his feet a little.

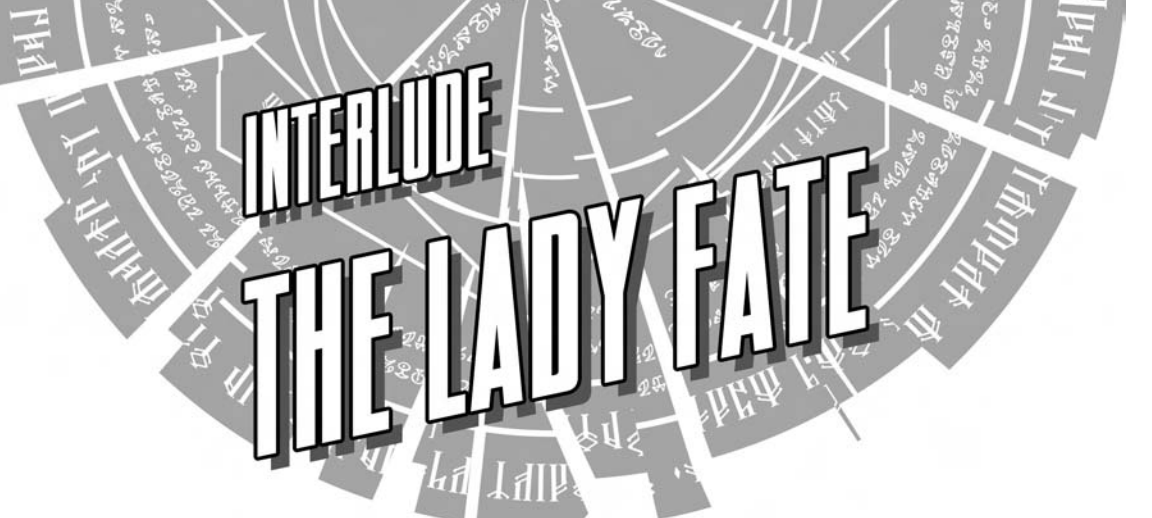
It’s been a long time since I pulled off that kind of stunt. I’m going to have a helluva headache tomorrow morning and its gonna last me a good month. I’ll probably sleep for a week. If the bunco boys weren’t so busy confiscating, they’d probably have noticed. But they didn’t. Or, if they did, they don’t care.

I pull a piece of paper out of my pocket, but it isn’t paper. A name’s written on it.

Thomas McCulcheon

He said rules were meant to be broken.

All right, Sarzo. Let’s play dirty.



INTERLUDE

THE LADY FATE

Morning, far away from the Detective, spreads its warm light across the cold city. It comes from the East, over the mountains curling north and meets the sea in the west. Just below the mountains are the foothills and even further east is the desert. Wind comes off the sea to the west, pushing the city's yellow air into the mountains where it hangs forever.

Morning, far away from the Detective, and there's a song floating through the rose red sky. It skips across the tops of the buildings, all the way down to the docks where men climb on boats, ready to catch the wind.

In the foothills, north of the Detective and his troubles, castles dot the landscape. You have to take Widow's Road to make it up this far. The street signs don't call it that, but the kids do. And their parents did, too (but don't tell the kids that). Everyone's called it Widow's Road for as long as anyone can remember, every generation thinking they were the first to do so.

"They call it Widow's Road," Jimmy Falk tells his little brother, "because it winds down the foothills like a mad ribbon. Blind turns everywhere you go." Jimmy's tuning up his engine, getting ready for high school, getting ready to pick up Nelly Birch, the pretty blonde with the blue eyes. "And a guy died there, on one of those twists or turns," he says, his brother wide-eyed. "And his girl, she still walks up there, looking for the guy who lost his life... on Widow's Road."

Danny Tobias tells another story. Danny's slipping baseball cards into little plastic sleeves, putting those into a little cardboard box. He tells the story to his little sister. "There's this trucker," he says, slipping his prized possession, a rookie Mason Diggs, into the sleeve. "And the trucker, he picks up this girl who's all dressed for some kind of dance..."

You know the rest. You've heard it all before. But kids are kids, and they tell stories to their little brothers and sisters like they've never been told before. Mostly to scare them. But deep down inside, they remember when they were kids (younger kids, at least) and they remember their older brothers and sisters telling them the stories.

Widow's Road. Winding up and down the foothills. Every once in a while, you see a little driveway creeping off the asphalt. Go down one of those roads and you'll find yourself a gate. Get by the gate (good luck) and you'll find yourself a fortress. This is where the money is, this is where the fortunes hide. Hide from the shadows the city casts down on the people who live in the tenements and apartments and walk the city streets asking brothers if they've got a dime. Soup lines used to populate those streets. That was before the war, but if you look close, you can still see the scars from when bubble burst and took half the city with it.

Morning, and folks who live below the foothills are just getting going. They're going about their lives, never looking up, never looking at the house that sits high above all the other houses. The house at the top of the foothills. The house high enough to look down, but too high to see from below. The house in the mists. The house where *she* lives. The woman who gave Widow's Road its name.

The folks living in the foothills never look up. At least, not when they think she can see them. No one ever mentions the house or the lady who lives there. Not when they think she can hear them. But this morning, a morning that isn't quite free of night just yet, if they look up, they can see her standing on the balcony, looking out over the city.

And they hear her singing.

"A siren," Martha Campbell says as she carries milk cartons for her father. Martha's never heard the voice before, or this is the first time she'll remember it when the lady is done. It is a sad song, an aching song, a mourning song. The sound sailors' wives sang, and still sing today. Little Martha Campbell hears it, and it reaches inside her heart, making her feel things her little girl's mind can't understand, making her feel ways she can't explain, because she doesn't know the words.

Her father sees that look in her eyes, and he shouts. "Shut up!" her father says. He cuffs her and she falls, breaking a bottle. "Look what you did!" her father spits on the little girl. She cries and promises never to speak of the woman again. They walk the streets, depositing half-frozen little white bottles on every doorstep. She wears mittens to keep her fingers from freezing, and she tries not to listen to the lady singing high in the hills, but the words echo off the walls

and find her wherever she goes. She listens, but keeps her eyes focused on her father's back, just in case he turns to see.

But after tonight, whenever she can, whenever her father isn't watching, she looks up to the house on the hill, hoping the mist will be thin, hoping she'll see the lady again. Hoping to hear her sing.

When she goes to school, the other girls tell stories. Not the stories Danny or Jimmy tell. No boy knows these stories.

"Red red roses, no one knows." Her friend Bonnie sings it while she swings the rope. "Dig a ditch, dig a ditch where no one goes."

The other girls sing along. "Lady Fate, Lady Fate, locked away." The boys watch them jump. The boys don't pay attention to the words. "Knock three times but she won't come out to play."

Their mothers and their grandmothers chanted these rhymes, but they watch the little girls, and say nothing. Men only know half the story. No, that's wrong. They don't know it at all, but women do, and they keep it to themselves.

"The mirror's cracked," Martha sings. "It can't look back."

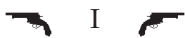
Bonnie finishes the rhyme. "Stitch the rest together!"

Then, they stop. Every woman in the foothills stops. They look up to the hills, to the balcony, to the mist. She's singing again. Just for a while. Just for a moment. She stops soon enough and she steps off the balcony, back into her fortress.

The men don't notice, or they don't want to.

The women go back to whatever it was they were doing.

Martha and Bonnie swing the rope and make up rhymes.



In the highest house in the hills, there's a balcony with a shut door. Behind that shut door, there's an office, and inside that office there's a desk. A desk with a photo on it. We'd recognize the subject if we were there. It's a photo of the Detective, his image caught unaware. Standing on a street corner, talking with a man weary of running from his own death. The photo doesn't show the mark on the man's forehead, or how there's a scar above the detective's left eye, but she knows it is there. The brow above that very same eye has a little white

streak. She can't see his eyes, but she knows they're blue, one lighter than the other. Carefully, she puts the photo away, but her fingers linger on the image just a little while longer. A little too long perhaps.

Under and behind the desk is her safe, the one her family doesn't know about. She puts the file there with all the other things she shouldn't own. More photos and files. More lives she's not allowed to touch.

But she sees. Far above the city, in her mirror of black glass, she looks down and sees. She speaks a name and the mirror shows her a face. The mirror is taller than her, almost as tall as the room, wide as a big man's shoulders, and old. Older than even her memory. It was her grandmother's mirror, her mother's mirror, and now it is her mirror. But unlike her grandmother and her mother, she can only look. She dares not utter a word into the mirror, not even whisper.

Her family lets her live here, high in the mountains. The family that gave her the warnings. The family that will know when she crosses those warnings.

Watch, but do not touch.

Her husband's family.

Watch, but do not touch.

Once a month, a black car pulls up to her drive and three men step out. The butler never asks them any questions, never offers to take their coats, just opens the door and they walk in. Then, he watches them walk up the stairs, never offering them anything to drink or eat. He knows they'll ignore him. Once a month, for longer than he can remember. He watched them do the same thing when he was a boy, when his father was the butler.

They come upstairs and they close the door behind them and they talk to the lady of the house, asking questions nobody listens to. Nobody ever hears a word they say, but one maid, who is very old, was once caught in the room when they came. She was a young girl, only fifteen, and she hid in the closet very still while they talked to the Lady.

She tells the story to only a few. "Remember our bargain," they said.

The Lady made no sound at all.

"You so much as breathe on anything and it's over," they said. She only tells the story to those whom she trusts.

"I have made a promise," she heard the Lady say. "And I intend to keep it, no matter how many times you remind me what will happen if I don't."

Then, they leave. When they were in the car, driving back down to the city, the Lady found her, Rosemary, moments later. She did not swear Rosemary to any kind of silence. Instead, she promised the girl a happy life in the household for as long as she remained.

"And that was a long time ago," Rosemary says. And if you ask her how long, she'll just blush. "A proper woman never talks about such things," she says. But if the truth was to be known, she was a young girl when the butler's father was first commissioned. A long time ago.

By midday, her chauffeur drops off a young woman in a red dress. The chauffeur who drives women up to the house and back down to the city. No man has ridden in the backseat of that car, not since her husband died.

The woman in the red dress sits on the other side of the desk. The lady shows her the Detective's picture and asks who he is.

"Where did you get this?" the woman asks.

"He helped you," the Lady answers. "A long time ago, he helped you. Even now, you are in his debt. Helping one of my women means he helped me. If you are in his debt, then so am I. I want his name."

The woman looks and tells her.

The woman little girls call Lady Fate looks at the picture of the Detective again. "I saw him," she says, her lips soft, her voice softer. "In the mirror." Then, she looks at the woman in the red dress. "Do you love him?"

The woman in red smiles, her lips bright. "Only when he asks me to." She watches the Lady closely. "Why? Have you seen something?"

She shakes her head. "No," she says. "I haven't."

The woman in red stands up from her chair, leaving the picture on the desk. "I'll bring you the Rosetti file next week," she says. "Seems our Cardinal ordered an adorable outfit from Kara's Boutique." The woman in red's eyes shine as she points at the picture. "Carter got me the photos. You'll love them."

She's about to leave, but she stops at the door. She looks at the Lady over her shoulder. "I trust him," she says. "I can't say that about many men." She pauses, laughs quietly. "No, wait a second. I can't say that about any man." She points to the picture again. "Except him."

When the woman in red gets back in the limousine, she looks up at the balcony overlooking the pool. The Lady's there, watching her leave. Singing.

The song floats up above her, catches the clouds and floats back down. Morning has burned off almost all the mist below her. It never burns off the mist around the balcony. Not ever. But a little girl can see her, down below on Lincoln Street. She looks down and watches the little girl watching her. She smiles. The little girl smiles.

She almost whispers the little girl's name. But even that whisper... they'd hear it.

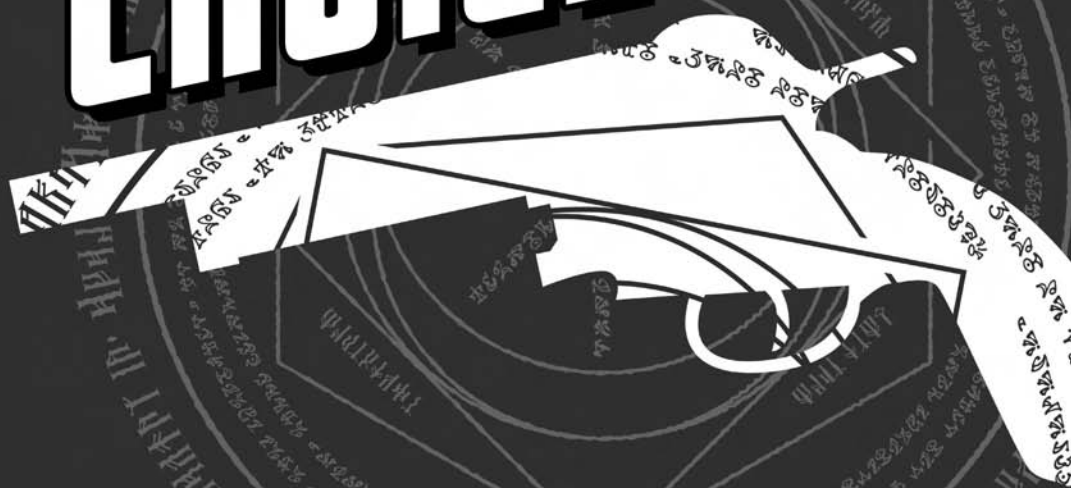
Her family can't afford to break promises. Look, but do not touch.

One word. Just one word.

So, she retreats back off the balcony, shutting the door behind her. The photo is still on her desk. The man with the sharp chin and the wounded, magic eye. She touches it one more time.

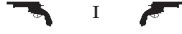
And she remembers her lie. She has seen something.

NO LOYAL KNIGHT PART TWO: CHOICES



CASE #4

DEVOUR



The limousine drops me off in front of a house just above the foothills. The house bigger than a city block. Below me is the city, and since I don't get to see her like this very often, I relish the view for a moment. The morning mist is almost all burned away, but some of it still lingers on the waterfront, and here at the base of the mountains. I see bodies scurrying along the edge of the water, the wide streets filled with people and cars, morning markets buzzing. But up here, everything's almost quiet. Green grass, tall trees, a soft wind moving everything. You could almost forget about the city.

Then, just for a giggle, I turn around and look up. Dotted along the ridge of the mountains are houses, even higher than this one, the one that belongs to the Babbages. The Babbage mansion is down here at the base of the mountains, and that means one thing. New money. Up above me right now is money older than God. And higher still, above everything else, is the Widow's house. The sun never burns away the mists that linger there.

The doors of the Babbage house open and a tall man dressed in black asks me to come in. He's a young butler, but his eyes tell me he's seen plenty. All those rumors you hear about the houses up here in the hills? The truth is worse.

"Mr. Carter, I assume?" he asks me while we step inside.

"Yes, indeed."

"Wait here, please." He walks away, leaving me there. I don't like waiting, so I start looking.

The front foyer is wide with marble floors and foreign carpets. The walls are painted with textures that match the floor. A marble and bronze statue of a naked warrior stands in the center of the round room, like the whole place was

built for him. What am I talking about? It probably was. He's naked, but he's holding a shield and a spear. His foot's on a dragon with the spear ready to strike. I don't see any iconography. He's not Roman and he's not Greek. As my eyes look him over, I see he's a bit more excited to see me than I am to see him. Check that: he's a *lot* more excited to see me. Or somebody. Maybe I should look somewhere else.

Pictures of people I don't recognize look at me along the curved walls. There's definitely a family nose. Most of them are dark, but there's a one or two white sheep in the bunch. They look at me and I spend a moment or two giving them a long look back.

"It's like a staring contest you can't win," a voice tells me. I turn around and the pretty little thing that owns the voice smiles down at me. She's wearing short pants that fit just a bit too tight, her top is giving away secrets. She leans over the banister, looking down into the foyer. "You must be the detective."

"Why do you say that?" I ask her.

Her eyes are half closed, her grin lazy. "Because big brother Drew said you were going to be here. He told me not to embarrass myself. Or him." She walks down the stairs, producing cigarettes and a box of Lucifers. She saunters up to the statue and lights the match on the statue's smooth, round backside. "Our boy here isn't very modest," she says.

I stand on the other side of him. His proud side. "From this side, I can see why he's got good reason not to be."

She's watching me, the match burning down into her fingers. Her long, soft, white fingers. "I grew up watching him," she says, gesturing at the fellow standing between us. The flame reaches her fingers. She doesn't flinch. I suddenly wonder if our naked companion is guarding her or me.

I point at our mutual friend. "If you grew up with this chap as an example," I tell her, "then, I'm sorry to say you have very unrealistic expectations of most men."

She drags off her cigarette and walks around him. I keep up the pace, keeping him between her and me. "I've found men can do a lot of things they don't think they're capable of," she tells me, "if they're properly motivated." I watch the flame in her fingers die. We stand there for a little while, nobody saying anything.

"You don't look like a detective," she finally says.

I shrug. "What do I look like?"

She smiles. "A professor."

I wink. "Well, this is my disguise."

She smirks. "Take it off."

I shake my head. "Not for the world."

She pouts. "The whole world?"

I nod, spreading my arms. "Whole wide."

She raises an eyebrow. "Oh, well then, how about a just a fuck?"

The butler coughs from the stairwell. "Mr. Babbage will see you in the library, sir," he says.

She laughs and grabs the spear, swinging around to the front of the statue, right up into my face. "Guess I'll see you later... professor." Then, she reaches to our naked friend and puts her cigarette out on the place I was trying to ignore. "Maybe you and me can take a pop quiz later."

"This way, sir," the butler tells me. I follow him up the stairs, leaving her behind, laughing in the foyer. Her laughter echoes up and follows us down a long corridor of doors and dark carpet. We lose it around a corner. Finally.

"Are you all right, sir?" the butler asks.

"Yeah," I tell him. "I just feel like I walked out of a cliché."

"Mrs. Babbage can do that to you, sir."

"Is that?" I get started, but the butler answers me before I can finish.

"Master Babbage's *sister*, sir."

"Oh."

We walk a little further, then we reach a set of black double doors carved out of a kind of wood that don't grow in the city. Wood from forests far from here, from trees that never see the sunlight.

"Master Babbage will be with you shortly," the butler tells me. "And please, with all due respect, resist the temptation to touch anything, sir." I sit alone there for a while, in a long couch with crushed velvet seats. Eventually, I get tired of waiting and make my way around to the bookshelves.

Its funny, you can really tell what kind of client you've got with a quick look at their books. Its kind of like that whole "judge a man by the company he keeps" line. Books are like friends in that way. When you get tired of someone's company, you stop calling them. When you get tired of a book, you get rid of it. A book can have its own life that way, moving from social group to social group, picking up new friends, dropping off old ones. And sometimes, when you're walking through a bookstore, you discover an old friend you haven't talked to in a long time and...

Sorry. Let's get back on track.

Drew Babbage walks in the room and sees me and his books. He smiles. "Are you a reader, Mr. Carter?" he asks.

"Don't have a lot of time for it anymore," I tell him. "More of a collector now."

He walks forward, his hand extended. "Andrew Babbage," he says, shaking my hand. It's dry and strong.

"Jefferson Carter," I tell him. "What can I do for you?"

He offers me a seat and I take it. While he talks, I watch him. His trimmed goatee is from a generation younger than mine, as is the hair that touches the back of his collar. He's got the energy of youth, that's for sure. But there's something else. Something I can't quite put my finger on just yet.

"I told you on the phone, I'm looking for my father."

I nod. "And I asked you why you couldn't involve the police."

He gets back up, his hands turning nervous. "Yes, you did." He pulls out two glasses. "Would you like a drink?"

I shake my head. "No, that's all right."

He pours himself brandy with no ice and drinks it down quick.

"You said you'd tell me why the police shouldn't be involved when I got up here." I motion to the couch. "Well, I'm here."

He nods and pours himself another drink. Down it goes. Quick. He holds himself up for a second.

"You don't do this often, do you, Mr. Babbage?"

"Drew," he says, his eyes shut tight. Then, he opens them and looks at me. "Please, call me Drew."

I shake my head. “Mr. Babbage, if you don’t want to tell me, I’ll just be on my...”

“All right,” he says. “I’m just not used to... well, I mean. Hm. Perhaps I should just tell you. Come clean, straight out and tell you.”

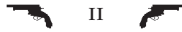
“That’d be a good start.”

He nods, puts the glass down and sits in the chair opposite the couch. “All right, Mr. Carter. Here it is. My father is missing.”

“We’ve gotten this far before, Mr. Babbage. What else can you tell me?”

He pauses, shuts his eyes, then opens them again and tells me.

“Mr. Carter... I think something ate him.”



This is my impression of Drew Babbage so far.

First, he looks like a good kid. Smart, funny and pretty clever. Don’t ever forget: being smart ain’t the same as being clever. Babbage has both.

Second, he’s scared. He doesn’t drink, but he’s putting down brandy like there’s cops at his door and he hasn’t got a toilet to flush it down. He doesn’t know what to do, so he does what he thinks is the correct thing to do. He’s drinking. We’ve got to stop that right quick.

Third, he’s the son of one of the most powerful men in the city: Milford Babbage. If you read it, it came from one of his newspapers. If he doesn’t own a paper, wait a second and he will.

I’m telling Babbage this as I’m taking the third glass out of his hand. “Before you graduate to whiskey,” I tell him.

“You’re very considerate for a detective, Mr. Carter,” he says.

“And you’re going to be very sick in an hour or so. I need you to tell me everything I need to know so we can get your father back.”

He nods. “All right. But remember this.” He puts up his finger to emphasize. He really is his father’s son. “What I’m about to tell you is... well, very very dangerous. If anybody found out I told you this, we’d both be very very dead men.”

“Like I said on the phone, confidential is my middle name.”

He squeezes his lips together. "All right. Let's go for a walk. I'll show you where my father went."

We leave the library and head down the stairs. I help him with the tricky steps. That pretty little thing is at the bottom, cigarette in hand, so eager to not help.

"My goodness, Drew," she says, "just look at you. Who'd have thought there was a Doyle under all that charm?"

"Shut up, Monica," he says.

She puts her lips together, faux pouts and all. "Shame on you, brother dear. Is that any way to talk to your wife?"

That stops me. I look at Babbage. The one I'm carrying.

"It's a long story," he says.

"Actually, it makes perfect sense." She takes another drag on her cigarette, her eyes never leaving mine. "Drew there was adopted when he was fifteen. It was love at first sight. Of course, I had to go through two husbands before I figured it out."

Right now, the only thought that's going through my head is that I should get out of this house right the hell now. She keeps talking.

"So, when I was all lonely and in mourning, Drew there comforted me the best way he could. And before we knew it, we were husband and wife, weren't we brother, dear?"

He nods. "Yes, we were. Before I even knew what was happening." He looks at me. "Can we go downstairs, Mr. Carter? I need to show you a few things before you get started."

Now, Carter. Get out now.

No. This is important. A Babbage contract is hefty. Could get me a lot of places. I look at both of them. I can handle him. Pretty sure I can handle her.

Take a deep breath. All right.

"All right," I say. "Let's go look. Then I'll tell you if I'm helping you."

We walk by her. She puts out her cigarette and reaches for another one. "I'll be up here. With a prize for the first one who gets back!"



The door shuts behind us and we're in the cellar. He sits down on the stairs and points over to the corner. "It's over there, Mr. Carter. You'll want to take a light with you."

I grab a lantern and move across the dirt floor.

"I apologize for the mess. We haven't had time to put in real floors."

I ignore him and look where he pointed. There's another door. This one makes my hand shake, just a little. It's made of the same wood as the library doors upstairs. Iron bindings. Seven locks. Each lock has a rune in the Old Tongue. The wood is carved with sigils I've never seen before. Wait a second, I do recognize one...

I can feel my skin go pale. I turn slowly and look at Babbage.

"Mordiggian?" I ask.

He nods without saying a word.

"The Charnel God?"

He nods again.

I take a step away from the door. I keep my back away from Babbage, keep him in plain sight. I realize just now that I didn't bring the gun with me. Didn't think I'd need it up here in the hills. Shows what I knew. Shows what I know.

"Your father worships the Charnel God?" I ask.

"Him and everybody else there."

"Where?"

"The Society. Daniel Dean Society. Most of them just don't know it."

This is going too fast for me. An important question now. "How involved are you?"

He smiles. That's when I notice what I should have noticed. The one thing keeping me from completely trusting Drew Babbage.

His teeth.

"Since my twenty-first birthday."

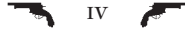
Sharp little teeth. Black spots on his gums. He's only been in the club for a few years.

Get out, Carter. Right now. Right the hell now.

But a contract with the Babbages. An invite into the Daniel Dean Society...

Dammit.

I shake my head. "Tell me more."



The next night, we're pulling up to a tall, fat building in the middle of the city. I step out of the Babbage limousine with a suit only new money could buy. "We have to make sure you look the part," he tells me. He's sober now. I have to make sure he stays that way.

The suit is powder blue and the shoes are black. The belt costs more than the best clothes I have in my closet. The handkerchief in my lapel could buy me seven steak dinners at Frisco's. Don't even ask me about the pins at my wrists.

The doormen all say my client's name and he tells them I'm a guest. They ask me to sign in. I look at the register for the other names here tonight and I almost drop the pen. At least I know what I'm getting into here. No surprises tonight.

Yeah. Right. Keep thinking that way, Carter. You'll get yourself killed. I've got the gun with me this time, at least.

We step inside. Music and booze everywhere you look. The place has more smoke than oxygen, and not all of it from cigarettes.

Babbage brings me into the crowd. I shake hands with people who's faces I see in the newspaper every day. They stand on phony magic circles—I mean *magick* circles—and talk about foreign affairs. The circles are part of the floor, put there by masons, no doubt. What's probably happened here is the construction boys got the design from some higher-up in the club without even single word of explanation. The cement jacks put the markings down in the tiled floors without knowing what they were doing. That means the circles have no power. Fucking amateurs. You screw around like this and people you don't even know get hurt. Fucking amateurs.

The band blows a swinging tune and gowns and tuxedos all move in three-quarter time. Some better than others, a few better than the rest.

Me and Babbage get seated at his table and he smiles. He looks at me. "What do you think?"

“Cute,” I tell him. Our waiter asks us if we’d like any drinks. I take a club soda with lemon. After a stern look from me, Babbage does the same. Then he waits asks us if we’d like any pills. One stern look from me and he doesn’t ask us again.

“It’s a magical place,” he tells me, sipping his water.

I shrug. “There’s a whole lot of hocus pocus going on,” I tell him, pointing at the crap they’ve filigreed into the floor.

He laughs. “That’s for the celebrities. Dabbling with the dark side and all that.” He lights a cigarette. “They get to pretend they’re breaking the law and we get to rub elbows. No harm, no crime, right?”

I take a sip of my soda. “Depends on who you ask,” I tell him. “And which laws you prescribe to. Where’s the *real* club?”

He finishes his drink. “After dinner. Then, we’ll go to the Inner Sanctum.”

I don’t like using random capitals, but the way he said it pretty much demands them. Of course, with this kind of crowd, *everything* gets capital letters.

The waiter’s back, asking for our order. I get a steak, medium-well. “And it is *beef*, right?” I ask the waiter. He nods and assures me it is. Can’t be too careful in a place like this. Babbage starts ordering in another language so I start looking out on the dance floor. Lots of faces with very powerful names out there.

“What are you thinking over there, Carter?”

“That I’m surrounded with people who shouldn’t know what I do for a living.”

Another cigarette. “Why’s that?” he asks me.

“Because they don’t want to know. They’re playing with dolls. Pretending to be what they’re not. Pretending they’re putting their lives in danger.”

He sits back in the cushion and blows a halo in the air. “That’s the idle rich, my friend.”

“They don’t look so idle to me.”

The food arrives soon enough and I put down the steak in an impolite amount of time.

“You liked it, then?” he asks.

“Damn best steak I ever had,” I tell him.

“I can tell.”

“When do we get to go upstairs?”

He finishes off what’s on his plate. He eats it with a little fork, leaving the shells on a smaller plate.

“What is that?” I ask him.

“Escargo,” he tells me. “Snails.”

I shake my head, wipe off my upper lip. “You’re eating snails?”

“Yeah. They’re delicious.” He winks at me, eats the last one. “A little garlic, a little butter....”

“One thing I learned from the East Side, Babbage. You put enough butter and garlic on *anything* it tastes good. You know why? Because it tastes like garlic and butter. Even if it did crawl out from under a rock.”

He laughs, stands up. “It’s time. Let’s go.”

“Aren’t you going to pay?”

“Not us, pal. Not us.”

Down around the dance floor, passed a dozen people who call Babbage by his first name. He shakes a few hands, but doesn’t introduce me. A few photographers catch us. I can’t help but wonder what the society page will say about us.

We come to a small room with a guard. He shuts the door behind us. Babbage walks to the other side of the room and pulls a lever. The wall slides aside and there’s more tuxedos and more smoke. No cigarettes at all, this time.

“Young Babbage!” says a man with a great chest and a greater beard. “How are you, lad? And where the hell is your father?”

Babbage doesn’t even blink. “Still overseas. Still dealing with the war.”

“Can’t say I approve,” the big man says. “Should have sent a whole squad of reporters over there. It doesn’t make a damned bit of difference if the front lines are moving, an editor belongs behind a desk, not on a battlefield.”

“You know Milford Babbage, sir. Just as well as myself, I think.”

“Well said, well said.” The big man turns to me. “And who is this you’ve got with you?”

I straighten my back, click my heels and extend my hand. “Jefferson Carter, sir. Pleased to meet you.”

"A well mannered lad, I must say," the big man says. "Do I detect a bit of soldiery in your past, son?"

"You never unlearn what the army teaches you," I tell him.

"Well said, well said. Serve overseas did you?"

