

Poisoned Pearls

Sample Chapters

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Prologue

Odin Val-Father (*oak-strong, shield-strong*) strode angrily down the length of his long hall, thumping his staff against the stone floor. Sparks flew, arcing up and away, silver and gold. Each solid strike gave him little comfort. He wouldn't break the stone, though—Frigg would have his head, or maybe his other eye, if he did.

And he was already in enough trouble with her.

With a wave of his hand, Odin set the flames of the long fire in the center of the hall sparking and hissing, reaching toward the towering, pine-timbered ceiling. Proud banners in red and gold, counting Odin's many victories in battle, lifted off the solid walls, waving as if in a sail-filling breeze. Even the snakes carved into the wide columns moved sluggishly, circling and looping continuously, making a hollow sound, like sand blown against an empty hull.

Odin's ravens, Hugin and Munin (*clear-eyed, sharp-beaked*) perched on the back of Odin's great chair *Hlidskjalf* at the far end of the hall. Odin angrily waved at them, but they remained placidly undisturbed.

"I will not be defied!" Odin shouted. He slammed the butt of his staff against the solid stone. An ear-splitting crack of thunder filled the long hall, followed by the familiar smell of ozone.

Hugin and Munin flapped and squawked appropriately before settling down again quickly.

Had they really been affected? Or were they just putting on a show for him?

Odin threw himself into his great chair. His long gray robe folded gracefully around him, the white collar, placards, and cuffs still dazzling. His staff found its place standing beside him. He looked down the fire-brightened length of his hall, his domain, his *rule*.

It was all dark, except for the one bright light. Just as the All Worlds were.

With a sigh, Odin reached for the table sure to be to his right, on his good side, where a pitcher of the sweetest mead should be sitting, waiting for him, with a fine goblet to drink from.

His hand reached out to nothing.

By Mimur's left ball, was everything set to defy him that day?

Odin turned, ready to blast the table and mead to bits.

Loki stood at his side, calm and cool, the table pushed behind him. He held the pitcher in one hand pouring a honeyed draught into the goblet.

Today, Loki wore a black tabard edged in red, with a fine white shirt from the Renaissance period. Why he persisted in dressing from times other than his own age Odin had never been able to guess. Loki's strong legs were covered in hose decorated with large black-and-red diamonds, and soft, ankle-high black boots.

"I am in no mood for your conniving today," Odin warned as he took the heavy gold goblet from Loki. The first sweet sip soothed his tongue, but his rage still pricked him.

"And when are you ever?" Loki asked, amused as always.

Odin didn't know what would permanently remove that smirk from Loki's face. He suspected that even after death, Loki would still be laughing, as if all the worlds held jokes and riddles that only he could see.

At least Loki understood enough to let Odin drink for a while in peace, the fragrant mead calming Odin's sparking rage. The heavy liquor coated Odin's throat, making his limbs heavy and replete.

Finally, Odin felt as though he could hold a hospitable tongue in his head, at least for a while—it was Loki, after all. "Why have you come to bother me today?" Odin asked.

Mostly hospitable.

"Why do you presume I am here to cause you grief?" Loki asked. He sipped his own mead from a goblet just as splendid as Odin's, though a ring of rubies circled the full cup. "Perhaps I came to see what was upsetting you. To see if I could help."

"Though I have turned to you, in the past, for aid," Odin said, "I've usually regretted it." He knew that was an exaggeration. Loki had helped out the gods more than once. And sometimes the price hadn't been too high. Like with the man building the wall around Asgard, and Loki distracting his horse.

It still always paid to be on his guard against the trickster.

"Then at least let me hear what ails you. Let me counsel you. You can decide whether I have a wise or foolish tongue in my head," Loki said. He turned his face to Odin. Half of it was scarred that morning—the poison from the snake above his head showing through. The other half was fair and clear, with a sharp cheekbone, thin smiling lips, and searing blue eyes.

They existed in the All Time that morning, when all the myths and battles had yet to happen; however, at the same time, they'd all already occurred as well.

The only fixed point was Ragnarok, sometime at the twilight of things. It was yet to come, always looming, that ever-present Fate that Odin had given his eye to prevent, only to be told it was unstoppable.

"So you show me your betrayal as well as your cunning?" Odin asked. For the first time that morning, he felt a smile threatening.

Loki shrugged. "I show you what your hall demands."

Odin didn't believe him. It wasn't his hall that changed Loki. Loki was too conscious to let his environment dictate his appearance. He was the trickster, and would show the face most likely to get him what he wanted.

Still, it was an interesting choice. Half beautiful god, half scarred demon.

"Tell me, Val-Father, what disturbs you today?" Loki persisted. When Odin didn't reply, Loki continued. "It's Frigg again, isn't it?"

Odin looked at Loki sharply. Was it that obvious that he was having problems with his wife?

