

SAMPLE CHAPTERS
FROM

SNYPER
A MATTER OF CALIBER

j. merideth harmon

www.getsnyper.com



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“It’s not surprising that the activities of one man, average in height and weight and appearance, with no distinguishing characteristics, should have escaped notice in Dallas after the President was shot.”

— Mark Lane, *Rush to Judgment*

One

In hindsight, I made two mistakes that fateful day in Dallas.

The first and most obvious mistake was shooting the President. Admittedly, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. At that point in my life, I never turned down a challenge if it made good use of my natural talents. Shooting people is what I do—sorry—did. But I'm not the kind of guy who likes to define himself by his behaviors. No, the first mistake was working a job I hadn't planned from top to bottom.

As for the second: President or not, I should have made damned sure I was the only guy pulling a trigger.



The unseasonable warmth washed over me as I emerged from the depths of the parking garage and into the midday sun. I'd been told to expect rain, but the storm front had already pushed through Dallas during the early morning, coating the streets with a thin film of dampness which had long since evaporated in the November heat. After traveling for three hours, I needed a drink. Water, Scotch, soda—anything to rid the dusty taste in my mouth. But I was already late and still had to get into position.

A thin crowd of spectators had formed along the sidewalks. Most were office workers escaping the nearby buildings on their lunch breaks; some were families who arrived early and staked out prime viewpoints to cheer their young and popular President. I hadn't voted for him. Then again, I didn't vote. Or care. My only concern was navigating the walkways, trying to thread my way through the spectators and sluggards without crippling any knees against the red metal toolbox I was carrying. It felt

like that old Victor Borge routine: excuse me, pardon me, pardon me, excuse me. I suppose I could have hefted the thing onto my shoulder and pushed my way along the sidewalk, but I didn't want to call attention to myself in front of the Criminal Courts Building. A nosy cop might ask to see what I was carrying, and he wouldn't take kindly to a fake elevator repairman sneaking a small arsenal along the motorcade route.

Usually I had more time to prepare. Instead of my standard week-long lead, the sealed order had come down just the night before. Typical bureaucracy from my higher-ups, but I didn't complain once I'd read the President's name on the hit list. And it was a cake job too. No setup, no planning. Just walk in, line up the sights and pull the trigger. It wouldn't be the first time someone called in a pinch hitter for a home run; Gates Brown had done it for the Detroit Tigers that June. True, maybe it wasn't quite the same, but hitting a president should count as a grand slam in anyone's book.

My orders were specific. I'd be shooting from a prepared location inside an active warehouse. Official name: the Texas School Book Depository, which loomed ahead on the corner of Houston and Elm Streets. If anything, it was a bit ordinary with its seven stories of basic red brick topped by a Hertz rental billboard and an electronic clock. I checked my watch out of habit, just to compare, and got the same result. Either way, it was slightly past noon, and I was cutting things close.

According to the reports, the motorcade would run down Main Street. But instead of continuing straight through the middle of Dealey Plaza, it would make a quick zig-zag up Houston, then head west on Elm. The detour made little sense, following the flattened S-curve of the northern perimeter, winding downhill past the Book Depository and a decorative concrete pergola before dipping below a three-spanned railway viaduct. Locals called the structure the Triple Underpass. Its tree-lined embankment topped by a simple picket fence would become infamous as the "grassy knoll."

I crossed Houston Street at the corner of Elm but continued north, circling to enter the warehouse from the rear parking driveway and loading dock. Nobody challenged me when I walked in. Most of the employees had filed outside to watch and cheer from the building's front steps. Of the two elevators, only the rightmost was running—probably stragglers coming down from the upper floors. Rather than risk being spotted by a

descending passenger, I took the stairs, slow and easy. I can move quietly when I need to, drifting like a ghost.

The first obstacle arose when I reached the sixth floor. My orders assured it would be deserted, but a young black man sat near a window along the south wall. He was eating lunch, hunkered near a stack of boxes which reached nearly to the ceiling, alternating between bites of chicken sandwich and sips from a bottle of Dr Pepper. Watching him drink only reminded me of the dryness in my own mouth. The air smelled of construction and tasted of the dust motes which hung thick in the sunlight. I clamped a handkerchief over my face and hovered in the dark corner of the stairwell, fighting the urge to cough, sneeze or clear my throat.

My watch ticked past 12:18.

I don't like taking out bystanders—it's not their fault they've had the misfortune of crossing my path—but I was running out of time. Just as I was about to step from the shadows to creep up and bash him in the head, the young man stood and brushed off the seat of his jeans. After crumpling the top of his paper lunch sack, he swigged down the last of his soda, left the bottle on a stack of boxes and marched over to the western freight elevator. He activated the manual control and descended with a whirr. As soon as he was out of sight, I dashed into the room, found the rifle exactly where my instructions indicated and scrambled to the open southeast window.

The easy shot, the obvious shot, was to fire head-on at the motorcade as it cruised north on Houston Street. Aim slightly low, let the target move into the path of the bullet. I could almost do it blindfolded. But if something went wrong, I'd also block my escape route with a swarm of police and Secret Service at my feet. Instead I'd need a clear path back to Old Red, the brick castle of the former county courthouse, to make my way home. That meant firing left-handed down Elm Street as the procession pulled away. Tougher, but I could do it—even with an oak tree in the line of fire and an inconvenient water pipe bumping my shoulder. Of course, it all depended on the weapon.

In my haste, I'd forgotten to examine the rifle. The strap was too short and the scope was off. I could compensate, but I can also bankrupt a carny in a rigged shooting gallery. When I tugged the bolt open, a spent casing tumbled out and skittered across the plywood flooring. The whole thing was junk, cheap war surplus. But worse, the rifle was the wrong caliber. I'd

been told to expect a Mauser, maybe an M-1903 or even an Enfield. I had rounds for all those (and more), but not for a 6.5-millimeter Carcano.

I checked my watch again: 12:23. Two minutes until the motorcade's scheduled arrival. A tinge of panic swept over me as I closed my eyes and tried to think.



To put everything into perspective, no American president had been shot in over fifty years. There had been other, more recent attempts, but the last person to be hit and wounded was Teddy Roosevelt, while he was stumping for re-election as a third-party candidate. A gunman leaped out from the crowd and shot him once with a .38. It should have been fatal. But thanks to a fifty-page speech and a metal eyeglass case in his breast pocket, the bullet had lost most of its velocity by the time it pierced his chest. Roosevelt had the presence of mind to realize he'd been hit, and after a quick pat-down, he stood back up and gave the damned speech anyway. Talk about a real bull moose. But the moral of the story is the value of a well-placed head shot: a bullet to the heart won't do much good if your target is wearing body armor.

Over the years, I'd grown to appreciate the simplicity of a .22 to the back of the head. Underpower the round a little and it'll punch through the skull and rattle around without creating an exit wound. No muss, no fuss. Add a suppressor and it's quiet—not that soft kitten sneeze you hear in the movies, but the quick snap of a heavy-duty stapler. I'd brought my favorite .22 just in case, hidden under the top tray of the toolbox. But it's a short-range weapon and I didn't feel like climbing into the President's limousine to ensure a proper hit.

My other backup was a Smith & Wesson Model 29 with an eight-inch barrel and custom wooden grips. Most people would recognize it now as Dirty Harry's .44 Magnum. I'd picked mine up in the late fifties when I started experimenting with larger calibers. It's a great weapon—if you skip the masculine bravado of a Magnum cartridge and go with a standard .44 Special. Halve the muzzle velocity and you reduce noise and recoil. That gives you better control, and combined with the longer barrel, an extremely accurate shot. But between the slow round and the iron sights, I still needed to be much closer than six stories up.

So I went off-plan, not realizing how much it would change my life, not realizing how one small decision could have so many ugly repercussions.

I loaded the revolver while peeling out of my repairman's coveralls. Given the target and the proximity to the local municipal buildings, I figured the best getaway costume would be a police uniform. Mine wasn't perfect—the badge and patches were fake and I didn't have a hat or holster—but at a casual glance, I doubted anyone would notice the difference. The need for a quick change meant wearing it under the coveralls, but I hadn't anticipated the Texas heat. Patches of sweat soaked my chest and armpits. I crammed the toolbox behind some cartons, stuffed the rifle where I'd found it and ran down the stairs, wrapping the revolver in a handkerchief and praying the motorcade wouldn't arrive before I reached ground level.