"Three years, sir. Field chaplain." The big man looks sideways at Babbage. "No worries, sir," I tell him. "There may be no atheists in the foxhole, but there's plenty in the medical ward."

Still a little guarded, he smiles a bit. "Gave up the cloth, did you?"

"More like it gave up me."

His smile broadens and he pats my back. "Well said, lad. I think I like you. I'm sure you'll feel right at home here. Plenty of heretics to keep you company."

The big man moves away. A moment later, I realize something.

"He didn't tell me his name," I say.

"I forgot to tell you. You never address anybody of higher station by name here."

I look at him. "Funny little thing," I tell him. "What do I call them?"

"Sir," he says, a smile on his face. "Come on, I'll introduce you around."



The first man I meet is thin and small. His hand slips into mine as we shake, his narrow eyes jut out from a slender brow, his black hair thin and stuck to his head.

The second man is so big, his shoulders are in two different zip codes. His black cigar puffs out black smoke and his voice bellows across the room. I'm sure china cups shudder when he laughs.

The third man's grip is like a vise. His square jaw and short pert nose frame his angular face. His skin is clear and clean, his head completely bald, his eyes gray and without emotion.

They don't need to tell me their names, but I know who they are.

Oil. Rail. Steel.

"Where's your father?" Oil asks, his voice like a snake's hiss.

Babbage spins the overseas yarn again. New details pepper the plot.

"That don't swim and you know it," Rail bellows after a long puff on his black cigar. The imported cigar. The illegal cigar.

Steel doesn't say anything. He just watches. So I watch him.

"Honestly, I don't know where he is right now," Babbage tells them. "It's the reason I brought Mr. Carter here."

Now they all look at me. And now I wish Babbage didn't say that.

"He's a private detective," he says. "I hired him to find my father."

Oil slides his hands together. Rail puffs on his cigar. And Steel, good ol' reliable Steel, just watches quietly.

"We should discuss this privately," Rail says, breaking the silence. Everybody nods and I'm invited to a quiet little room with big chairs, books, and small tables big enough for brandy glasses.

"Would you like a cigar, Mr. Carter?" Rail offers me one from his pocket.

"Thank you, but I'm on the clock."

He laughs, that chest of his heaving. "I don't believe you know what you're turning down, son."

I shake my head. "Yes, sir. I know *exactly* what I'm turning down. I know where you got those cigars, and that's why I'm telling you I really shouldn't have one. I'm on Mr. Babbage's time, not my own."

Rail nods and puts his stogie away. "I like a man of character, Mr. Carter," he tells me. "It means you can be trusted."

The door closes behind us. It closes like a tomb.



Rail's cigar is getting to me. The shadows aren't dancing yet, but I can see they're warming up.

"Tell us what you know already," Oil says.

"Mordiggian," I say. They all look at Babbage. "He didn't tell me anything I couldn't figure out myself."

Oil slithers forward in his chair. "Then you know what happened to poor Master Babbage's father?"

I shake my head. Not too fast, though. That damned cigar. “No. I’m not sure. I’ll need more from the lot of you.”

“And what makes you think we’re going to tell you anything, Mr. Carter?”

I look at Rail. “Because you’re all in this together. Partners. You need four. That’s the circle. Five is better and three will do, but four has power. With four corners, the power you have is... well, look who I’m talking to.”

Steel looks at me with his gray eyes and says, “You are more than you first appear, Mr. Carter. You may actually have a brain under that borrowed suit.”

“Half a brain,” I tell them. And after tonight, after that cigar, I’m not sure I’ll have that. “But that’s typical. You need four. If one of the corners is missing, your power ebbs. You need Babbage the Elder back. Otherwise, other powers in the city grow.”

Oil stands up and pours himself a brandy. Rail offers him one of the cigars. That’s all I need. He lights it up and the room’s atmosphere shifts from tolerable to dangerous. To keep my mind sharp, I keep asking questions.

“What happened to Elder Babbage?”

The question hangs in the air with the smoke until Young Master Babbage answers.

“He went underground.”

“Why’d he do that?” I ask.

Oil answers. “Because he needed to.” I lean forward and he keeps talking.

“We who serve the Charnel God are blessed by his greatness, Mr. Carter. I cannot speak for the others, but since I gave myself to his grace, I’ve felt stronger than I ever did.”

The others nod and smoke. Oil keeps going.

“But there is a price. One I’m sure you understand and can name.”

That’s my cue. I don’t miss it. “Flesh,” I tell them.

“Specifically?”

I’m silent, but Rail saves my bacon. “I think we all understand each other here.”

Oil’s disappointed. He wanted to hear me say it. Too bad for him. He goes on.

“There are tunnels, Mr. Carter. All throughout the city. Tunnels dug by those

who serve the Charnel God. And there are times when we who serve him must go below the earth to be... close to him.”

I interrupt. “And that’s where you think Babbage is?”

They all nod, showing me I’m on the right track.

I turn to Drew. “Your father went native and hasn’t come back yet?”

He shifts in his seat. “Yeah. I think its something like that.”

I sit up in the chair. “All right. Let me see if I’ve got this straight. The four of you worship Mordiggian. Every once in a while, you get... ghoully.”

They’re offended. Too bad. I should have walked out of the Babbage house when I had the chance.

“And you need to go underground. I presume you steal corpses out of the cemetery and munch of them to keep your girlish figures?”

Rail stands up so quick, his chair hits the wall. “What is this?”

Steel stands as well, his hand on Rail’s shoulder. “Sit down,” he whispers. Rail either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. Then, Steel’s grip tightens, Rail’s face squints with pain and Steel says it again.

“Sit. Down.”

Rail follows instructions. Steel turns to me. “Mr. Carter, neither I nor my colleagues appreciate your levity. I assure you, this is a matter of utmost urgency and importance.”

I smile. “I know. That’s why I can be like this. You need me. Three of the biggest, baddest boys on the block need me.” And that’s when I whip out the contract. “And if you want your fourth corner back, you’re gonna have to pay for it.”



Don’t be fooled. I’m scared out of my head. But I can’t let these boys see it. Not even for a second. I can’t even let them smell it. And you have to trust me on this one, they *can* smell it. The bravado helps. Mixes them up, confuses them a bit. They’re not sure if I’m scared or half-crazy. And as long as they’re confused, they won’t eat me. Kind of like the tiger who won’t eat the sick antelope. I’m dealing with men who eat corpses. And if I’m not careful, I’ll be the desert.

I tell Babbage I've got research to do. "I'll need all of tomorrow," I tell him, as his limo drops me off at my doorstep. He's still inside, looking as worried as ever.

"Not too much, I hope."

"If you want to go down there all by yourself and look for him, feel free. I don't go anywhere without knowing where I'm going."

"There aren't any maps, Carter. Nothing like that."

I shake my head. "I'm not looking for maps. At least, not the kind you're thinking of. I'll call you when I'm ready."

He doesn't like that, but he swallows it. "All right," he says. "I won't call you until you call me."

"I won't be long. Don't worry. We'll get your father back. One way or another."

I shut the door and walk back to the apartment. I unlock the heavy front door and start up the seven flights of stairs, right passed the elevator that hasn't worked for two years. It's a jaunt, especially with a stomach full of steak and wine. Very good wine.

When I get to the door, I know there's someone inside. I've even got a clue who it might be. The runegun is inside. Hidden. I open the door slowly and look who's sitting behind my desk. My suspicions are confirmed.

"Ready for that quiz?" she asks me, the end of her cigarette casting shadows across her face.

"I'm afraid I already know all the answers."

"I'll change the questions."

"No cheat sheets?"

She stands up, putting the smoke out on the complimentary ashtray sitting on my desk. "Don't you smoke, Mr. Carter?"

"Nope."

"I thought men like you had all sorts of bad habits."

"I do. None of them involve cigarettes."

She turns, the moonlight through the window showing me what she has on under that thin dress. "Well then. Perhaps you can tell me what they *do* involve."

I walk in the room, open the door a little wider. "They also don't involve married women."

She sits on the edge of my desk, opening a little wider. "Marriage is a contract, Mr. Carter. A piece of paper."

"And that, Mrs. Babbage, is the worst thing you could have said." I walk over to my desk. "Did you drive yourself over?"

"I took a cab," she says, her voice cold.

I pick up the phone. "Then I'll call you another one."

She puts her hand on the cradle. "Mr. Carter," she starts. I don't let her finish.

"I'm not in the mood, Mrs. Babbage."

"What if I told you I don't want my father found?"

"I'd say you should have gotten to me before your husband did."

"He's not my husband. Not in any real way."

I give her a hard look. "Is there a paper in city hall saying you two are man and wife?" She nods at me. "Then you are man and wife. Now, if you'll let me..."

"He beat me, Mr. Carter."

I stop. Take a look. A close look.

"Beat me. Used me. Did things to me I know I don't need to explain. Not to a man like you."

"We talking about your husband or your father?"

"Drew would never hurt me. He loves me."

The fact we're talking about her brother makes me... well, I've been in more uncomfortable situations. Just give me a minute and I'll remember one. Maybe.

"Drew loves me, Mr. Carter. He really does. Not in the way you're thinking. He loves me in a way I don't deserve."

"Is that why you come over here? Trying to seduce me on my desk? To get the kind of love you deserve?"

"No, Mr. Carter. I'm telling you this because Drew loves our father, but he doesn't know what he's getting involved with."

"You mean the Society?"

She steps away from the desk. “Of course that’s what I mean.” She’s putting it on good if this is a put on. The Big Alabama would be proud.

She keeps it up. “He’s in this thing so deep, he can’t even see straight.” Turns back to face me. “If my father is gone, maybe I can pull him back from it. Take him away from all of this.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Babbage. No, wait a second. I’m not sorry. I just don’t buy it. First you play dirty-mouth tramp. Now you’re the good wife. You don’t really expect me to...”

She reaches forward and kisses me, her arms wrapped around me before I can do anything. Her hands find her way where they need to be. I put mine back behind me, on the edge of the desk, so we don’t fall to the floor.

When she’s done, I’ve still got my hands on the edge of the desk. She doesn’t like that.

“You a faggot, Carter?” she asks, her voice cold enough to freeze fire.

“My lady doesn’t think so.”

She goes to the other side of my desk and picks up her jacket and her purse. Then, she walks out of my office on high heels. Good. She tastes like raw steak gone bad.



When she’s gone, I get to work. I shower and get dressed, take a drive down to the public library. The security guard’s name is Dill Barber, an old friend of my uncle’s, and he lets me wander through the shelves late at night. He uses the library’s record collection and plays tunes all night.

“We’re in the Country section,” he tells me.

“Great,” I tell him. “Just what I needed. Wailin’ fiddles go good with lizard men.”

Dill Barber looks at me funny. “What did you say? You say ‘lizard men?’”

I’ve got a couple books under my arms and I walk by him. He’s still holding the platter in his hands. “Yeah. Lizard men.” He’s still looking funny, so I take the record out of his hands, put it on the table, set the needle and explain.

“Way back when, when the city wasn’t even here, there was something else,” I tell him. “Somebody else.”

“Them natives,” he says. I nod and continue.

“The natives, they believed lizard men, or probably snake men is a better translation, these snake men, they lived underground, moving between this world and the dream world.”

“You mean the other side?”

“Yeah, kinda. The other side of the world, the ‘other side.’ That whole thing. Well, when the city was built, it was built on one of their holy places. One of those places where the snake men came and gave them news about the other world.”

“You kiddin’ me?” Dill asks.

“That’s the story,” I tell him.

“You believe it?”

I shrug over at the record player. “More than I believe this crap is music.”

Dill smiles at me, playing along. “Now, listen here, Carter. That crap is what your daddy used to play when he was on tour with me and your uncle, so you’d better watch what you say.”

You can hear us laughing all the way from Aardvark to Jurassic. Dill sings along with the record and I keep reading.



The next day, Drew and me stand where his father must have stood just before he went under. I’ve got the gun with me as well as road flares, gaslights and a lot of rope. And I’ve also got a mask, held over from when I was overseas. No telling what these tunnels will smell like. One more thing, too, but I’ll save that for later.

“So, who’s Daniel Dean?” I ask Drew as he undoes the locks and wards protecting the door.

“The founder,” he tells me. “The guy who started the whole thing.”

I get the last of my stuff ready as he finishes on the last lock. It pops and the smell comes out from under the door. I’m glad I brought the mask. Just before I put it on, he turns to me.

"I've got to warn you," he tells me. "Being under here... it may affect me."

"I kind of figured." The smell gets worse. He doesn't seem to notice. "What's that mean exactly?"

"It means... we don't have a lot of time to do this. The longer I stay down here, the harder it gets to keep my human mind."

At least he isn't all poetic about it. Like three other guys I know.

"You mean you'll..."

"Get all ghoully," he says, smiling. "I don't know how long that will be. I'll try to let you know if I feel funny."

He's about to open the door when I put my hand on his shoulder and stop him.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask him.

"Because my father's down there."

"No, not *this*. I mean, *this*." He keeps his confused look. "The ghoul thing, I mean."

"Oh," he says.

"You don't seem the type," I tell him. "And trust me, I know the type."

He nods. "It's what the family does," he tells me. "I grew up knowing this is what I'd do. I mean, don't you ever think how weird your life must seem to other people?"

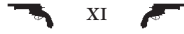
I smile. This kid is too nice for the shit he's got himself into. I tell him that straight to his face.

"You know," he says. "If this was one of those crime novels I read in the airport, saying something like that means I'm dead by the end of the story."

I shake my head. "I don't think so. I've got a plan."

He sighs. "Well, only one way to test a plan."

He opens the door and I put on the mask. Just then, it hits me: how did he sigh with all that stink in the air?



You'd never know. Never know if someone stole the corpse of someone you loved. How often do you visit? Once a month? Once a year? And Mordiggian's boys like corpses that've been in the ground a long, long time. The moldier the better. And if they dug it out from above ground, at least there'd be the groundskeeper to bribe. But if they stole it from *underneath*...

Like I said, you'd never know.

And I never knew. Until I came down here.

The tunnels are wide enough to stand in with your arms spread out. There are no lights anywhere, only the light from my gas lamp, so the walls throw shadows everywhere you look. A guy could see a lot of things down here. I'm hoping to see less than that.

The floors are anything but flat and there's rubble here and there. I remember making snow tunnels in the winter, crawling through them with little black-haired Tom Crowe, and I wonder where he is right now. My best friend in the whole wide world was Tom. Taught me how to whistle. We used to sing everywhere we went. And when we moved, I never kept up with him. Lost him. My best friend in the whole wide world. I wonder...

"Here we are," he says, breaking in on my little flashback. I look up from his feet and I get to see everything I hoped I wouldn't.

Corpses everywhere. Everywhere you look. Bodies piled up like in those photos you see from the war, from the camps. Piles of them, neatly arranged. I have to keep my eyes down low, so all I see is my feet. Piled neatly, piled by date. Or, as Drew puts it, "arranged by fragrance."

"You find yourself one from the right cavern and put yourself in a private place," he says. "Then, you..."

"I get the picture. Where would your father go?"

"Down deeper. The lower chambers. This way."

In a city this size, there's dozens of deaths a day. Seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. You can do the math.

"But they do go bad," he tells me. "A century corpse is good and ripe, but anything over that, you're taking your chances." He keeps on talking. "Of course, I don't get any of those. Reserved for the four exclusively."

I just nod and follow him, watching his feet. I remember myself in his house, telling myself I should get the hell out. That little voice in the back of my head. That little voice I never listen to and curse myself later because I didn't listen.

We're getting lower now. The upper levels are more refined. As we go lower, we start to see the walls get rough. From tools to talons.

"They want to take you on as the fifth," I say through the mask, only half-guessing.

"That's what they tell me."

We walk a little further. I keep the light straight ahead of us. "Could anything else be down here?" I ask.

"Not that we know of. At least, *I've* never seen anything down here."

I look at the kid. "Exactly how old are you, Drew?"

He stops and turns. "Seventy-two," he tells me. Then he grins sideways. "No. I'm twenty-five. Been doing this since I was eighteen."

"You sure?"

He doesn't miss a beat. "I'm sure."

I'm not so sure. I don't like being lied to. Only one thing I like less: not knowing if I'm being lied to.

I have to crouch to move now. They twist here and there. Tighter fit. The walls scrape my shoulders every now and again. How they're supported, I can't tell. But everywhere we go, there's bones. You can't take a step without stepping around or over some ivory remainder.

That's cute, Carter. "Ivory remainder." Nice way of dodging it. Like you're dodging them right now, stepping over them, trying so hard not to hear the sound if you step on one. That sound, like a cackle. Let's drop the poetry. It's not a something, it's a someone. Someone who got put in the ground in a box tight enough to keep the worms out. Yeah, they didn't count on worms this big, did they? And here you are, down here, following one of them around.

He's a nice kid.

Sure he is.

He just doesn't know what he's doing.

Sure he does.

“Shut up!”

Babbage turns around to look at me. “I didn’t say anything,” he tells me.

“Never mind. I’m just... just never mind.”

He turns, then turns back around. “You’ll let me know if *you* go ghouly, okay?”

I nod. “Okay. Just keep going. I’m all right.”

Now I’m lying to him.

Great, Carter. Just great.

I try to focus on the details. Get that damn voice out of my head.

The walls have markings, some kind of system I don’t understand. I try not to get distracted, to keep my eyes sharp, even if they have to peer through thick plastic. The mask helps, but not much. I can still smell the caves through the charcoal filter. My tongue is thick from it. My eyes watering. I want to wipe them clean, but I’m afraid to take off the mask. I might pass out. I don’t know what could happen to me down here, unconscious with Drew. Better than with his sister, I think. But not by much.

Finding Daddy’s shirt almost makes me run back to the door. If I could find it. Babbage almost jumps out of his boots. He’s got it in his hands, his fingers tight around it. He sniffs the collar, under the arms. When he looks at me, his eyes shine in the light like a cat’s eyes. His teeth gleam against thick spotted gums.

“Look!” he says. “Look!”

“That’s not good, Babbage.”

His smile doesn’t fade for a second. He throws off his jacket. His shoulders hunch and he tears open his shirt. “Clothes? You care about clothes?” It’s off those shoulders. I didn’t know they were so wide. Muscles I didn’t know a man had on those shoulders.

He’s naked from the waist up now. Looking at me. “Clothes mean nothing!” he says. “Just look at me! Look at what clothes hide! That’s what they do! They...”

The shine in his eyes dim just a little and he sees me again.

“Oh,” he says. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I pick his shirt back up. He picks up his jacket. Zips it up his chest.

"This way," he tells me, turning away. I see his hands shaking. I don't know if that's from excitement or.... Better find the old man quick.

There's a slope, ducking down under a low-hanging rock. It looks slick, like black mud. "I don't know if I could climb back up," I tell him.

"He's this way."

I don't think he heard me. I try again. He just keeps moving. Time to get out the rope.

I pull a spike out of my backpack and put it through the wall with a small hammer. Then, I loop the rope through the eye of the spike and make a bosun's knot. Moving down the slope, my feet slip at least twice. I can't see or hear anything, just dark, damp and sweaty. Like we're in the belly of some...

I stop right there, in the darkness. My hands fast on the rope, the light strapped across my back. I let one hand loose to touch the slope. Slick, wet. And warm.

I should have left him drunk with his step-sister. I should have gotten the hell out when I had the chance. Fuck.

Now I don't know if I should go up or down. I'm too distracted. I'm just now noticing how damn hot it is down here. I hear Drew's voice down below me, urging me to come down. I can't figure out how *he* got down there without rope.

"What is it?" I shout down.

"I've found him!" he shouts back.

Do I trust him? It doesn't matter. I've still got my back-up plan. I slide down the rope, trying to remember which way we walked to get here. I'm no good with directions. Can't keep them in my head. I should have taken notes. Damn. Damn, damn, damn.

At the bottom, I see Drew kneeling on the floor. He's sobbing. He's also holding something that looks like human remains. I say 'looks like' because I've never seen anything like it before in my life. No, that's not true. I had a lizard once, when I was younger. Just a kid. Ate a mouse, then threw it back up again an hour later or so.

Daddy Babbage looks like that mouse.

Drew's crying, holding the corpse close to him. That's bad. Blood on clothes. Fresh blood. Animals can smell blood and track it.

"Drew, take off your jacket," I tell him. "We've got to go."

“We’re not leaving him here.”

“You’re damn right we’re leaving him here. And we’re doing it *right now*.”

He’s up and at my throat in a heartbeat, his eyes shining that cat shine they did before. “We. Are. Not. Leaving. Him!”

I shout right back in his face. “Yes! We! Are!”

His teeth glisten. His eyes shine. His skin is ashen and thin. I can see bone. I can see muscle.

And he can feel the rune gun against his chest.

“Drew, its time to calm down and go now.”

He’s breathing heavy. No steam from his lips. It’s hot down here and I don’t even want to know why.

“We’re taking my father with us. Dead or alive, he’s coming back.”

“Why Drew? There’s no point. No point at....”

Something shudders over Drew’s shoulder. Right where I’m looking. I’m frozen. I couldn’t even move if I could think straight, and right now, I’m nowhere near thinking straight.

Eight legs. A million eyes. Thin layer of thick hairs.

“D—D—“

Watching its round, bloated body, that’s about all I can get out.

“We’re taking my father, Carter. I’ll make a litter out of your skin if I have to.”

It’s moving. Soft, silent and slow. Mandibles. Moving back and forth.

I look back at Drew so I’m not looking at the thing. I can’t speak. He isn’t listening. I can’t move my legs, I can’t move my arms. He’s got me pinned against the wall with all that strength Mordiggan’s given him. Stack that with the terror in my blood and I’m not going anywhere.

But it is. Right behind him. Right in front of me.

“Do you understand, Carter?”

A heartbeat and it strikes.

“*Do you?!*”

I do. I understand completely. So I pull the trigger. A lot.

Every round goes through him, his thin body not much of a hindrance to something like the rune gun. The rounds go through his belly and into the thing behind us. It squeals and black blood blows over Drew's head onto my face. Onto the mask. Now, I can't move and I can't see. Fuck.

I keep squeezing the trigger. Drew lets go of me, falls to the side. I'm not sure which one. Now, there's *nothing* between me and it.

I keep squeezing. I fall to the floor, holding the gun where I think it might be. I don't hear anything anymore, except Drew's screaming. I try wiping away the black crap on my mask, but it's no good. I've got to take the thing off.

I throw the mask to the floor and look, my breath set firmly in my lungs. The thing is gone, pieces of it left on the ground at the foot of the slope. Black blood everywhere. Drew sits on the other side of me, holding his gut. His blood is deep purple, almost black. He coughs it between his lips, his white teeth stained by it.

He tries talking. I don't get any of it. I move closer, trying to see what I've done.

"Don't," he says. He looks down. So many holes, I can't count them. All I can see is blood, oozing from his skin.

I want to talk to him, but that means opening my mouth and breathing. The smell's already snuck into my nose. I can't keep it out forever. I take a handkerchief from my backpack and wrap it around my face. Then, I breathe through my mouth. You'd think that would help. You'd think...

"We've. Got to. Get out," I tell him, trying to breathe as little as possible. "I don't know. Carry you. Up slope."

He shakes his head. "You can't," he says. "Can't move."

"I don't. Know. Way out."

He nods. "I know." More blood. "Too bad." He motions behind me. "Put me with dad."

He screams while I move him, but only for a short while. Then, he passes out. I pull some things out of my bag and with some words from the Old Tongue (spoken very quickly), I stop the bleeding. For now. He's very white. And cold. I can't carry him out.

I need to go back and get help.

It doesn't take me very long to figure out that's not a good idea. Who will help me? His sister? The three?

No, it's up to me to get him out of here. I don't have much time. The bleeding will start again if I jostle him too much. I put him over my shoulder like they taught me in the army. Then, I walk over to the rope. I look up.

Not a chance.

Set him down. Tie the rope around his shoulders. Use the rope to climb up. Then, when I'm at the top, start pulling. I don't know how long this takes, but it's too long.

I start moving with Drew, carrying him again. I don't recognize any of the corridors, any of the turns or chambers. I'm lost. And Drew's bleeding is going to start again any minute. I set him down and pull out my old watch. We've been down here for three hours. We may be down here for a lot longer.

I remember to re-load the gun. Open the bag, pull out the box of bullets...

Pull out the box of bullets...

Other things are missing from my bag, too. They must have dropped in the pit. I've got only enough oil for another half hour. One flare. Fuck.

Walking. I hear walking. Bare feet on stone walking.

I stand up. Drew's on the ground. The walking stops just when I could have gotten a good look. I hear a sound that isn't human, see a form that could be.

Manflesh, it says to me. *Sweetlysick is the marrowbones.*

The gun is in front of me. "Who are you?"

Suck the meat tween the teeth. Chewchewchew.

It's bigger than a man. Shoulders like... no, bigger than Mr. Rail. Much bigger. I think I hear fingernails on the wall.

Fingers and toes. Fingers and toes. Eyeballs pop when the teeth find 'm. Roll 'm on the tongue.

I see it now. Into the halo of my gaslight. The servants of Mordiggan may live forever, but there's a price for everything. I'm looking at it right now.

Danny got dinner twice!

Danny?

Little thing thinks dreams hopes it hurts Danny but he knows better. Wise eyes. Old bad eyes I got in my head.

Everything I know and everything I've learned. What Drew told me about coming down here. Every trip a little longer than the last.

I hear Drew gibbering behind me. "Taste it all," he whispers. "Taste..."

The thing I think is Daniel Dean comes closer. I've got the gun in both hands. I give one up to reach in my pocket. What I pull out makes Danny Dean stop in its tracks.

I hold up the contract.

Whatsthis? Whatsthis?

Four signatures. Lots of power in names. More than people think.

Drew's behind me, screaming again. The thing in front of me backs off. I don't follow it. It doesn't go away, just keeps its distance.

"Show me out," I say to it.

Brainsjuicyfingersandfeet.

Got to do this right. One time. Take a deep breath. Say it quick.

"Show me out. I'm the protector of Andrew Babbage and I hold the names of the four servants of the Eater. Show me the way out."

I almost throw up. The stink is all over me, all inside. I could shower forever and it'd never come out. The thing that wants to eat us hovers in the corridor, half-hidden by shadows. It starts moving away, muttering. I turn to look at Babbage.

His gut is bleeding again. Less time than I thought. I pick him up, the rune gun back in my jacket. It won't do any more good here. With Babbage on one arm and the contract on another, I follow the thing, hoping it takes us where we need to go.

In five minutes' time, I see well-spaced corpses. Another minute goes by and I feel air moving against my hands and face. Then, I lose sight of the thing that led us here. I see a door. I back up to it, holding the paper up between us and the corridors. We hit the door. I put Babbage down and turn the...

It's locked.

From the other side.

Now, I hear laughing and the chattering of teeth.

Noscape. Noscape. Lost and stew. Brew up your brains for beer.

I bang on the door. I scream her name, hoping she can hear us from through the cellar floor.

Everything sleeps, it says.

I don't know the words to open the door. I should have paid attention when I watched Babbage do it. I was too busy making sure I had everything I needed. Dammit, where *is* she?

Babbage's eyes open. His brown eyes. He looks up at me, looks at the door. Hears the sound of whatever it is. He touches the door and whispers something too slight for me to catch.

The door pops open. We fall through. The door slams behind us, just in time to catch snarls and bangs and scratching and cursing on the other side.

His eyes are still open. He's bleeding all over the cellar floor.

"I told you," he says to me. "I die at the end of the story."

I shake my head and take my first full breath of fresh air. "Not dead yet," I tell him, gasping. "We still have a few pages to go."



I saw him in the hospital yesterday. Good spirits, smiling and asking for me to smuggle him cigarettes. "Monica won't do it," he said. "She likes watching me suffer."

I sit down next to him. The doctors were amazed. Couldn't explain how he was still alive with so little blood in his system. I didn't say anything. Not a word.

"You've got to quit," I tell him. "You don't have the heart for this. Trust me, I know what kind of person you have to be, and you ain't it."

He takes my hand. "I am my father's son," he says.

"You're adopted, Drew. And it doesn't matter. Guys like you, they just get..."

"Eaten?"

I don't know what to say to that, so I put the cigarettes under his pillow. "Good luck, Drew."

When I leave, I spot two guys in black, pretending to read newspapers. I don't know if they are here for me or Drew. Probably both. That whole two birds and one stone thing.

Well, today, I pick up the paper. His father's paper. I was wrong. No, not about him being too soft. I was right about that.

"Andrew Babbage disappears from hospital," the front page says. "Wife Monica Babbage to take over Babbage Publishing."

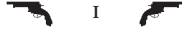
I read more. No mention of cause of death. No mention of the marriage. No mention of men in black suits. No mention of the Charnal God. But there she is, shaking hands with three very powerful men on the cover of her father's newspaper. Call them Steel, Rail and Oil.

I sit at my desk and read the paper. On my desk is a black stain I'll never be able to make clean. It happened some time last night, when I was asleep. That black stain on my desk where I threw Drew's contract when I shuffled in last night. The smell woke me. I was lucky the whole place didn't burn down in flames as black as ink. Black as those caves. As that thing's blood. Never did see no lizard men.

He wasn't his father's son. But she was her father's daughter. Like I said, I was wrong. Here's the end of the story, and Drew Babbage is dead.

CASE #5

BORROWED LOVE



She's a succubus with a heart of gold. No, really. It's around her neck right now, a little locket with a picture inside that looks like her, unless you look real close. She sits on my couch, far away from the bed. She knows better than to sit too close to the bed.

She got the locket because of a guy who used to be a big name in the tall buildings downtown. Something happened. His wife died when he should have. He came to me for help.



It's last week, and he's all red-eyed from tears and 3 AM coffee pots. His suit looks like it's been bundled in the backseat of his car for a week. Probably has, with him inside it.