Loki sighed and shook his head, gazing down into his cup of mead. "That's the problem with women. You try to please them, do everything they ask, and yet it turns out what they want is something different."

Odin found himself nodding, then hastily took a swig of his own mead. *By Hel's black teat*, he wasn't going to say another word to Loki about his marital problems.

But oh, how his loins ached at the thought of Frigg turning him away. Again.

The crackling of the fire in the center of the hall filled the silence between the two gods. The soft slithering of the carved snakes slid into the gaps. Odin let the light in the hall fade as he morosely contemplated yet another night alone.

"How long has it been since you've had a real battle, Val-Father, father of the slain?" Loki asked suddenly.

Odin pressed his lips together. *You mean besides the royal fight I just had with Frigg?* Even in the All Time, it seemed as though it had been an age ago.

"Women like their men to be leaders," Loki confided. "How can they have confidence in us if we don't show them our force now and again? Not in the bedroom, no, that is merely a man not in control of himself. But on the battleground. There isn't anything more sexy than a victorious leader."

Odin stopped himself from nodding this time. Maybe that was what Frigg had meant that morning, insisting he be more forthcoming.

The silence grew again, but this time, it pricked at Odin's conscience instead of his ready rage. "So what would you have me do? Go declare war on the frost giants? Again?"

Loki gave a mirthless laugh. "No. Not that. You need a real challenge." He looked at Odin over the edge of his goblet. "A serious contender."

"You mean yourself, I suppose," Odin said. Of course Loki thought he was the only one fit to challenge him.

Loki gave a one-shouldered shrug, the scarred side of his face tipping as well, as if all the skin was connected and strained. "You could do worse." He walked from next to Odin and stood in front of him.

"I can raise an army like no other. And I would battle you, too, to the last Valkyrie standing."

Odin stirred uneasily in his great chair. Hugin and Munin also shifted restlessly from foot to foot. "You're talking about the end of days, Trickster. The Twilight Battle."

"Do you think you wouldn't win?" Loki challenged.

"It isn't as simple as that," Odin said. "No one wins. And all for what?"

"The glory of battle," Loki said, raising his goblet high, his tone pompous. "Or some such nonsense," he added with a sly grin, taking another sip.

Odin took a drink in response. He knew better than to start the last war with Loki. The trickster was just too damned slippery.

Still, his proposal had some merit. "Tell you what," Odin said. "I think maybe, *maybe*, we could start with a small skirmish. Just to keep our hands in. To make sure our troops are still trained to the highest capabilities."

Loki gave Odin a wolfish grin. "And the winner of this battle gets what?"

Odin paused. This was where it always got tricky, didn't it, when he dealt with Loki? "Winner

gets the other's horse for a day," he proposed.

Loki snorted. "Really? That's so generous," he said sarcastically.

"Take it or leave my presence," Odin said coldly. Giving up Sleipnir for a short while wouldn't be too dangerous, would it?

"A month," Loki bargained.

"A fortnight," Odin replied.

"Done," Loki declared. "Look for me on Thor's day, three days before the *Jól* winter festival."

Odin shivered abruptly. This year, the longest night of the year would be blessed with the tiniest moon. It would be a dark time, when it would be easy to lose hope.

Still, he wasn't likely to lose.

"Done," Odin declared, his word ringing true through all the worlds.

After the trickster had left, Odin sat long in his hall, wondering if he'd just been played, if Frigg would join his bed now, if the world had just been made better or worse.

It didn't matter. Odin could always break the deal.

He wasn't known as an oath-breaker for nothing.

Hunter lay on his back on his cot, the desert heat already flitting under the edges of the canvas tent and stealing away the coolness of the night. He wondered just how fucked he and his unit truly were. It was still early days in the War Against Terror, and no matter what the leaders might say, it wasn't going to be over in month. Or even a year.

Something had awoken him, setting all his senses tingling. His pre-cog abilities were all on high alert.

Something bad was coming. But for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what.

Hunter expanded his awareness, like how they'd taught him at P-Camp. He imagined himself just a small, blue blip (why blue was important, he had no fucking clue, just that there had to be a color and no other color worked) and then extended his awareness out from that dot in ever-increasing squares, hunting for whatever it was that had awoken him.

First, his cot; easy enough, really. Sheets that always grated, desert sand never washed clean, a mattress not really comfortable but better than the hard ground.

Just beyond his cot, expanding outward, the square taking up most of the tent, Hunter found everything normal. Inside the tent, Hyperman lay breathing shallowly on the other cot, too aware like all of them. Outside, the wooden walkway that had been set up for the times the desert turned into mud.

He continued his hunt. Outward, taking in the full camp, the two hundred and eight souls among the warrens of tents, the sandbags piled against every wall, the plastic corrugated roofs.

A dark cloud hung over the command center, but it wasn't deadly. And it wasn't what had awoken him.