Much of the crowd had gathered along Main and Houston Streets at the eastern end of the plaza, so I ducked out the side of the Book Depository and forced myself into a hurried walk toward the viaduct. Running would attract attention, as would the revolver, if anyone looked closely at the barrel protruding from the handkerchief I was holding. I cut west, away from potential witnesses, and skirted behind the wide arch of the concrete pergola separating Elm Street from the parking lots and a railyard further north.

After a quick pause to catch my breath, I glanced up at the billboard clock again: 12:28. The President was slightly behind schedule. But in the far distance, I could hear the sound of cheers and sirens as the motorcade passed through downtown Dallas.

The pergola ended at a wooden picket fence and a concrete walkway that dropped in a series of steps to street level. A thin ribbon of onlookers lined the sidewalk. Some sat in the grass. One guy with a movie camera had perched himself on top of the retaining wall for a better view. Across the street, a couple of women in bright raincoats, red and blue, stood out against their grassy backdrop. Too many people. Not enough cover.

I scrambled behind the picket fence and into the parking lot, searching for a better shooting position—and quickly found one in the form of a tan '61 Buick. Its owner had inched close to the fence slats under an oak tree, maximizing the shade from the warm noonday sun. I picked my way through damp grass and drying mud and climbed onto the front bumper, balancing with one foot against the radiator and the other on

the protruding bullet ornament. Not the best firing position, I'll admit, but I had a good view of the road. A young soldier with a field cap and camera stood on the other side of the five-foot fence, but unless he wandered into my field of fire, he wouldn't be much of a problem. Besides, I was running out of time.

The motorcade arrived as the billboard flashed 12:30.

I heard the first pop after the limousine turned onto Elm Street. It sounded harmless, almost normal, like a firecracker or one of the motorcycles backfiring. Many witnesses would later describe it that way. Alternately, we were near the rail yard so it might have been a track torpedo, the small explosive charge used to signal locomotive engineers. But the sound came from my left, not from behind. I didn't think much about it, other than to curse the timing and hope the Secret Service driver wouldn't spook and floor the accelerator. But the crowd still cheered and the car, an open-topped Lincoln convertible, crept into range.

Sixty yards. Fifty. Forty.

Then in a quick motion, I raised the gun and leveled the sights at the President's head. He was reaching up toward his neck, as if to adjust his tie, and had leaned in beside his wife. I tracked slightly to the right, held my breath and squeezed the trigger.

The bullet entered above his right ear and passed straight through with clean entrance and exit wounds before falling somewhere in the lawn. A perfect shot. One of my best. And for half a second, I congratulated myself—until another slug ripped through the plaza and burst his head with a halo spray of blood and brain matter. The First Lady screamed and began crawling onto the trunk of the limousine, scrabbling after a portion of her husband's skull. A Secret Service agent leaped onto the back of the car, pushed her into the seat and shielded her with his body.

The motorcade sped away and all hell broke loose.

I was as confused as anyone. Part of me was stunned by the suddenness of the other attack. Part was incensed at having a target shot out from under my sights, although pride should have been the last thing on my mind.

People were shouting and rushing in my direction toward the grassy knoll. I dropped down from the bumper and fought the instinct to run. I could have escaped right then. Even if I were caught, no jail could hold me. But I would have left behind a huge pile of evidence on the sixth

floor. The authorities would find my toolbox and guns and scrape them for every clue imaginable. And with as many witnesses as there were on the street, someone might have gotten an accurate glimpse of me. Or have taken a picture. There were so many cameras that day. The feds would have my prints, maybe plaster my mug on wanted posters throughout the country. The manhunt would never end. And if they tied me to other jobs...

I had to go back.

Weapon still in hand, I ran to the other side of the fence and found the soldier lying in the grass. He'd hit the dirt at the sound of gunfire and rolled over to face me. His cap was crooked, tears streamed down his cheeks and the camera was whirring in his hand. The lens came up as I approached and I swore out loud.

I pressed for an advantage with my police uniform, waved my gun under his nose and asked what he saw. All he did was cry. Then I demanded his film. He refused, so I kicked him and threatened to blow his head off for withholding evidence. That got his attention. I tore the film from its reel and crammed what I could into my pockets as I sprinted across the pergola to the Book Depository.

One of the motorcycle cops had parked at the bottom of the front steps, so I ducked in through the west side of the building. Barely two minutes after the shooting and they were already locking it down. I ran to the elevators but both were up on the fifth floor. I swore again and scuttled up the back stairs, then slowed when I spotted movement from the second floor landing.

A uniform, maybe the same motorcycle cop, had drawn his gun and was confronting a young man in the break room. I didn't see much, just the man, young and thin and with a Coke in his hand, being questioned until someone shouted he worked there. The cop tore off. I did too, hustling up the stairs until my heart threatened to leap from my chest.

I rushed over to the rifle when I reached the sixth floor. It was still stuffed behind boxes in the northwest corner. I wiped it down with my handkerchief as best as I could. The toolbox and repairman's outfit were where I'd hid them a few yards away. I opened the lid, shoved the revolver under the top tray and tried to force the box shut. Something was blocking it. I scooped through the contents, wasting precious seconds trying to close the damned thing. Then I gave up and wrapped it as best as I could

in the blue coveralls, tying the lid shut with the shirt sleeves and cradling it like a baby.

The elevators were moving. I scrambled to the stairwell, only to hear the clomp of boots down below and shouts to search floor by floor. I could only go up. I skipped the seventh floor, went straight to the roof and shouldered through the metal door. Pigeons scattered from their roost under the billboard. I wedged the door shut behind me and dashed along the edge of the building, looking for a fire escape, a set of pipes—any way to get down. Nothing.

The muffled noise from the stairwell grew louder. Someone jangled the doorknob, shouted an obscenity in frustration and began throwing his weight against the frame to force it open.

I was trapped, with only one way out, so I took it.

Clutching the bundled toolbox against my chest, I scampered back for a running start and cannonballed over the side and into the air. I fell seven stories, plunging headfirst into the roof of the Depository loading dock, and that warm, autumn sunlight gave way to a cold grip of pitch black.

TWO

Boss?”

The woman’s voice filtered through the haze and found a lonely spark of awareness in the back of my skull. I tried to ignore it and dragged a down duvet over my head.

“*Psst!* Boss. I need you to wake up.”

I cracked an eye open, pulled aside a narrow gap in the bed linens and slowly peered out at the figure framed in the doorway. Light from the hall filtered around the soft curves of her outline, casting a long hourglass shadow across my bed.

She was young and pretty and blonde, the kind of girl most guys would pay to wake up to—or at least try to keep dreaming about. Hell, some women would too. I just pay her to type.

I wanted to say something rude, but cleverness required more brain cells than were functioning at the moment. A muffled “Leave me alone, Ash,” came out instead. My mouth was dry and tasted like a layer of old socks at the bottom of a laundry hamper.

The girl ignored me and walked into my bedroom. She pushed aside the debris littering a black lacquer night stand and snatched up a used tumbler and an empty bottle of Scotch. A tall glass of effervescent grayness took their spot, inches in front of my face.

Both eyes were open now. I tried to focus.

“You’ll want to drink that,” she said.

The stuff looked hideous. Small groups of tiny bubbles formed on the inside surface, slowly and deliberately, like gangs of inmates in a prison cell block. I watched them patiently gather together, drafting plans and posting lookouts while they conspired and bided their time until exactly

the right moment and a sudden dash to freedom.

“It’s herbal,” Ashley said, as if the words offered a thorough explanation. She took a guarding position on the edge of my mattress and waited until I complied. “I know your liver grumbles at anything under fifty proof, but it should help with the hangover.”

This wasn’t a battle worth fighting. I reached out for the glass, pulled myself up onto an elbow and took a cautious sip. Escaping bubbles fizzed under my nose and popped with the crisp odor of wet pennies. Someone emptied the hamper into a rusty bucket and rinsed the socks with the contents of a kitchen spice rack and a junior chemistry set. I’ve had worse, but that’s not saying much. I drank it down while she nodded her approval.

“Thanks, Boss. It should kick in while you’re in the shower.”

I glanced over at the clock. Brass hands pointed at 2:17. Thick red draperies held back the afternoon light.