"They want me dead, Mr. Carter."

I ask him if he knows why.

"If I knew that, I could *do* something about it, couldn't I?"

I ask him what he wants me to do about it. But he's too busy talking to himself to hear me.

"Besides, I don't really care why. Not any more...."

He stops there. He pulls something out of his pocket. A little gold locket. There's a picture inside. The woman looks familiar. "Who is this?" I ask.

"My wife," he tells me. "She was in the car."



Up until a week ago, Granger Lawhead was the head of a respectable firm here in the city. Up until a week ago. Now he lives in the backseat of his car, too afraid to go home, too afraid to check into a hotel, too afraid to run. So, he lives out of his car, using up the cash he had in his pocket and in the trunk.

Oh, didn't I tell you? This respectable company Mr. Lawhead works for moves cash. A lot of it. Cash for people who prefer government officials didn't know about. He's currently carrying cash that belongs to David Doyle's clan. Yeah, *that* David Doyle.

I made another mistake, by the way. He's not driving *his* car, he's driving his *wife's* car. *His* car needed an oil change. She told him she'd take care of it; he could use her car and she'd get the oil changed while he was at work. He went on his merry way and later that morning, when she turned the ignition, the bomb under the drive shaft lifted her and the car ten feet off the ground. She wasn't killed instantly. It took her a good two days to die. In the hospital. Alone. Because he was too afraid to show his face.

Don't get me wrong, Mr. Granger Lawhead loved his wife. But he had a choice to make, didn't he? Go to the hospital to see her and end up with a bullet in his head or find a way to hit the men who burned his wife to death, and hit them *hard*.

That's where I come in. It took him a whole week to make sure nobody was following him, to make sure nobody was watching my office, to make sure he'd get here in one piece. And now that he's here, he's not leaving until he signs a contract.

"Explain the contract," he says to me, wiping tears off his cheeks and lips.

"It's very simple, Mr. Lawhead." I push the contract forward. Looks like paper, but it's something else. "It gives me authority I wouldn't normally have." It's not written on anything you could identify just by looking at it. "Suffice to say, without it, our chances of finding the man who killed your wife drop dramatically."

He looks it over. "It doesn't say anything about cash."

"Payment is unique for each client, Mr. Lawhead. In your case..." I turn to the last page. "You can see right here what I'll require when my job is done."

He nods. "That doesn't seem like a lot," he tells me.

That's what everyone says. I don't tell him that.

He takes the pen on my desk and puts his name next to mine. "Is that it?"

"That's how it starts." I take the contract back, fold it up and put it in my inside jacket pocket. "Our next step is somewhat more complicated."



In between him trying to read between the lines on the contract, I remembered why the picture in his locket looked so familiar.

"Bring it with you," I tell him. He asks me why. "We'll need it."

I take the runegun as well. If this involves Doyle's boys, I want to be prepared. I fill my pocket with iron bullets and we go downstairs to his wife's car. He parked it right under my window. I've been watching it this whole time. I didn't see anybody fiddling with it, but you never know. I give it a once over, quietly whispering as I do.

He asks me what I'm doing. I don't answer. Don't break the concentration. When I'm done, I tell him, "Your wife's car is clean. You get what you need from it and I'll do the same."

He gets into the trunk and pulls out a few things. I get in the front seat and start looking. I find what I'm looking for: a long strand of black hair. I put it in an envelope and seal it. Then, we take a cab.

When we get where we're going I pay the cabby and we head up the stairs of an old brown stow. On the fifth floor, I tell Lawhead to stay back a few paces, right over there, where the shadows will hide him. Actually, I don't want him looking at who answers the door.

Of course, she knows it's me. She can smell me a mile away. She can't help it.

"Hello Carter," she tells me as she opens the door. Her red bangs fall just over her green eyes.

"Hello Sam."

If you ask her, it's not "Sam for Samantha." If it is short for something, she's never told me. It's just "Sam."

The fact she's wearing clothes doesn't help. I've seen what's under there. I don't even need to use my imagination, only my memory. Of course, with Sam, you can never really tell when one gives up to the other.

"You here on business or... well, I guess you could call it pleasure." She winks. "Technically."

I try to forget that, but not being able to lean back in your chair for a week is hard to forget. "Business," I tell her. "A wet job."

I can't believe I just said "wet job" in front of her.

She asks me if that means murder. I tell her it does.

"Then you'd better come in."

I shake my head. "I've got the client with me. It'd be best if he had a place to stay. Isn't very smart him showing his face on the street right now."

She raises an eyebrow at me. "I've got clients, too, Carter. I can't have a stranger here."

"He's got cash, Sam. He's willing to pay for a safe house. And let's face it, there's few places in the city safer than here."

She notices the compliment, but doesn't let it get in her way. "How much cash?"

"How much you want?"

She gives me the evil eye. Not the real one, otherwise, I'd be on the floor. We go through a bit more of this, but I'll cut to the chase. I show her the money, she lets him in the door. A while back, I made sure nobody could walk into Sam's place without an invite. That's how she keeps the Vincenzis outside.

I go back to Lawhead and talk to him. "You can stay here. She'll tell you all the rules."

He's confused. "You're not coming with?"

I shake my head. "No. I can't go in there. One customer at a time. That's one of the rules."

He tries to tell me he's not a customer. I cut him off.

"Only one *man* in there at a time. If she gets more than one man in there, it can cause a lot of confusion. For everyone involved."

He's still not getting it. Guess love really does blind a man to women like Sam.

"Look. Just go inside. Listen to what she says. We'll take care of your problem. I promise."

He nods. Still doesn't get it. He walks down the short corridor to the door and knocks. I turn my head when he does. I hear the door open. She doesn't say a word. He does all the talking.

"Mandy?"

The door closes behind him and I wait.



In college, I had a professor try to convince me that perception really made reality. "What you see is what you get," he told me. "Human beings perceive the world with faulty eyes. Everything they perceive is through one kind of lens or another."

Too bad the old prof never met Sam. With Sam, perception really *is* reality. What you see *really is* what you get. I can only imagine what's going on in that room right now. A grieving husband. I don't know if Sam's ever been with someone like Lawhead. A good man, from what I can tell. Sam's been with plenty of men who wanted her to be something. Don't know how many men she's been with who *needed* her to be someone. Maybe plenty. I try not to think about it.

I think about Lawhead's problem while I wait for her to come down. It's pretty straightforward, really: we need to know which of the Doyle boys had it out for him. Once we know that, things will get complicated. The DoYLES aren't a pack of loyal bootlickers like the Vincenzis, but their soldiers are tough. Real tough.

Sam and I end up at my place for a change. I'm braiding that strand I found in the car into her long, red hair. A single strand; that's tricky. Trying to not break the thing with my thick fingers.

Want to know something else that isn't easy? Running your hands through Sam's hair and keeping them from wandering. It's not like she can't tell. She can read me as easy as black words on white pages. Her shoulders curve down from her neck, and they're strong shoulders and strong arms and strong hands. Hands that know how to...

"Stop it, Carter."

I tell her I'm sorry. It's just so hard not to...

"I know. Is the braid done?"

I laugh. "I was done a couple minutes ago."

She gets up and walks across the room. She doesn't blame me. That would be as stupid as me blaming her. I'm a man and she's what she is. Made for each other. Literally. Almost like someone planned it that way.

"Finish the ritual, Carter."

I kneel down on the floor and draw the circle around her feet. Feet that lead up to ankles that lead up to legs that lead up to...

"I can *hear* you when you do that, you know."

On the radio, the singer tells me tura-lura-lural is an Irish lullaby. Slow, steady and strong the band plays in the background and he sings like his soul is on the line. Funny how the radio only plays that song when she's in the room.

When I finish the ritual and look up, she isn't Sam anymore. She's the woman in the picture. Her red hair and green eyes are gone, replaced by black hair and brown eyes and olive skin. I know she's still Sam, but something's missing. Something's different.

"I'm not yours anymore," she tells me.

"You can still...?"

She shakes her head. "No. That's the funny part." She pauses. "Okay, it's not funny. In fact, I don't like it at all."

She runs her hands down her arms, trying to rub away the goose bumps. It isn't cold. She shakes her head. "I can't read you at all, Carter."

That's a problem. A problem we'll just have to deal with later.



The cab drops her off a few blocks away from where I pay the guy and start walking behind her. Just far enough I'm not seen, and just close enough I can run and catch up if I need to. A week ago, Mandy Lawhead was killed by someone in the Doyle organization. Now, she's walking the street again, a street loaded with pubs and restaurants that serve corned beef and cabbage. The streets are tight and cramped and sweaty, even at this hour of night. Someone may see me. Maybe someone smart enough to put me together with a dead girl walking around. But that's all I want them to see right now. Her, walking around.

Around midnight is when she does her walk. At twelve fifteen, the street is filled with Doyle boys, all with their eyes open, all sweating like the streets. I get a look at them. I know who they are. By tomorrow, Mickey Maloney will be on the street asking questions. And that's where I want him.



I get a phone call from a lawyer and the next thing I know, I'm eating corned beef and cabbage. The lawyer says his client wants to talk to me. I tell him talking is free. The lawyer tells me cash money is involved. I tell him I don't work for cash money. A little more of this and I hear a voice in the background screaming for the phone.

"It's the banshee," the background voice tells me, but with that accent of his it sounds more like "bane shay." That's what Mickey's calling her when he asks if anyone else has seen her. Nobody sees *anything* in this city, let alone a "bane shay."

Mickey grabs the phone from the lawyer. "I need your help, Carter," Mickey says over the line. His voice sounds like he's ready to eat the phone. "I need you now."

"I don't do cash, Maloney. You know that."

"You got a piece of paper with a place for my name?"

"Depends on the..."

"You get over here in ten minutes, I don't care what it says. I'll put my name on it."

I told him I'd be right over.



The place is called Mickey's. That's because it belongs to Mickey Maloney. At least, his name is on the front. His daddy's name is on the papers.

"She's haunting me, Carter. I don't know what to do."

"You want me to find out why?"

"I want you to make her go away," he tells me, looking over my shoulder.

"You mean, you *don't* know why?"

He stops looking over my shoulder and starts looking at me.

“What do you mean by that?”

“What I said. You’ve got a ghost, and you don’t know why.”

“No, I don’t.”

I smile, take another bite. “You promise?”

He doesn’t like that. “You think I’m a fuckin’ idiot, Carter?”

“I know your blood, Maloney. You’re daddy’s a Doyle. Nothing your kin says means anything without a promise.” I take another swig of the mead. It puts a sweet in my mouth that tastes good with the corned beef. I usually don’t do the drinking thing, but I just can’t eat corned beef without it.

“Listen.” He’s leaning over the table now, putting his finger in my face. “I know what I am. You don’t need to tell me that. You know what I do. If this was something my pop could take care of, you think I’d be calling you?”

The band starts playing music behind me. I scoot my chair a little so I can watch. The band plays a little before the singer comes on stage, and when she does, the whole room stops breathing. Me included. Maloney’s talking, but I’m watching. She’s just standing there, the band getting ready to play. Just standing there, a little brunette with hair so black it makes a raven look like it’s been out in the sun for too long. Her eyes are dark and her features sharp. Her lips are small, making her smile look vicious.

And then, she opens her mouth and her voice...

“Carter? You listenin’ to me or the canary?”

I turn back to Maloney. Just barely. I got one ear for him and one for the brunette. “I’m listening. And you’re telling me you don’t know who she is?” Half of me distracted by the singer, the other half distracted by the song.

Maloney looks at me sideways. “Hey. Wait a second.” He starts getting that “I just figured something out” look on his face. “How do you know it’s a she?” he asks, his eyes getting a bit too sharp. “How’d you know *that*, Carter?”

I wink at him. “Because there isn’t any such thing as a *bane shee* with balls, Mr. Maloney. That’s why.” I scarf down some more corned beef. “The scorned woman. That’s the banshee. The woman who’s lover died, or who died in childbirth. A woman who walks the world, wanting to make him hurt, but she can’t, because she still loves him. That’s the banshee, Maloney. I thought your daddy would have taught you that.”

The look on his face tells me he bought it. Lucky me. I turn to face the stage again. The brunette flashes her dark eyes over this way, looking for Maloney. She finds me. She smiles. Mick doesn't notice.

The stare lingers for a second or two, then, it's over. I hate it when it's over. For two seconds, there's that mutual thing, when both people say, "Hey, what you're doing, it's okay." But it only lasts that long. Just that long.

Mickey slams the table. "Fuck, Carter! You taking the job or not?"

"All right," I tell him. "If you don't know who she is, I can start looking. But if you do..." I put my fork down and touch my napkin to my lips. "All I'm saying is, it would help out if I had a name."

He pushes his chair back, putting his hand over his heart. "I swear on my mother's urn, I don't know who she is," he tells me. His hand over his heart. One of those fingers was just in my face. And he swore on his mother's ashes. His mother wasn't a Doyle.

"Then how do you know she's a ghost?"

That stops him. "What did you say?"

I repeat the question. He just stares at me. I'm looking over my shoulder out the front window of his place. There's an alleyway that faces the front window. If it was dark enough, anybody looking down that alleyway wouldn't be able to see further than his face. I remember that for later.

I get up and drop some cash on the table. "There's a lot of rules in the world, Mr. Doyle. A fact I'm certain you're aware of." My turn to lean over the table. "One of those rules: I don't take cases from clients who lie to me."

I start to leave, looking over at the stage at the brunette who sent me a smile. A little while later, I'll pay someone to find out who she is.

She was looking for Mickey Doyle, and she found me.



IX

Her name is Molly. She kisses me with small, soft lips, barely open. Quick darts across my lips, cheeks and neck. And she holds me tight with her hands so small. When she sings, her voice burns. Too big a voice for such a small body.

I met her in the back alley of the place, just as she was leaving. Told her I wanted to buy her a drink.

"No more drinks," she says, her accent thick. "But something to eat would be nice."

So we catch a cab and eat across town. Spaghetti, far away from corned beef and cabbage. I see the bruise under her eye that her make-up hides so well.

I pretend not to notice.

"You're pretty," she tells me.

"I'm sorry?"

"Pretty," she says again with that accent of hers, making it sound all thick with vowels so mean they swallow consonants whole. "You know. Ready to fight?"

"I don't get it."

"That's what you call a man whose got his fighting clothes on."

"Pretty?"

"Yeah."

"A woman the same way?"

She nods, slurping spaghetti. "Fighting clothes," she tells me.

"So you think I'm pretty?"

"Dressed for a fight."

"What kind of fight?" I ask.

She smiles. "Don't know. But I'd hate to be on the other end of it."

"Are you sure?"

It's my turn to slurp and her turn to give me a look.

"Mr. Carter, I think you're flirting with me."

"I am. And my name is Jeff."

I give it a second, then ask. "Have you been singing at Mickey's long?"

"About six months. Came in from across the water."

"The war?" I ask, then with a look from her, I realize I shouldn't have.

"Let's talk about something else," she says.

"You with Doyle?"

She hasn't picked up her fork yet. "That's two strikes, Mr. Carter."

"I told you, it's 'Jeff.'"

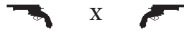
"Not yet, it ain't."

The next words out of my mouth are important. She's looking, waiting.

"I'd like to hear you sing again."

We're catching a cab. In the dim light, her hands are soft and her lips are softer. Her whispers say everything they're supposed to and tell me what to do.

My hands find her skin and it's soft and warm and giving. I also find the bruises and she winces when I do. She watches me, her eyes expectant. I just keep touching her and pretend not to notice.



She tells me he's afraid of something.

"He thinks he's haunted," she says. "He's wearing an iron cross around his neck."

That's funny. Mickey didn't strike me as the kind of guy who'd risk pissing off those pure blood cousins of his. He's *that* kind of scared.

She curls up around me. The summer sun makes it too hot for sheets, so we push them down to the bottom of the bed with our feet. The window's open, letting the morning breeze cool us down.

"Why a P.I.?" she asks me.

"Seemed like the thing to do at the time."

She runs her hands through the hair on the back of my head. "I mean, how do you decide to be one? Just wake up one morning and say, 'Gee, wouldn't it be cool to do that?'"

"That's not exactly how it works."

"Well, how does it work?"

I shake my head, put her hand in mine. "Just seemed like I'd already done everything else. So, I went to an insurance company, they hired me on and I apprenticed to a guy who was retiring in two years. When his job was up, I took it over."

"That easy, huh?"

“Just that easy.”

She shuffles to the edge of the bed. “Be right back,” she says. Her accent makes everything she says so cute. She walks naked out of the room, closing the door. I look around.

Her place is a renter. One of those two room places. Frontroom, bedroom. No bathroom, just a water closet. Like that? Learned it overseas. Dresser that came with the place. Closet full of long dresses she wears to work. One of those is on the floor right now. I get out of bed and pick it up, find a lonely hanger and get the two acquainted.

I hear water run and she’s back. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“Put your dress up. Didn’t want you spending money on dry cleaning.”

She smiles and pounces on the bed. “After last night, honey, that thing will have to go through twice.”

I take a long look at her. “What are you doing?” she asks.

“Thinking that most people don’t look good naked.”

“Most people?”

“Yeah. Most.”

“You an authority on the subject?”

“A strictly one-sided authority, yeah.”

“Didn’t you see any naked in the army?”

I put my hands together and look to the ceiling. “I averted my eyes, oh Lord.”

“Well avert them eyes back over here. And them praying hands, too.”

I follow instructions. Later, when she’s sleeping, I leave her my card. And a short note. You don’t get to know what’s on that. Some secrets should keep.



I’m stepping out from her place on the corner of 117th and Kramer when a long black car pulls up beside me and three heavies jump out. Of course, I’m wise to the wicked ways of the world, so I try to run for it. The three heavies push me to the ground, slap a blackjack alongside my ear and I fall straight to the cement, doing a nasty number on my chin. They pull me up to my feet

and drag me down the street. I look around me through the groggy fog in my head and blood in my eyes. There's got to be a dozen people on the streets and nobody's looking. Nobody dares. I get tossed in the back of the limo and I hear its tires squeal on the pavement.

Now, I've got a bloody ear, probably all cauliflower, and I'm sitting on the other side of Jimmy Doyle. This is one place nobody wants to be.

"Mr. Carter. I don't think we've ever had the pleasure."

I check my lip and my head. "If you know me and I know you, why don't we skip all that?"

"Fair enough," he says, smoking one of those little black cigars I see rich people smoking. The kind that make my stomach do its pretzel imitation. "In fact, I admire that," he tells me.

"Don't get used to it. I got a lot of other really bad habits."

He pours himself a drink, probably whiskey and water, hold the water. He starts talking.

"I suppose you've been keeping up on current events?"

I know what he's talking about, but I play dumb. "Yeah, the Blues are two games out of the pennant and Mason just hit his fifty-third homer for the season."

He puffs on the cigar. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Carter? I have some scotch here that is very old."

I shake my head, push myself up to a proper sitting position. "Probably not a good idea for me to be drinking with a concussion."

He chuckles through that black smoke. "You don't have a concussion, Mr. Carter."

"How do you know?"

His eyes glow through the smoke. "I know," he tells me.

"Sorry," I say. "Forgot where I was and who I was talking to."

"I presume you won't make that mistake again while in my company?"

"Hit a guy hard enough, you never can tell."

"We wouldn't have had to hit you if you didn't run away."

I smile. "A long, black car pulls up next to you on the street and three whiskey sipping overgrown leprechauns want to play catch with your head, and we'll see how fast *you* don't run."

The big guy nods and smiles. "I suppose this cigar isn't any good for that head of yours, is it?"

"I wasn't going to say anything," I tell him.

He puts the cigar out and opens the window, just a crack.

"Thanks," I tell him.

"Never say I never did anything for you, Mr. Carter."

"With all this courtesy, I assume you want me to do something for *you*?"

He nods. "Very perceptive. You come highly regarded, Mr. Carter. Your wit alone has been worth the effort of finding you. Of course, if I knew you'd be stepping out of *that* boarding house," he pauses, "well, let's just say I'm glad my cousin Mickey wasn't with me."

I look at the ice and the glasses. "I don't suppose I could get a cold glass of water, could I?"

He pours the drink and puts it in my hand. The cold glass feels good against my head. He coughs. That's his signal. Enough chit-chat. He gets to the point.

"Recent unfortunate events in this city has opened a vacuum in the power structure."

I listen carefully, hoping this isn't going where I think its going.

"Needless to say, I'd like to see that vacuum filled with persons I trust and admire."

I try to play slow, but not dumb. Too dangerous for dumb. "You're talking about the Vincenzi murders?"

"You don't mourn the loss of the Vincenzis, do you, Mr. Carter?"

I shake my head. "I didn't really notice they were gone."

"I don't have to tell you what the papers say every morning, do I?"

"I don't know. Your boys hit me pretty hard. Or maybe my memory isn't what it used to be."

"All right, then. Let's make this simple."

He lays it on the line. Vincenzi versus. Doyle. Oldest rivalry in the city. Someone whacked all the Vincenzi heavies in one night. Papers suggest it was the Doyles. Shows what they know. Now with no Vincenzi in charge of vice, the

Doyles become the most powerful family in the city. After the water's all gone, I take the ice out of the cup and into my hand, putting directly on the wound.

"You all caught up, Carter?" he asks. I nod, grabbing more ice out of the cooler, setting against my throbbing head. "Good," he says. "This is real simple. My cousin Mickey is a fuck up, but Uncle Doyle loves him. I want to show Uncle Doyle how much of a fuck up he is."

He shifts in his seat while we turn a corner. I feel the ache in my head from the direction change. He keeps talking.

"I'm willing to pay a lot of money for someone to follow Mickey around. Take some pictures."

"Dirty pictures?"

"I was thinking of something more in the damning department."

"Ah."

"I know he's losing it. I've seen him in his restaurant. He don't come out. Has his clothes brought in so he can change. Washing up in the bathroom in the back."

"Remind me not to eat there anymore," I say.

He leans across the car, pours himself another drink. "Now, I don't want to let this conversation turn uncivil," he says that like he's being subtle, "but I saw where you just walked out of. I know where you spent the night. I could *make* you do this job."

One fucking moment of careless indulgence and I'm the Doyle's bitch. Shit.

"What do you say, gumshoe?"

Can't say I approve. So I don't.

"I won't do it," I tell him.

"You'll help me or see lavender, Mr. Carter."

He's calling me "Mr. Carter." That can't be good. "Funny," I tell him. "Lots of people are telling me they're gonna kill me these days."

"Oh, I won't kill you. But Mickey will. And trust me, you'd rather it be me than him. And you don't even want to *imagine* what he'd do to *her*."

The car turns a corner down Rosecranz. I've been waiting for that turn. Unfortunately, this isn't the way I wanted the deal to go down, sacred geometry or not. Fuck it. I'm cornered and I've got to bend.

"All right," I say. "I'll follow him around. I'll take pictures. I'll see what I can do."

Doyle smiles. "I knew you would." He pours himself another drink. "Who says chivalry is dead? You're a regular Lancelot, Carter."

"You mean Galahad," I say so soft, he doesn't hear it. That's probably a good thing.

He pulls a fat envelope out of his jacket and tosses it in my lap. "I'll double that when you bring me the pictures," he says. Then, he taps on the glass that separates us from the driver. The car pulls over to the side of the street. I look out the window. My building looks back at me.

The car pulls away and I limp back to my office. When I get there, Lawhead's sitting outside the door. His eyes look like they've been soaking in tears. He looks up at me, his hands wrapped tight around a gold locket.

And this is where things get complicated.



"Mickey Malone," Lawhead says, standing in my office. "So what does that mean to us?"

I tell him it means Doyle's the man who killed his wife.

He nods. "Thank you, Mr. Carter." He stands up. "Your payment will be available in the morning."

I shake my head. "If you think you're going on some kind of suicide-revenge ride, you aren't. Killing Doyle is like going after the gun that killed your wife and ignoring the man who used it. Is that what you want?"

He sits back down.

"That's good."

He looks me in the eye, fidgeting with a pen. "What do we do now? Tell the police?"

"No. The cops who would *want* do something about this aren't the kind of cops who *can*."

"What then? Call the Vinzenzis?"

"They're too fucked up to do anything right now. Besides, that would make things messy," I tell him, "and I don't like the idea of adding onto my list of favors right now. I'm already behind."

He looks at me sideways. I didn't expect him to get it.

"The Doyle family has rules, Mr. Lawhead. Its time we put them to use."

"What kind of rules?"

I smile. "The kind of rules Mickey Malone is breaking right now. As we speak."



Here's an aside for those of you who aren't up to speed. Lawhead wasn't. I had to fill him in. Besides, it's his buck. His wife. He should know what's going on.

"It's kind of complicated," I tell him on the car ride back to Sam's. "The simplest way to explain it is this: the Doyle family is easily offended."

"What did I do?" he asks me.

"Tough to tell. There's just so many ways to do it." I turn down Westminster off Ventura. "Religion is one way. Invoking the church or any of its trappings."

"You mean like crosses and holy water?"

"Yeah. That kind of stuff."

"It burns them?"

I laugh, slowing down for a stop light. "You're thinking of the wrong family," I tell him. "No, you're missing the point. Stuff like that doesn't hurt them, it just makes them mad." I'm trying here, but it's hard. I'm making it sound like some sort of Saturday morning matinee. "It *offends* them," I say again. It's the best way to explain it.

"So, things offend them."

"Yeah. Make them mad. And they don't take that well, let me tell you. A Doyle can hold a grudge for a long time. A *long* damn time. Piss off a Doyle and your grandkids' grandkids will know it."

"What else?" he asks.

"Promises and gifts," I tell him. "They take that kind of stuff *very* seriously. You owe a Doyle, you *owe* him. Likewise, the other way around."

"And promises?"

"Don't ever break one." I take a second away from the road to give him a look.

“Not ever.” The light’s green and we’re moving again. “And if a Doyle makes a promise to you, he keeps it.”

“Or what happens?”

“It’s a matter of family pride. They’re whole family relies on promises. If even *one* Doyle breaks a promise...”

“What good are any other promises they make?” He’s smiling. Starting to get it. He points at the runegun under my jacket. “That any good?”

“What this?” I touch the cold, carved metal. “Sometimes. With a Doyle? Only if the bullets are iron.”

“You mean like steel?”

“No, I mean like iron.”

“Why’s that?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. I don’t think anybody knows. If the DoYLES know, they’ve forgotten it.”

We’re driving near the hills. He looks up, the sun just setting over the taller ones. Taller than any others is *her* house, always surrounded by a thin blanket of mist. “Is that why she’s up there?” he asks, shading his eyes from the setting sun. “Because she broke a promise?”

I take a look up at her house. You can just barely see it from here. “No,” I tell him. “I think she’s up there *because* of a promise.”

Suddenly, I’m cold. Like someone put a whole cup of ice down my back. My left hand shakes on the wheel. I try to calm it down, but it won’t.

“You okay, Carter?”

I shake my head and pull the car over into a parking spot. I sit there for a second until the shaking goes away. Whitelaw puts his hand on my shoulder until I stop. Then, he asks me again if I’m all right. I tell him I’m fine, but my left hand won’t stop shaking.

Finally, it slows down enough that I can start the car back up and get back on the road. We’ve got a while to go to Sam’s still, and she’s got something I need her to do.



Lawhead is crashing at Sam's place. I have to wait downstairs for her. It's not like she *can't* be around more than one man at once, it just hurts, all the concentrating she has to do. She's got to be *with* someone, just one of us. Can't be both Lawhead and me. When she's up there, with him, she's his. When she's down here, with me, she's mine.

At least, she used to be. But things are different. She comes out of the building and I'm leaning on the car, reading my newspaper. I look up and it's Sam all right, but she's not Sam. She's different. Her hair's shorter and not as straight. The color in her eyes is wrong. Every day I see her, she looks a little more like the woman in the locket.

She gets into the cab and asks me where we're going. I don't mention how different her voice is.

"To the East Side," I tell her. "I need to you to make one more walk."

"You're not going to get me killed, are you, Carter?"

I start up the car and shake my head. "Not intentionally, no." The radio comes on. It isn't that singer telling me about that Irish lullabye. I don't think she notices.

"When we're done with this," she says, "you and me, we're clear, you understand?"

I nod, turning the wheel. "We're clear." Used to be a time when I couldn't drive a car with her in the passenger seat. Making my hands and feet work independent isn't a skill most men have sitting next to Sam.

We pull on to Broadway and 7th, passing the train station. The trains make the street rumble; you can feel it through the floor of the car. I remember that Molly's out of town, visiting her mother upstate. Up by that city with the bridges. Twain said the coldest winter he ever spent was a summer up there. He was right. And it had nothing to do with the weather.

"Penny for your thoughts," she tells me.

I tell her.

"You really hated it up there, didn't you?"

"Me and that city, we got off on the wrong foot." I hear her giggle. I give her the eye. "Got off on the wrong foot and kept on walking."

"I love it up there," she tells me. "The water sends mist all through the streets.

The hills, the trollies. I love the buildings, all cuddled together, trying to keep each other warm.”

“You make it sound friendly.”

“It *is* friendly, Carter.”

“Not to me, it wasn’t.”

She crosses her arms. “I suppose it’s a lot friendlier down here?”

I’m turning the car onto La Brea. I can smell hot dogs and pull over to the curb.

“This city, she may be a whore, but at least she’s honest about it.”

I don’t need to see the face she’s making to know I just said the wrong thing. Maybe the worst thing. I try to cover it up. “You want a hot dog?”

“Yeah,” she tells me. “With *relish*.”

I get her one. I get me two. And cherry soda. We lean on the car and eat. It’s all quiet between us for a while until I say the thing she’s expecting me to say.

“I’m sorry, Sam.”

She hands me the soda. “Open this, will you?”

I reach in my pocket and take out my knife. She takes the bottle from my hands and I’m remembering how much Molly hates hot dogs.