Hunter pushed outward again, taking in the sand on three sides, the muddy water on the fourth, the dried hills and scrub, the sky that was already starting to pale in the heat, the emptiness of the region with no fucking roads or people and yet they were fighting, still.

Then his awareness stopped. He couldn't push out anymore.

Hunter walked the interior of his blue-lined square, testing the edges, pushing.

Nothing.

He couldn't increase his awareness beyond a city block of space—about a tenth of a mile. And there wasn't anything wrong in that space, nothing to wake him out of a dead sleep like that.

So something was coming. And it was past his diminished area of knowing.

This wasn't good. As November Company's pre-cog, he should have at the very least two city blocks' worth of area that he'd keep his awareness in, where he'd be able to judge if something was going to happen.

That the radius of his area of knowing had been effectively cut in half meant something had gone very wrong indeed.

Had the enemy (and which one was it? The locals? The Taliban? Some new force?) managed to find a dampening agent for pre-cogs and hide it around the camp without alerting Hunter to what they were doing?

Unlikely.

Or the latest dose of PHS-370 (Psychic enHancement and Stimulant), the drugs that had increased his pre-cog abilities, had failed. He hadn't detected anything wrong with the pills, each round and glowing with its own light, like a huge pearl.

Either way, they were quite possibly truly fucked.

Hunter was going to have to report to his CO—to tell him that something was coming and Hunter didn't have a fucking clue what it was and oh, by the way, he was no longer as effective, either—a conversation Hunter didn't want to have without some sort of fortification.

Which meant hauling his ass off his cot, going into the command center where that crazy-assed black cloud of simmering something floated, and possibly dealing with that before getting the sludge they served instead of food—100% nutritious and 110% vile.

Hunter pushed himself up, scratching at his back. He was never going near a beach ever again once he'd served his duty, paid back his debt to the government for all the pre-cog training. Private sector and cushy office job for him.

Out of habit, Hunter knocked over his boots, watching to see if a critter scurried out of them. He stood, slid on his pants over his briefs, threw on a shirt, knocked his boots over the other way before he put them on.

Hyperman didn't move, but he wasn't asleep. Did he know? How could he? He didn't have paranormal abilities, hadn't been trained like Hunter. He'd started as Hunter's babysitter. They weren't friends now. Comrades, maybe. He wasn't a true companion. Not a blood brother.

Hunter didn't know when he'd started searching for a blood brother, the ones who would match his abilities. He just knew that they were out there, and that someday, he'd find them.

“Stay out of the command center for a while,” Hunter called out as he walked out of the tent. Hyperman deserved at least that much warning.

Outside, heat pounced on Hunter like a coiled cat. He squinted, wishing he’d thought to put on his shades as well. The far-off hills gleamed white and brown, while the distant horizon was hazy with dust, tinged red along the ends.

There’d been at least two weeks that spring when the desert had turned green. Then everything had dried up again, the sand spinning on the winds, seeping into fucking everything.

Hunter paused before he walked into the door of the command center. He had no idea what was going on there. As a pre-cog, he should at least have a clue. But all he got was a sense of a dark cloud, something ominous, but at the same time, not about to blow up on him.

More sandbags lay piled both inside and outside the center. Fluorescent lights were strung along the wall, the wires exposed. The command center was a warren, with long halls of cheap plastic or canvas, opening up randomly to smaller rooms where soldiers sat and relaxed or worked on computers or even slept.

Hunter had hoped he’d been wrong, but his luck wasn’t that good. The dark cloud was centered over the damned mess hall.

Before he went to talk with his CO, he was going to have to deal with this.

As well as try to explain why the hell he hadn’t seen whatever it was coming. And why his area of knowing was no longer as large as it once had been.

Hunter pushed open the doors and walked into...nothing. Two dozen men sat scattered at the long wooden tables, sharing breakfast, stories, and the morning. No one fought. They weren’t trying to kill each other.

Yet, Hunter could still sense the brawl going on. The dull thud of a fist colliding with flesh. A sharp crack of ribs breaking. Howls of pain. Growling aggression.

In addition to the men who sat there, who Hunter could see as clear as day, fighting men filled the room, dancing like wisps of clouds through the tables of the mess hall.

When was the brawl going on? Was it in the future? Or was Hunter seeing something that had happened in the past, like a post-cog? This wasn’t happening like his usual pre-cog visions at all.

Who was fighting? Hunter couldn’t see their faces well enough to distinguish good guy from bad. He tried concentrating on their uniforms, but they were all just a gray blur.

Hunter jerked to the side when a man threw a punch too close to his head. A breeze blew by his cheek.

From a great distance, Hunter heard someone calling his name, asking if he was okay.

Hunter couldn’t reply, but he knew.

It wasn’t the unit that was fucked. It was just him.