“What’s going on, Ash? I don’t have to be downtown until four.”

“You have a new client on her way. She wanted to set something up for this morning, but I told her you’d been out late on surveillance.”

“What kind of case?”

“She didn’t say, but it’s probably the usual—hang on, incoming.” The girl tapped a button on a tiny earpiece hidden under her hair and shifted into her cheery phone voice. “Good afternoon. Bowman Investigations...” Ash stood up, tucked the empty bottle under her arm and walked away with the dirty glasses in between polite listening noises. She stopped at the door and turned back long enough to mouth “downstairs” before heading to her desk.

I fought a strong urge to lie back down and stay there. Instead I rolled upright in the spot where Ashley had been and let my legs dangle over the side. I could have stayed there too, sitting with both hands clutching the edge of the mattress for support, staring down as my feet conquered a small island of white sheepskin in an ocean of hardwood flooring. After a minute or two, I’d finally amassed enough strength of will to stagger my way to the bathroom.

I twisted the taps open in the shower, brushed my teeth while waiting for the water to run warm, then clambered inside the curtained confines of a decrepit cast-iron bathtub. It’s a claw-footed monstrosity which must date back to the early days of indoor plumbing, but I’ve never bothered

with the forensics. Presumably it'd been hoisted up from street level and heaved through the window by at least eight men, whereupon they attempted to conceal their crime by entombing it behind a wall. I don't have a bathroom; it's an immurement with cheap tile and fixtures.

To her credit, Ashley was right. Her holistic nightmare of a hangover remedy began to take full hold while I stood under the spray and watched the flotsam of soap lather, stray hair and other personal debris swirl down the drain. My head still throbbed but at least I'd be functional enough.

I dried off, pulled my hair into place, changed into a blue dress shirt and dark gray trousers and maneuvered down the spiral staircase to find Ashley.



Bowman Investigations is located in a converted four-story brownstone near the corner of Stanton and Chrystie Streets in New York's Lower East Side. I bought the building back when the neighborhood's mean streets still had their teeth and the local parks were havens for gangs and drug users. Now they've gone the way of CBGB up Bowery. Families are moving in. There's an Organic Mart in the new high-rise condo building a block away on Houston Street. It's depressing.

I had the foresight to place ownership into a perpetual trust, created in Utah or Nevada or someplace like that, and then lease the office space and residential area back to myself. It's convoluted, but given how my identity as Phil Bowman is just as fabricated as the Hyrum Davis Family Trust, there's an advantage to obfuscating the paper trail. That's been tougher to do as the years have gone by, especially now after 9/11, the Patriot Act and Homeland Security, but I figure I can still trick the feds. Always staying one step ahead is the downside to being immortal. Well, that and having to fricking wake up every day.

The agency takes up most of the ground floor, including its own entrance and foyer, which Ashley guards with a buzzer and magnetic lock. The neighborhood isn't as dangerous as it once was, but Ash is a pretty girl and spends most of the day by herself. I'd rather be careful. It's my neck if something happens to her.

Behind my office is the main house kitchen, complete with a dining room and a spiral staircase leading to the upper living areas. Through the

backdoor lies a relatively spacious garden—by New York standards, at least. Side stairs lead down to the basement for laundry and additional storage. My bedroom and a shared living room are on the second floor. Ashley has her own connected room up on the third, adjacent to the library. The fourth floor of the building shares a separate residential entrance and can be rented out as two apartments if I ever have the inclination. I doubt I will. I don't need the extra income, and tenants have an annoying habit of being loud, getting in the way and asking irksome questions. I'd made an exception for Ash, given her unique situation, but she's a special case. And on the whole, I'd rather deal with humans as clients rather than as neighbors.

I found Ashley at her desk, typing effortlessly into half a dozen e-mail and message windows. She's my secretary, girl Friday, personal assistant—whatever they're called these days. I'd kept my own office and files for years until a friend begged a favor a few months ago and twisted my arm into taking part in a supervised work-study program. I said I'd think about it and expected to be charitable to some shy librarian of a gal with too-thick glasses, too-thin legs and the personality of a soggy handkerchief. What they dumped on my doorstep was an emotionally-stunted blonde with bright blue eyes, perfect teeth and a hard-core addiction to the Internet.

"Hey, Boss," she chirped as she glanced over her shoulder. "There's some coffee here for you." Her fingers kept typing while she nodded in the direction of a mug on top of her reception desk. "It's bitter and black, like your soul."

I scooped the coffee up from the chest-high railing. It was in one of the novelty mugs she'd bought for the office: EAT STAKE! printed in a bold gothic script with a cartoon wooden tent peg. Typical Ash. I swirled the mug around and took a cautious sip. "I thought it was 'bitter and black like my heart.'"

"Nah, your heart's usually okay," she said without looking up.

I let the dig slide. "Who's the client?"

The girl abandoned her computer screen and turned to face me. "It's a Mrs. Guildenstern. Heart status: likely broken. She didn't really say but it sounded like infidelity."

"Guildenstern, huh? Like 'Rosencrantz and?'"

"I don't know. Why? Is that a law firm?"

"No, they're two guys from *Hamlet*."

Ashley stared at me blankly. “Where’s that? Upstate?”

“It’s a play. Main character’s a guy named Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are old pals of his but they turn out to be spying on him. He has them killed.”

She screwed up her eyebrows in thought, then had a small flash of what seemed like recognition. “Do they come back as zombies?”

“Sorry, no zombies. There’s a ghost, if that helps.”

“But it’s in Denmark, right? And there’s a girl that dies. O-something.”

“Ophelia. She drowns. Suicide.”

“Right! But then she’s revived by a secret government project and they pump her full of genetic enhancements so she can go all Buffy on the zombie invaders. I’ve seen it before. It’s really cool, Boss. She has a big ax.”

“Shakespeare didn’t have any zombies. He drew the line at ghosts, witches and fairies.”

“Then maybe I saw the sequel. Lauryn and Holly would know. They went with me when we watched it with our sci-fi group.”

“*Hamlet* doesn’t have a sequel. Everybody dies at the end.”

“Well, yeah. That’s why there’s a huge zombie army walking around Denmark.”

Like I said, I pay her to type.

“Did Mrs. Guildenstern say anything else?” I asked.

“No, she just wanted a consultation. Your four o’clock’s been pushed back to five, by the way. And I hope you didn’t use all the hot water. I still have to get ready.”

“You’re going out tonight?”

The girl hesitated, then looked down at her desk and searched for something to straighten. “Um, actually, no. When you leave for—I mean, when you go visit—” She fidgeted with a toy spaceship sitting beside her computer monitor. “I’ve been requested to accompany you this time.”

“No way in hell,” I told her.

“The queen thought you’d probably say that. She said to tell you it’s a royal request and totally her idea. If there’s a problem you can call her main number, the land line. Apparently her cell phone’s on the blink again.”

“Wait—you *talked* with her?”

“Not intentionally. That call upstairs—that was her asking to reschedule. I couldn’t place the voice and thought she just had a new assistant or something. I didn’t realize it was actually her.”

“You should have told her no.”

Ash stiffened in her chair and chewed her bottom lip. “Maybe you can, Boss, but not me. I mean, all she has to do is call the placement office and tell them I didn’t—” Worry filled her face and her eyes grew moist. “I’d get into trouble if she—you wouldn’t let her, would you?”

I sucked a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Nah, but be careful not to piss her off. The woman can get difficult. You have something appropriate to wear?”

The blonde dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “I was thinking of the green thing I had on when you met me.”

“That could work. It’s classic. She likes classic.” I wielded the mug and continued toward my desk. “Lemme get ready for Mrs. Guildenstern. Send her in when she gets here.” I turned when I reached the doorway. “Hey, Ash?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Watch yourself when we’re down there. She’s tough on rules. And get something to eat first. Big lunch. Put it on my card.”

“Will do.” She gave me the kind of smile an orthodontist would envy, then returned to her computer.

I pushed through the door, kicked it shut behind me and reveled in the silence.

Three

Sarah Elizabeth Guildenstern was on time, out of breath and out of her element. In spite of all the urban reclamation in recent years, she was still a Park Avenue dame and this was still the Bowery.