“Carter?” she asks me.

“Yeah?”

“Who are you thinking about?”

“What’d’ya mean?”

“I mean I’ve been holding your hand for ten seconds and you haven’t even blinked.”

I look down. She’s right. There’s one hand, still on the cherry soda. The other’s on the bottle. Her hand is right there, on the bottle, right next to mine.

“That’s what I mean, Carter. Who are you thinking about?”

I give her back the bottle. “I’m not thinking about anyone. I’m thinking about what we’re doing tonight. Trying to see if there’s anything I missed. Anything that could get us both killed.”

“Oh,” she says, in that voice she uses whenever she pretends to pretend to believe me. And that’s the only word she ever uses with that voice. “Oh.”

I stop the car a little way out from the place we need to be, down an alley so dark, I can barely see my hand in front of my face. She changed in the car. I don't need to turn away. She noticed that, but she didn't say anything.

In the alley, I tell her what she needs to say. I take out my knife and hand it to her. She holds it in her right hand, pulls the blade free and runs it across her left palm. She winces and hands me the knife back. I clean it off with a handkerchief.

"Wish me luck," she says to me. I do. She starts walking. When she hits the street, anybody in the club looking out the window will swear it looked like she walked right out of the night. It's perfect.

Down the ally, she moves like a whisper. Her bare feet must be freezing, but she doesn't show it. I asked Lawhead to bring me a white dress that belonged to his wife. She's wearing it now. It's a perfect fit. Funny, from the pictures I've seen, I could have sworn Sam was at least half a foot taller.

She's in that white dress now and all you can see under the thin gauze over her head are her black eyes, her black hair and red lips. She's got nothing on under that dress and the moonlight lets all the world know it. Her left hand is shut tight. Her right hand is bleeding. I'm sitting back in the alleyway. If everything goes according to plan, I won't have to do a thing.

I watch the faces through the window. Someone's seen her. It looks like all the blood in his face went straight down to his legs, because he's running, right through the restaurant, pushing down tables as he goes. I almost laugh. I wish Molly could see...

I take out my knife and hand it to her...

Wait a second.

She holds it in her right hand...

Something's wrong.

Her left hand is shut tight.

It's so cold. And she's not even shivering.

... pulls the blade free and runs it across her left palm...

Oh shit. Sam. I didn't...

Her right hand is bleeding...

I'm running across the street now. I can't let her go in there. But someone's already seen her. A man. A man's already seen her.

Seen what he expects to see. Seen what he expects her to be. Seen my Sam. Lawhead's Mandy.

Seen her in a white dress with a bloody hand.

The whole world stops as she walks into his club and every face turns to see who is there. Every face turns, sees her in the white dress. Sees the bloody hand.

In Sam's world, perception is reality. What you see is what you get. A room full of Doyles just turned and expected to see something. Sam just became what they expected to see.

I slide in the front door. Nobody notices. Not even little Mickey. But everyone is here. I see faces I've only seen in newspapers sharing congratulatory handshakes with lawyers. This could go very bad very fast.

Sam raises her bloody hand. Mickey almost screams. She's pointing right at him.

"Oh God! Please, God, no!" he screams.

Half the faces in the room look at Mickey with tight, sour milk faces. They didn't like that, what Mickey said. Not one bit. He's not thinking. Scared out of his pants. Good.

But as pissed of everybody is, nobody moves. They just shift to look at their nephew. Nobody wants to look at her.

He stumbles a bit. She's still as a body in a coffin. He drops to his knees, right in front of her. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

People shift in their chairs and I remember the rules I told Lawhead. I thought I'd need to loan him a shovel. Turns out, he brought his own jackhammer.

"I'll do anything! Anything! Just don't..."

I look at Sam. But she isn't Sam. In fact, I don't know what she is. No, that's not true. I know what she is. I just hope she doesn't look this way. I try to keep my eyes on her, but it's like looking at the sun, so I look down at my shoes.

Then, those red red lips under the shawl speak.

"Mickey," she says, and it's not Sam's voice.

She says his name again. His whole name.

“Michael David Patrick Doyle.”

The power of her speaking his name rushes through me like a live current. Thirteen crystal glasses shatter behind the bar. Nobody in the room needs to count them to know that.

“I’ll give you anything you want!” He’s almost face down on the floor, his tears and snot all over his face.

“Give? How can you give? You took everything.”

He’s crawling now. I can’t even see the other ones breathe.

“Please...”

“I want what you took from me, Michael Doyle. My life. My family.”

“I didn’t... I didn’t...”

“Everything you took from me.”

He looks up, his eyes ragged. “Our child?”

That catches me. Sam, on the other hand, doesn’t even blink. “Our child, Michael Doyle. The one in my womb. The child you killed to protect your family’s bloodline.”

The whole room takes a deep breath. All at once.

“I want my child back, Michael.”

He looks around the room, his hands and knees on the floor. He sees what I see and he’s on his feet. He grabs a baby from a woman’s arms and turns back to Sam before the mother can say a word.

“Here!” he screams, shoving the child at her. “Take it! Take it!”

I see a man stand up in the back of the room. He looks old, but his body and face are strong. I know his name from the papers. The woman sitting at his table grabs his arm. He doesn’t look back and he doesn’t sit back down.

“Your family will seek retribution for this, Michael Doyle.”

“No, they won’t,” he says. He’s not thinking. Not even a little bit.

“They won’t come after you,” he says to her. “I promise.”

“Say it again.”

He does.

“A third time.”

And again.

The baby is crying. Doyle only now begins to recognize what it is he’s done.

And that, my friends, is strike three.

She turns from him, turning away with the crying baby. And when she’s gone, it’s easy enough for me to leave unnoticed.

They’re all looking at little Mickey.



“Too bad, kid,” Jimmy Doyle tells me. I’m on the street, he’s talking from inside his limo, the window down just enough so I can see his eyes.

“Too bad for who?” I ask, knowing I should have said “whom,” but I just can’t make myself say it. Makes me sound like a snobby English teacher who won’t let old rules die.

“Too bad for Mickey,” he says. “And too bad for you.”

“Don’t need those pictures anymore do you?”

“Nah. That’s okay. Keep the money. I just wish I was there to see his face.”

“When the banshee showed up?”

I didn’t think it was possible for you to see someone turn pale through so much darkness, but I’ve been proving myself wrong a lot lately.

“See ya ‘round, Carter,” he says. The window rolls up and he drives away. I walk back to my building and up the stairs where a succubus with a heart of gold stands outside my door, waiting for me.

I unlock the door and she sits on my couch with her heart of gold and she tells me she can’t stay. There isn’t so much as a scar on her hand. Not either of them. I look at her and all I see is the woman in the locket. I was there when he gave it to her. The day she wasn’t Sam anymore. Just last night.

He put it in her hands and closed her fingers around it.

“I loved her,” he said. “Loved her so much.”

He put his hands over hers and looked at her. "I know you're not her."

And this is the only time I've ever seen her eyes go red.

"I know you're not her," he said again, trying to blurt out what he wanted to say.

"I will be," she said, squeezing his hands tight.

And with that, she wasn't Sam anymore. And on my couch, she's trying to explain it to me.

"He loves me," she says. "Men have said that before, but..."

I just stand there. I can't even look at her. "Don't," I tell her.

"It's not love," she says, looking at me. "But it's close enough."

She leaves and I don't say a word. I don't dare. Anything I say may break it. I don't know that, but it isn't worth me risking a goodbye.

Not even a goodbye.

They leave with the child. Watching them drive away in her car, I can't help but think, *Instant family. Just add water.* But that's just me being bitter. I can't help it.

I sit down at the desk and pull open the drawer with the bottle. I fill the little cup I keep next to it.

The perfect woman. Right there. And, like *I* didn't love her. Couldn't she see that I...

I stop and empty the cup down my throat. Half the bottle, too.

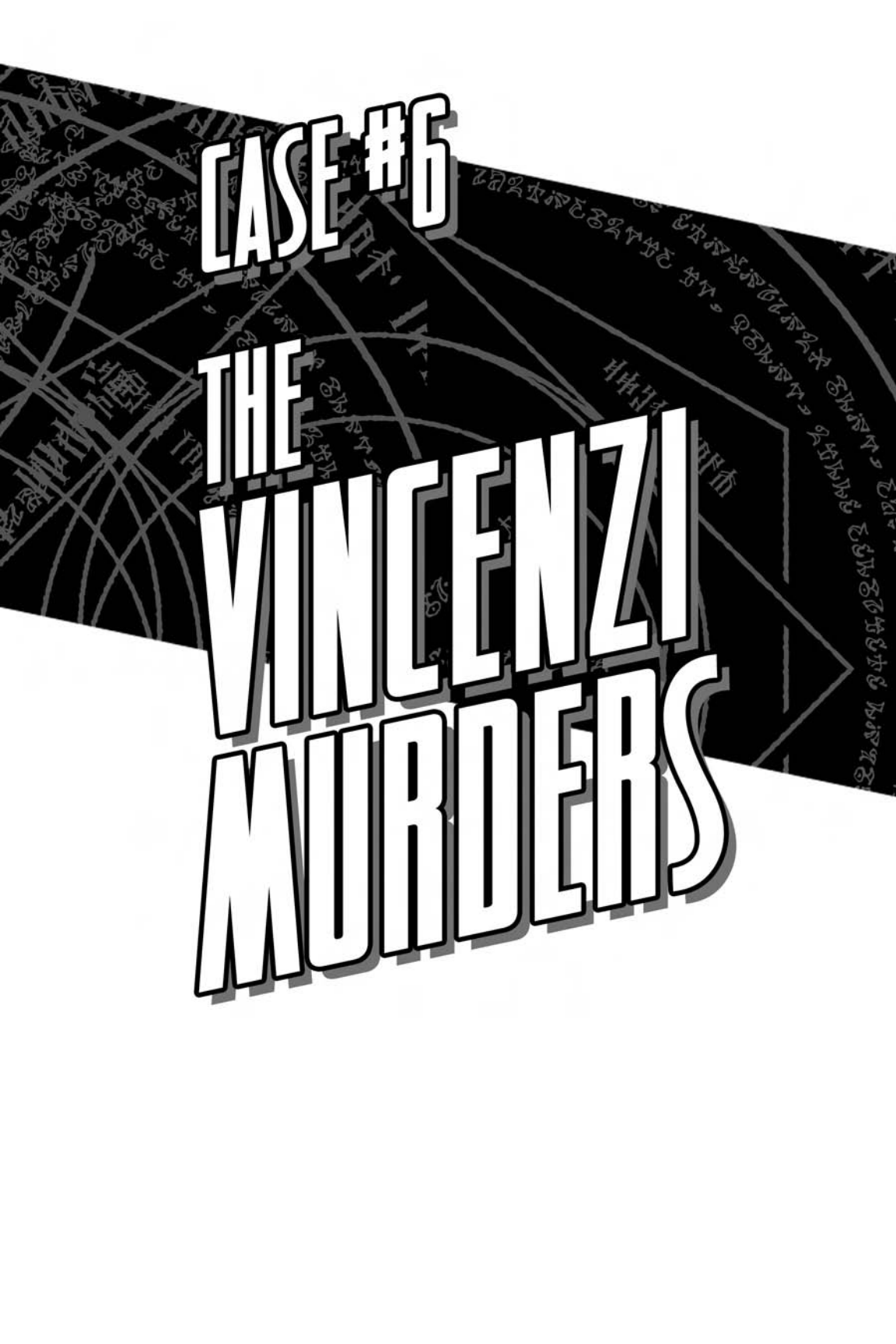
That night, I call Molly. She's back from visiting her mom. She tells me her mother is very sick. She'll need to go up there at least once a week. Doesn't know how she'll pay for it.

"I'll help," I tell her. She objects. "I've got a friend at the train station. Owes me a favor. Don't worry about it."

"You're sweet," she tells me. I tell her I want to come over.

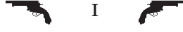
"Something stopping you?" she asks.

Later, I'm pressed against her, with her soft lips and little kisses. When I'm not thinking, I call her Sam. I look at her, my eyes expectant. She just keeps kissing me and pretends not to notice.



CASE #6

**THE
VINCENZI
MURDERS**



This starts at the end. I've got my hands and face in the sink, getting the stink of a job off of me. The sink is full of soapy, dirty water and I'm right there in the middle of it. My shirt and gun are on the desk just behind the placard that tells my name. We'll get to them soon enough. Just keep in mind that my runegun is out of reach. I'm gonna need it in a second.

I look up and I'm reminded how much the man looking back at me in the mirror isn't what you'd think of as a P.I. His chin is pointed, following the sharp angles in the rest of his face. He's got a bit of a beard. He's not muscular, but he used to be, like a guy you know who was in the Marines a hundred years ago, but doesn't really keep in shape anymore. It's his eyes that make his face, but the funny thing is, most people, they just don't even notice. One of them's just a little off. One's a little bit more blue and the other one is just a little less. I can always judge someone by the way they react to that. Those that don't notice, ain't worth my worrying about.

I'm looking in that mirror, seeing the man, seeing the room behind him. There's my desk, the bed that folds up into the wall, and the files, all locked up by some careful phrases. That's good. I wouldn't want my guest digging around in there.

Yeah, my guest. The guest that doesn't show up in the mirror. The one who can't enter the home of an honest man without an invitation. But there he is, waiting for me to turn around. I can't see him, but I know he's there. I can smell his skin, like orchids and grave dust. I keep my face to the mirror, eyeing the shirt and gun on my desk, knowing I haven't got a chance in hell of getting there before he rips my throat out.

Of course, if he wanted me dead, I'd be a mess on the floor already, so I give my hands and face one more wash and rinse—just in case—and then I turn right round and let him play spooky. I even jump a little, just so he won't feel bad.

"How's it going, Carter?" he asks me in that accent of his, direct from the south of Venice, just north of 88th Street. He's standing there, in a suit that costs

more than I'll ever count, and his smile flashes like a star. The red rose on his black suit looks like a wound. But he's scared under that smile. Scared right down to his cold, old bones.

"Not bad," I tell him, "recovering" from the jolt. "A bit busy. You need something?"

"You could say that," he tells me.

I step over to the desk, pick up my shirt and throw it in the water, leaving the gun where it is. "All right then." I push the shirt under the water and walk to the dresser, pulling out a new one. I don't want him smelling what's on that shirt. I turn, button up and watch him watch me. "Tell me about it."

"Not here."

"Where, then?"

"Uptown."

"All right." I go to the desk, pick up the runegun, and get a new jacket from the closet. "Let's go."

We sit in the back of the car, a big man with a few letters written on his forehead drives us through the misty night streets. You probably couldn't see the letters, but I can. Wanna guess why? I gave you a clue just a bit ago at the mirror.

"What's this all about?" I ask again, partaking of the limo's wet bar.

"Help yourself, Carter," he tells me.

"I thought I was."

His bloodshot eyes get a little darker. "Look pal. You ain't nothin'." His voice gets louder and his finger starts waving. They always wave the finger. "A washed up bookworm, washed up cop, washed up priest. You know what that makes you?"

"That's a lot of washed up. Maybe driftwood?" I take a long sip from the drink I just made, keeping my eyes away from his.

"Funny. Real smart ass, ain't ya, Carter?"

"Rather be a smart ass than a dumb shit." You know the best part of a martini? It's the olive. I love that olive.

"That don't mean shit to me," he says. "To me, you're three seconds away from a body bag. Nothin' more."

I mix the gin and vermouth, my eyes on the shaker when I say, "And you're a torpedo under orders. You know what that makes you?" Pour. "A message boy." Drop the olive.

We don't talk anymore. I pushed him hard. Maybe too hard. We'll see later. Of course, I'm making this up as I go.

The lobby's full of security. More than I expected. The torpedo and two guards accompany me up the elevator. It gets cold in there quick. The torpedo notices.

"Scared?"

"A Southern boy like myself's got a thin skin for such chilly weather."

He laughs. "You're scared. You don't show it, but you smell it. Scared out of that thin Southern skin."

He's right. This is the last place in the world I want to be. Can't let him see that. I give up one clue, and I'm just as cold as the man waiting for me upstairs.

And speaking of the Old Man...

He's at the desk when the door opens, looking exactly the same way the last time I saw him. Right away, I see what they're all so upset about. It's hard to miss. His head is thrown back, his arms splayed to the side. Most prominent feature? There's a wooden stake sticking out of his chest. And blood. Lots of blood. My feet squish when they walk on the carpet. They haven't cleaned up. Haven't touched anything. Good for them. That'll make my job easier.

A woman's there. Her hair is black and long and straight. Her eyes... I'll just stop there. You've already got your own picture. Anything I say will probably spoil it.

She's sitting in one of the big leather chairs, holding a cigarette. Nobody knows how to hold a cigarette anymore. Nobody but her. Bet she knows how to walk in those heels, too. Bet she knows lots of lost arts.

Standing on the other side of the room is a man who looks like he forgot to die, like the only reason his skin doesn't slip right off is because it's stapled on. You know those wax dummies of famous people? Leave one of them out in the sun too long and you get the picture.

So, that's them. The torpedo, the dame and the prune. Then, there's me and the fat man in the chair with the lumber problem. I wait through about ten seconds of silence. Then, I open my smart mouth.

"So, you all want me to do something here?"

The torpedo lifts me right off my feet, his teeth glaring. “I still say we don’t need him.”

“Put him down, Antonio,” the wax museum says. Antonio does what he’s told, but he’s not happy with it. I imagine he’s only happy when the front of his shirt is drenched with blood, veins and arteries struck between his teeth.

I fix my tie and give him a good look. Antonio. Torpedo. Easy enough to remember. He turns away, moping in the corner. I want to give him a smile to go with the glare, but you can push things too far. I’m in a bad place here, playing a bad game. I hold my smile for later.

“Mr. Carter,” the woman says, rising to her feet, extending her hand. “I’m Ms. Lethe.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, trying not to shiver from the chill of her touch. “But I don’t think there’s a single thing I’d forget about you.” Her thick, soft lips smile when I say that. “Besides,” I tell her, pointing at the body behind the desk, “*he’s* the one with the problem. I really don’t see yours.”

The walking wax museum talks then. “You *are* Jefferson Carter? Isn’t that right?”

“Only one in the book.” I shake my head when the lady offers me a smoke. “Sorry. They make me sick to my stomach.”

“Are you allergic to vice, Mr. Carter?”

“Only the ones that get me killed.”

“Too bad.” She smiles, taking a long drag on that cigarette, reminding me exactly how long women from her family can hold their breath.

“We don’t have time for this,” the walking wrinkle says. “Mr. Carter, I am under the impression you are a man of some — shall we say, education?”

I shrug. “Let’s just say I went to college, but didn’t bother graduating.”

“Fair enough.” He closes his eyes and sniffs. His thin nostrils look like they’ll collapse any moment. “You have a talisman with you now?”

I nod. “Uh huh.”

“May I see it?”

“Why?”

“Let us say I want to see your credentials.” He’s got his hand held out, and it looks like one a daddylonglegs. A long, thin hand brittle as October leaves.

I shrug again, pulling the piece from under my arm. I hold it with my thumb and forefinger, both far away from the trigger. He looks at it without touching it. Smart fella.

“A sacred weapon,” the old man says.

“Runegun,” Antonio says behind me, just above a whisper.

I put it away. The old man smiles and I see a maw of perfect teeth against that flawed face.

“You are a man of will, Mr. Carter, and, it appears, a man with no small degree of skill. I must agree with Ms. Lethe. She has made an excellent choice.”

She doesn’t say anything, just raises an eyebrow. A perfectly curved eyebrow.

“I think our dilemma is fairly clear.”

“I’m not wearing my genius glasses. Maybe you can make things a bit clearer for me.”

The old man sighs, more out of habit than necessity. “Very well. As you can see, our beloved patriarch has met with a rather foul end.”

“Really? I thought it was more fitting than foul.”

Antonio shifts in his corner. Lethe takes another long draw off her cigarette. The old man shakes his head. “Come, come, Mr. Carter. I had such a high opinion of you just a moment ago. Let us not make this any more *uncomfortable* than it has to be.” He pauses. “And I mean that in a most *literal* way.”

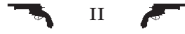
“That means *me*,” Antonio says from the corner. He’s got his hands shoved deep in his pockets and he rocks on his heels like a little boy waiting for candy.

“All right. I’ll listen. I’ll be quiet.” I take a seat and hear what they’ve figured out so far.

“Very well. Allow me to get to the point. Mr. Vincenzi here is dead. He was obviously murdered. Our initial investigation shows whoever did this to our patriarch had intimate knowledge of our security systems. And that, Mr. Carter, is our problem.”

“Let me guess. That leaves three suspects.”

The dame exhales a halo of smoke. “And they’re right here, Mr. Carter. In this very room.”



Now that you know where we're going, let's you and me take a step back for a second and get some perspective. I don't think I need to tell you much more about the Vincenzi family, but here's a couple of details. First, they're the largest crime family in the city, currently fighting a very quiet territory war with the Doyles. They've got themselves about forty or fifty soldiers, controlling most of the vices this city has to offer.

They think I don't know why I'm here. I do. Sometimes you have to play dumb so you can find out what they know. This is one of those times.



"You see, Mr. Carter," the corpse says, "tonight is a very special night."

"Educate me."

"It's the longest night of the year," Lethe tells me.

"Yeah? And?"

The torpedo in the corner smirks. "He doesn't know."

The walking corpse puts on one of his creepy smiles and shakes his head. "I think he does. I think he's just testing us."

"You give me a lot of credit."

"Not every man is capable of making a weapon like the one you're carrying, Mr. Carter. I think you know *exactly* what is supposed to happen tonight."

"All right. Suppose I do?"

"Then don't waste our time." The doll gets up and walks over to the other end of the room, to the bookshelf. One of the books is tilted, just a bit. She pulls on it, it turns, and I see the safe behind the fake books. The empty safe.

"This is what we're talking about, Mr. Carter. The Nocturnum Document."

"It used to be in there, and now it isn't?"

She nods. "That's right. And if we don't get it back by morning..."

"You can't cast your ritual."

The torpedo snickers. "I think he's catching on."

“And if we can’t cast our ritual,” the old man starts. He pauses so I can finish the thought.

“You all can’t go walking around in the daylight.”

Ms. Lethe shuts the fake books over the safe. “I think you see our dilemma, Mr. Carter.”

I have a thought. Something I learned back in college somewhere. I decide to share it while I change my posture in the chair. “You know, the Chinese characters for *dilemma* translate to *dangerous opportunity*.”

“Your point, Mr. Carter?” the old man asks.

The dame speaks up. “I think Mr. Carter is saying we’re misusing the word.”

I shake my head. “Not at all. Losing the Nocturnum Document is dangerous for you. For me, it’s all opportunity.” I stand up, run my hands over the creases in my jacket. “What’s in it for me?”

That’s when all their eyes go dark. The old man talks first. “I’m sure you’re aware we are a family of no small means, Mr. Carter.”

“Money is a good start. But let’s not stop there.”

“Little fuckin’ prick.”

(I don’t need to tell you who said that, do I?)

I shake my head, reach into my pocket and pull out my lucky penny. I hold it tight between my finger and thumb. “I can use money. Everyone can use money. I’m talking about payment not everyone can use.”

“You want magical knowledge, is that it, Mr. Carter?” the corpse walks over to where Lethe stands, just before the books. “I’m sure you can see we are also quite prepared...”

“Oh no. None of this crap. I’m talking about secret libraries, like the one the Nocturnum Document comes from.”

Both Lethe and the old man shiver. I never seen that before. Probably never will again.

“Do you have something specific in mind, Mr. Carter?”

“Got to do the shopping before I can make the purchase, don’t I?”

“We don’t have *time* for this!” I hear Antonio move, but there’s just no time to do anything about it. By the time I hear the torpedo’s first footstep, my chest is

slammed against the wall, my lip broken, a Vincenzi against my back, pulling my neck so hard, I hear popping deep down under the skin.

“Antonio!” the old man screams.

I feel the hard ivory teeth against my skin, and his drool burns like hot water. If that stuff gets into my system...

“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you Carter?” he whispers to me. “Thinking about having *me* inside you.”

“Antonio!” Lethe joins the chorus.

“You’re a smart guy, Carter. You know what happens if *that* happens.”

The others are screaming, but they aren’t doing anything. That’s when I know I pushed it too far. This is part of their plan. I don’t know if they’re bluffing. Getting Antonio into my system would solve a lot of their problems. I’m in check. I’ve got to make a defensive move. Question is, can I think of something that protects my own king while putting theirs in jeopardy?

“Listen,” I say.

“No. *You* listen.” The torpedo’s teeth run along my skin. Those razors don’t have to have much behind them to make a cut. And just one little cut is all he needs. “You’re gonna find out who did it. Then, you’re gonna tell us. Then, we’ll decide if we let you live. You got it?”

No room for moving here. I really don’t have any advantage. I think about nodding, then think better of making any kind of movement at all with those teeth against my skin. “All right. I’ll find out which one of you killed him. Then, I’ll tell the other two. You can do what you like after that.”

There’s a long pause. The sound of my heart is in my ears. Finally, the corpse talks.

“Let him go, Antonio.”

Pressure lets up. I realize my right arm’s been wrenched so high up my back, I could scratch my left ear. Funny thing about fear: it doesn’t let you feel anything else.

“I think you broke my arm,” I tell the torpedo.

“Nah. Just pulled it out of whack. Here...” He gives it a tug, pulling the ball of my shoulder back where it belongs. When I hear the pop, all I can do is fall to my knees, biting the scream when it hits my lips.

“What am I now, altar boy?” Antonio asks me.

I keep my mouth shut, just trying to keep from throwing up all over the carpet and hard wood floors.

"What am I now?"

I wipe my lip clean and push myself back to my feet with my one good arm. The one I can still feel. "You're a Vincenzi," I tell him, my eyes way lower than his.

"Damn right." He straightens his jacket and heads back to his corner. A hand through his thick, greasy hair and the whole thing's done.

"I suppose its time you start your investigation, Mr. Carter," the corpse says. "After all, the sun waits for no one."

"I know where to start."

"Good. You'll have Ms. Lethe to keep you company."

"You mean to make sure I don't try to leave the city?"

His laugh is dry leaves rushing along the pavement, their fingers scraping. "Of course not, Mr. Carter. Where would you go? How far do you think you could run?"

I reach in my pocket and pull out a handkerchief. Just then, I remember my lucky penny's still in my hand. That brings back a hint of my smile, and that's just about all I dare show in this room. "Don't know. I guess we'll never find out."

The dame takes my arm — my good one — and leads me over to the elevator.

"Come on. We'll take my car."

"That's good, 'cause we can't take mine."

"Why not?"

"Mine's still on the lot, waiting for me and a check."

We step out of the room, leaving Antonio and the corpse behind us. The Old Man is still in his chair, his head still flung back, his hands still splayed at his sides.

"That was foolish, Mr. Carter," she almost whispers.

"Who recommended me?" I ask her, ignoring what she just told me.

She hits the elevator button and the doors slide open. "A mutual friend," she says.

I think about how many people we'd both know. I can only think of one. "One with a big Greek nose, I assume."

"You'd be correct."

We step into the elevator.

“Why isn’t he here to help us?”

“The Spartan is a pawn, Mr. Carter. Not a back-row piece.” She hits the button for the lobby. “And with me as your companion, you’ll have little need of...”

The elevator door’s about to close when something pops in my head. “Wait a second!” I shout and hit the open door button. I’m rushing back into the room with the three dead men; a woman named Lethe is right at my heels, my feet squishing on the bloody carpet.

“I’ve got it,” I tell them, snapping my fingers.

The corpse gives me the once over. “What is it exactly that you’ve *got*, Mr. Carter?”

The grin on my face is so big, it almost hurts my cheeks. It *does* hurt my broken lip. “You don’t need to know who killed the Old Man,” I tell them.

The torpedo looks sideways at me. “We don’t?”

I shake my head. “No, you don’t.”

“Explain to us why this is so, Mr. Carter.”

I walk over to the corpse and answer his question. “You don’t need to know who killed him. You just need what was stolen brought back.”

They’re all getting it now. That’s good.

“All you need is the Nocturnum Document.”



The interior of her car is just what you’d imagine: all soft and red. The ashtray was never used before tonight, but it’s got ten in there already, just from the time we left the building. That’s a lot of smoke for someone that doesn’t breathe.

“You don’t smoke,” I say, pointing at the ashtray.

She smiles, tossing her cigarette out the window. “No. I just started tonight.”

I’m sitting next to her, all grins. I’m just grateful they bought the plan. I was beginning to wonder how I was going to conjure up a murderer, especially after being hired by the three most likely suspects. Back in the room, with all of them paying close attention, I laid it all out.

“Look,” I told them. “Do you really care the Old Man is dead? That leaves you, the three *capos*, in charge of things. Not lieutenants, not advisors, not vice-presidents, not even senior administrative assistants. In. Charge. That’s you. Right now.”

“We see your point, Mr. Carter,” the corpse tells me.

“All you need is the book back. Hell, you don’t even need the book. All you need is the ritual *in* the book. One of you can cast the ritual...”

I watch very closely then. Not at the torpedo, but at the dame and the corpse. She drops her eyes, but him... I’d never want to be looking at two pair and a pile of chips with him on the other side of the table.

But finally, he nods. “You’re right, Mr. Carter. All we need is the Document. Find it, and we’ll let you live. I suppose you know where to start looking?”

I nod. “I suppose you know where I’ll start looking, too.”

“I do,” he says.

Back in her comfy car with the all-red interior, she pulls up to Bennie’s Used and Rare Books.

“We’re here,” I tell her. She stops the car.

“A used book store?”

I nod and open the passenger door. “I just hope Bennie’s home.”

He’s not. The door’s locked, the room is dark and nobody answers the bell.

“Well, that kills my first lead.”

She’s looking at me funny. I explain.