Chapter One

Kyle still smelled of baby oil and cigarette smoke, though I figured he'd been dead for at least two hours, based on the light dusting of snow that covered his artistically torn jeans and preppy red-and-white-striped button-down. The snow around his body was all smudged with footprints, probably from the cops. He sat propped up against the wall in the alley, dark red bricks supporting him, while some stupid tagger's name spiked over his head, painted in black, like a post-modern halo. His eyes were still open, shining a weird blue in the stark light. He'd always been pale and blond, but now he looked perfectly preserved, like a snow-carnival princess carved out of ice.

He'd been found slumped in the alley, next to the entrance to Chinaman Joe's Good Luck Parlor, the sex & toy shop where I worked. Kyle would have been mortified to learn of his final resting spot. Homeless bums worked the dumpsters just up the alley, digging for thrown-out noodles and rice from Mihn Ho Takeout next door. They frequently used our doorway to shelter themselves from the wind while they peed.

Two yellow cop "Do Not Cross" tape lines had been strung across the alley on either side of Kyle, just like on all the TV shows. A white ambulance sat at one end of the alley, blocking off traffic. The blue strobe cast weird shadows on the remaining snow, as if it were thick enough for snow weasels to be skittering underneath.

The grin Kyle wore freaked me out. He'd never been the happy-go-lucky kind: he'd preferred Sartre to Kant, Bergman films to anything modern and understandable and fun.

The only reason the cops let me near the crime scene was because the bastard had followed through on his threat and listed me as his emergency contact. They'd found his wallet still in his pocket.

That I happened to be working in the building that he'd been found dead outside of was just the kind of coincidence cops loved. They were already looking at me for the murder, I knew. Particularly if his death had been caused by someone choking him or stabbing him or something else physical. I was tall, particularly for a woman, almost six foot with my short, bleached-white hair spiked up as it was. I'd always been *zaftig*, taking after my Russian grandmother rather than my skinny, uptight Swedish mother. The black leather biker jacket I wore probably didn't help, or the solid, fourteen-hole Dr. Martens that I'd tucked my leggings into.

But I couldn't tell what had killed Kyle. His hair still seemed artfully mussed, he wasn't bleeding anywhere, and I didn't see any bruises on his neck or face. He could have OD'ed on something, maybe tried some new street drug. However, Kyle generally wasn't that stupid.

The only thing that appeared wrong, besides the fact that he wasn't moving, was that his pants were undone and his dick was hanging out.

I looked at it critically. I knew they got bigger and I shouldn't judge Kyle based on what I was

seeing now. I'd seen dicks before—I worked in a sex & toy shop and had reviewed an awful lot of videos—but I'd never been up close and personal with one.

I was a gold star lesbian, never been with a man. And proud of it.

“That’s him,” I told the detective—Ferguson, I think his name was—identifying the body for him. The cop had a face made of slopped-together concrete, all hard planes and bulging brow. Tiny black eyes stared out at me from his pudgy face. He wore a dark blue down jacket. It was too short for him. Someone his size and shape should always wear longer coats—hell, even a parka—or too many references could be made to the Michelin Man.

The detective indicated I should follow him further down the alley, out of the light, closer to the street. He even held up the tape for me to duck under, like some kind of modern gentleman. When we stopped and I glanced back, I saw that the emergency workers were already swooping in.

Going to carry away the body and brush the snow clean. Nothing happening here, folks, nothing to see.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Ferguson told me, his voice gruff. Or maybe that was just the arctic wind, coming direct from the North Pole into Minnesota. From what I’d seen on the news earlier, it wasn’t going to be ending anytime soon, not pausing for Christmas next week.

I shrugged, opened my mouth to comment, then closed it again. Kyle and I had been really good friends. Maybe even besties. I was kind of in shock. I remembered one drunken night when he’d tried to teach me dirty dancing, failing spectacularly, both of us laughing our asses off. My hips just didn’t move like that. Plus, though I was just smidge shorter than he was, I had at least fifty pounds on him. Maybe more.

I dug out a cigarette pack from inside my leather jacket, shook one up and offered it to Ferguson.

He pressed his fat lips together and shook his head. I think he would have spat in disgust if he’d been able.

I lit it with a cheap blue Bic and took a deep, calming drag. Cooling smoke filled my mouth and trickled down my lungs. Stupid bastard. Both Kyle and the detective. Finally, I nodded at the cop, letting him know I was ready.

“So what can you tell us about Mr. Magnusson?” Ferguson held up a pen in one fat-fingered gloved hand for me to speak into. Damn thing probably took biometrics as well, could tell if I was lying.

“He worked down at Richard’s place,” I told the officer. No sense in lying about that kind of thing. It was easy enough to find out.

Not like his parents would have known. I doubted they’d even seen their son for the last six months.

Probably one of the reasons why he’d listed me as his emergency contact.

“Bartender?” Ferguson asked.

I held back my snort. Ferguson must have been new to the area not to know what type of

place Richard's was.