True New Yorkers live and breathe in their neighborhoods and rarely venture into others. I've known Upper East Siders who proclaim they've never stepped foot in the Upper West and vice versa. Central Park stands as a demilitarized zone between the two warring nations. Crossing Twenty-Third Street requires use of the word "far." Below Houston lies an uncivilized *terra incognita* where the coordinate grid system breaks down and forms an incomprehensible jumble of streets with actual names.

An advantage to maintaining an office in this part of town is that my clients only visit me when absolutely necessary. It also avoids the risk of them being seen by gossip-prone neighbors when consulting my services.

Mrs. Guildenstern was dressed to the nines: pashmina shawl, silk blouse, cashmere skirt, stockinged legs and designer pumps. All Italian, all expensive and all perfectly coordinated, down to the limited edition leather handbag a fashionista could recognize just by its straps and buckles. Call her in her fifties, maybe slightly more depending on the Botox and amount of work she had done. I'd bet she'd just taken a taxi after getting her dark hair coiffed and recolored at Bergdorf's. Or from eating lunch at the Plaza or at the new Tavern on the Green or wherever happens to be fashionable this week. It's a life, just not mine.

I greeted her at the door and offered her a seat in front of my desk. The woman glanced apprehensively at the loaded filing cabinets and assorted office debris. When she first came on, Ash wanted to digitize the records and hyper-organize everything to leave the place looking like a cloistered priory cell. It took a while for her to accept that a reasonable

amount of clutter is set dressing. People expect the dust and debris of work in progress, and it implies that I'm a busy man earning my fee. Well, that and I don't want my clients to think I'm obsessive-compulsive like that neurotic guy on cable.

"Can I get you something to drink, Mrs. Guildenstern?" I ran through the list as I walked to my chair and sat down: water, coffee, tea, soda, a glass of wine.

"It's Sarah. And coffee, please. Milk and two sugars."

I rang up Ashley on the intercom and conveyed the order.

My client fidgeted in her chair, dreading the inevitable like a pet store rat on its way home to a hungry snake. It's the nature of the business that people don't come to me unless their problems require a certain degree of expertise in solving. They're nervous, uncomfortable and would rather be anywhere else than in the chair in front of my desk, baring their souls and explaining the unpleasantness in their lives. I try to make it easier for them.

"Nice bag," I said. I've learned it's sure-fire small talk to break the ice. Ask about purses and shoes, jewelry or cats.

She brightened visibly. "Oh, thank you. It's the new Paolo Finelli." She held the thing up and allowed me a moment to admire the canvas and leather. For all I knew, it was a back alley special from Canal Street, but probably not with this dame.

"Yeah. Nice." Whatever. "But do me a favor and don't show it to Ash. She'll want one for the holidays." I gave a practiced wink and tilted my head toward the lobby.

"Oh, she's your—?"

They never know what to ask. Daughter? Girlfriend? Office playmate?

"Niece," I finished. "My sister's daughter. She helps out between classes at N.Y.U. It's a win-win. I get the help. She gets room and board. And her parents don't worry about scary boyfriends ruining their Thanksgivings." It's simple enough as cover stories go.

Ashley rapped on the door and brought in another mug of coffee along with cloth napkins and a small plate of cookies. "Milk and sugar?"

"Yes, thank you, dear," Sarah told her. "How wonderful of you to help your uncle with his practice."

Ash knows the script. "Oh, I don't know what I'd do without him. He's the best," she gushed. She smiled on cue then turned in my direction. "Do you need me, Uncle Phil? I still have that project for tonight."

I told her we were fine. She exited through the lobby door, closing it gently and holding the latch to soften the click against the strike plate. Time for business.

“She’s adorable,” Sarah remarked.

“Yeah, like kittens in sunshine.” I waited a beat and shifted gears. “So how can we help you, Sarah?”

“Ellen Weinberg gave me your number. She said you worked with her on a similar problem last year.”

“Which was what?” I always play dumb when it comes to other clients.

She gulped a breath, held it, then blurted, “I think my husband is having an affair.” She kept her composure, better than most.

I didn’t bother with a sugar-coat. “He probably is.”

“Shouldn’t we, um, at least be sure first?”

“We could. But I’ve been in the business longer than I care to admit, and I know how the game works. When a man comes in, thinking his wife is cheating on him, odds are practically fifty-fifty that he’s just being jealous or seeing something that isn’t actually there. Maybe it’s an affair. Maybe it’s a harmless friend. The bet’s even money. But when a woman suspects her guy is fooling around, we’re talking better than twenty-to-one that he is. Don’t ask me why, but it’s consistent. If you’re clinging to a thin hope I’ll vindicate your husband and prove you wrong, then I’m just taking a bunch of your cash for you to end up disappointed.”

“That’s an unusual sales pitch, Mr. Bauman,” she said after a moment.

It’s Bowman, but I didn’t bother correcting her. “Maybe, but it’s the truth.”

Mrs. Guildenstern cupped her hands around her coffee and flashed a rock the size of an almond. “So what should I do?”

“That’s your call. But I can gather information, learn what the facts are so you can make the best decision for your circumstances. Is it better for your marriage to forgive a moment of weakness on a business trip or a drunken one night stand? It’s up to you. What if the late nights at the office are really his secretary or the neighbor’s nanny? Maybe he’s been keeping a mistress in Queens or boning your best friend every week since the Clinton administration. Sometimes it’s even better not knowing—he could be with prostitutes, other men or even children. I’ve seen it all. There’s no guarantee what we could find. And no way of taking back the knowledge once you learn it.”

I let the implications hang in the air and watched her brown eyes flicker as she searched for words of her own. She elected not to choose any.

The bitter blackness in my mug had gone cold. I set it to one side and continued the motion to retrieve a sheet of cotton bond paper from my top right-hand drawer. After laying it in front of me, I grabbed a pen and started taking notes. “Does your husband know you’re on to him? Has he caught you snooping around? Checking up on him? Asking too many questions?”

“No, I came straight to you when I started to suspect an affair.”

“That’s usually a smart move.”

“I saw what happened to Ellen.”

“Keep it that way. Grin through your teeth and act like normal. It’ll hurt, but we don’t want him covering his tracks or moving money if he thinks he’ll get caught.” That had been Ellen’s mistake. She had a flair for the dramatic and confronted her husband with the red thong she discovered under the passenger seat of his Mercedes. Twelve hours later, he skipped out through Bermuda with a suitcase and everything but the mortgage. “What does your husband do for a living?”

“Finance. He’s the co-founder of the Goldstone Group. It’s a private equity firm downtown.”

“Wall Street’s been a mess since the recession.”

“It’s not as bad as one might think. Harry’s group hedged against the subprime market and braced for a credit crunch. They’d repositioned by the time Lehman collapsed and the banks were failing.”

“Big money from the bailout?”

“Not directly. Harry said he saw it coming and planned ahead. He’s a genius when it comes to risk management,” she said with domestic pride. Then the corners of her mouth turned down as she realized he might be her new adversary.

“We’ll hope he’s not as smart in regard to his personal life. Either way, it’s tougher for us. Normally I’d run a search for concealed assets if he’s been squirreling away on the side. I’m sure he has—it’s second nature for finance guys. But they’re pros when it comes to sheltering accounts and titles. Makes Enron look like grade school. I can try looking, but there’s no guarantee I’d find anything. I’ll leave that decision up to you. Do you have any property or assets in your own name?”

“Some, but perhaps not as much as I should.”

“That’s still better than most women in your position. You’d be surprised how many wives rely on joint credit cards and checking accounts. They never think about it until something happens and the men and the money are gone.” I’m sure that was another lesson she learned from her friend last year. “Ashley has a packet of forms and a list of information we’ll need. We have a couple of workstations up front and can hold your materials if you don’t have a secure environment at home. We also have some short-term storage lockers and a safe in the basement if you need a temporary place to stash a fur coat or your grandmother’s jewelry. No fee for that, by the way. I bill a flat one hundred per man-hour for investigative work. Double for basic surveillance and photos. Triple for advanced surveillance, electronics and video. The hourly rate also covers incidental equipment and expenses. I’ll contact you in advance if the circumstances require anything special, but they usually don’t. Any questions?”

She took a slow, final pull from her coffee and set the mug on the edge of my desk. After a thoughtful pause, she dabbed the napkin against her lips and returned it to her lap. “May I ask something personal, Mr. Bauman?”

“Call me Phil.”

“Were you ever married, Phil?”

I should have lied but I didn’t. “Once. A long time ago.”