“Bennie’s a black market dealer. Rare and used books is exactly what he sells. I thought your boss got the Nocturnum Document from Bennie?”

“I don’t know where he got it. That’s not my department.”

That catches my interest. “You don’t use any magic at all?”

She shakes her head. “None. At least, no magic from *books*.”

“I get your drift.” I go back to the car. “Give me the keys.” She does. I pop the trunk and get my bag.

“What are you...?”

"My toolkit." I bring up a silver cigarette lighter. Bunko cops never look twice at a lighter. They're looking for black chickens, bottles of blood and belladonna. Low magic. Most of them don't know there's such a thing as high magic, let alone how to look for it. Lucky me.

I flick open the lighter and call up the flame. A few words from the Old Tongue makes the flame turn blue and the doorknob... turns.

"Fancy trick," she tells me.

"Street trick. I can teach it to you."

"No thanks."

We go inside.

The front of the store is just what you'd expect. Lots of shelves and books, all arranged in an order that only Bennie understands. There's a lot of things in this place only Bennie understands. Like the traps he left for people who are doing exactly what I'm doing. Like the runes he left on a safe in his office. A safe made from a black iron I saw in front of a library in a house not too long ago.

But those were runes I'd seen before. Even knew how to crack them if I had to. This one's different.

"This is real exotic stuff," I tell her. "Stuff I've never even seen before, let alone know how to crack." She doesn't look impressed.

"You came highly recommended, Mr. Carter. I don't see why we can't get into this man's safe."

"You keep saying that. When all this is said and done, I'm going to make him very unhappy for getting me involved in all this." I'm looking at all the different runes on the iron door. The iron alone makes it tough. Three different languages of runes make it even messier.

I know how to handle the Latin. The Greek and Arabic are giving me problems.

"Of course, they could be blanks," I tell her.

"What do you mean, blanks?"

"Maybe I should call them bluffs. Bennie's a collector, not a caster. I'd be impressed if he could write English, let alone Latin. Of course, he could have hired someone to come in and do it for him..."

"But then someone else would know the runes."

I nod. "You're catching on quick."

She kneels down next to me. "I'm a fast learner." A soft part of her, just below the shoulder blade, touches my cheek just then. "And teacher."

She keeps pulling this shit and we're getting *nothing* done tonight. Which, by the way, is just fine by me. Still, I've got to keep up appearances.

"Can you break her?" she asks.

I stutter my reply. "Her?"

"The safe," she says. "I thought safe-crackers always referred to safes in the feminine gender."

"I wouldn't know. I'm a detective, not a safe cracker." I stand up. "But, I'll give it a try. She stands up, then stands back. Probably smart. Wish I could do the same.

Like I said, the Latin is easy. It's an old rune, and I know the words to fade it. Once they're spoken, I'm a little sweaty and shaky, but the rune is gone.

"The others?" she asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know them."

"But you're willing to buy that they're blanks?"

I get out the lighter. I open the flame.

"Get ready for some hurt if I'm wrong."

She steps forward, touches my shoulder, squeezing it. She doesn't know her own strength. I remember what she said about magic and that last sentence is true in more ways than one.

I say the words and the flame turns blue. I hold the flame under the safe's lock.

And I find out they weren't blanks.



The way I figure it, the other two—the corpse and the torpedo—put a lot of trust in Ms. Lethe. Either that, or I'm just a distraction to get her out of their way while they cast the ritual without her. I bet she's thought of that. She may even be thinking of that now, unconscious on the floor, bleeding from the head while I'm staring down two demons with only one gun.

Nine bullets. Each of them silver.

The first demon looks like a hundred thousand roaches crawling on a huge slab of rotten meat. When it speaks, every roach speaks, making a chorus of clicks and other sounds I'd just not rather think about. The other demon is a huge man with blue skin, a sharp goatee and horns. Your typical djinn-looking demon. Funny thing is, I think the Arabic rune brought the cockroaches.

I don't know Arabic, so I speak in the Old Tongue, hoping both of them will understand. "No offense I intend."

Blue smiles and shakes his head, flames licking his body. "Violated the sanctum you did. Must pay you shall."

The cockroaches just giggle. Ten thousand giggles with legs rubbing against each other.

"Holding pain here. Willing to share." I'm talking about the runegun, of course.

"Must dine," Blue tells me. "Feed us we must."

"Feed on flesh?"

Blue nods. I'm not looking at the roaches.

I shake my head. "Protect my flesh I shall. No bargain here."

"Die you shall then," Blue says. The roaches squeal in agreement. They all move forward.

I squeeze the trigger on the runegun and Blue bleeds flame. The explosion hurts my ears and I feel the heat from the barrel on the edges of my fingers.

The roaches fly. I can't shoot ten thousand roaches, so I keep on Blue. He's hurt bad by the third round, but after that, I can't see him anymore. I feel ten thousand tiny bites on my skin as I run for the door. I hit the pavement, my face bloody and scarred. The roaches hit the door and stop, bouncing against something that I can't see but I know is there.

"Bound to the store," I say to them. "Too bad for you."

They hiss at me the way only roaches can hiss.

But there's a problem: Ms. Lethe's still inside. I go to the driver's seat of her car and pop the trunk open, run back there and see what's inside.

Tire. Rope. Tire jack. A gas can.

I grab my knife and the can's open. I slice a bit of my jacket and stuff it in the top of the can. Light it.

Then, I think twice. Vencenzi and fire don't always get along.

I shrug. "She's tough." And I throw the can.

Gas spills out on the floor and the flame finds it quick. Then it finds wood floors that haven't been swept in months and books with years of dust. Haven't seen moisture in years. The whole place comes down in less than ten minutes. She's out of there in less than a minute, hair singed and dress burned.

"You fucking bastard!" she shouts at me, her teeth bared and my back against the car, ready to snap from the impact.

"Demons!" I shout at her. "Two of them! Ready to eat us alive!"

She calms down after a second or two. Then, we have to go. Sirens. Last thing I need is arson on my record sheet.

Bennie's place is in flames. And we still don't know what's in his safe. We'll have to check later, after the police are there and gone. But something tells me there isn't anything in that safe that'll save my skin. Including the Nocturnum Document.



I ask her, "Where to?"

She says, "Your place."

I give her the directions and she puts us on the path. We pull up outside the building and I unlock the door. She steps in the small entryway and walks to the elevator.

"It's broken," I tell her.

"How many flights up?"

"Seven." I start climbing. "Come on. A little exercise never killed anyone."

She takes off her heels. "Depends on the exercise," she says and follows me up the stairs in bare feet. On the way up, I'm thinking how queer it is I haven't seen Jack. Not once. They must have him off somewhere. Keep him far away from me. Too much at stake to have us together. That's what I'm thinking. I'd be right. Too bad. I was thinking about getting together with him when I had my face in the sink, when the torpedo showed up. Had a present for him.

I'm thinking all that when I unlock the door. Or, try to unlock the door. It's already open.

“That’s not good,” I say, just under my breath. She hears it all right. She probably heard my heart skip a beat before I even said anything. Smelled the fear on my skin. She stops just behind me, her shoes in hand, caught between stepping up. She stands perfectly still. I pull out the runegun and push the door open. Slowly.

I take a look, trying to see through the darkness. My desk lamp is on. On the floor. The light shining up to show me someone’s sitting behind my desk. The gun is in both hands now. Whoever’s there is bent over, his back facing us. Looking for something on the floor.

“Stand up!”

Whoever it is isn’t listening.

“You heard me! Stand up!”

Still, nothing.

I step forward. Another step. Careful, the gun out in front of me, my eyes on the tip of the gun and the body... wait a second.

It’s a body, all right. I drop the gun to my side. No way this guy’s a danger to me. He ain’t a danger, but he’s a problem. A big problem. I see those hands, the ones that look like spiders, but the long, scary fingernails are gone, ripped from the tips. I see the skin, withered like dry leaves. The gray suit I saw him wearing earlier. There’s just one thing missing. She spells it out just perfect.

“Where’s his head?” she asks me.

I’m scratching mine. “How should I know? We found him together, remember?”

Things are moving fast. I’d be stooping to cliché if I said “too fast.” Besides, it isn’t true. In fact, I wish they’d speed up.

“Why is he here? In your place? And who killed him?”

“Well, unless you can move across town so fast I don’t see you move from my side, I think you may be in the clear on this one.”

“How do you know I didn’t hire someone to do it?”

I turn to look at her. “Sweetheart, the last thing you want to do is make excuses for why you *may* have done it. Especially to the guy you hired to find out who did it.”

She nods. “Oh. That makes sense. Unless I’m trying to fool you into thinking I’m a lot dumber than I look.”

"Trust me. I'm not fooled."

The body is sitting behind my desk, in my chair. The head is missing. I look on the floor. There's no blood. A Vincenzi can hold a hell of a lot of blood, so where is it?

"Unless another Vincenzi is holding it," I say to myself. I'm sure she hears me, but she doesn't show it.

"Two down, two to go," she says. "It's got to be Antonio. It just has to be."

"Why not you again?" I ask.

"I have nothing to gain. I can't cast the ritual. If the ritual *isn't* cast, I go into a whole world of trouble."

I'm looking through the corpse's pockets. "Yeah. Right. A whole lot of trouble. Walking around only at night is a whole lot of trouble."

"Mr. Carter, I'm a businesswoman. I need the daylight hours to do business. Otherwise..."

"Your business is vice, Ms. Lethe, and that has very little to do with the nine-to-five shift."

There's something in his pocket. I take it out and look at it, then put it in my own. I don't think she saw me. It really doesn't matter one way or another. She won't be able to make heads or tails of it, even if she does...

"See what?" she asks.

That makes me jump. "What did you say?" I ask her.

"You said, 'She won't be able to make heads or tails of it.' Heads or tails of what?"

I pause for a long second. "How long have you been doing that?" I ask her.

"Doing what?" she asks me in return. I can see a smile on her face through the shadows.

"Reading my thoughts," I say.

"Only sometimes. When I concentrate."

I take a moment to get my composure back. "I didn't know that."

"Most of you don't. But now you do." She walks over to me and I reach into

my pocket where my lucky penny slips between my thumb and forefinger. “So, why don’t you show me what you found in his pocket?”

I pull it out of the other pocket. It’s a small piece of paper with a bit of scribble on it.

“What is it?”

“A very hastily cast rune,” I tell her.

“What’s it for?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Whoever wrote it did it quickly.”

She looks at me. Concentrates. I look right back.

She nods. “All right. You’re telling the truth. But don’t hide anything from me again. You hear me?”

I nod. “Right-o.”

She turns away from me and the corpse. I let go of my lucky penny.

She’s still got her back to me when she asks, “Is there any way you can tell who did this?”

“Not without the head, no.”

She lights up another smoke and offers me one. “I still don’t smoke.” She doesn’t say anything about that.

“Look, it’s pretty obvious who’s responsible for this,” I tell her.

“I know.”

“And that solves your problem with who has the Nocturnum Document.”

“Or maybe he just thinks I have it.”

My turn to shrug. “Maybe. We can ask him. Either way, I’ve got a dead Vincenzi in my office, and that’s not an easy thing to get rid of.”

Before I get done saying that, I’m on my back with her on top of me, the smell of blood and cigarettes in my face, her eyes sharp as razors.

“You little fuck! You don’t get it do you? He’s going to kill us!”

It takes me a second to catch my breath, there on the ground with a mad Vincenzi on my chest. She keeps shouting at my face. The backs of my hands on the wood floor. Think she busted one of my knuckles.

"I don't know anything about any of this shit! The Old Man wouldn't teach me! Fucker never taught me anything!"

"Women are better at," I manage to get out.

"Sonofabitch just fucked me whenever he wanted. That old skin, like dried, cracked leather. His breath, his fucking *fingernails*!"

I say it again. Maybe she'll hear me this time.

"Women are better at it. That's why."

"Made me drink his..." she stops. Thankfully. "What did you say?"

"Women are better at it than men. That's why he never taught you. He was afraid of you."

She thinks about that for a while. She could think about it until dawn for all I care. Finally, she gets back up. I look at her in that tight red dress and I wonder how she's moving at all. Not a stitch out of place.

She lights another. "Well, Carter," she flips hair from her eyes. "I hope you enjoyed yourself."

I sit up, adjust my shirt. "If being that close to having your neck torn out is your idea of a good time..."

I hope that breaks the mood. It helps a little.

"Look," I tell her. "We still have a few hours before daylight. We can still find the Document. If you're the only one in the room when the ritual is read..."

"I'm the only one who benefits from it."

I nod. "I'm sure he's thinking the same thing. If he has it, he wouldn't go out of his way to kill the corpse over there. But if he *doesn't* have it..."

"Then he's trying to scare me into giving away where it is."

She's catching on. "Which means he's probably watching us right now. Or at least waiting for us to come downstairs so he can follow us to where you've hidden the Document."

That stops her. "What did you say?"

"You have the Document." I say it with the kind of certainty a mother has catching her kid with his hand in the cookie jar. "You were the one who killed him. Antonio didn't do it because he's running scared. Making mistakes. The

corpse didn't do it because..." I look over at old headless over there. "Well, just look at him. See those hands of his? He didn't die clean, sweetheart. He died bad. And someone asked him a lot of questions before he died."

She's scared again. "So, if he knew..."

"He didn't know. If he did, he wouldn't be here." I go over to my bookshelf. "If the corpse knew what was what, little Anthony wouldn't be using him to scare us. He'd just have the Document. He'd be using it right now."

She glares at me through the dim light, the flashing blue neon outside making strange colors on her pale flesh.

She waits. Finally, she tells me, "I didn't kill him, Mr. Carter."

"It's 'mister' again, is it?" She doesn't have anything to say. "Look," I tell her, "I really don't care who killed the Old Man. It doesn't matter one whit to me. All I want is to be alive after dawn. You could have killed me on the floor there. I know it. If you really wanted to kill me, you could. But you need me to cast the ritual."

"That's right." She's thinking. I could be in trouble.

"I want to live," I tell her. "You want the ritual. I also want to be on the side that wins this little disagreement."

"That would be better than being on the side that loses."

I've got what I need from the bookshelf, so I go back to my desk and push the headless corpse out of the way. "If you've got the Document, we can do the ritual right now. Put an end to it. It's a win-win for you. You're the only one who benefits, and he's left dodging sunbeams."

She nods. "All right," she says. "That sounds like a plan."

I look up from the desk. I'm being as genuine as I know how when I ask, "Do you have the Document?"

She smiles. It's a secret smile only certain men get to see. Maybe certain women, too. Never can tell with a Vincenzi.

"Do you?" I ask again.

She flutters her eyes. "No."

I kick the desk so hard my foot hurts.

"I'm sorry, but I wasn't the one who killed the Old Man."

I limp over to my other bookshelf and pull a certain book. “That’s a problem,” I tell her.

The bookshelf tilts and turns and reveals a small room thick with smoke and candles and other smells. Smells that keep her from even looking at the place.

“What kind of problem?” she asks me. Her voice comes from all the way on the other side of the room. Guess the smell was stronger than I thought.

“Antonio didn’t kill the corpse to scare you,” I tell her, gathering up a few things in a bag I’ll need later.

“Why did he do it, then?”

I come back out and put the bookcase back where it was. I’ve got a big bag full of goodies.

“He killed the corpse to scare *me*.”



Her car. She’s driving. Mad.

“I’m *useless*? What do you mean I’m *useless*?”

Dawn is coming up quick. Another hour, tops.

“I didn’t say you were useless. I said he doesn’t have any use for you.”

Around a tight corner. We pass a cop. He doesn’t even blink.

“Sonofabitch.”

Right through the red light. I don’t pray anymore, but I suddenly remember I haven’t forgotten how.

“He doesn’t have any use for me. That’s just great. I’m expendable.”

“Welcome to the club.”

She takes her eyes off the road to glare at me. That’s okay. She doesn’t need her eyes to drive. She’s watching me and I’m looking back at her and the kind of thoughts going through my head I really shouldn’t be thinking but I can’t seem to stop thinking them with her hair and her eyes and her lips and her fingers and all the things those lips and fingers could do all the things they know all the secrets they could share and when I think about all that the whole world just kind of...

"This is his place."

... stops. We've stopped. Drove halfway across town while I was looking at her. She was looking at me. Whenever I'm around one of them, I'm like a forty-five being played on thirty-three.

The three-story building looks down at us, the black sky not-so-black anymore. It's the dim light of dawn creeping up there. Creeping awfully damn fast.

"He'll kill you," I tell her. "He doesn't need you. He needs me."

"And when you're done casting the ritual, he'll kill you."

"I kind of figured that."

Up to the front door.

"You should knock," I tell her.

She looks at the door, moves fast, and the door blows across the entry hall in splinters. She smiles, standing on the other side. "After you, my noble and loyal knight."

"I'm no loyal knight," I tell her. "You've got the wrong guy."

I've got my bag in one hand and the runegun in the other. I don't know if I can handle the kick with one hand. We'll find out.

Up the stairs. She knows where she's going. I'm following right... hey. Wait a second. I came in before her. How did she get ahead...?

That's about how long I have to think about that.

A black blur kicks in my chest and knocks the wind out of my belly, my bag and gun out of my hands. I'm tumbling down the stairs, hearing the sound of a hundred thousand cats, all full of claws and teeth, on the top of the stairs above me. The banister turns to slivers. The pale green walls are coated in crimson.

I get back up, gripping my chest. I think something's broken in there. It hurts to breathe. I leave the bag where it is and pick up the gun. I start walking.

One. Step. At a time.

One.

I can hear them blasting at each other with weapons nobody else has.

Two.

He's on the floor under her, the long gashes on his face closing as she makes new ones.

Three.

He's healing faster than she can hurt him.

Four.

Halfway up. His hands in her hair.

Five.

Her head pulls back, her white neck exposed and she screams. I see his teeth.

Six.

I squeeze the trigger. I've got nine bullets of silver fired from a weapon of rune-carved cold iron.

Blam!

The shot barrels into his chest, black smoke from the wound and his lips.

Blam!

Just a touch below his heart. The pain won't let him move. He's hurt. I raise my aim just a touch. He might as well be a statue. I squeeze the trigger.

click

I forgot to re-load after Bennie's place.

He moves so fast I feel the pain before I feel the impact.

He doesn't say anything. I hear it all.

You don't need hands to cast the ritual, Carter.

I feel three fingers crack, just after my wrist.

You don't need toes, either.

How he can reach them with one hand on my neck, holding me to the wall, I just don't know. But I feel it. If any air was passing through my throat, I'd scream.

You need a tongue, but you don't need...

He's got blood in his smile, oozing between...

... *teeth*.

I feel his cold fingers, like biting into a block of ice. Way back where your mouth is all soft and warm and...

... I feel fire. I hear his scream. His hand on my throat scalds my skin. I smell ash and brimstone. And I'm blind.

I fall to the floor, clutching my broken hand. My eyes are burning cold.

"We need to get you to some water."

Her voice. Her hands, lifting me to my feet.

"What happened?"

"A spank of wood from the banister we broke."

Somewhere, in the back of my head, I know she means "shank," not "spank."

"You've got his ashes in your eyes. We need water. Hold my arm. We'll get it in his place. Then, we'll find the Document."



So here we are at the end, again. I've got my hands and face in the sink, washing the ashes of a dead Vincenzi off my skin and out of my eyes. The sink is full of soapy, dirty water and I'm right there in the middle of it. After a few minutes of washing, I start seeing blurs. Then, a bit more and I can at least bump my way around. She's over there, in the other room, tearing things apart, screaming. I'm where I started with my face in the sink, looking at the man in the mirror.

The eyes are still in place, but I'll need to fix my fingers. And my ankle. They hurt in so many ways, I don't have time to tell you about all of them. I'll be limping for a long time, maybe forever. We'll see.

Outside, in the other room, she's tearing everything apart. The mattress is off the bed, its insides all over the floor.

“God damn fucker!” she’s screaming. “Where did you put it? Where did you put it?”

I turn twenty degrees to the left of the sink and look at the toilet.

“I swear, if I could bring you back I’d kill you all fucking over again you fuck!”

It can’t be that easy.

“You don’t have a bookshelf because you don’t have any books because you don’t read you stupid sonofabitch!”

Something crashes out there. I can’t see her from where I am. I open up the lid.

“Goddammit where did you put it?”

A moment later, I step out of the bathroom with a tiny plastic bundle in my hand. It takes her a second to notice. When she does, I’m smiling.

“In the toilet,” I tell her. “I should have thought of that first. Our boy wasn’t exactly a genius.”

Before I get to ‘genius,’ she’s got the thing in her hand and I’ve got scratches on my thumb and wrist. Ripping at the plastic, tearing it free. Now she’s looking back at me, a little book in her left hand, a little black book like bookies keep, her eyes shifting from killer to kitten.

Now, it’s out in front of her, my blood on the cover. She’s handing it to me.

“Read it, Carter,” she says. “Do the ritual.”

I don’t argue. I take the book. In two minutes, the most powerful Vincenzi in the city will owe me. That is *if* she lives up to her side of the bargain.

That is, if she doesn’t kill me the second I finish.

I get the stuff I need out of my bag. Then, I kneel down and draw a circle. When I’m done, I tell her to stand in the center. She does, pinching her nose.

“What the hell is that smell?”

“Herbs,” I tell her. “Be quiet and let me concentrate. We’ve only got a minute or two left.”

She stands perfectly still, her eyes closed. She looks like she’s ready to collapse. A hell of a night. I’m barely able to keep my concentration. If I wasn’t paying attention, I wouldn’t have a clue what I was doing. Even if I’d done it a hundred times before. She isn’t paying attention. Lucky, I am.

I say the words. They echo all around us. She doesn't hear a word. Inside the circle, she's cut off. But she hears me when I tell her, "I'm done."

She opens her eyes. She smiles. "Thank you, Carter."

Kitten to killer in zero point seven seconds.

She moves. Faster than I can. Faster than *anything* can. Fast enough to put my back on the floor. Fast enough to sink her teeth deep in my flesh. Fast enough to drain every drop in a heartbeat. Dead, bloodless Carter on the floor.

Not quite.

She moves, all right. But she bangs that body of hers against the wall of the circle she's standing in. No way in hell she's getting out of that. Only way is to cast the counter ritual.

And we already know she can't do that, don't we?

"What the fuck is this, Carter?"

I go back into my little black bag.

"Carter, you fuck! What *is* this?"

I get three things. The first is the Nocturnum Document. I've had it with me for a while. Ever since I took it from the Old Man's safe. Right after I put the stake through his heart.

"Carter?"

It was easy, really. Remember that little book I got from Benny? The one I made sure nobody knew was in the city? Had a spell that lets you pass by anybody with Vincenzi blood. They can't even smell you. And trust me, dodging Vincenzi sniffers is a lot harder than dodging the peepers. Good thing I told Benny to get out of town this weekend. He won't be happy when he sees what happened to his store. I'll make it up to him. Not sure how just yet, but I'm making all this up as I go along. Or haven't you noticed?

"Carter, please? What's going on?"

She's gone back to kitten. Her eyes and lips. Her fingers, her thighs. I've been fucked by a succubus. Ain't no way this bitch is getting to me. All I had

to do was think of Sam. Her lips, her eyes, her hair... you didn't think I was imagining this bitch all this while, did you? I thought we knew each other better than that.

And when that failed, there was always my lucky penny. Even the corpse couldn't sniff that one out.

I look at her in the circle and fetch the second thing. A picture frame.

"Carter... I..."

She's out of words. Or, she's saying them and I don't notice. To be honest, I can't tell you which is which. I've never seen a Vincenzi cry. It's something I'll carry for a long time.

The third thing I get. Sunglasses. One of us hasn't been keeping track of time as well as the other. I slide a chair up next to her circle. I put the picture frame on the chair, facing her so she can see what it holds.

"Carter, I can give you anything you want. Anything!"

I put my hand on the rope that opens the shades. "Sweetheart, what I want, you can't give me."

Never underestimate the power of a dramatic pause.

"Carter... why are you doing this?"

I point at woman in the picture. "Her name was Janet."

She looks at the picture. She looks at me. Her eyes tell me she knows why, so I put on the glasses and pull the shades, waiting for the morning sun.



INTERLUDE

THE MIRROR CRACK'D

She's been watching. Listening. High in her house on the hill. She's walked through her gardens, smelled the roses and lilacs. Most of all, she's watched the snapdragons bloom, their yellow snouts aimed at the sun.

Three lives. She owes him three lives.

Three of her ladies saved or redeemed by his hand, and he doesn't even know. He'll never know.

And she's thought of what will happen when she touches him. When she reaches through the mirror and...

She sits in the garden, picks up her needles and starts working again. Only half-finished, it will never be completed. Only half-finished ever since her husband...

Her mind is everywhere. It won't stay still. So much happening and so few know. She holds the needles in her hands. And the sweater. It's just a sweater, that's all. Nothing extravagant, nothing fancy. Just a sweater. "It gets cold up here at night," her husband said to her once. And the next day, she started knitting him a sweater. A month later, he was killed. And the sweater she started was never finished.

But today, she thinks of the Detective and starts knitting.

"Madame," the butler says. "Perhaps you should come inside. It is a brisk evening."

She nods and picks up her work. "Put this in the library, would you?"

"Yes Madame." He takes the sweater away and she sits still in the garden, surrounded by flowers. Her husband liked the flowers. She feels her heart

tighten thinking about him walking through the garden, looking at the colors.

She looks at them now and remembers. When the remembering is done, she lifts herself up and walks inside. She sits for dinner, but can only eat a few bites. The butler takes away her dishes when she's done and she returns to the library putting her needles back in her hands.

All through the night, her hands work while her mind wanders between waking and dreaming, when your mind isn't with your body, when idle work isn't so idle, and every little motion seems right and sure. By dawn, she hasn't slept, but the sweater she started so many years ago is finished.

Just a sweater. That's all. Because he said he was cold.

She puts away her needles and goes to her writing desk. She opens the old desk, wood creaking against wood, the iron fastenings cold. The paper sounds crisp when she lifts a single page off the small pile of pages. She opens the stopper on her little bottle of ink and dips her tall pen into the black liquid. The sound and feel of the wet pen against the dry paper. It's something she's loved as long as she can remember. And when she's done, she folds the paper and slides it into a fresh envelope. Sealing the envelope with her tongue, the taste of the glue.

She rings the bell. The butler stands at the door.

"Be sure this is delivered," she says.

"Of course, Madame."

Then, she goes back up to her room and sits in the sunlight. Her eyes are weary, not only from the long night, but from tears. She knows where they come from and she blesses them.

Then, she turns away from the window and walks to the tall mirror of blue glass.

"Show me," she says, in a language older than any spoken in the city below her.

The mirror fades and twists, making the glass look like a shivering eye, filled with white blindness. Then, the image clears and she sees what she asked to see.

Who she asked to see.

She watches him.

"Three lives," she says. "One life is worth three."

Her tears begin again. Her hand raises up, hesitant. Her fingers trembling. He sits on an old couch, his face bloodied and beaten. At his feet is an open book. The room is almost completely dark, broken furniture and papers strewn about. She reaches forward, and for a moment, just a moment, her fingers touch his weary face. And she whispers one small word.

“No.”

The mirror shatters. All across the city, a thousand mirrors shatter with it. And all across the city, faces turn away from whatever they’re doing and look up at the house at the top of the hills.

She looks at the shards of the mirror, her hands truly trembling now, bleeding from broken shards of glass. She presses her fingers against her body to still them. She sinks to her knees, touching the shards with frantic fingers, as if she could put them back in the frame, one by one. Her lips move, whispering words, but making no sense.

And there’s a knock on the door.

She almost screams. She spins around, rushes to the window. No, they’re not here yet. They couldn’t be.

“Madame?” the voice behind the door asks. “Is everything all right?”

A long, ragged sigh escapes her. “Yes.”

“We’ve had a bit of an accident down here. It seems a few of the mirrors have broken...”

“Every mirror in every Doyle house,” she whispers.

“Pardon me, Madame? I didn’t quite catch that.”

She rushes across the floor and opens the door. She tells him to bring all the servants to her at once. Yes, at once. She turns back to her desk and opens the small safe at the base of her chair. Twelve envelopes. One for each of them. She distributes them all, and somehow, she manages to not let a single tear escape.

But when they’re all gone, all but the butler, she collapses into her chair and weeps.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m so sorry.”

He doesn’t know what to say. So, he leaves her alone, shutting the doors behind him.

Soon enough, below her window, a black car pulls up into the long drive. She heard it at the bottom of the hill and she's been listening to it ever since it reached the bottom of the hill, seven miles down.

The engine idles, then dies. Three men step out, all with low brims and heavy guns in their jackets. Their heels clip on the walkway leading up to the front door. They knock, the butler answers. He asks for a card, but they push him down and call out her name. She hears them, storming up the stairs. She opens a book on her desk, flips to a random page and reads.

AND SOMETIMES THRO' THE MIRROR BLUE
THE KNIGHTS COME RIDING TWO AND TWO
SHE HAS NO LOYAL KNIGHT AND TRUE

She smiles. "Of course," she whispers.

So, she stands up from her desk and turns to the glass doors to the balcony that overlooks the city. She opens the doors and steps through, the wind that whips through the mountains finding her hair and her dress.