"Stripper. Though he preferred the term 'exotic dancer.'"

Richard's specialized in male strippers, catering to a female clientele, unlike Kitty's, right next door, that had female strippers.

"Was he also a prostitute?" Ferguson asked, his face carefully blank, trying hard not to show his judgment.

"Not professionally," I said. Kyle didn't need the money that badly. "He plowed his way through guys regularly enough, and I'm sure he always accepted whatever they gave him, but he made enough in tips at Richard's that he didn't have to be hardcore about it. He just tricked a little."

"I see," the detective said. He looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he tugged off one of his gloves and pulled out an actual notebook.

Must have been important—he was risking frostbite by exposing his flesh that way.

After glancing through a few pages, Ferguson paused and pressed his fat lips together again.

"What?" I asked after a few moments. He obviously wanted to ask me something.

"Do you know a Helen Eaton?" Ferguson asked.

The name sounded familiar. "Nope," I told the cop easily. Was he asking about Helen of Troy? That had been her street name. She'd been a working girl, coming in for "free" samples of condoms every once in a while.

Tough broad. Had to be, to work the streets of Minneapolis in December. I remember overhearing her and a couple of the other girls laughing about how the cold froze even their lube.

But I didn't want to be involved. Didn't want to give the cops a reason to bring me into the station. Would have meant closing the shop for the night. Chinaman Joe would have docked my wages, and I couldn't afford to miss a night of pay.

Ferguson seemed to take my word as he quickly put away the notebook and covered his fingers again. "Did Mr. Magnusson take drugs?"

I gave him a noncommittal shrug. "Nothing serious." Like most of my friends, Kyle smoked pot and took the occasional hit of speed or E or such. He was too pretty to dirty up his body with needle holes, too broke to afford anything else.

I knew the cop would be contacting the local dealers. I wasn't about to warn Csaba or any of the others. They could just figure that out on their own. But my friends—I was going to have to let a bunch of people know to keep their heads down for a while, watch who they were buying their shit from. Narcs were going to be everywhere, looking for some kind of drug connection to Kyle's murder.

"What else can you tell me about Mr. Magnusson?" Ferguson asked.

I gave the detective Kyle's address, 'cause I didn't think it was accurate on his driver's license. Kyle had moved a lot. I also told Ferguson that Kyle was generally well liked, if a little depressing sometimes. He didn't have any paranormal abilities, either. He'd tested negative on the PADT—Psychic Ability and Distribution Test—like ninety-five percent of the population.

Kyle also swore he had an aunt who merely had to look at you to know your whole past, present, and future. Didn't think the cops needed to know about her, though.

I'd never taken the PADT, even though Mom had sent me through a bunch of pre-testing. All of which showed I had no abilities. I had the genes, but something else was missing: whether it was the personality, or environmental stimulus, or that I hadn't been born on a Tuesday. Frustrated the hell out of all the scientists that they couldn't accurately predict psychic ability based on DNA.

More memories came up while I talked. Kyle wearing a ridiculous red bowtie and white suspenders holding up his gold lamé underwear that one Valentine's Day party. The morning we'd all decided to have chips, salsa, and margaritas on muscle beach at Lake Calhoun, despite the fucking rain. How I'd never bothered to learn any of Kyle's boyfriends' names: they never lasted more than a few months at most.

After Ferguson took my information, he assured me they'd get back in contact with me if they had any news.

"Why'd you ask me about that other person?" I asked after I stubbed out my second cigarette. "Helen?"

Ferguson shook his meaty head. "No reason."

He was a terrible liar. You'd think a cop would be better at that sort of thing.

Didn't matter. Even if he'd told me the truth, I would have started asking around myself, looking for a connection.

What could I say? I was a nosy bitch. And Kyle had been my friend.

Before the cops finally let me go, one of the post-cogs who worked with the police came to the site. She wore a long mink coat and an air of superiority that only the *blessed* have, that sense that they're better than us plebeians.

She was blissfully unaware that we plebeians referred to her kind as the PA—not for *paranormal ability* but for *pain-in-the-ass*.

Her skin was as pale as Kyle's, though I'd bet hers came at the cost of surgery as well as a daily regime of rejuvenation creams and makeup slapped on with a stick. She wore her dark hair soft and loose around her face and was pretty enough, with a pert nose and wide lips, though not really my type. At least she had sensible brown leather boots on underneath that coat.

I'd never seen a post-cog at work—not in real life, just on TV cop shows. She didn't stalk dramatically around the site, flaring her coat around her, nor did she drop to her knees and spread her hands out over where Kyle's body had been, shaking and muttering to herself. She simply walked over to the spot, stood there with her eyes closed for a moment, arms crossed over her chest.

I wasn't sure what she was supposed to be doing, exactly. Post-cogs worked on different frequencies—some read people, others read places or things. Was she getting a read on the alley?