She nodded. “And it ended badly.”

“Some would say ‘epically,’ but yes.”

“Did you have any children?”

“One. A girl. A little older than Ashley.” Technically she’s a *lot* older but you wouldn’t know by looking at her. There was silence. I kept filling it. “Her name’s Heddie. We don’t talk much these days. Why do you ask?”

“Most parents have photos of their children on their desk. The only one I see is a picture of you and your niece.” Sarah pointed at a silver frame next to my in-box. It holds an impromptu shot Ash took in a frivolous moment during her first week here—one of those where you hold the camera at arm’s length and hope you’re not a horribly-cropped, over-exposed blur. I’m not sure which surprised me more, the way it turned out or that she actually printed and framed it.

“Does it matter?” I asked.

“No, but I’m starting to understand why Ellen said you were a real mensch.”

“A real mensch wouldn’t charge the rates I do.”

She batted my comment away with her ring hand. “What’s your retainer?”

“For infidelity it’s twenty-five hundred. Generally it takes some leg-work to identify the third party and assess the situation. From there we can decide how you want to proceed. If you’re considering a divorce, your attorney might require additional investigation and evidence. Be warned: it can add up quickly.”

“I understand. May I pay with a check?”

“Only if your husband won’t notice if he goes over the account.”

“It’s my own. I doubt there will be a problem.” Sarah reached into her handbag and removed a pair of reading glasses from a small matching case. A leather-bound checkbook quickly followed before she placed the bag on the floor. “Should I make it out in your name?”

“My female clients generally make it out to Ashley. Here, let me give you her card.” I fished one out from my center drawer and passed it across the desk.

It’s basic enough: ASHLEY GREENLEAF, DESIGNER in a stylish emerald script, along with her phone number, e-mail and a Web address. The girl has an aversion to common wood and paper products and initially tried to ban them from the office. After the argument and a threat against half my furniture, we settled on white hundred-percent cotton as a practical compromise. It’s rather expensive, but the lettering pops and it adds an air of professionalism to our printed correspondence.

Sarah palmed the card and gave it a glance to copy the spelling. Then she stared at me over her designer frames and looked thoroughly puzzled. “Greenleaf? I thought you said she was your niece.”

“They changed it from Grünblatt during the war.”

“Ah.” She nodded to herself and continued writing. “Is she a designer as well?”

“Not that I’m aware of. But she’ll answer her calls and leave messages like one. It’s a good cover in case you can’t talk openly or if someone decides to go through your purse or phone while you’re taking a shower. I think she even has brochures and swatches to take home if you’re questioned about your appointments here.”

“I’m impressed by your attention to detail.” She signed her check with a flourish, then tore it loose and placed it on the pile of folders nearest her

seat. "Thank you for your time and for taking my case. I'll call to make the necessary arrangements with your niece."

I thanked her in turn, we exchanged goodbyes and I escorted Mrs. Guildenstern and her Paolo Finellis to the front door. I held it open for her and pointed the direction back to Houston Street and civilization as she knew it. Ash had already gone upstairs, and the door closed with a solid metallic clunk as the magnetic lock engaged.

The clock read 3:34. I needed a drink.

Our cookies had gone untouched during my stoic client's consultation, so I popped one into my mouth and gathered up the dishes, mugs and napkins. The back wall of my office contains a steel fire door leading to our kitchen and living quarters, which makes for convenient access and cleanup. Ashley knows the keypad combination, but I never bother with it. With my hands full, I simply leaned against the door and bumped the latch with my left elbow. The lock clicked open without protest and I pushed backward into the kitchen.

The Bowery is home to several restaurant supply companies, so I had the kitchen remodeled in the interest of convenience and functionality: stainless steel everything. Ashley says it looks like the inside of an alien mother ship and refers to the island countertop as an autopsy table. She tried to liven it up once with a crystal bowl of cut flowers, but the end result looked like a science experiment on daffodils. She gave up soon after but conceded that I didn't opt for wooden cabinets and counter tops.

I slid the plate of cookies on the island, dumped the mugs in the sink and the napkins down the laundry chute. Ash had washed out last night's tumbler, which I collected from the bamboo drying rack next to the basin. Five minutes later, I was trying to relax in the second-floor living room with a double bourbon and Coke while waiting for the girl to get ready.

"Hey, Boss?" she called down eventually.

"Yeah?"

"Can you help tie me up?" She descended the spiral stairs, one hand firmly behind her, while trying not to trip on the length of her dress. "I mean, can you help me with my girdle? I can't seem to get it right." She stopped in front of me and wiggled tasseled ends of a gold-colored cord in my direction.

With a grunt, I tied them in a knot at the small of her back.

Ash thanked me and whirled around. “So how do I look?”

The uninitiated would call her outfit a toga. Those with some specialized education might know that a toga for women is called a stola. But more properly, the girl was wearing a modern version of a classical Greek chiton. A key difference is that a Roman stola, like an Indian sari, is a long length of cloth wrapped around the body with the excess thrown over a shoulder. Think Statue of Liberty or your typical frat party. A chiton, however, is a type of tunic resembling a human-sized, open-ended pillow case. It’s the original tube dress, although with extra width and a higher neckline than today’s varieties. Fold the bed sheet lengthwise, sew up the side, add a belt and you’re getting close.

Ashley’s was, of course, much more elegant than makeshift household linen. The main garment was silk, dyed a deep green and trimmed with gold embroidery. Leaf-shaped pins held the front and back edges together, above her shoulders and down to the elbows, forming basic sleeves. What she called her girdle was a band of gold cord wrapped behind her neck, across her chest in an X and cinched around the waist. Modest slits for each leg. Lace-up sandals. She looked like a goddess, but I knew better than actually say it.

I compromised. “You look great.”

“Really? I’m not too saggy, am I?” The girl scooped up her breasts in her hands, released them and bounced on her toes to check for jiggle. Repeatedly.

“No, you’re fine. Are we—will you stop doing that, please? Thank you. Are you ready?”

“Almost! I just need to fix my hair and put on some makeup.” Ash gathered her skirts in both hands and dashed up the staircase to her third-floor bedroom. She stumbled near the top of the steps but caught herself without mishap.

“Don’t think you can get there faster by killing yourself. This isn’t a date, Ash. It’s a summons,” I shouted up to her. “I can’t help you if you get into trouble.”

“I know. But you’d still try to rescue me,” came her muffled response.

I knocked back the rest of the bourbon, then poured myself a refill and repeated the action. After setting the glass on the side table, I sprawled back on the couch, closed my eyes and waited for the beginnings of a slight buzz to kick in.

Ashley came down and tapped me on the shoulder when she was finished. She'd pinned her hair back in a low bun and clutched a green silk wrist bag. "So how do I look now?" She gave the requisite slow spin.

"I'd say heavenly, but we're going to the other place instead."

She stifled a quick laugh behind her hand, then checked herself in the mirror before holding out her purse. "Would you mind carrying this for me? I don't have any pockets."

I crammed it into one of mine.

"Thanks, Boss." She held my arm and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Don't thank me until we get back—if you get back."

Once or twice a week, I go downtown to spend time with my dearest and closest friend, typically over lunch or afternoon tea. We have a complicated history, having grown up together and even dated for a while. But that was long ago. She's married now, but her husband doesn't see the need to feel jealous or threatened. If anything, he encourages us to spend time together, which I've grown to appreciate in recent years.

If we were normal people, I wouldn't worry too much about dragging my new, attractive secretary to visit an old girlfriend. Worst case, I'd have to watch Ash fumble with her manners and eating utensils at some upscale restaurant. I'd suffer through embarrassment, maybe some veiled cattiness and a minor gaffe involving a glass of Champagne and an oyster fork.

No, the real problem, particularly for Ashley, is that my best friend is Persephone. As in *the* Persephone. As in the Greek goddess variously known to mortals as the Iron Queen, the Terrible Maiden, She of the Forbidden Name, Dreaded Goddess of the Underworld, Mistress of the Dead.

Ashley may not be human, but she is mortal. And close friend or not, Seph's track record isn't exactly stellar when it comes to the living entering her domain. Tricks and traps ensnare the careless and unsuspecting, dooming them to hell for all eternity.

I'm free to come and go as often as I please, but my unique travel pass doesn't include a plus-one exit visa. If something went wrong, I couldn't bring the girl home. She'd have to stay forever. Dead—or worse.