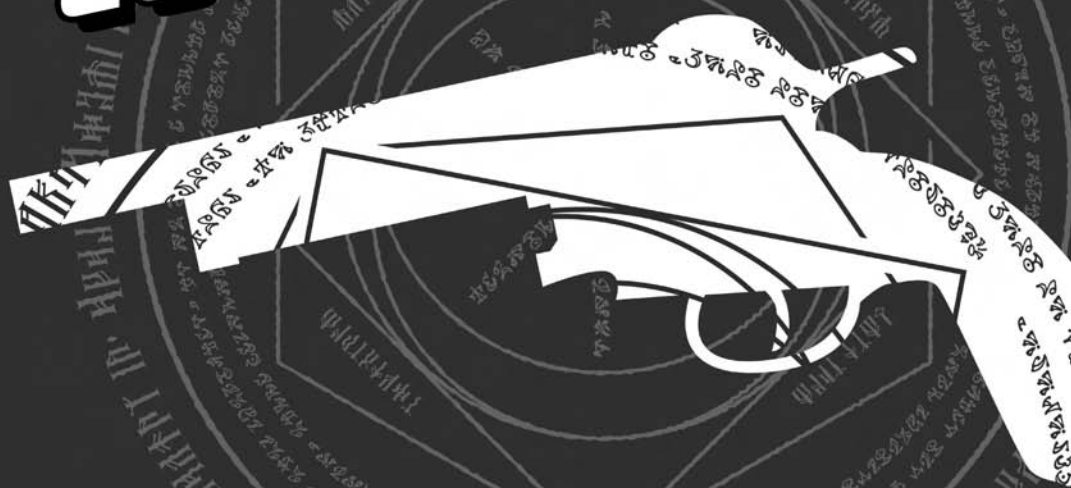
She opens her arms and her lips and she sings. For the first time for a very long time, she sings. Her lungs pushing breath, her teeth, lips and tongue making sounds she can feel in her belly. Her legs tingle. And she sings.

She sings.

She sings.

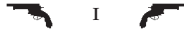
NO LOYAL KNIGHT

**PART THREE:
CONSEQUENCES**



CASE #7

SHINJU



The cabby drops me off in the part of town where I can't read the signs. Instead of handsome Roman letters, all I see are foreign squiggles. Sure, a few of them are considerate enough to put English equivalents under the lines, dots and bars, but not all of them.

I don't like it here. A guy like me can get lost here real quick, and it's hard to hide my white face and round eyes. Fortunately, Arabic numbers are on the street corners, so I can find my way to where my client wants to talk. His name is Yoshio. I send a silent thanks to anyone listening; his lawyer and I can communicate. Sort of.

"Mr. Yoshio thanks you for coming, Mr. Carter." The lawyer talks pretty good. His accent is almost invisible. Must have come before the war, before his people were chased across the water by the thousands in those little boats.

"You go to college out here?" I ask him.

"Yes," he says. "It was difficult."

"I can imagine." I remember growing up in the south. It was hard on the blacks. I can only imagine how hard being yellow must've been.

The restaurant we're standing in smells like fish and I'm pretty sure the meat they're hanging up on the other side of the street doesn't come from either a chicken or a cow. The waiter shows us to a table and the lawyer offers me a seat.

"Thanks," I tell him. "How can I help you?"

"Shinju," Yoshio says, cutting the lawyer off. Then, he says something else I just don't understand.

"My client has been robbed, Mr. Carter."

I nod. I don't like it here. The furthest east my stomach goes is spaghetti.

The waiter brings us small porcelain cups and decanter. Inside is a steaming clear liquid that smells like turpentine. They pour it out for me and another waiter puts cutlets of what look like fish on patties of rice on the table between us. The fish looks raw.

"Is this cooked?" I ask the waiter. The waiter smiles, nods and goes away. I don't think he understood a single word I said.

The lawyer starts talking again. "Mr. Yoshio wishes to make an exchange with the thieves for the stolen merchandise," he says. "And he wishes you to be there when it happens."

I shake my head, pushing myself up from the table. "I'm sorry, but I think you have the wrong man. This is a job for the police."

Yoshio understands that word. He stands up, blocking my way to the door. "No," he says. "No police. You." I look at the other men at the table. Everybody's eyes are on the table. Nobody's looking up.

"I don't understand why I'm here."

Yoshio's lawyer stands up. Yoshio sits down. "Please, Mr. Carter," he says. "Let me explain." I feel a little like a pinball, getting tossed between Yoshio and the lawyer. Probably not unintentional.

I sit back down and sip what's in my cup. It enters my mouth and fills it with a flavor that's sweet and hot and good. The lawyer re-fills my cup.

"Mr. Carter. You're an honest man. Mr. Yoshio knows this and wants you to be at the exchange."

"What exactly is getting exchanged here?"

"Shinju," Yoshio says.

I nod, taking another sip of the hot clear liquid, looking at the fish and rice patties Yoshio keeps eating. I think one of them just looked back at me.

"Perhaps you'd like some chicken?" The lawyer smiles. Yoshio smiles. My gut screams at me to get out of this mess. Problem is, I've got bills to pay and there's cash on the table. No contracts, no favors, just cash.

"We are willing to pay..." the lawyer stops, then pulls out a pad of paper and writes down a figure. He pushes the paper at me. I look at it. A mighty big figure.

"All right," I say, putting the paper between us. "Half up front, half when the exchange is made."

I figure that will scare them off. I'm wrong. Yoshio's lawyer pulls out a blank check and starts writing my name.

"Stop," I tell him. He does. I wait a second, trying to think how to ask what I want to ask. I figure being clever at this table will only cause confusion, so I'm up front about it. "Why me and why not the police?"

The lawyer puts down his pen. "You are *gaijin*," he tells me. "And the police," he finishes the check, puts it between us. "The police have no jurisdiction here." He puts the top back on the pen and puts the pen in his pocket. "You were once a police man. You know that."

I look at that check. "Yeah," I tell him. "I know that. But I don't know what that other word is."

"*Gaijin*?"

"Yeah. That word."

"Outsider," Yoshio says. Again with the tag team thing. "Make things difficult."

I think Mr. Yoshio understands a bit more here than he's letting me know.

"If I make things so difficult," I ask him, "why do you want me there?"

The lawyer and Yoshio smile like the waiter just did. "Be there, Mr. Carter. And bring your gun."

Yoshio's smiling wide, teeth white as the porcelain on the table. I take another sip and the lawyer says something to the waiter I just don't even try to understand.

On the way home I got a cross-language dictionary. I looked up *shinju*, half expecting it to mean *trouble*. Depending on how you look at it, I was right.



Jack's on the phone.

"Why do you call me after you've *taken* the job? I can't talk you out of it if you've already taken the job."

I'm getting dressed. Jack speaks to me from the speaker.

"They play by different rules over there, Carter. You know that don't you?"

Half-dressed, I put a talisman around my neck and whisper a silent thanks that the heating works.

“All I’m saying is that you should do a little research before you go.”

The shirt is cotton and my shoulder holster fits neatly under the silk jacket. The rune gun snuggles right in under my left arm.

“You’re going in blind, Carter. You’ve got to read up or do whatever it is you do.”

I tell him I’m out of time. I’m meeting them in half an hour.

“You’re going to get yourself killed.” I hear a click on the other end of the phone.

Killed? Yeah, probably. But at least the bills aren’t overdue.



I have a standing policy about not taking jobs from clients who lie to me. I shouldn’t be here in Yoshio’s car. I can’t tell what he’s saying to me, let alone whether he’s lying or not. But my electricity bill is in the mail along with the advance check. And I don’t break promises.

The car drops me off on a corner and Yoshio and his lawyer meet me there. “Good to see you, Mr. Carter,” the lawyer tells me. “A good day outside.”

“Let’s get this over with,” I tell them. I spent all last night trying to do research, and I still don’t know what I’m getting into here. So, I sit at the table, the runegun handy, and I wait with my client.

I watch the clock. Fifteen minutes go by. I sit in the corner of the place and watch them at another table, watch them eat things I never even considered edible. I try more of that sweet smelling drink they fed me before. All around are images of beautiful foreign girls, all smiling empty smiles, all staring with empty stares. Not so different than some other places I’ve been after all.

And sitting here, looking at the clock, watching moments tick by, I’m wondering if this is what they mean by “your life flashing before your eyes.” I mean, as far as I know, I could be bleeding on the floor, just under this table, watching the last moments of my life just before it all goes black. They say the brain keeps on working up to ten minutes after the doctors call you dead. I could tell a lot of stories in ten minutes. See the last few weeks of my life going right by me. I imagine myself right there, right now, all but in the ground, my mind still pumping juices from one neuron to the next.

If that's how it works, how does any of us know we're not dying, right now? Or dead, even? Sitting in the grave, replaying our lives like a Saturday matinee in the last few seconds of our lives as our brains give up the ghost.

Yeah, this is how I entertain myself when I'm bored. And my blue isn't your blue, either.

It's a half an hour before another car arrives and five men step out. Everybody's in black suits with dark glass covering their eyes. Mr. Yoshio stands up, and I stand up with him. I stay in the back, but the gun is out from under my arm and in my hands, my hands under the table, hidden by the tablecloth. I look at the men getting out of the car — but the men getting out of the car aren't men. Small. I mean, smaller than usual. And their faces are thick with baby fat. Clean skin, no scars in sight.

"Kids," I hear myself say. "They're kids."

And they are. I mean, not toddlers, but high school kids. And they aren't like Yoshio. I mean, they're boat people, but they're not the *same*. The faces are different.

Something's going on here. Something I don't understand.

I'm thinking all that just as these boys pull a little girl out of the car, her eyes wet and ragged and red.

A little girl. And this time, I mean a little girl. She can't be more than five. A stained white dress. One of her knees has an ugly scab. One of her shoes is missing.

The boys come in. We all stand still for a second or two while they exchange cold stares with Yoshio. Their voices are different. The language they speak between themselves is different. Not just dialect. Then, they all sit, and for just a second, under my client's right sleeve, I see the beginnings of a tattoo.

Shouldn't I have seen that before? Yes. I should have seen that the first time we met. Why didn't I see that?

Everyone starts talking, but I'm doing more watching than listening. Not just looking, but *watching*. I'm watching Mr. Yoshio, fixated on the fact I missed. And for the first time, I also see his pinky finger is missing.

If I was looking at the boys, I'd see the bulges in their jackets. I'd see the tattoos crawling out from under their sleeves. I'd see these kids have the look the kids with Doyle at the end of their names have. But I'm not watching them. I'm not paying attention. I'm watching Yoshio, trying to get a look at him.

And if I was paying attention, I'd notice one of the boys looks like a leader, doing all the talking. He's got eyes and a brain behind that dark glass and he never

smiles. I'd notice another of the boys looks like an iron trap, ready to snap at any second. The bulge under his jacket is bigger than the others. I can't see his teeth behind those tight lips, but I know they're as sharp as razors and his tongue is any color but red.

But I'm not looking at the boys. I'm stuck on Yoshio. Something that won't let me pull my eyes away. I tell myself, *I don't miss details like that. I should have seen it the first time we met.*

I'm *really* in over my head. I shouldn't be here.

Jack was right. I'm going to get myself killed. I've got to get out of here. Now. Remember the mess you got into up in the hills. Remember the Carrion God. Remember poor Lawhead.

Get up. Walk out. Forget the money.

Then, while I'm lost in my own head, everyone starts shouting in languages I don't understand. More facts I'm missing.

Just do what you're supposed to, Carter. Keep your gun handy and use it if you have to.

Problem is, I don't use the piece unless I know it'll work. In this part of town, I don't know when to use the gun and when to put it away. As far as I know, Mr. Yoshio here could be a dragon in disguise, bargaining for a virgin to eat.

And there, right there, something in my gut tells me I might be more right than I realize.

More shouting and quick movement breaks me out of my haze. I look up and I see blades, all shining like silver moons in the dim light. I get up and try to grab Yoshio, but all I get is blood on my hands and a corpse falling next to me. Yoshio's lawyer is next, screaming at me. Of course, he dies looking at me.

Bad luck.

The runegun is out in front of me. Everyone on my side of the table is dead. Just like that. When did that happen?

The boys stand on the other side of the table, all smiling. They've got knives and I've got a gun. And they're smiling.

Mr. Iron Trap moves forward, a blade as long as my forearm in his hand. In the other, something that looks barbed and wicked.

"Stay back," I say. He doesn't listen or doesn't understand or both. He walks right up to the barrel of the runegun. I pull the trigger...

... too late. His kick knocks my hand up high, the gun firing next to my face. There's the heat of the discharge and the smoke in my nose. Sulfur and something else I shouldn't talk about. I blink. When the smoke is gone and only the smell is left, I open my eyes.

And now — right now — I don't hear the echo of the gun or the rain that's started outside or even the laughter of the boys or the *plunk* of the bullet falling to the floor. All I hear is Jack's voice on the phone, talking about rules.

I'm going to die here.

The knife enters my body quick and quiet. I can't even hear the slicing sound for the thunder in my ears. I fall backward, clutching the wound in my chest, tasting the blood rushing up into my throat.

And now I'm lying on the floor, as the stuff that makes me live floods out onto that dirty floor. I'm remembering that thought about my life flashing before my eyes. Right here, right now. All these memories. It could have happened ten minutes ago. I could just now be catching up.

Outside, there's the sound of screeching tires and gunfire. The cavalry, I guess. A little too little, a little too late. There's more sounds and more screaming and the sound of steel hitting steel.

There's movement in the street and the front window of the restaurant. There's screaming, but I can't understand any of it. I can't lift my head to look. I see feet and bodies and blood. And in the middle of it, there's a little girl crawling on the floor. Through the blood, over the bodies. Someone tries to grab her, but he's pushed back by someone else. She crawls over to me, smiling. She looks at me like I've got candy in my pocket, and I think, "She understands about as much of this as I do."

Everything is moving so fast, but that little girl, she just keeps moving toward me, as slow as a watched pot, as slow as backseat permission, slow and painful as a confession. But there she is, kneeling over me, one shoe missing and a scab on her knee. She reaches forward with her little hands to touch me, big Buddha smile on her face. She understands about as much as I do.

She touches my chest and before I know it, her eyes are fireflies. Something hot happens between her fingers and the wound in my body and I remember being a boy putting my hand on a hot skillet because I couldn't wait for the flapjacks any more. I try to scream, but I've lost my breath.

And I can't hear the violence. It's happening all around me: men and boys dying and screaming, flesh ripping, but all I can hear in my head is my own skin

stitching together and a little girl's voice, telling me everything will be all right. We just have to get out of here. Right now.

Before I can tell her I can't get up, the runegun is in my hand.

Nobody's paying any attention. I'm standing and she's clinging to me like she's drowning.

I hear more screaming. Sirens now. I look at the little girl in my arms and I remember what the dictionary told me last night.

Shinju means *pearl*.

Nobody's paying attention. They're fighting and running from the sirens.

There's got to be a back door. There's always a back door.

And before anybody notices, me and Pearl use it.



We don't get far.

Around the corner in the back, down the alleyway. Steam rising up from the grates in the street, the smell of fish everywhere. It's dark. Nobody's on the street. Half the street lamps are dark. I've got a little girl in my arms. Both hands busy.

Both hands.

I left the runegun back in the restaurant. On the floor, under a table.

I hear the fighting from around the corner. I can't go back in there. I wonder when I'll start hearing sirens. If I'll hear them at all. Six years as a cop and I never once set foot in this part of town. It wasn't my beat, but that's not the point. I *never* knew any cop who came in here. Again, I'm hearing Jack's voice.

They play by different rules over there, Carter.

Rules they brought with them from across the water in little boats.

Either way, I've got a problem. A little girl and a runegun I've got to get before someone else picks it up.

I hear the fighting. Wait.

I hear car screaming. Wait.

Car doors. Tires. Wait.

A still, cool silence. Now.

I put her down. She doesn't like that. She kicks and holds on tight. I give her a gentle shush and put her behind a dumpster that smells like the restaurant. She's looking at me with eyes that speak.

Don't go, she tells me.

"Got to, little Pearl." I open the back door. "Now, sit still. I'll be right back."

The back door opens with a load creak, despite my efforts to stay quiet. The kitchen is empty, bowls and pots steaming, some boiling over. Large rubber mats on the floors to keep the cooks from slipping on the wet floor. I see a rack of knives. I take one. A big knife for big fish.

There's two swinging doors that separate the kitchen from the eating area. I wait there for a few seconds. Then, I push one of the doors. *Slowly. Slowly.*

Take a peek. See the restaurant empty. Empty of moving bodies. There's dead men and boys everywhere, blood on every surface. See my runegun under the table where I left it.

All right. Just go. Go. *Go!*

I run over the dead bodies, trying not to slip on blood or trip over limbs. When the gun is in my hands, I'll feel safer. Over the lawyer's body, over Yoshio's body. I guess I'm not gonna get that second check.

I have to kneel down to get the gun. It was bad enough to be stepping over their still bodies. Now I have to get close to them. I put one hand on the edge of the table for balance.

Reach. Stretch. My arm isn't long enough. Why haven't I heard sirens yet?

I have to take my hand from the table and put it on the floor, next to one of the dead boys.

Reach. Stretch. I can touch it with the tips of my fingers. Just a little more...

Someone grabs me. Lifts me. My head bangs on the bottom of the table and I'm thrown half way across the room onto the corpses that squish under me when I hit them. There's blood on my clothes, blood in my eyes. I blink, try to wipe them away and look.

The Iron Trap. He grins at me. I was right about his teeth. He's standing between me and the gun. He pulls a long knife. A bloody knife. I bet that's my blood. I wonder if he knows I was going for the gun. It's the only chance I got.

He's stepping across the corpses without any thought to where his feet land. He steps on hands and noses. I hear the crunch of bones and the wet sound of bleeding flesh. For a moment, I remember the war. Trenches and gas. Stinking bodies and screaming. I shake my head. No flashbacks here, or its time to die. Second time in one day.

He says something to me. I say something back. Really doesn't matter, does it? Neither of us understands. He keeps stepping forward. I could just run out the front door. Leave the gun and the girl behind. I can't do that. Damn. Just then something moves behind him.

Damn. No. I told her to sit still. I told her...

The Iron Trap sees my eyes shift. It's because of what's standing behind him. He senses it. He turns.

Shinju. Her knee scabbed, missing a shoe. Standing there, looking at all this gore. The Iron Trap laughs. He's got his back turned. Fast bastard. I don't have a chance of getting to...

I'm under the table. He's running for the girl.

I've got the gun. He's got his hands on her.

I stand up and shout. He turns, the girl between me and him. Me, with the gun. Him, with the girl. Holds her up next to his chest and head.

He may be big, but ain't too bright.

"Who says I have to aim for your head, pal?"

The gun goes off. Black fire rips through his left leg and he drops the girl. She runs to me, I run to her and we're out the front door before you can crack open a fortune cookie.



We rush down an alleyway, kicking cans and newspaper as we go. Turn left. A flight of stairs. I pick her up and go down. They're steep. I can't move fast enough. My balance is still off and my left hand is shaking so bad, I almost lose her. Then, I almost lose my footing. I fall on my ass and hit the bone you shouldn't. It all gets bad from there.

I spin around, feel a twisting pain in my ankle. I duck and hope my head doesn't hit anything. Curling up, trying to keep Pearl safe.

And after endless bumps down the steep stairs, we finally hit bottom. My ankle's burning, but I can wiggle my toes. My knuckles are broken open, oozing. I want to just stay still right there at the bottom of the stairs, but I know what's behind us, and I get back up.

More running. I'm in deep now. Little Pearl in my hands. More stairs, going down. I take these easy, letting her take the stairs with me. At the bottom, there's more doors, but no more stairs. Some kind of alcove. Dead end. I'll have to climb back up those stairs. With this ankle.

I start to turn, but then, a door opens. I spin around with the piece out in front of me, putting Pearl behind. A little boy is there, no more than ten, with a broom in his hand. He's wearing something that looks like a dress. It's yellow. His feet in black shoes. He looks at me and Pearl.

"It's about time you got here, Mr. Carter," the boy tells me, his accent slurring the words. He sweeps the stoop. "The Master is waiting." I look up above him. A sign swings above the door, but I can't read it. The boy steps back inside, leaving the door open behind him. Light inside, pouring out into the street. Reflecting off the cobbles.

I hear something behind us at the top of the stairs. Shit.

The boy pops his head out. "They can't come in here," he says. "The Master won't allow it."

"Out of the frying pan," I start to say. Pearl grabs my wrist and pulls. Toward the door.

I nod. "All right, darling. What else could go wrong?"

She almost pulls me off my feet. I stumble forward.

There's a plaque on the wall, just outside the door. I almost get a chance to read it as Pearl pulls me in. All I can see are five of those squiggles set in circles.



The place is clean. I mean, dust just wasn't invited. The floors are yellow wood and creak heavy when I walk on them, walking in bare feet. The boy made me take my shoes off at the door. I'm limping in my socks. Lucky I know how to sew, or I'd have toes peeking out. There's jade everywhere, but the rest of the place is sparse. Reminds me of Jack's place. He hasn't got a chair anywhere, not a single chair to sit in. Just like this place.

Round a corner, through a little sliding door I have to duck to move through. It leads into a little room where a little man stands in front of a stove, mixing something in a large curved pot. It sizzles and smokes. The room just might be smaller than him. Just might be.

The boy sits next to him, this old man stirring the pot. He doesn't seem to notice us at all. I move across the room slowly, my hand on the gun, the other in Pearl's little hand.

The boy looks at the gun. "Your weapon will not aid you here."

"Never can tell," I say.

The boy doesn't smile, doesn't blink. He talks like a machine. "You truly are a man of your world, Mr. Carter."

"Yeah, well, this isn't the first rabbit hole I've slipped down."

"A statement more true than you know," the boy says. The old man hasn't said anything yet.

I've put as much distance between Pearl and the old man as I can. My ankle won't let me stand still, but I force it. Pearl's right behind me. She's still holding on to my right hand. The one that isn't shaking.

Sitting between us is a long shaft of wood, about the length of a forearm. "You are in a foreign place, Mr. Carter," the boy tells me.

I nod. "Tell me something..."

"And your people always speak when they should listen."

I shrug. "All right."

The boy pours tea and offers me some. I look at the gun in one hand and Pearl in the other.

"You will have to let one of them go, Mr. Carter," the boy tells me.

"No thanks," I answer back, letting him know with my eyes that I understand both meanings he's trying to convey.

"You are wiser than most of your kind, Mr. Carter," he tells me. "You of all people should know of the healing power of herbs," he tells me.

I look down at Pearl. Then, I look at the gun. *Your weapon will not aid you here.*

I put the runegun away and take the cup of tea. "Thank you," I tell him, trying to be polite, figuring that if these folks are protecting me and Pearl, I should

play along. *If* they're trying to protect us. That's why I have the gun right where I can reach it.

"*Kishi*," the boy says. "That is the right word."

"What?"

"You are *kishi*. Like your Round Table."

I shake my head. "You mean *knight*?"

The boy nods. "Yes. *Knight*."

I shake my head again, sip my tea. "Got the wrong guy, kid."

He doesn't smile, doesn't flinch. "No. *Kishi*. This is you. Different than us. Do you know why?"

I shake my head. "Educate me."

"In our tales, our hero must fulfil his *shukumei*. You know this word?" I shake my head. The boy blinks. "Fate, Mr. Carter. Face his fate."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Your hero," the boy says, "he is cowboy." I know that word. "He lives by his own rules. Makes his own rules."

"Yeah, but..."

"The *kishi*, he is part of the universe. The great machine. This is true courage, Mr. Carter. Looking at the universe and knowing your role in it." For the first time, his voice shows some emotion. "Not running through life like a child, making things up as you go."

I don't get this. First, a bunch of kids try to kill me and now another kid is playing Socrates.

"Look, I don't know..."

The boy picks up that length of wood sitting between us. "Do you know what this is, Mr. Carter?"

"Yeah, a stick."

"It is *kyosaku*."

"All right."

“When boys come to train at a monastery, they must learn to meditate. They must learn to pay attention to the world around them. Most of the time, sitting still, breathing deeply, concentrating on the sound of the universe to hear their role in it, they fall asleep. So, the teachers carry a *kyosaku* and strike the boy when he does so.”

“Funny. The nuns used rulers.”

The boy holds the stick very still. “Do you hear the sound of the universe, Mr. Carter? Do you hear what it tells you?”

I shake my head. “Can’t say that I do.”

The boy nods. “Most people don’t. Most are sleep walkers, moving through life trapped in their dreams. Occasionally, when we are lucky, we are offered a moment of wakefulness. A single moment where we pierce the dream and see the world truly.”

The boy turns, putting the stick in the old man’s free hand. For the first time, the old man moves, taking the stick into his grip.

“Sure,” I say. “Most people aren’t aware magic even exists, let alone that there’s laws, but what does this have to do...”

“The spider,” the old man says. I don’t know why, but his voice reminds me of crows.

“What? What spider?”

The old man keeps talking. “The spider weaves the web, but he cannot see it.” His hands curl around the staff.

“But the fly can.”

And before I can do anything else, the old man moves, all the way across the room, and the end of the staff clips my chin and I fall back. I push myself to my feet, my hand on the gun...

... and we’re in the alleyway. Me and Pearl. Right where the boy found us.

I look up. See the stars. I look down. Pearl’s there, her eyes and smile flashing, as always.

She hasn’t said a single word since I met her, little Pearl. But she squeezes my hand tight, like if she lets go, the big bad world will eat her whole. She’s looking at me right now, asking me to do it. Asking me.

And for the first time since I took this goddamn job, I know what to do.



"This is what I think," I tell Pearl. She's walking beside me, eating an ice cream cone. The chocolate's all over her lips and cheeks. Cute. "I had it all backwards. I'm the outsider. The *gaijin*. I thought that meant I'm the one who doesn't understand the rules."

She finishes the cone and I stop to wipe her face. "But this whole time, I've been distracted. I *should* have seen the tattoos. I *should* have seen the missing fingers. I *should* have seen a lot of things. But I got distracted. By the money. My own fear. A lot of things."

She holds my hand, her fingers sticky with chocolate. "Did you like the ice cream?" She smiles and nods. Silent little Pearl.

"I *should* have seen a lot of things," I tell her. "But the most important thing is this." She stops and looks up at me.

I look up. We've walked right out. Halfway across the town in a few footfalls. A trick I learned overseas. I feel a big smile on my lips. I look down at Pearl. She smiles back.

"I'm the outsider," I tell her. "I knew that, but I wasn't looking at it the right way. It's not that I don't understand the rules... it's that I'm not bound by them."

Pearl claps her little hands, smiling wide. Almost like she understands.

Yeah. Understands. Like I know what I'm talking about.



Jack's on the phone.

"You're not dead?" he asks. "That's good."

"I'm at Pink's," I tell him, standing at a payphone just next to the hotdog stand on La Brea. She likes hot dogs. Can't say I blame her. Three of them in her tiny stomach while I'm still working on my first one. If this works the way I think it does, we'll share a hot dog the right way. The *only* right way.

"Look, I know this sounds weird, but I'm *glad* you didn't come with me."

He doesn't know what to make of that. "Okay. But I don't suppose you could bother to explain what is going on down there?"

“Yeah. Hold on a second.” I turn to Pearl. She wants another hotdog. I give Paul a nickel. “Try chili next time,” I tell her. Paul loads it up nice and fat.

“I’ve got a plan,” I tell him. Then, I tell him where to meet me. And why.

“You may get out of this yet, Carter,” he says.

“I’ll be lucky if I do.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it. Someone’s looking out for you. Can’t you feel it?”

“If you find him, give him a sawbuck for me, would you?”

He hangs up the phone and I give Jimmy another nickel. Jack’s right. Someone is looking out for me. I’ve been too lucky lately and I can’t account for it. Most folks think luck is an abstract thing. They’re wrong. If you know how to smell it, you can. Just like hot dogs.

“The works,” I tell Paul. He’s more than happy to oblige.



My phone’s been busy. If I had a secretary, she’d be busy, too. But not answering phones. Me and Pearl need somebody to get us more soda pop.

“I never knew kids ate so much,” I tell her. She burps. It’s time. I pick up the phone.

“Persistent, aren’t you?” I say to the caller on the other end.

There’s a voice saying something on the other end. I ain’t listening. I’m putting iodine on Pearl’s knee and she doesn’t like it. But she doesn’t make a sound, just skwinches her face. Yeah, I said skwinches. It’s what my grandma said my face did when she put iodine on my knee. If it’s good enough for her, it’s good enough for you.

“Look, here’s the deal,” I tell the phone. “You want the girl? *You* meet *me*. Slauson and Westminster.” Nice names I can pronounce.

“Mr. Carter,” the voice on the other side says. A new voice. “I’m certain we can make the arrangement agreeable.”

“Oh, it’ll be agreeable, all right. Me and Pearl get more agreeable all the time.”

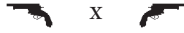
“I promise you, Mr. Carter. If you’ve harmed her in any way...”

“I haven’t. She’s still your perfect little Pearl.” I pause. “By the way, who is this? The punk kids who stuck me or the old men who lied to me?”

They pause. “We did not lie to you, Mr. Carter.”

“That makes you the punks. Keep your knives and swords and P.I. stickers at home, boys. Otherwise, there’s no telling what this round-eyed devil might do. And trust me, you’re on *my* ground. I’ll know what you bring.”

I hang up. Then, I pull out the business card I got from that attorney and make a phone call.



Slauson and Westminster. There’s a gin joint on the corner hidden behind a coffee house. Right over there’s Dick’s gym. Across the street is my favorite place for pasta: Hank’s Italian Restaurant. That’s where I’m sitting right now with little Pearl, slurping up noodles. Not the noodles she’s used to, but she’s working them like she was born to: with a fork and a spoon.

Hank taught her good. His huge hands around her tiny hands, his big voice soft, almost fragile. You’d never know he was in for assault and battery. Fifteen years.

“You wrap ‘em up like this, sugar,” he says. She watches the fork and spoon twirl around the noodles and she almost laughs. Almost.

“You got kids, Hank?” I ask him.

“Nah.” His smile’s as big as Old Muddy. “But I had six brothers and two sisters.” His accent doesn’t come from the Vincenzi side of town, but when he was in the clink, he learned how to cook. Fifteen years worth of learning to cook. And a whole lot of Vincenzi to tell him when he got it wrong. Eventually, he learned how to get it right and when he got out, he decided he liked filling people’s stomachs more than picking their pockets or breaking their faces. Good choice, Hank.