Or a sense of the last people who'd been there? Was she able to figure out the weapon that had been used? Or maybe she was good enough to focus in on the killer, though I doubted she'd be working for the Minneapolis cops if she was that good.

When she opened her eyes, they connected immediately with mine. It wasn't a shock, not like how the magazines claimed. A bolt of electricity didn't pass through my soul.

But *something* happened. More like a chill. Like a ghost walking over my grave. She also seemed to recognize me, though I didn't know her from Eve.

Then she stalked toward where Ferguson and I were standing. *Shit*. Ferguson's face had gone carefully blank again.

I knew that thinking about the multiplication tables was bullshit—there wasn't anything that could keep a really strong telepath out of your thoughts. And she was probably just a post-cog, not a telepath. Though the government (and the rich) had tried for years, people almost always only had a single ability: Telepathy, telekinesis, pre-cognition, or post-cognition.

Still, I automatically started going through my numbers as she approached. *Three times two is six. Three times three is nine.*

"How do you know the deceased?" she demanded when she got close.

Ferguson gave a loud sigh. "Ms. Monroe, this is Ms. Lewis. She isn't a suspect at this time. She's listed as the deceased's emergency contact."

Maybe Ms. Monroe's skin really was that pale, because even in the dim light of the alley I would have sworn she blushed. *Three times five is fifteen.*

"I'm sorry for your loss," Ms. Monroe said, sounding mostly sincere. "So the deceased was a friend of yours, then?" she continued, giving me the once-over that in another time and place would have had me offering to buy her next glass of champagne. Didn't matter if she wasn't my type. There was something about her that set my pulse pounding.

"Yes," I said shortly. No sense in giving her more material to work with, worm her way inside my skull. Especially since she seemed to already be there. *Three times six is eighteen.*

"She's involved," Ms. Monroe said flatly, turning to Detective Ferguson.

"What?" I asked. I was *not* involved in Kyle's death.

Ms. Monroe waved her hand at me, dismissing my objections. "Not now. But she will be."

Ferguson turned his cold stare at me. "We don't need any sort of vigilante going off half-cocked on this case. We still don't even know the cause of death, if it was even accidental."

His tone implied that he doubted this was anything other than an OD, just another stupid street kid who'd found a new creative way to off himself.

"I'll stay out of it," I lied. Particularly if the cops had that kind of attitude.

Ms. Monroe glared at me. "Be careful what you seek. Or you'll see things you don't want to."

My mom had named me Cassandra in the hopes that maybe I'd turn out to have some sort of powers. She hadn't appreciated it when I'd pointed out that Cassandra hadn't come to a good end.

"I'll keep that in mind," I told her dryly. "Look, can I go?" I asked Ferguson. "I need to get

back to work. And you know where to find me.”

“You work here?” Ms. Monroe said, indicating the building next to us.

“Yes, ma’am,” I told her proudly. “Chinaman Joe’s Good Luck Parlor. We have all the toys you want—even the ones you didn’t know you needed.” I winked at her.

Surprisingly, Ms. Monroe wasn’t insulted; instead, she laughed, a clear tinkling sound through that dark alley that caused all the cops to look up. It had that joyous sound that you rarely heard these days, that promised warmth and safety and a really good time in bed.

It sent a warm jolt through my middle that the thought of going inside couldn’t match.

Not my type, I told myself again, though I knew I was well and truly screwed, particularly when Ms. Monroe told me, “I’ll come see you sometime.”

I wasn’t about to tell Chinaman Joe that I’d had to close the store for more than an hour. Normally, we had one person in the afternoons, with two people running the place at night. But the schedule had gotten screwed up: Travis had needed the night off, and Amy, the other worker, hadn’t been available. Plus, it was a weeknight. I knew the place wouldn’t be hard to manage on my own.

Knowing my luck, Chinaman Joe would probably find out anyway.

Cheap bastard had better not dock my wages.

I was living close enough to the edge as it was. A couple hours’ pay meant the difference between being in nicotine withdrawal and bumming smokes and alienating all my friends until the New Year or coasting in a happy smoky haze.

I knew better than to hope for some kind of Christmas bonus. Not like Chinaman Joe celebrated the season, despite the cheery red and silver garlands strung up on the wall, the candy-cane vibrators proudly on display as you walked in the door, or the “elf” costumes that were merely green and red corsets.

The store was in west downtown, in one of the many warehouses that had been converted into more livable space. Though the conversion had been recent, the store had that groovy ’70s feel. The shelves were cheap metal and plastic; the gray linoleum floor always looked dingy, no matter how much time I spent cleaning it; and the lights were all fluorescent and buzzed annoyingly.

Still, it was kind of home for me. Chinaman Joe had given me a job when I was still “in between” residences, living at a halfway house. Plus, even all through the winter, it was blessedly warm. Chinaman Joe might have been a cheap bastard, but he hated the cold more than most.