Or as Ash often says, it's not a situation that generally leads to hugs and puppies.

Four

Nestled incongruously among the glass and steel skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan's Financial District rests Federal Hall, a small Doric temple to American history that commands the intersection of Wall and Broad Streets.

Long ago this was the site of the nation's original Capitol, before the seat of power shifted to Philadelphia and ultimately to Washington, D.C. The First Congress convened here and added the Bill of Rights to the new American Constitution. George Washington swore his oath of office on this spot to become the nation's first president. A larger-than-life bronze statue commemorates the founding father, whose calming hand stretches diagonally across the street, toward the New York Stock Exchange.

Before the September 11 attacks cast a pall of security over the area, mesh-jacketed brokers and dark-suited refugees from surrounding offices routinely picnicked at Washington's feet, basking in the sunshine and a good day's profitability. Lunch on the steps was a barometer of sorts. When the market fared poorly, relaxed meals gave way to quick bites and nervous chain-smoking. On the worst of days, a haze of cigarette exhaust hung thirty feet in the air while news teams jockeyed for the reporting platform on the western steps of the building.

When politicians, real or imagined, need a serious backdrop for their campaign speeches and announcements, they appear in front of the Greek columns of Federal Hall. When Hollywood directors seek a convenient stand-in for any official-looking government building, they use Federal Hall. Conversely, if a scene calls for a generic urban street corner, they just swivel the cameras around and shoot the action from the steps, taking care not to ding up good ol' George in the process.

Given its iconic history as the original seat of power, its location at the epicenter of the financial universe and the fact that the intersection of Wall and Broad is one of the most-photographed spots on earth, it's no surprise Federal Hall sits on top of a confluence of energy that wells up like a spring of mystical whatsit.

Explaining this to Ashley turned out to be easier than I expected. We'd barely closed the security gate on the office and were walking toward the subway station by the time she processed it all.

"In other words, it's like a hellmouth," she said.

"I guess. Maybe not as sinister as anything you're thinking, though. No zombies, for sure."

"I'm telling you it must have been the sequel. I'll take you if it shows again, okay?"

"Only if you insist."

"Oh, trust me. I will." Her fingers squeezed my arm, and she turned to flash me a brief smile. "So how does the non-zombie hellmouth thing work?"

"It's a mystical hotspot. And it's interconnected with others, which lets you travel around between them. Well, I can."

"Travel where? Can you take me to Rome? Paris?" Her blue eyes filled with mischief. "Cleveland?"

"If you want. Most major cities were originally settled around them, especially in the old days. But why Cleveland? I'm not gonna shuttle you around if you've picked up some boyfriend online."

"Hardly," she scoffed. "No, I just wondered if there's a hellmouth there." She fought to keep a straight face but the giggle eventually escaped.

"It's not a hellmouth, Ash. It's more like a big subway station. But without the cars or tracks. Or getting electrocuted on the third rail if you're drunk and wander off the platform. Not that I've, um, ever done that."

"So now it's a magic subway?" Dripping sarcasm pooled at her feet, then drained into the gutter.

"I said it was like a *station*. Think of one of the larger ones, like at Forty-Second Street. The tunnels and walkways sprawl around for several blocks under Times Square and the adjacent roads and buildings. So if you know the layout, you can avoid all the above-ground weather, tourists and traffic by using the station itself as a shortcut."

"But instead of going two blocks away, you're in another city."

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“You could have just called it a stargate, Boss.”

“It’s not a stargate.”

“Then how does it work? If it’s covered in symbols, we dial up where we want to go and a wormhole takes us to the other side, I won’t let you hear the end of it.”

“No, it’s not that complicated. You go in, walk around and come out where you want to. That’s it. No stars. No gates. No worms. Just tunnels and passages.”

“Okay, but how does it work? I mean, are we talking about a zero-point field and the Casimir effect manipulating space-time on a quantum level? Because then you’re really just walking into a giant Tardis that serves as a dimensional—”

“I don’t know!” I snapped.

She paused a moment then asked innocently, “Why not?”

“That’s like asking an eagle how it flies. I don’t know how it works. It just does.”

“But didn’t you ever want to know? Aren’t you curious?”

“Why should I be? It wouldn’t change the fact that it still takes me from place to place. And it’s a hell of a lot better than all that sci-fi and fantasy crap you spend all your time with.”

It hit a nerve. I knew it would.

She stopped in her tracks, spun me around and gave me a sharp look. “So let me get this straight, *Uncle Phil*.” She began slowly and counted off points on her fingers. “I’m walking down the street, dressed in full period costume, in the company of the down-and-out, alcoholic Greek god I work for, who’s been telling me about some kind of magic subway we can take to spend the afternoon with the queen of hell—”

“Underworld,” I corrected. “Hell’s technically just a small part of—”

“Excuse me. So we can spend the afternoon with the queen of the Underworld. Is that better?” she asked under a raised eyebrow.

“She’s picky about her titles and you’re mortal. Just be on your best behavior around her, okay? And don’t ever refer to her by name.”

“She’s Voldemort. Got it. Did I miss anything?”

“You left out the part where you’re a nymph.”

“I figured it goes without saying. But fine, I’m a tree nymph. Yes, I’ve heard all the jokes.” Another finger went up; she held out both hands to

show me the tally. “And yet, in the middle of all this, the aforementioned Greek god I work for is being condescending about my pastimes because they aren’t adequately based on—air quote—the real world, to which, strictly speaking, neither of us actually belongs.”

“Some would argue that’s entirely the point.”

“You know nymph logic doesn’t quite work that way, right?” Ashley gave me a quick wink and took my arm again, leading me down the sidewalk. “Anyway, why are we taking the subway?”

“I can’t teleport us to the Underworld directly. Or at all, for that matter.”

“No, I mean why are we taking the J train instead of a taxi?” She tilted her head toward the open-entrance indicator, a lit green globe mounted above the station stairwell.

“Oh. Most of the downtown streets are barricaded around the Stock Exchange, so we’d have to walk a few blocks anyway. The J also lets us out at Broad Street, and we can access the—wanna call it a ‘gateway?’”

“Sure.”

“We can access the gateway while we’re underground. And I figured between the miles of silk you’re wearing and who you’re about to meet, there’s less risk I’ll get you torn or sullied on the train than in the back of a cab.” I knew the words came out wrong as soon as I heard myself say them, but backpedaling would just draw more attention to the implications. With any luck she’d just let it slide.

The girl leaned in close, wet her lips and purred into my ear. “If you want, you can have some fun sullyng me on the way home.”

So much for sliding.

“That’s, um—that’s not what I was suggesting.”

“I know,” she said with a casual shrug. “Consider it an open offer if you’d like.”

“Drop it, Ash.”

“I mean, it’s not like anyone thinks you’re really my uncle or that you hired a young, beautiful blonde for her impressive filing skills. I’m already living with you, so you might as well enjoy all the benefits of—”

“I said drop it. I’m not having this conversation.” I shook her off my arm and marched two steps toward the station entrance.

“But, Boss, I’m just trying to be honest about—”

Honest or not, I didn’t need this. Not from her. I spun around and stared her down, straight in her baby blues. “Drop it or I’ll call Placement

and send you back.” The threat worked. Admittedly, it doubled as proof I’m a cold, cruel son of a bitch who probably delights in drowning abandoned kittens. But it’s better she learn that up front than suffer through the weepy regrets later. Besides, it was for her own good anyway. I let the silence hang in the air while the words sank in. “Are we clear?”

I avoided eye contact until her shoulders sagged and she stared at the ground like a busted marionette.

“Yes, Boss.” The tears would start soon. “Can I have my purse, please?” Yep, right on cue. I handed it to her, and she tugged out a small pack of tissue to dab at her eyes. At least she was quiet about it and didn’t collapse in a heap of sobs on the sidewalk.

“We should probably go,” I said after a moment.

“Sure. Let me just—” She fumbled through her dress, looking for a place to stash her wrist bag among the folds. “I’m sorry, but would you mind? I still don’t have any pockets.”

I took it and shoved it back into one of mine. After yanking out a fresh tissue, she tucked the rest of the pack into her girdled bodice.

Ash didn’t take my arm again, but she followed me into the gloom and misery known as Bowery Station. When we reached the turnstiles on the mezzanine, I snatched her hand and pulled her through without bothering with the fare card, then let go as we descended the stairs to the main platform.