“They should be here any minute,” he tells me. His eyes are on the clock. Mine are on Pearl.

I’ve got last second doubts. This is a tricky thing I’m pulling off here. It all depends on her. I’m not even sure if she understands that. Just outside, I’ve got another friend. The one who thought I was dead. At least, as good as dead.

“I should have laid a wad down on it,” I told him just before me and Pearl walked into Hank’s. He’s in the driver seat, just in case this doesn’t work. It should work. Damn, it *will* work.

"This isn't going to work," he says between those teeth of his.

"Keep the piece ready."

"Always." He leans back in the seat, leans back in those black glasses of his. The gun in his hand is as cold as his skin.

Back inside, me and Hank see a set of headlights turn the corner. Down Westminster, another pair pulls into view. Both right on time.

Out of one steps blue suits and ties. The other, boots and dungarees. Both want the same thing. Each group sends one set of shoes into the restaurant. They both walk up to the table, staying clear of each other the whole way.

"You lied to us, Mr. Carter," says the boy who walked in. "You said this was a private meeting."

I shake my head. "Nope. I never said anything about privacy." Pearl's still eating noodles with big Hank standing over her.

The man in the suit looks at me. He looks at the boy. "Shinju," he says to me.

"Don't talk to me," I tell him. "Talk to her."

The boy and the suit both look at the little girl. They pause for a second, looking at Hank. He's big, but he's clean. They know that. I saw them move back in their town. Over there, they'd have no problem with Hank.

But this ain't *over there*, now is it?

It's *my* side of town.

"Shinju," says the boy. The suit repeats it.

She looks up from her spaghetti, her mouth red from the sauce. The suit's skin goes white as he realizes what she's doing. The boy hasn't figured it out yet. But he will.

The suit says something to the boy. The boy's face turns as white as the suit. That's when he turns to me.

"You let her eat... cow?"

"And ice cream," I tell him. "She *loves* ice cream."

"Ice cream!" Pearl says. Just as loud as an alarm on a battleship, and she says it again. "Ice cream!"

Both of them fall backward. The suit falls on his ass. That makes me smile, but more importantly, it makes Pearl laugh. Loudly.

The boy and the suit don't know what to say. They're watching that silent little girl I found on their side of the town. She ain't wearing that little white dress anymore. She's got my niece's hand-me-downs. The shoes didn't fit, so I've got to go to the store tomorrow and get her new ones.

"Shinju," the suit says.

"Pearl," I tell him. "Her name is Pearl."

The kid shakes his head. "You have no idea what you've just done, Carter."

I smile. "I think I do."

Then, from behind me, Pearl looks at both of them and says, "Go away!"

And that's what I was looking for. Good girl.

The boy pulls something from his jacket. He's fast. They were too damn fast for me in that restaurant when they stuck that knife in my side. He's too damn fast for me here, too.

But over here, *nobody's* faster than Jack. Sitting at the table just beside us, he grabs the boy's hand and twists it. I hear bones break. Hank grabs Pearl's face and buries it in his chest. I see her peek through his thick fingers and I wonder for a second if she *shouldn't* see this.

The suit looks up from the floor. Looks at me, looks at Pearl. I kneel down and talk to him while Jack works on the kid.

"It took me a while to figure it out," I tell him. "But here it is, just in case you haven't."

I put my finger on his chest. He doesn't like that. "You're the spider." I point back at me. "I'm the fly. And if I choose not to land in your web, you've got no power over me."

Watching his eyes, I think he understands.

"I forgot a few things over on your side of town. I forgot there are some rules that are true, no matter where you are."

That's when I hear the sirens. That's when I hear tires squealing outside and men with badges and guns burst through the door. Detective Ben Schullson, right on time.

I look back at the suit on the floor, his face filled with surprise. "Welcome to *my* part of town, asshole."

"Asshole!" Pearl shouts between Hank's big hands. She points at the man on the floor. "Asshole!" she says again.

I nod and stand up. Ben's there, putting everybody in cuffs. I shake his hand. "Good to see you again, Detective."

He's all business. "You willing to testify to what you told me you saw over the phone, Mr. Carter?"

"Yup."

"All right." He looks at the broken boy on the floor. Jack's nowhere to be seen.

"How did that happen?" he asks me.

"Another customer helped me out. I won't be able to point him out in a line-up."

Ben nods. He understands.

"Selling little girls," he says to the lot of them. "You should be ashamed of yourselves."

Yeah, there are some rules that are true no matter where you are. No matter who you are.

They pull the boys and suits away and I sit back down at the table with Pearl. She's smiling.

"Carter," she says to me, pointing up.

"Yup," I tell her. "That's me."

Hank goes back to the kitchen. "I hear she says 'ice cream,'" he shouts over his shoulder.

"Ice cream!"

Hank smiles and wipes his hands on his smock. "I'll be right back."

I watch him leave, then I watch her eat. She came through for me, all right. Little Pearl. What in the world am I going to do with you?

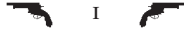
She finishes her spaghetti and looks up at me from the empty plate.

"Puppy!" she says.

And somewhere in the panic, I realize I didn't teach her that word.

CASE #8

**“HER NAME
WAS JANET”**



Those words still echo in the air, along with the dust from the woman I just watched burn into cinders. The sunlight hit her skin, and I watched it blister, then burn, then blow away. It takes a little while, but Janet finally speaks.

“That was real pretty,” Janet tells me, smoking a cigarette, leaning against the wall, half-transparent. “But you’re still gonna die.”

“It’s done,” I tell her. “They’re all dead.”

Long drag. More smoke I can’t smell. “Yeah.”

“Now you want to tell me why?”

She shakes her head, disturbing her smoky halo. “They killed me. That pissed me off. Ain’t that all the reason a girl needs?”

I take a seat, my hand throbbing. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

After a long rest with neither of us saying a word, I finally get enough strength to clean up after myself. I use every trick I learned in the bunko squad, and by that I mean, I do everything they *didn’t* teach us. The boys won’t look too hard, though. On hits like this, they never do.

“You’ve gone a long way down, Carter. Murder and all.”

“It was self-defense,” I tell her. “And a means to an end.”

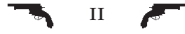
She walks across the room, her blue dress shimmering in the morning light. She fills up that dress good. Pity she can’t be touched. Not by the likes of me, anyway.

“So, you got me what I wanted,” she says. “Now, let’s get you what you want.” She keeps quiet until I finish. “So, what is it you want, Carter?”

I stand up, my head all but reeling for the rituals I’ve put down. “I need a ghost,” I tell her.

She smiles that shimmering smile. “Well, you got one. What you need me for?”

“To catch a ghost.”



We're in a rental, driving down Pine Ave. She lights a cigarette. "At least I died with smokes in my pocket," she tells me.

"At least I can't smell them."

She blows the smoke right in my face. Ghost smoke. "Lots of things you can't do. And you're such a looker."

She touches the shiner on my eye. I don't feel a thing. Not even a tingle. "Nasty."

"This is serious," I tell her. "The man we're looking for is not a nice guy."

"After watching you last night, I'd watch who you call naughty and nice, Carter."

I ignore that. "His name is Victor Sarzo. He's a serial killer. He's a ghost and he's jumping from body to body."

"Nice trick. Maybe he can teach it to me."

A turn down Vermont. Another turn down Third.

"He killed seven people before we caught him."

"We?"

"My partner and me. When we caught him, he possessed Mac and ran."

"So he's in your partner's body now?"

Cut to the chase. I tell her all about it. I didn't think a ghost could go pale. I'm learning a lot in the last twenty-four hours.

"I don't know if I want to do this..."

"We have a deal. The Vincenzis are dead. Now, it's your turn to ante up."

"I didn't think it would be like this." She sits quiet, her ghost-cigarette burning in her fingers. "If I'd known..."

"That's why I didn't tell you," I say.

"Well," she says. "If we're going after him, how do we find him?"

I stop the car. A big brown brick building with ten stories and a lot of stairs.

"The hard way," I tell her.



Breaking into Ben's apartment is easy. He's not expecting anybody like me to come knocking.

A drop is all I need. Just a drop. I start in the bathroom, but he washes his razor clean. But, like every other man in the world, he leaves hair in the sink. I take his toothbrush, too.

I dig a little deeper. I find a baseball cap. The lining is brown with sweat. That's three. One more. There's a picture of him and a young woman on his drawing desk. Hair, saliva, sweat and the image. That should do.

I drop everything on the floor and do the deed. I'll help him clean the circle off his floors when this is all over. She watches me, keeping her trap shut the whole time. Good girl.

When it is done, she asks if it worked.

I wipe my brow. "No," I tell her. "Sonofabitch. Your kind make so much noise."

"You didn't even *see* him?"

I shake my head, getting to my feet, staggering a little. "No. But he's still here. I know that much."

That's when I fall flat on my ass.

"You okay, Carter?"

I shake my head. "No," I tell her. "Not really."

I've almost burned myself out. Too much too fast. Von Junzt's book. The Nocturnum Ritual. Finding Ben. I wouldn't be surprised if my soul jumps up out of my mouth and dances away any second now. I can feel my brain squeezing inside my skull and my heart pounding on my chest. Any more of this and I'll be needing nitroglycerin pills to keep on my feet.

"I'd offer you a hand," she tells me. I look up. Her voice and her eyes show me something I haven't seen in her yet.

"Thanks," I say, doing my best at sincere. I push myself back on my feet.

"Maybe you'd better take a rest," she says.

"No. I have to get Ben back."

"Just lay down on the couch for a minute or two," she says. I can see her now, wishing she could touch me. Wishing she could touch *anything*. Wishing she could push my dumb ass on that couch.

I nod. "All right. You win. But only a minute. If I fall asleep, after all I've done, there's no telling how long I'll be on that couch."

I lay down. She kneels next to me. "What do you mean?"

"Magic takes a lot out of you. Do too much and you can end up sleeping for a long, long,"

"Wake up, Carter."

What?

"Open your eyes."

Where the hell...?

"Come on. I know you're awake."

I open my eyes.

Four men, dressed all in black. Black glass on their eyes. I try to say something, but I can't. I know I've been asleep, so I put my hand on my chin. The stubble is thick. Almost two weeks worth of thick. My stomach aches. My eyes are dry. The light hurts.

Two weeks.

The man behind the black glasses talks to me. "You've been asleep, Carter. Big sleep. You know the language I'm talking?"

I do. "I do."

"That indicates to me you've been using deep magic, Carter. You know your license only allows..."

"I know what my license allows and doesn't allow, kid-o."

Mr. Black doesn't like that. Tough shit.

"I could take you in, Carter," he says. "In fact, I probably should." He turns and points at the room. "Look at this crap here."

He points at the circle I made on the floor. The black mark in the wood my fire made.

"That's sweat, hair, saliva and an image, Carter. You know what that looks like."

I try to push myself up. I fail. *Big sleep*, he called it. I've never heard it called that before. I'm not up on the jargon these kids use today.

"I need a glass of water," I tell him. It hurts to talk. Hurts to move. Hurts to think.

He kneels down. Looks me in the eye. "I don't think so. Not until you tell me what's going on here."

My voice gets caught in my dry throat. I speak very slowly. "Water," I tell him. "Can't... without... water."

He looks at me through those black glasses. Then, without turning, he shouts for one of his cronies to get me what I need. Takes a couple of sips for my lips to remember what to do. It's warm. I hate warm water. But it's what I need.

"You've got your water, Carter. Now tell me what you were doing in Schullson's apartment using illegal magic."

"First off, kid. You can't prove it was me who did that."

"You were here. Unconscious. You've got chalk on your fingers. I bet the boys downtown can tell me if that's corpse chalk." He doesn't even grin. "And I bet it is, Carter. I've got you on possession and casting. Fifteen years for each. And I haven't even tagged on that little B 'n' E bit you pulled to get in here."

I try to push myself up again, but I use the wrong hand. I scream. Can't help it.

"What's wrong with your wrist, Carter?"

"Nothing."

"Looks like you hurt yourself before you fell down."

"Yeah."

"Lucky for you the big sleep kept you preserved. Just like a mummy, eh?"

"Yeah," I say again. "Lucky." He's right, though. Two weeks with broken fingers would have hurt. Hell, it already hurts.

"Two weeks in suspended animation, Carter," he says. "What kind of magic would put you under for two weeks?" He turns. I get a peek over his shoulder. One of his boys has my bag. The one with the Nocturnum Document. And Von Junzt's book.

He turns back to me. "I guess I'm gonna find out."

Improvise, Carter. Think!

He stands up, pats me on the shoulder. "You aren't under arrest yet, Carter. But don't leave town. Okay?" His boy hands my bag to him. "We may have more questions later."

"Sure."

He points at one of his goons. "Make sure Mr. Carter leaves the scene of the crime." He smiles at me. "Just as soon as he's able."

Prick.

Mr. Black stops in the doorway. "Watch it, Carter." Like he heard me. Then, he's gone. And ten minutes later, they drop me on the street, lying on the sidewalk. The boys in black pull away and I'm there alone.

Mr. Black gone. The boys in blue gone. And Janet gone.

Yeah. She took off when I dropped my lucky penny in his pocket.

Prick.



I stop at the hospital long enough to fix my fingers. I whisper a few words before the doctor starts. He knows what I'm doing, but he doesn't say anything. I don't suspect he'll snitch, either.

I make my way back to my office. There's a shower there and I use it. My head still aches, my lungs hurt from breathing. Blood down the drain. The hot water washes stink and sweat off my skin. I wash up with one hand covered in a plastic bag. I spend the rest of that day resting, taking calls. I book a few gigs. A rich wife wants me to follow her husband. I tell her to meet me in the office tomorrow at one. She may show up.

It's just about when the sun's about to go down behind the hills when the phone rings and a man's voice is on the other end.

"Carter?" he asks.

"That's me. Who's this?"

"Come over to the 42nd street station and take your goddamn ghost with you."

I chuckle. "She causing problems?"

I hear him snort. "A woman," he says. "Figures. Come get her, Carter."

"No, really. I want to know. What did she see that you didn't want her to see?"

"Fuck you, smart ass. Come get her."

"Be right there." I catch a taxi and head on over.



When I get there, Mr. Black is on the steps with Janet right behind him. He's got my bag. I open the door to the cab and before I can get up, he throws the bag in my face.

"Pissant," he says. "Get rid of the bitch."

She doesn't like the sound of that. I tell him.

He's shouting now. "Get rid of her, Carter!"

"What's the matter, Black? Don't like someone looking over your shoulder?"

"Fuck you," he says. Right there, in the middle of the street.

"Guess not," I tell him.

Janet lights a cigarette. "He figured it out when he tried something out of that little book of yours," she says.

"The black one?" I ask.

"Yeah. I felt woozy for a second, and he saw me. Then, he slammed the book shut and started freaking out."

"You talking to her?" he asks me.

I nod. "Yeah."

She smiles. "Tell him I saw him jack off in the men's room."

My laugh gets caught in my throat and I cough. "He did *what* in the head?"

"What she saying?" he shouts at me.

"And I saw him fiddling with the files down in the basement."

"And the basement?" I ask her. "Which files?"

"Oh God," he's saying now, falling to the steps. "Oh God."

Janet's not done yet. "And what he said about the chief. That was priceless."

She steps up and whispers it to me, just for fun. I look at our buddy Mr. Black and shake my head.

"Get rid of it, Carter," he says. "I don't care what you have to do. Get rid of it."

"I get my books back," I tell him.

He nods. "Yeah, they're in the bag." He points to the pack over my shoulder.

"All right." I look around at the crowded street. The people looking at a bunko boy about to cry like a sissy.

"Give me your pants," I tell him.

I see him blink behind his dark shades. "What did you say?"

"Your pants. She's anchored to your pants. "

He shakes his head. "No fucking way," he says.

I shrug. "Fine." I turn on my heel. "I'd love to see what she's gonna see tonight when you go home...."

"Goddammit!" he shouts, his hands shooting down to his belt buckle. Next thing I know, he's standing half-naked in the street, in white and blue striped boxers and those little suspenders on his socks.

I throw his pants over my shoulder. "Thanks," I tell him.

"Yeah," Janet says, whispering in his ear. "Thanks."

He looks like he might have heard that. Probably did. Janet and me get in the cab and we leave him far behind us.

"Prick," she says, sitting in the seat beside me.

"That seems to be the consensus," I tell her.

Back in my office, I toss the bag on my desk. She lights another one. "You should quit those, you know," I tell her. "They'll kill you."

"You're not funny," she says. She's lingering by the pants, the suspenders still dangling over the backside of my chair.

"You mind?" she asks.

I nod and go to the trousers and pull out my lucky penny. I set it in the middle of the floor. "That should let you wander 'round the room," I tell her.

"Thanks," she says. "So, you're pretty screwed, huh?"

I sit behind the desk, pull out my bottle and cup. "You could say that."

You got any clue how we're gonna find happy boy?"

"Not one."

"Too bad." She smiles through the smoke. "I do."

I look up from the chair behind my desk. "What's that?"

"Check your bag," she says. "He put something in there. A file from the office. It's what he was looking for down in the basement."

I open the bag. There's Von Juntz's book and the Noctur —

There's a file all right. And I see the name on it. A thick file. Thicker than the one Ben and I were looking over in his office. A lot thicker. I look through it. Fifteen more cases I never even heard of. All since I gave up the badge.

I read the name on the file. She says it for me.

"Victor Sarzo."



It's a good plan. Tricky, though. Could get us both in a lot of—cut that. I'm already in a lot of trouble. And she's dead. Ain't much more trouble than that.

I go over the file with my good hand. My left hand. They've been keeping dibs on him, but keeping their distance. They're scared of him. I see why. Half the names on the folders inside his file are cop names. Seems he's got a thing for cops. Possessing them, using the confidence their badges give them. Makes his job easy.

"He left town," I tell her. She reads over my shoulder. "And they let him go. Didn't want to get on his bad side."

She points at something on the front of the folder. "What's that?" she asks.

I look at it. A symbol I haven't seen before. Looks like the Old Tongue, but it isn't. Different. "I don't know," I tell her. "It looks like something I've seen before."

"Something you've seen before?"

"Old Tongue. There's a word. Looks like the word."

"What's it mean?"

I shake my head. "Pantheon," I tell her. "But the character is different. Simpler. Maybe an old dialect I haven't seen."

I go through the cases, one by one. Lots of cops. Lots of victims. They kept track of him, but didn't move on him. I don't know why. They'd have the manpower to catch him and the rituals to take care of him.

"Why are they so afraid of you?" I ask the folder. I just don't understand it. Technically, he's a cop killer. You'd think they'd send every gun they had...

"It doesn't make sense," I tell her.

"Doesn't have to," she says. "If they're scared of him, then we should be scared of him, too." She leans back against the wall. "The thing I don't understand is why you *aren't* scared of him."

I shake my head, turn the pages. "Because I'm stupid." Then, at the very end, there's a glossy photo. I don't recognize the face when I first see it. He didn't have the beard when I saw him last. Grows fast. But there he is, standing in front of the Squire Hotel, holding a pack of smokes.

Ben Schullson. And he's wearing Sarzo's clothes.

On the back of the photo there's a number. The Squire. The file says that since I lost track of him, he killed three women out on a drive on the freeway to the desert. That's four more.

"You have a plan?" she asks me.

I nod and go to the closet behind my bookshelf. I take a small charm out and drape it around my neck.

"What's that?" she asks.

"Keeps folks like you out," I tell her.

"Why..."

"You and Sarzo, I mean."

Her head cocks to the side. "You've got a plan," she says, this time with a bit more confidence.

"Ghosts make interference," I say out loud. "And a body can only hold one soul at a time."

"Then how is he in your friend?"

"Possession is painful. For both parties. One more than the other." I point at the picture of Ben on the desk. "You can guess which one?"

"Yeah," she says.

"You get two souls sharing one body, that's like a cart holding too much weight. Either somebody's got to get off..."

She finishes for me. "Or the cart will break."

"Right. And with two souls in one body, the body eventually burns out."

She's figuring it out. "The body burns out and it can't hold *any* souls."

"Yeah. And if you get *three* souls in one body..."

Her eyes light up then. She's figured it out. "You're gonna teach me how to do it," she says.

I pick up Von Junzt's book with my good hand. My left hand. I just hope it doesn't start shaking. I open up to the marked page. "Just learned the trick myself not too long ago."



It's a simple plan, really. Ghosts can see ghosts. He'll see her coming. But not if I've got him distracted. Sarzo will have to jump somewhere, and once I've got myself guarded, he'll have nowhere to go.

Nowhere but Hell, that is.

So, we're here at the Squire. The lobby. Before we came over, I called, asking if there are any suites available on the tenth floor. He tells me only one of them is occupied. When we get there, I ask the front desk about the resident in #1002. He's not in, but I can leave a message. I ask if there's any other way to get up to the tenth floor. The desk clerk tells me there's only one elevator and its right there. If I sit here in the lobby, he'll be sure to see me.

I walk over to the elevator and step inside, taking it all the way up to the tenth floor. The doors open and I take a look around. There's a bit of carpet loose in one of the hallway corners. I pull it up a little more and slip a penny underneath. Then, I get back in the elevator. And I wait.

I count seven people before he steps in. He sees me and stops.

"Benny!" I shout, grabbing him on the shoulders. "How have you been!"

"What the hell are you doing, Carter?" he mutters under his breath.

"Benny! I'm just so glad to see you!" I grab the elevator gate and swing it shut.

"Come on! Let's go up and talk about old times!"

The doors close. He hasn't moved an inch because he feels what everyone in the lobby didn't see. A runegun in his side.

"Don't fucking move, asshole," I tell him. The doors are shut. It's just him and me now.

"I still have the knife, Carter," he tells me.

"Yeah, you've got a knife and I've got a gun. Where does that put us, Sarzo?"

He grins. "There's pointing a gun, and then there's firing a gun. Those are two different things, Carter."

I slam him against the wall and put the muzzle against the bottom of his chin.

"Listen here, you fuck. I was a soldier in the war, and I've killed better men than you."

"Put the gun away, Carter," he tells me. "Put the gun away and we'll talk."

"You're talking with another man's lips, Sarzo. Talking with borrowed lips. Talking on borrowed time. You should have been dead a long time ago. And we're gonna remedy that. Right now."

The elevator reaches the tenth floor.

"Open the door," I tell him. He does. Janet's there, waiting for us, a cigarette in her mouth. She sees us and that ghostly smoke drops out of her lips to the floor.

"This is it, Janet," I tell her. "Do it."

"Carter," she starts. I can't spend more than a second looking her way. Not with Sarzo this close.

"Do it!" I shout at her.

"What's she supposed to do, Carter?" he asks me.

I look in his eyes. Ben's eyes. Ben who trusted me. Ben who came to me for help. Ben who got fucked because I didn't pay attention. Because I wasn't careful enough.

“Do it, Janet!”

“Carter, I can’t!”

“Why?” I waste one second looking at her. She’s terrified.

“Carter,” she starts. Pauses. Then, she finishes. “He’s not a ghost.”

I look at Ben’s face. His grinning face. That same grin I’ve seen on three men’s faces.

“Not a ghost,” I hear myself saying through half-numb lips.

“No, Carter.” He says. “And I told you, quit calling me Sarzo.”



I’m on the floor. I think my jaw might be broken. The gun spins from my hand. My good hand. My left hand. It starts to shake. He’s walking across the carpet, right over the penny I hid there. He kicks the gun away.

“Little fool,” he says. “All this time, you thought I was a *ghost*?” He laughs. That laugh I’ve heard from three men’s throats.

A kick to my gut. I feel at least one rib come close to breaking. Moving on its own.

I try to talk. “What the fuck are you, then?” A stomp on the back of my head, my face hitting the floor. At least my jaw isn’t broken.

“Something you will never understand, Carter.”

He tries another kick. I grab his ankle and twist. He falls back a step. I kick at his other ankle and he’s on the floor. I twist the foot I’ve got, but my good hand has no strength, no grip. He laughs more. I stumble over him, staggering for the gun.

“What good will that do you, Carter? You can’t shoot me. You haven’t the will.”

I grab the gun, lifting it up. It takes two hands to fire this thing. Some may say I’ve only got one good one, but I know better. All I’ve got is my left hand. That means I’ve got *half* a good one.

“I’ll shoot. I swear...” My left hand is shuddering.

“Even if you do, even if you kill *this* body, where do you think I’ll go next?”

He steps forward, reaching out. He limps just a little. He grabs the charm I’ve got around my neck. The one that keeps ghosts from jumping in and taking residence.

"You think this could prevent me from taking your body?" He throws it on the floor. "Quite the contrary, Carter. I could take you at any time."

Just then, just when he's saying "contrary," something happens. I feel the tips of my fingers and toes go numb. My tongue does the same. I remember that time someone slipped me absinthe in Irish pub. I try to blink, but my eyes aren't mine anymore. I try to move my left hand, but it doesn't belong to me. My lips move and it's my voice I hear, but it isn't me talking.

"What are you gonna do now, motherfucker?" my voice asks.

Sarzo stops, his eyes betraying his confusion. "What did you say, Carter?"

"Wrong, asshole," Janet says, speaking with my lips. "Not Carter."

I feel my left hand pull the trigger. The impact blows my body back at least ten feet. The back of my head bangs on the floor and I want to look up, look up and see what happened. But she's doing the driving now.

She gets me up to my feet. "Sonofabitch, that's got a kick," she says.

Sure does, I tell her. I don't know if she can hear me. All I know is...

Oh hell. Here comes the pain. Like falling asleep on your leg for an hour and waking up and you can't walk. She feels it, too. She stumbles for a second, but she keeps the gun up and pointed at Sarzo. At Ben. At whatever the hell it is that's in him. And my hand is as steady as steel.

There's black smoke coming from Ben's leg, just above his knee. He's grabbing it and holding it tight. No blood. The bullets I put in there burn the wound shut tight. Just in case I needed to use it.

"Now," she says, sitting down on his chest, putting my legs on his arms, my knees on either side of his head. "Now, we're gonna take care of this."

"What is *this*?" Sarzo's screaming.

"This is one angry motherfucking bitch. Not Carter anymore. And I don't know this Ben bastard from Adam. You know what that means?" She puts the gun under his nose. "That means I can work on you for a long fucking time and not give a single shit about it."

The barrel's hot and it burns Ben's nose.

"Now, you've got a choice, asshole. You can skedaddle or you can stick around. Either way, you're not getting inside Carter. That means you've got nowhere to

run. Nobody to jump into. You stick around, I'll just keep on hurting you until you go. Or, you can take off and spare yourself the hurt. I really don't care one way or another. It's just good to *touch* things again. It don't matter to me what it is I touch." She leans in close. "Or why."

"Little woman, I..."

She slams the gun into the side of his head.

Use the butt, Janet, I tell her. Not the barrel. I still don't know if she can hear me.

"Get gone, you bastard!" she's shouting. Another swipe with the gun. This time with the butt. Maybe she can hear me.

She keeps hitting him. And hitting him. And hitting him. Ben's face is a bloody mess. Then, in the middle of the whipping and the cursing, she stops.

Very clever, Carter. I'm impressed.

I was cold. I get colder.

You were asleep for a long time, Carter.

I feel like a wrecking ball just hit my heart.

And while you were asleep, I was busy.

In me. The fucker is in me. But he's slipping. He can't hold it.

And before that, too. I've been watching.

He's almost gone.

They know, Carter.

Almost...

I told them.

... gone.

I feel my body collapse as Janet leaves. I hear Ben's ragged breathing beside me. I put my hand on his chest.

"I'm sorry," I hear myself tell him. "Ben, I'm sorry."

He coughs. Again.

"Ben?" I can barely talk. "Ben, can you hear me?"

He takes a deep breath. "Ow," he says.



The hospital again. They're stitching up Ben's face and his leg. I said some words for him before the doctor came in. He pretends he doesn't notice.

"Thanks," he tells me.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "No. I owe *you*."

He shakes his head. "Damn it, Carter. Will you drop the favor crap?" He sits up, wincing all the way. "Listen to me, okay? Favors are for people who keep score. You don't have to keep score with me. You understand that? You don't have to keep score with me."

The nurse tells me its time for my new stitches. I turn away, but Ben grabs me by the shoulder.

"You understand, Carter?"

I drop my gaze to the floor, then lift it back up.

"Jeff," I tell him.

Ben nods. And sits his sore body back down.

A whole lot later that night, I'm standing outside with a cast on my arm and my gun under my shoulder. My lucky penny's in my good hand. My left hand.

"You sure about this?" I ask her.

"I never got a chance to see anything," she tells me. "I'd like to."

"All right," I tell her. "Good luck, then."

"You too, Carter."

A group of sailors comes walking out of a bar. I walk right up to them, stopping the youngest.

"Here, lad," I tell him. I put the penny in his hand. "For luck."

He smiles, his eyes and voice far from sober. "Thanks, mister."

"Just don't go throwing it in any fountains, okay?"

He smiles and laughs, his buddies patting him on the back. Then, his spine straightens up and he turns around, looking back at me.

"Thanks!" he shouts again, his voice a little more sober.

I make my way home.

Later that night, sitting behind my desk, waiting for the whiskey to kick out the pain, I start thinking about what Sarzo said.

I've been watching.

Yeah. Watching. Watching what?

Another drink. I've got two books on my desk. At least one man downtown knows I have them. Is he smart enough to put two and two together? Maybe. But if he's smart enough to do that, he's smart enough to know I'm not someone to screw around. He figured that out today.

I've been watching.

There's a knock on the door. I push myself up, my body arguing all the way, walk across the floor and answer it. A brunette. Pretty one. Wearing a long coat.

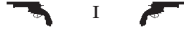
"Sorry, Carter," she says. "I just couldn't leave without thanking you."