I’d been born in Minnesota, so while I could claim I was used to it, no one really got used to forty below. I peeled out of my jacket and scarf, then held my hands over my ears so they might have a chance to warm up.

I refused to play any damned Christmas music while I was running the store. I argued with

Chinaman Joe that our customers were looking for a different kind of home cheer. But I had to play something in the background, otherwise the hum of the lights would drive even the most sane to vodka. I spun up my favorite '70s rock mix.

I figured if I could keep moving, I wouldn't get morose over Kyle's death.

Before I could grab my phone and start calling people, soft chimes let me know that someone had just come in the door.

I braced myself. It wasn't Ms. Monroe, was it?

No, it was Angela, one of the hookers who worked Hennepin Avenue, who I'd let crash at my place a couple of times that summer, when she'd been in a bind. She'd never brought a john up, and hadn't minded sharing a bed, though neither of us took it further than that.

I didn't see how she or the other girls could work a street corner in Minneapolis during the winter, particularly not in that getup—short, fake leopard-fur coat, black hot pants that rode all the way up to her crotch, gold fishnets, and matching gold ankle boots.

I was cold just looking at her.

Angela's wig that night curled tightly around her ears, streaked in blonde and black. I wouldn't have called her makeup subtle, but there was still a beauty to her exaggerated red lips, the dark brown skin growing darker in the warmth, the extra-long lashes and sparkling blue eye-shadow.

"Hey, girl," I called to her, waving her to the front of the store. "Whatcha doing?" I leaned against the cool glass of the display case, bringing my head closer to Angela's height.

She joined me at the counter, leaning her hip against it, rubbing her hands together, trying to force some warmth back into them.

"Stupid cops chased away all the traffic tonight," Angela replied. "You know what's up with that?"

Did Angela know Kyle? I didn't think so, but then again, you never knew. "They found Kyle Magnusson's body out back."

Damn it. Why did saying that out loud make my voice shake?

Angela looked over her shoulder and blinked her wide black eyes at me a couple times. "Nope," she said after a few more moments. "Can't recall. Friend of yours though, I guess?"

"Yeah," I told her. My throat suddenly hurt. I wasn't coming down with something, was I? 'Cause I wasn't about to cry.

I didn't cry that way.

"I'm sorry," Angela said, her voice as soft as if she was trying to make nice with one of the feral cats out back.

"You know Helen Eaton?" I asked, standing up straight, trying to shift the conversation away before I maybe embarrassed myself with tears or some such useless thing.

"Helen of Troy?" Angela asked. "Cops think she's in on it?"

I shrugged. "Where's Helen working these days?" I asked.

Angela shook her head. "No one's seen her for at least a week. Celine was wondering if

maybe Helen had finally found that ride out of town, gone someplace warm.”

Now I was worried. The street girls sometimes fought, and occasionally put each other in the hospital, particularly if they thought one of them was stepping into their territory. But they also looked out after each other, kept tabs on each other’s whereabouts.

It wasn’t as if they’d get any sympathy from the cops if something happened to one of them.

“Did she have a pimp?” I asked.

“Naw, she was part of the association,” Angela said.

More than one of the groups of hookers—excuse me, *sex workers*—in the downtown area had organized themselves when the shootings and gang violence had gotten real bad, before the cops had gotten involved and started cleaning up the place. They’d pooled their money and hired actual security, some muscle men who delighted in taking down any john or pimp who bothered their girls.

The cops were right to be worried about vigilantes, particularly in this neighborhood.

But what had happened to Helen? I figured it had to be something bad if that detective was asking about her.

Before I could ask anything more, Angela said to me, “The streets are clean. The people are good. But be careful of what you see.”

“Excuse me?” I asked. What the hell did that mean? She wasn’t on something, was she?

Angela blinked her too-wide eyes at me again. “The streets are clean. The people are good. But be careful of what you see.”

“What are you on?” I asked. I couldn’t tell if Angela’s pupils were dilated, but I assumed they were.

“The streets are clean. The people are good. But be careful of what you see,” Angela repeated again, seemingly frustrated.

“You’re not high, are you?” I asked.

Angela shook her head. “The streets are clean. The people are good.”

“Yeah, I have to be careful of what I see,” I told her. “Got that. Thanks.”

So the TV did get some things right—there was such a thing as a pre-cog loop. I’d never seen one before. Angela hadn’t ever been trained, though. Had she taken the PADT? I would have thought that if she had any real ability, she wouldn’t be hooking.

Angela had once told me that she’d taken a correspondence course in paranormal ability and that she’d scored the highest in her class.

Tonight, I believed her, though most of the correspondence schools were a scam. Taking people’s money and giving them false hope.

Still. She had to have some level of pre-cognition to get caught in a loop that way. The next time I saw her, I was going to be sure to ask about it. Maybe this had been the first time it had happened, though.

I pulled a pack of cigarettes from below the counter and passed a smoke to Angela.