Of the four hundred-odd metro stops in the New York City area, Bowery Station is like the unwanted stepchild in a family with too many mouths to feed. A hundred years of dirt and grime cover everything with a surface. Tiled walls weep crusted rivers of brown at the memory of having been polished and gleaming and white around the time of the *Titanic*. Cherry red I-beams loiter along the platform like cheap, lonely women on a rainy Saturday night, supporting a twenty-foot ceiling too frightened to come any closer. If an angel flew down from heaven, she’d struggle between the mercy of throwing herself onto the tracks and the fear of what she might have to touch before being crushed under the wheels. She’d look like Ashley—gathering up her dress skirts and holding tight in case they dragged, snagged or blew around—like Marilyn Monroe.

Silent minutes ticked by as we waited for the train. Service on the old BMT line is irregular at best and worse still on weekends when maintenance and rerouting wreak havoc on the schedules. I ignored Ashley for

the most part, dividing my attention between the safety niches along the outer wall and the antics of a rat scurrying in the channel between rail ties. It dashed away when the grungy tiles lighted a dull yellow as the train approached. The screech and squeal of metal grew deafening, and sleek cars came to a stop beside the platform.

For such a desolate and desperate station, the Bowery is serviced by some of the transit system's newest rolling stock. The passenger doors slid open with a winding whirr, revealing clean floors, blue plastic benches, satin-finished steel bars and several overhead L.E.D. displays. Seats were available but I opted to stand and grabbed a support pole in the center of the car. Ashley released her skirts as she boarded and joined me. She held onto the same pole but turned away and stared at her feet.

Five seconds later, a pre-recorded male voice announced, "Stand clear of the closing doors," and they shut with the same electric whirr in reverse pitch. The train lurched forward as we departed the station.

I broke our silence one stop later. "Did you eat anything?"

She nodded but kept her gaze on the black-and-white flecked flooring. "What did you have?" I asked.

"A sandwich from the deli. Turkey and swiss on a hero, spicy mustard, lettuce and tomato and a Diet Coke." She rattled it off like she must have done when placing the order.

"Did you eat all of it?"

She looked up at me and her eyes still had the damp sheen of recent tears. Blue irises swam among streaks of red. "As much as I could."

"How about now? Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

"I'm not stupid, okay? I know I can't eat or drink anything when I'm there."

She ignored me for the rest of the ride to Broad Street.

When the doors slid open, I led her up the steps to the rear of the station and into the main crossover mezzanine. The stairways and turnstiles ahead were filling with the early homeward rush of stock traders and office workers. We navigated against the pedestrian traffic and stopped beside a ticket-selling machine hidden behind the attendant booth.

"Wait here a minute," I told the girl.

I poked at the touch screen and purchased a basic two-fare MetroCard. A mechanical mouth popped open and I pushed a ten-dollar bill into the slot. The machine sucked it up and spat out a card in return. Change

rained into the hopper, and I scooped several golden dollar coins into my pocket.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

Ash craned around. “So where’s the gateway?”

I pointed at the wall and sidestepped to face the bare white tile between the ticket machine and a map of the transit system.

She rolled her eyes at me. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, that’s it.”

“Let me guess: It’s easier if I close my eyes and run straight through.”

“Only if you want a cracked skull on top of everything else today.”

“I’ll pass. Then what do I do?”

I grabbed her hand and locked my fingers between hers. She bristled and tried to pull away, but I kept a firm grip and held our hands up for emphasis.

“Stay close and don’t let go,” I told her.

“Why?”

“Because you’ll end up dead or stuck in the middle of a wall. And I’ll say it now: Bringing you wasn’t my idea. It’s hers, and we’ll be on her home turf. If anything goes wrong while we’re there, we’re subject to her laws, and I won’t be able to help you or intervene in any way. Do you understand?”

She didn’t look as apprehensive as I wanted, but she paused before nodding and telling me yes.

“Let me know when you’re ready. And maybe close your eyes too. It’s a bit disorienting.”

Ashley gave my hand a tight squeeze and I pulled us through the bricks, tile, concrete foundations and loose earth of the mortal realm and willed our bodies into the murky nothingness that leads into the depths of the Underworld.

Five

The road to hell might be paved with good intentions, but navigating the tunnel system is more of an exercise in zen than anything else. There are no maps, no charts, no GPS or online guides or princesses with skeins of yarn to help heroes find their way. The guiding thread here is merely a thin ply of direction sense and an understanding of where one should end up. In truth, the endless maze of dripping caves, rough-hewn stairways and torch-lined passages is probably just symbolic, existing only because it needs to—but I'm not exactly the right person to ask when it comes to metaphysics.

Ashley stumbled several times as we tripped over the stones and natural clefts and fissures along the path. At one point she twisted her ankle and fell against a rocky outcropping, landing with a sharp cry of pain. I hauled her up and pulled her closer to the torchlight. Thoroughly embarrassed, she tottered on one foot and hiked up the side of her dress to have me check her injuries. I didn't find any serious cuts or wounds, but she'd develop a nasty bruise on her thigh when we returned topside. I brushed her off and we continued onward.

We emerged from the tunnelway into a dismal grotto along a gloomy shore. Ash gathered up her skirts again and tiptoed around the mud and puddles. A fallen boulder blocked most of the cave entrance. We squeezed past, making our way outside to stand on the stygian banks of Erebus.

Souls inclined to generous euphemism or literal geology might describe the expanse of rocks and wet sand as a "beach," but the word invokes the wrong set of imagery and ideas. Beaches are dynamic environments teeming with life: bathers, surfers, fish, sea birds, scuttling crabs. Waves crash against the shore. Tides ebb and flow. Palm fronds sway in the wind. Erebus has none of these. The desolate shore resembles an

abandoned stretch of California or New England coastline, suitable only as a spot where mariners and fishermen would go—and perish. Overcast skies and a haze of fog enshroud the stony flatland between jagged cliffs and the River Styx, bathing everything with a damp, eternal gray tinged with the scent of swamps and stagnation.

I released Ash's hand and walked along the shore, onto a long stone quay jutting into the river. She followed me to the end, where a tarnished bronze bell dangled from a mooring pole. I rang it twice. Two mournful replies echoed back from the fog.

We waited for the ferryman.

The shroud of mist peeled away to reveal a boat, black and sleek like a Venetian gondola, propelled by an upright figure sculling a single oar. The boatman was tall, at least six feet, with white hair and a scruffy beard, and was wearing a ruddy tunic tied with a rope belt. Mottled patches covered the rear deck where his calloused feet had worn the polish down to bare wood. Dark eyes hinted at mischief. This was Charon, ferryman of the dead.

Historically, anyone demanding passage across the Styx either had to pay his fee or wander the rocky banks of Erebus for a hundred years. But from what I understand, modern efficiency and economies of scale have reduced the wait to about fourteen months now.

Charon aimed his boat straight at the quay, then swung the bow around at the last moment to bleed off momentum and slide lengthwise against the mooring. I caught the prow with both hands and held the vessel steady for boarding.

"What seek ye in the Underworld, milord?" he asked me in a foreboding voice.

"I have business with the queen."

"Can ye pay?"

"I can."

I reached into my pocket and removed one of the dollar coins from the MetroCard machine. I offered it to the ferryman, who snatched it from me and held it up for inspection. Golden metal glowed in the boat's lamplight.

Charon grunted his approval and slid the dollar into a small leather purse tied to his belt. "Ye may board."

I slipped Ashley a coin as I took a seat in the rear of the boat.

“And what seek ye in the Underworld, *mortal miss?*” He spat the last two words with a hint of contempt.

Ash glanced at me nervously, and I gave her a small nod to follow my lead. She did without incident and sat in the rear-facing bench in front of me.

“Stay seated,” Charon muttered. “And keep yer hands and arms in the boat. I won’t be fishin’ nobody out if ye take a tumble and drown.” He shoved off from the quay and propelled us into the gloom. A thick and damp fog clung to us like wet clothing in the rain until we could barely see each other.

Long minutes passed. Or perhaps they didn’t. Time never feels right down here.

Ashley broke the silence. “Can I ask a weird question, Boss?”

“Go for it.”

“What should I be for Halloween this year?”