I'm a bit slow on the uptake. "Hi," I tell her, the whiskey doing most of the talking. "You don't..."

Her fingers touch my lips. She tosses a penny on my bed. The coat falls away and she helps me forget all about Sarzo.

CASE #9

**NO LOYAL
KNIGHT**



The woman on the other side of the desk doesn't like the look of my eye. The purple, puffy one. She looks at the cast on my right arm and her skepticism shines like the morning sun behind me. She smells like orchids.

"I think I should explain," I tell her, pointing at the eye with my cast. "A very ugly divorce case..."

She raises her gloved hand. "I understand, Mr. Carter." She settles that gloved hand right back into its proper place on her dress. The dress that makes sure no man who isn't married to her can figure out that figure underneath. "A man of your... station... must have to deal with all kinds of undesirables."

I nod a little. "From all kinds of stations," I tell her. I'm being a smart ass. I really shouldn't. It's my first clean case in months. An easy job. All watch and no work.

"I won't tolerate any unnatural machinations, Mr. Carter," she tells me. "I think we understand each other, don't we?"

I smile politely. "Yes, ma'am. I do."

"Very good. Then, I want to impose upon you the need for discretion in this matter."

"Yes, ma'am," I tell her. "Discretion."

"I am a married woman, after all, and one with prestige and respect in our community. If it should be known that I visited such a place as your... well, your place of employment, I should say there would be much to talk about on Howard Hill."

"Well, I'm not exactly an employee, Mrs. Punch."

She keeps on going.

"And so I have prepared a list of ineligibleibles."

"Uh... ineligibleibles?"

"Persons not to be contacted directly or indirectly by you or your staff, Mr. Carter."

"Uh, I really don't have a staff..."

She keeps going. "Persons who I consider beyond reproach, and therefore, so should you."

All right. Consider my patience officially tried.

"I don't want you to soil their good names and reputations with such surly looks as you are giving me right now, I must say."

Tried and convicted.

"Mrs. Punch, I assure you—"

"I'm not finished," she scolds me, just like my third grade teacher used to. Sister Mary Catherine. I wonder if she has a ruler in that handbag. "In addition, I have provided a list of behaviors, techniques and methods I prefer you not to use."

"You did what?"

"I have done a bit of research, sir." She opens her purse and pulls out a pulp. *Black Mask*, in fact. And as she starts talking, I realize I don't have a copy of that one.

"I read all about men of your profession, and I assure you, if you wish to see my bank notice deposited in your account, you will refrain from such lewd behaviors, as characteristic as they may be for a man of your station and education."

That's about it. "Mrs. Punch, I don't think I'm the right man for the job." I get an idea. I reach into the desk and grab Sarah's card. Leaning down so low makes my head hurt, and I do my best not to show it. There's a ringing in my head, too. It squeezes my eyes shut.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't bring a gun," she says.

"I usually don't carry one on watch jobs," I tell her, still looking for the card.

"Here," I tell her, trying to talk through the pain. "Ms. Winter can help you."

"A woman?" she asks.

“Yup.” I rub my temple, but it isn’t helping. “She’s discreet.”

“I daresay a woman detective doesn’t sound very discreet to me.”

For a second between the pulses of pain in my head, I wonder if she means “discreet” or “discrete.”

“If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Mrs. Punch, I’ll be right back.”

She watches me leave and shut the door behind me. Next thing I know, I’ve got my face wet in my sink, looking in the mirror. The mirror in my little room, just off my office, where my bed and hot pan sit. The one that sits just above the sink where just a few weeks ago, I washed the dust of Old Man Vincenzi off my skin, just in case. That mirror.

I open the medicine chest and pop a pill. Haven’t done that in a long time. But something’s wrong with my head, something I can’t quite get a hold on.

I sip some of the water out of the sink and go back to Mrs. Punch. “Mr. Carter,” she says. “I have to say this meeting hasn’t put much confidence in my heart.”

I sit back down. “It’s all right,” I tell her. “I’ll take the case.” I need the money. “I’ll start working tomorrow.”

“I’d appreciate it if you began work *today*,” she says.

I nod. “All right.” It’s her money. “Today.” I open a desk drawer and get a pad of paper. My pen’s almost dry, I have to fill it back up. Ink bottle, blotter.

“Just a moment,” I tell her.

She waits, patiently. Don’t make much sense, but she waits. Didn’t want my competitor’s card. Keeps giving me shit. Pain in the ass this lady is. Makes me wonder if her husband’s name is Mr. Judy.

“All right,” I tell her, the pen full of ink and writing. “Shoot.”

She gives me the details. Mr. Punch—I still can’t get over that—is a lawyer for the so-and-so firm and comes home late every night. She called the office last week and he wasn’t there.

“I won’t follow him,” she says.

“I will.”

“I supposed as much, Mr. Carter.”

She gives the rest of the details, then hands me a wad of cash. I hold it between my fingers. “You mind me asking?”

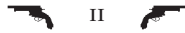
“I handle the family’s finances, Mr. Carter. He hasn’t looked at the checkbook in years.”

I nod, put the money away. “I’ll get right on it after lunch,” I tell her.

“Very good.” She rises up from her chair. I get up from mine. She extends her hand, I touch it and she withdraws it quickly. Cold hands. I can tell that even through the gloves.

“Good night, Mr. Carter,” she says and walks out. I turn around and look at the morning sun. That’s funny. So, out of curiosity, I peek my head out my office door and watch her leave. She gets almost around the corner and stops. Slams her foot down hard on the floor. Then, she picks up the dead roach and puts it in her mouth.

Funny lady.



Her husband has lunch with co-workers. I’m reading a paper outside his building when he leaves. Looks just like his picture. Not a handsome fellow, but not an eyesore, either. He hops in a cab. I follow in my car, finally recovered from the lot. Favors are fine, but it takes cash to take care of parking tickets.

He eats at a restaurant that serves snails, covered in butter and garlic. I don’t eat anything that comes out of a shell. And if you cover a dog turd in enough butter and garlic, it’ll taste good. It’ll taste like butter and garlic. I order a salad. They charge me three bucks for it. I paid three bucks for a steak last week. I wonder if they charge the water by the glass.

More following. No women in sight. I have to wait through the afternoon outside his office, reading the paper. I pick up a copy of *Black Mask*, too. The guys they’ve got writing this crap don’t know shit about the job. Most of it is just this, waiting in a car outside a building for hours and hours. I’ve got my binoculars and my camera. That new-fangled kind of camera that develops its own film. Put me back a hundred dollars, but I get the picture right after I shoot it. Handy that.

He comes out around three. He gets in his car and I tag him. It's getting late. Summer's gone and the days are getting shorter. Sun will be down by half-passed five.

He drives along for a while, leading me out of downtown toward the desert. Rendezvous in some sleazy desert motel, no doubt. The radio plays Bennie's latest tune. Got to learn to dance. Molly likes dancing.

More driving. Out to the desert, all right. On the 10 Freeway, straight East. We'll be out of sight of the city soon. Dust tosses across the road. Not another set of headlights in sight. I have to stay far back. Hope he doesn't notice. Most people don't, by the way. They don't even consider the notion someone could be following them. They think the only person they have to fool is their spouse. Don't figure the wife talks to her friends, shares her concerns, gets advice. Hires a pro. I ain't cheap, but a housewife always has enough cash to blow to hire me to follow her husband for a day or two.

Finally, he pulls into a little place I've seen before. Two murders there a few months ago. Doyle hits. You'd think that would dry the place up, but nobody reads the papers anymore. Not since TV told them not to.

He pulls in. I drive by. I know he's there. A fiver to the bell boy will tell me which room he's in and who he's with. I drive down the road for another ten minutes, then turn around, drive back. Park. His car's outside bungalow three. What are the chances?

But there's no other car in the lot. She must not have arrived just yet. I park on the other side of the lot, walk up to the office.

And I stop halfway there.

No lights. Not from the office, not from any of the rooms. The vacancy sign is off.

Oh God. The site of two Doyle hits.

There's a payphone on the other side of the lot. It rings.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't bring a gun," she says.

"I usually don't carry one on watch jobs," I tell her, still looking for the card.

A door opens. A tall man in a black coat wearing black gloves walks out of the dark room.

"Pick it up," he tells me from across the lot.

The phone keeps ringing. Impatient. I walk across the lot, gravel crunching under my shoes. The sun is almost gone.

I pick it up. Don't say anything. Then, a man's voice. "You there?"

Hang up. Hang up. Hang up.

"Yeah."

Quiet.

"Carter. Glad you picked up."

I don't recognize the voice, but its made of whiskey. "Yeah. I guess I'm not."

"You know where I am?"

"Can't say that I do."

Wait.

"I'm at her place."

Her place?

"Tonight. The witching hour. We're sending you a lullaby."

What's that mean?

"Sleep tight, you fuck."

The line goes dead. I put the phone back on the hook. I turn around and the man in the black coat wearing the black gloves is in the car, driving away. He left the door to the bungalow open. The desert wind swings it, just so.

I walk across the concrete. I open the door. Hit the lights.

Bullet, through the brain. Five more in his belly and chest. I don't touch anything.

Look through the room. Nothing remarkable. Gideon's bible in the drawer. Into the bathroom. There's blood on the mirror. And a name.

Molly's name. And a time.

Midnight.



I'm back on the road, speeding through the dim light, swiftly turning into darkness. Check the watch. Eight thirty-five. An hour and a half to get back into the city. Ten o'clock. Time enough. So, what's the game? First, I'm headed out to the desert, then running back to the city. Back and forth.

Keeping me moving. Keeping me from thinking. React. Jump here, jump there. Don't think about *why*.

So, why?

The voice on the other line was a Doyle. I know that.

They know.

Sarzo's voice. Like a bug in my ear. I swat it.

I've been busy

Forget that. Keep driving. Keep thinking. Why would the Doyles want you driving out to the middle of nowhere?

To keep you out of the city.

That's right.

To keep you away from her.

She was his. Before he... before I...

They know.

He couldn't have meant that. Sarzo couldn't have meant... no, not that. How could he know? How would he know?

I've been busy

Busy watching me. Watching me for days. Weeks. Months? Watching everything. Watching every deal I made. Watching every job I took.

I've been watching

He saw what I did to the Doyles. Saw Sam. And the baby.

I've been watching

Saw what I did to the Vincenzis. The Nocturnum Document.

I told them

How I tricked them. Screwed the Doyles out of a child. The Vincenzis out of their sunlight.

They know

Sarzo told the Doyles. And the Vincenzi family.

I have to stop the car. My heart is pounding through my ribs. My lips whisper the words. My left hand starts shaking.

They know

Here, in the middle of the desert. Tricked like a rookie. A fucking mark.

The woman smelled like orchids. And I didn't see it.

Sent by the Vincenzis. With just a drop of blood in her morning coffee, they have her. Just like that. And they send her to me with a story. And I buy it.

But the voice on the phone was a Doyle.

They know

Both of them. Oh God. *Both* of them.

I hit the gas and ignore the speed limit signs.



The lock on her door is broken. The apartment looks like a windstorm went through it. Nobody heard anything, of course. Of course. Who would want to?

The drive back to my place takes longer than I want. Ten forty-five. Something happens at midnight. I don't have a clue.

The lock on my door is fine. I use the key and open the door slowly, with me on the right side of it.

The door swings open. Nothing. Take a peek...

Nothing.

I check the place, room by room. Clean. Lock the front door and say a few words to keep it locked.

Then, I open the closet behind my bookshelf. I get the books and things I'll need. To find Molly.

The witching hour; Carter.

That isn't midnight. Midnight is midnight. The witching hour is...

"Stop it!" I'm shouting at myself. "Just stop it! You don't know! You just don't know!" Now, I'm walking across the floor. Loudly. "Think! You're only thinking of yourself! You have to warn people! If they know, you have to— Who else? Who else do you have to warn? Who..."

Pearl.

A long distance call to Baker's Bluff. Jim answers the phone.

"Hello?"

"Jim, this is Jeff."

"Hey, Jeff! Long time no..."

"You have to get out of town."

"What's that?"

"Take your wife, take Pearl. Get out of town. Go north. Go to Vegas. Just get out. Right now. Take a vacation. I'll wire you the money tomorrow."

"I don't understand this, Jeff."

"You don't have to. It's a long shot, but I don't want anything to happen to you. Just get you and yours out of there and don't come back until the weekend."

Silence on the other end. Then, Jim's voice. "I'll do it. You know I'll do it. But if you need help..."

"Not the kind of help you could provide, Jim. And it'd take you too long to get here. So, just go."

He promises me he will. I know he'll keep his promise. I hang up the phone.

Who else? There's someone I'm missing. Who am I missing?

Then, I remember.

Jack.

His phone rings just once. His voice on the other end, cold and distant as ever.

“Jack! You’ve got to get out of your apartment! You’ve got to...”

“I know, Carter.” He’s pissed. I can tell. “I’m already set. I’m on my way over now.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. Can’t risk anything. I’ll be there in ten minutes. You ready?”

“I’ll *be* ready when you get here.”

“Make sure you are,” he tells me. “And don’t go anywhere.” He pauses. “They’re looking for you, Carter.”

I throw the receiver in the cradle and keep piling up books. Which ones to take? I need them all. I can only carry so many. Shit shit *shit!*

Fucking Sarzo. Last laugh bastard. I’m packing Von Junzt’s book, the thing that gave me the whole fucking idea in the first place. Nothing but trouble. Cursed little black book that brings doom to all who read it. That’s what the legends say. Well, you can put my name on the back cover, too.

Guaranteed to bring doom down on your fucking head! — Jefferson Carter, Ex-Priest, Ex-Marine, Ex-Cop, Ex-fucking-living-person.

Ten minutes later, I’m still throwing crap into a bag and there’s a knock on the door. I stop. Get the gun. Loaded with iron bullets. Just for Doyle and his kin.

The door knocks again.

“Carter, will you let me in?”

I set the hammer back slowly, feeling the gun grow hot in my hands. I open the door and Jack comes in.

“Very bad weather,” he tells me. “Hard to keep warm with no body heat.”

I don’t pay attention. I go over to the desk and set the gun on the chair. He walks over to the windows, tugging at the shades. “You know,” he says, “I’m surprised you haven’t closed these, yet. A soldier boy like you knows all about high powered rifles, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah,” I say. I’m almost done. Fuck the books. I can get more later. Besides, DoYLES have no need for them and Vincenzis can’t go in the room. I toss them all back in, and they spill across the floor of the tiny room. I shut the secret case and lock it.

“You know how this works, don’t you?”

"What?" I ask him. I'm on the way to the bedroom, getting my bag.

"The Vincenzis will send one man. Just one."

I'm back out the bedroom, bag in hand. "Yeah. And if I kill him, the vendetta is over."

He nods. His jacket and gloves on my desk.

"Where's your stuff?" I ask him.

"I've got everything I need."

"True Spartan to the end, eh?"

He walks across the room and puts his bare hands on either side of my face.

"You sorry little man," he says. Then, he kisses me.

I drop the bag. His lips are cold and soft. Like orchids left out in a snow storm.

"You know the rules, don't you, Carter?" he asks me.

I nod, his hands tight on either side of my head. "Yes, I do."

He smiles. Shows me his teeth. "Good."

And now, his glasses come off. And for the first time, I see his eyes.



Nerve punches are first, to make my limbs numb. I block his hands as best I can, but he's too fast.

"They sent *me*, Carter," he tells me. His voice still and calm. I catch his left arm and wrap my own around it, hoping to get leverage, but he squeezes out quick and his forehead hits my jaw. My jaw butts up against the bottom of my skull and stars fill my eyes. Now, he has *my* arm and he does what I wanted to.

He immobilizes it. And I scream.

"They sent *me* because they knew. They knew I respected you. They knew you respected me."

I turn my hips just in time to catch his knee in the side of my pelvis, rather than straight in my groin. It doesn't help much. I crumble to the ground.

"Why did you make it be me, Carter? Why did you make them send me?"

I ram my cast into his knee. An electric shot of pain rushes up my arm. I do it again. I can feel it like a root canal in my wrist. His grip loosens and I fall backward, scrambling for the closet. But he's there, and I have to dodge him. Bastard put himself between me and what I need. He knows how to move. He knows how to fight. He knows how to think.

I've only got one of those, and I'm not doing it too well these days.

I limp backward, back toward my desk.

"They won't help you, Carter," he tells me, pointing at the bookshelf. "You and your books. You think you know everything. You think you've got it all figured out."

"Not all of it," I tell him. "Just most of it."

The gun's on my chair. I jump for it. He jumps for me. I squeeze the trigger and miss. Squeeze again and his talons at my chest, ripping at my shirt. Another miss. But the third one doesn't. Blows him and black smoke halfway across the room. I shoot again, but he's faster than bullets. He's faster than anything.

I run by him, firing all the way. I'm at the bookshelf. Pulling at books, hoping to find the right one, keeping my eye on him until...

The gun runs out of ammunition.

The blur slows down to a single image. "When I was a boy," he tells me, walking slowly across the room, "we had a word that fits your character. *Hubris*. You know that word, don't you?"

I nod.

"Of course you do. You're an educated man. But you weren't educated enough, were you?"

He moves fast again, grabbing my hand and twisting it. My good hand. My left hand. Ripping the gun away. I let go of the bookshelf and slam the cast against his chest, right in the center of his ribcage. He can't dodge that. Don't hit at the edges, Carter. Hit in the *center*.

Two more. I swing it up into his chin. He bends backward to dodge it and my feet kick at his bad knee. We both fall down. My cast lands on his throat.

Maybe that will shut him up.

I kick my shoes against the slick floor, trying to gain some ground. Both hands throbbing, I pull myself up and toward the window. He grabs my trousers and pulls me back. I turn in his grip and see those teeth of his. I kick them. Hard. A lot.

He spins me around, putting himself between me and the bookshelf again. I push myself up and stomp on him, my hand reaching out to the hidden lever. I pull the wrong book and it falls to the floor. He's on his feet, his hands and fingers and teeth all reaching.

I find the right book. The panel opens. Between me and him. And all the stuff I put in there to make sure nobody with Vincenzi blood could get in bellows out like an invisible gas cloud. He makes a sound I never want to hear again and collapses under the weight of that cloud. But he moves again, reaching at me, and I slam the panel on him, books falling over me, knocking my hands and shoulders and head.

"Carter! You bastard!"

I push again and it hits his head and I push again and he falls backward and I push again and the door locks with him inside.

With all the stuff I put in there to make sure nobody with Vincenzi blood could get in.

I hear him screaming. I smell him burning. Soon, I hear him begging. And here I am, on the other side of the door, crying like a kid with his first broken heart.



It's done. All the noise is over. He's been in there long enough. I pull the latch and open the door. What used to be my friend is now a blackened, wet mess on the floor that won't ever come clean. Not with cleansers, anyway. The black stain on the floor will be there long after I'm gone.

And speaking of being gone.

I push myself back up and limp over to the bags. Like I really need anything in them. I let them lie.

Back over to the mirror to clean the blood off. The water's cold and stings. Almost a comfort compared to every other pain in my body.

I look up in the mirror. Look at my weary face. My right eye is almost closed. The left one is bloody and nearly blind. My cast is cracked.

Run? I can barely walk.

I fall on the couch, rain pelting the windows. One of my books is at my feet. I dare a bend of the spine—mine, not the book’s—and pick it up. A random page.

*Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable,
Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat
High in her chamber up a tower to the east
Guarded the sacred shield of Lancelot*

And I throw the book down. I fucking hate Lancelot.

I look at the books. Some of them still smoldering from their time with Jack in the closet. I look at Jack, still smoldering from his time with my books in the closet.

Why did you make them send me?

“Because I wasn’t careful,” I tell him. “Wasn’t careful enough. I broke too many rules.”

His corpse fidgets. I let it.

“And you’re right. It was my fault. It is my fault.”

Fingers scrape against the floor. They make my ears ache.

“You have to pay for everything you do. One way or another.”

Hands now. And feet. I get up and shamble over to my bags.

“You were the price I had to pay, Jack.”

The face pulls itself up from the floor. Parts of it stick. There aren’t any eyes, but teeth don’t melt.

“I had to pay... with the people I love.”

It tries to scream.

“I’m sorry.”

I take the stake from my bag, the one I blessed when I was a priest, the one made from oak and ash. And I use it.



Of all the things to do, I decide to get drunk. On whiskey, no less. I had a bottle. Hadn’t touched it in years. But, why not? By dawn, it’ll all be over anyway. I’m

out of tricks. Nothing I can do will protect me. No book, no ritual, no bargain. I stole a child.

I stole the sun, too. Stole it fair and square. Okay, so maybe not fair. Other men, better men, have paid higher prices than I just did. Prometheus got tied to a rock with his liver eaten out for all eternity. Me? I just had to put a stake through my best friend's heart, that's all. No, that's not all. I put him in the position of having to kill me. And I couldn't let him. Couldn't take the bullet.

Some friend I am. No loyal knight.

So here I am on my couch, drunk. The bottle's empty. I can barely stand. Could barely stand *before* I got drunk. Midnight came and went a long time ago and there's only the witching hour to look forward to.

No, not midnight. Fuck no. That's for all those pansies down at Daniel Dean's place. No, anybody who knows anything will tell you the real witching hour is later. The hour that's a moment that's an hour that's all night. When all the stars hide their faces for fear of what they'll see below. When even the moon closes his eyes. When things we don't want to see come dancing. And singing. And keening.

Yeah, that's a word you don't hear much anymore, not unless you live on *their* side of town. *Keening*. Not a scream, not a howl, not a moan, not a groan, not any of those. A keening. They made a special word for it, 'cause nothing in all the world sounds like it.

I know this because I can hear it. Right now. At least seven blocks away. And I'm too fucking tired to do anything about it.

That's funny. Like I *could* do anything about it.

No, when she comes, all you do is sit down and wait. With whiskey. I'm out of whiskey, so all I got is waiting.

Four blocks now.

For some reason, I think of Sam. I wonder if she's happy. And I think of Jim and all those women, fat and filled with sea water. Their empty eyes looking at me.

You're too late, they said to me. *You're too late*.

A knight would have saved them. Knight in shining armor. Not me.

Just below the window. I can feel it shaking from here, sitting on the couch with an empty bottle of whiskey and a book that's too dark to read. No lights. I don't want to see it. Nobody wants to see it. Nobody's ever seen it. Nobody alive.

I remember what I know about her. That she's a woman done wrong by a heartless man. The sound she makes is for him. Love and anger. Loss and hope. She loves him, she hates him. She wants him, she'll kill him when she finds him. With a song.

Why did you make them send me?

Then, I think about Molly. I wonder if she'll have Molly's eyes. I wonder if she'll have her voice. I'll wonder if she'll steal my soul with a kiss. A small, soft kiss with her mouth barely open.

Why did you make them send me?

The door downstairs flies open, nearly off its hinges.

When Odysseus' ship was about to pass by the sirens, he ordered his men to lash him to the mast, so he could hear their song. I know why he did that. I knew it when I read it as a boy. He wanted to be the only man alive to hear it. And at the end of it all, when he's back home, planning his best trick of all, to kill the suitors and win back his wife, Athena appears before him, caresses his cheek and calls him her favorite.

Touched by the goddess. Carry her favor, if even for just one single moment. One single breath. I read that when I was a boy and I knew what it meant. She touched him. A goddess doesn't need to *touch* anybody. But she touched *him*. The only man in the world to know her caress.

Zeus, he fucks anything. But Athena, she just touched his cheek. And that was enough.

The keening is at my door now. I think of all the women I laid with, who shared their bodies and their trust. I never loved any of them. And right now, each and every one of them is outside my door with eyes as big as saucers and a mouth red and black as a pit, making a sound I'll never forget. For the rest of my very, very short life.

I should have told you, Molly.

The door swings open.

I should have

no

told you.

The door swings open and it's empty. Empty. The doorway is empty.

The door swings open and there's nothing. The sound walking down my street, up the stairs and down the hallway drowned out everything in the world. But now, I can hear all those sounds you can only hear in silence. The E-train moving along the tracks. A cat calling for his mate. A dog barking far away, tied to a leash.

The door swings back shut. Not all the way, but enough to block the corridor outside. And part of me asks if she was ever there.

Was I asleep? Am I still asleep? I don't know. I'll just wait here until dawn. By then, something will happen. Something.

But hours later, nothing does. The sun rises and I'm still alive. Nothing. Nobody. Not even a nightmare. Maybe she was a dream. Maybe.

I get up on my sore legs and feel my backache in protest. Shamble across the office to my bathroom to wash my face. I turn on the light and turn on the water.

And that's when I see my mirror, broken, the shards lying in my sink.



EPILOGUE

Three men walk into the Detective's office, finding him nursing his wounds. The men have suits and badges. He looks up, recognizing one of them. Words pass between them. They ask him to come with them for a drive into the hills. He doesn't argue.

They drive through the city toward the north end of town. The rich end of town. The Detective doesn't say anything, not unless he's asked.

Did you know her?

No, I didn't. I didn't think anybody did.

Did you ever see her?

I didn't think anybody saw her. Not for thirty years.

She a client?

I wouldn't tell you if she was.

Well, then?

Pause. *She wasn't.*

They're all quiet the rest of the way up the hill. The road is tight with only two lanes. Kids love driving down that hill as fast as their parents' cars can go. "Widow Hill," they call it. The kids don't know the name has nothing to do with cars.

The Detective and the badges pull up to the house surrounded by sirens. The gate's open. Photographers stink up everything with their little explosions. Blue uniforms hold newsies back while suits walk across the grounds with notepads and pencils.

"Let me show you something," one of the badges says. The Badge with the familiar face.

They go upstairs, the winding staircase.

“Any of this look familiar?”

The Detective looks around. “Nope.”

“Wait a bit. Maybe what we got to show you will jog your memory.”

Double doors and foreign handles open into a study made out of books. No walls, just bookshelves and broken glass from the tall mirror at the end of the room. An open window and balcony overlooking the pool below. A desk with papers and photographs. The Detective looks at the photos and sees another familiar face looking back at him. His.

“You sure you didn’t know her?”

He shakes his head. “Never met.”

“Well, she sure knew you, pal.”

On the desk are notes in many different hands, but more than notes are the pictures. Pictures of him with a blurred face. Pictures with him and a tall man in a white suit and black glasses. Pictures of him with a little foreign girl, eating hot dogs at the ball park.

“The only right way,” the Detective says, looking at that last one.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

Pictures of him standing outside a burning book store. Pictures of him picking hairs out of a driver seat pillow. Pictures, pictures, pictures.

“So the lady liked taking pictures of me. So what?”

The Badge doesn’t smile. “Let’s go down to the pool and take a look.”

They all turn to leave. When nobody’s looking, the Detective’s hands find a picture on the table. The only picture without him in it. It slips into his pocket.

“Figure she had enough to really nail you, pal,” the Badge says. “I don’t know what all those pictures are about, but I’m sure you do.”

“I’m in the dark here, too.”

“I don’t think so. Besides, some of them pictures get in the right hands...”

The Detective stops him on the stairs. “You’ll make sure they don’t.”

The badge eyes him. “Maybe. Maybe not. That all depends on what you tell me.”

They're at the pool now. A black bag waits for them.

"The doc says she was in the water for hours before we found her." The badge pulls back the zipper. "She's still perfect. Take a look."

"She's a pureblood," the Detective says. "She could have been under water for a month and she'd still look..." He sees her and stops. Like that's all he planned on saying today.

A flash bulb explodes, capturing the two men looking at the body in the bag. Upstairs, suits go through the shelves, looking for black list books, stuffing them down trousers and in jacket pockets. Downstairs, pant pockets jingle with expensive, imported silverware.

The Detective looks.

The Badge sees something tremble on the edge of the Detective's eyes.

Finally, the Detective's lips part, hesitating.

"She's beautiful."

"But you don't know her."

The Detective doesn't even shake his head, his eyes fixed on her face. "No. No, I don't."

"She knew you."

He still doesn't move. "No," he says. "No, I don't."

The Badge looks at the Detective. The Detective doesn't move. Then —

"No. I don't know her."

"All right. I believe you. You lied to me once. I know what your lying voice sounds like. That wasn't it."

The Detective stands still, still staring at the woman in the bag.

"Johnson will drive you back to the city."

A blue boy takes the Detective by the shoulder. "Come on, sir. We'll..."

The Detective shakes him off. Then, he turns to the Badge. "If you bury her, something bad will happen."

"What are we supposed to do with her, then?"

"Make a pyre. Use holy wood. Oak, ash. Rowan. Spread the ashes. Don't let them settle in one place."

The Badge nods. "All right. I'll make sure."

"Promise me."

He does. Three times. The Detective almost walks away, but stops and walks back. He walks back to the Lady, puts his hand on her forehead. His lips whisper words nobody in earshot can understand. Then, he turns to Johnson. "Let's go, kid."

They get in the car. Johnson starts driving. They drive by the lawn and the big gate. He gets halfway down Widow Hill before he says anything.

"Can I ask you a question?"

The Detective nods from the back seat.

"What did you say? Over the woman, I mean. You said something. I didn't understand it."

"It's the Old Tongue, kid. You weren't supposed to."

"Well...?"

"I said you could ask a question. I didn't tell you I'd answer it."

There's no more talking the rest of the way. When Johnson pulls up to the curb, the Detective opens the door.

"Thanks, kid."

"Sure."

He steps out of the car and closes the door behind him. The Detective walks into the building, up the stairs and into his office, locking the door behind him.

Down into his chair, he pulls a bottle and a short glass from his desk. Then, a picture out of his pocket. A picture that was on her desk. The only picture without him in it.

He spends a long time looking at it.

He empties the glass and puts it down, picks up the picture and walks to his file cabinet. He takes another long look before he lets it fall in between the files and folders, papers and sheets. He shuts the drawer, pours himself another glass.

And the phone rings.