“I dunno. What did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking about dressing up as a Na’vi, but I’m not really sure anymore.”

“What the hell’s a Na’vi?”

Charon broke in. “It be the alien race from *Avatar*, milord.”

This hit Ash’s geek button. “Wow, you’ve seen it?”

“Aye, missy.”

“Really? How?”

“We may be in the Underworld, but we have cable and Internet, we do. Our Lord and Mistress govern all things buried beneath the earth. We tap into the feeds as easy as ye be sittin’ here.”

“Gods that’s shiny!”

“Be careful on the blaspheming, missy,” he scolded. “What be the problem with yer costume?”

“I’m worried it’ll take a lot of effort to apply the body paint evenly, and we can’t wear anything over it if the weather is cold and rainy. Plus it depends on the guys who show up from our sci-fi group. Some of them get really gropey after a few drinks, and I don’t want to spend the night walking around with handprints all over my—”

“Do we really need to have this conversation right now?” I asked.

“Sorry, Boss.” She turned back to address the boatman. “Anyway, that was the idea. I’m not sure if I still want to.”

“What were ye last year?”

“I was Kaylee, from *Firefly*. You should have seen me, Boss. I did my hair up with some brown spray color in it and had the jumpsuit and the parasol and the teddy bear patch and everything.”

I never quite know what to do when Ash is nerding out. I just stared at her and gave a half shrug before peering into the fog.

“I met her once. The actress,” Charon said. “Not professionally, o’ course.”

“Really?”

“Two summers ago, at the big convention in Atlanta.”

“OMG! Did you see a blonde girl dressed up like Silk Spectre?”

He thought for a moment, then nodded. “Aye.”

“That was me!”

For a split second, I was afraid Ash would jump up and fling her arms around the ferryman, capsizing the three of us into the Styx, or maybe into the Acheron, depending where we were at the moment. Either way, the outcome would be less than ideal, given how the rivers of hate and woe are toxic channels of mystical runoff. Touching the stuff is like swimming in a reactor coolant tank during a nuclear disaster. I slid down in my seat to lower my center of gravity and dozed off to a torrent of nerd chatter.



Charon shook me awake when we reached the far shore. “Welcome to Tartarus, milord.”

We had moored in a claustrophobic inlet barely large enough for our boat and tied up against a pier built from the scree fallen from the cliff above. The air was heavy and stale and infested with unending mist. Omnipresent haze thinned in spots to reveal a path of stone stairs and ironwork clinging to the escarpment like a tendril of desperate ivy. Moisture and reduced visibility would make the climb treacherous.

Ashley had already debarked and was wandering about the landing. I heaved myself from the boat, bade Charon farewell and tossed him the end of his mooring line. He sculled away into the fog.

“We’re almost there,” I said as I approached the hewn steps at the base of the pathway. “The palace is on the cliff top above us. It’s a hike but

not as bad as you might think. Just stay close and always keep one hand on the railing. If the fog's too thick or I'm too far ahead, yell if you can't see me."

"What happens if I slip and fall?"

I'd started up the steps but turned to look back. "You'll yell a lot more, so I suggest you don't, knock on wood." I looked around but didn't find any to do so literally.

Her forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Huh?"

"You know. The expression. 'Knock on wood.' For good luck. Or when you mention something you don't want to happen."

"That's stupid."

"I thought it was an old nymph thing. Knock on wood so the tree spirits help you."

"Well, yeah. But that's not how you say it, Boss. The expression's 'touch some wood.'"

"Same difference."

"It's not when you're the one getting knocked on. Besides, it ruins the punch line for dozens of dirty nymph jokes. You know, like: 'Why did the unlucky satyr cross the grove?'"

She didn't see the grimace. "That deserves being ruined."

"But it's a classic! I heard Aristophanes came up with it while he was working on *The Frogs*."

"Aristophanes was a hack. Trust me, I had to suffer through most of his plays back in the day."

"But he's still funny. Like in those old movies with Karl Marx."

"You mean Groucho."

"I'm not being a groucho. I just said he's funny."

"Not you, Ash. Groucho Marx. Karl Marx was a communist, not a comedian."

"Is he the one with the horn or the one who just sings?"

"Will you just be careful and pay attention where you're walking? The trail's slippery."

We trudged upward through the eldritch gloom, hindered by the lack of sensory input and disoriented by the twists and switchbacks. The silence was eerie, devoid of all sensation of life and the natural outdoors except for our labored breathing and the muffled plodding of feet on stones and gravel. As we neared the top, the rough trail gave way to a

steep stairway hewn directly into the cliff face. Mist covered everything in a sticky sheet of gray. We clung to wrought iron bolted into the rock and picked our way upward. My feet slipped twice, but I caught myself before plummeting off the cliff.

Ash piped up while we rested on a narrow landing. “Shouldn’t we have left earlier if our appointment was at five? I mean, we won’t get in trouble if we’re late, will we? It feels like we’ve been gone a couple of hours already.”

“Nah, time’s more subjective in the Underworld.”

“So it’s not like we can be down here for a hundred years but when we get home it’s really only been one day or anything like that, right? I don’t want to come back old or have all my friends think I’ve been dead. Plus I can’t be away from my tree for long.” A worried look crossed her face and a hint of panic crept into her voice. “Oh crap, Boss. What if something happens to it while I’m down here?”

After spending all afternoon being warned about the dangers of the Underworld, she never voiced a problem until it came to her tree? I tried to sound comforting. “You’ll be fine, Ash.”

“But what if something catches fire while we’re gone?”

“It’ll be okay. Just relax.”

She wasn’t listening. “Maybe I left the iron on. Did I leave the iron on? Gods, Boss, I think I did! I left it on and it’ll fall over and burn down our house and the office and my tree and maybe even the whole block because I wasn’t with you last spring and didn’t check the battery in the smoke alarm when we set the clocks forward.”

“Breathe, Ash.” We were two hundred feet up the side of a sheer cliff, balanced on a narrow ledge. The last thing I needed from her was a panic attack—or worse, a fainting spell. I leaned in close to look in her eyes. They were wide, frightened and pleading.

“Don’t let me die, Boss! I’m too young and pretty to die!”

She gathered herself to jump up and bolt away, but I grappled her and threw my weight against the cliff wall before she could fling herself over the side. She nearly squirmed free, but I held her and gave soft reassurances until she settled into a crying heap in my arms.

“You’re okay, Ashley. We’re close to the top. I’ve been here before. You can trust me. Take a deep breath and tell me you’re okay. I want to hear you say it.”

Her chest heaved and tears streamed down her face. She'd mentally shut down but kept her eyes locked on mine. "I—I'm okay." She repeated herself and tried to smile. I wasn't fully convinced.

Once she'd settled, I gripped the cord around her waist and coaxed her through the last fifty feet, one small step at a time, until we reached a stone-walled balcony at the top of the precipice.

The area immediately along the cliff's edge had been landscaped as a garden, with benches and tables perfectly arranged in full appreciation of the panoramic vista—had there ever been one. The sky at least had some brilliance here, but it seemed equally unnatural, like the eternal twilight of a Las Vegas casino.

I guided Ash a safe distance away from the cliff-edge garden, toward a wide green lawn and a tiled pathway leading to the palace gates a hundred yards ahead. She collapsed in my arms, and I held her close while she drenched my chest with tears.

That's when the beast attacked us.

Cerberus, the three-headed dog-monster who guards against intrusion and escape, should have been chained. Or maybe it had been—I vaguely remember hearing a crash and shouting and turning to look as the hell hound burst through the gate. Six nostrils flared and locked onto Ashley's mortal scent. The heads growled and snarled as the creature charged us at full speed. The ground thundered beneath its paws. We were trapped in the open with a sheer cliff at our back.

Ash squirmed in my arms and tried to run. I shoved her to the ground and yelled for her to stay there. She fell sprawling. I couldn't tell if she fainted, cracked her skull or played dead, but I didn't see any movement. By the time I turned around, the beast was already on me.

The leftmost head lunged at my arm. I tore myself free and punched the center face squarely in the eye. With a collective yelp, the body took a step back in surprise. It was the break I needed. I ran past the beast and aimed for the gate. Instinct kicked in. Cerberus heaved its hulking body around and gave chase.

I never made it to the gate.

I remember being knocked down. Pain. Wild thrashing. Then sudden darkness as it crushed my head in its jaws.