She nodded her thanks, then hurried away, her boots clicking across the floor.

Maybe getting out of my presence would shake Angela free. She wasn't going to be good for any kind of conversation until she could get out of the loop.

Then again, her clients didn't pay her to talk.

So the streets were clean, though that didn't mean anything to me. Since the new mayor had decided to "Revitalize the Downtown Area," garbage got picked up off the streets and out of the alleys every other day.

I remembered Kyle's body slumped in the alley behind the shop, how the EMTs had taken it away and swept everything clean. Was that what she'd meant? That though there was a body, maybe more, that they wouldn't stay around for long?

And that people were good? I couldn't contain my snort. That sure as fuck wasn't true. I'd learned that early, at my mom's knee, when she'd found me making out with another girl on my sweet sixteenth and given me the option of turning straight or leaving.

Fucking Republican Senator wannabe.

I hadn't seen her for years, except on the other side of a TV screen, and I still hated her guts.

And how the fuck was I supposed to be careful about what I saw? Admittedly, that part fried my ass the most. I wasn't about to stop looking, or look away, if I saw something.

Particularly something bad happening in my neighborhood.

Sure, most of my friends were junkies and whores. But this was still my patch of turf, and they were still my friends. I always had my friends' backs, whether they reciprocated or not.

Nope. I wasn't about to look away.

Chapter Two

Of course, my night didn't get any better. Not given my luck. No, it had started sliding down that sweet slope of sheer fucked when the cops had first shown up and demanded that I accompany them and identify the body of my friend Kyle in the cold alley out behind the store.

Then, after the cops, and my friend Angela's warning, who should show up at my store but Ms. Monroe, the post-cog who was working for the cops on Kyle's case?

She seemed perfectly at home in Chinaman Joe's Good Luck Parlor, despite the fact that she was way overdressed for such a dive. Her mink looked like it was more expensive than all the toys in the store combined. I swear even the fluorescent lights overhead stopped hissing above her.

The almost-tasteful display of condoms on the large table at the front drew her attention first. Black velvet covered the table and the display stands, with a sprinkling of white glitter in the center to suggest snow, or at least that was what Chinaman Joe had claimed.

Every condom on the table had been filled with air. Each waved proudly on its stand like a party balloon. Instead of the standard colors, we'd done a group of red and green ones, with some gold and purple mixed in as well.

After Ms. Monroe had circled the table, she wandered down the first aisle.

I called out to her, "Let me know if you need any help." I wasn't about to go any closer to her than I needed to. I was already in enough trouble as it was, wondering how soft her hair really was, what it would feel like when I pulled it, if she'd moan or squeak when I pinched a nipple.

Three times five is fifteen.

Ms. Monroe poked her head out from the second aisle, holding up "Black Billy"—the supposedly realistic dong of some porn star that was almost as big as my fist and about as long as my forearm.

And I don't have small hands.

The "real flesh tone" color was a corpse-like gray-brown, and I bet there wasn't a man out there whose dick actually felt that smooth. Or who smelled like plastic and melted rubber.

"Really?" Ms. Monroe asked, incredulous. "This is the most popular dong in your store?"

We had put up helpful, handwritten signs on some of the aisles, suggesting products to those too shy to come up to the counter and ask.

I shrugged. "We sell a lot of them." I didn't know if many, or even any, of them got put to serious use, or if they were primarily gag gifts.

"Huh," was all she said before she disappeared back into the aisle again.

Three times six is eighteen. Three times seven is twenty one. Three—

"You know, whatever you're doing won't work."

Damn it. I hadn't seen her sneak out of the aisle and approach the front. "What do you

mean?" I asked. I knew my guilt was probably written all over my face—damn my Swedish mother and my fair skin.

"I'm not a telepath," Ms. Monroe said. "You can't distract me from your thoughts. I'm a post-cog. That's all."

"Sure," I told her. Three times three is nine.

She smiled and shook her head at me, as if she were dealing with a particularly endearing, if stubborn, child.

"So how can I help you tonight, Ms. Monroe?" I asked.

"Please, call me Sam. Short for Samantha," she said, holding out a beautifully pampered hand for me to shake, the nails done in a perfect French manicure that probably cost more than I made in a month.

"Cassie. Short for Cassandra," I told her. I clasped her hand, then figured, what the hell, and brought it to my lips for a quick kiss. Her lotion smelled surprisingly of lemongrass, not anything girly. The skin was softer than silk and, I suspected, very addictive.

"Sorry," Sam said, pulling her hand back.

"I'm not," I told her cheekily. "Wrong team?" I asked.

"Out of your league," she said demurely.

Wait a second. Did that mean that—

"You *are* involved with your friend's—Kyle's—death," Sam said, derailing any question I might have asked.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. "I didn't get him killed." If she kept telling the police that, my life was sure to be hell. The cops would start coming after me. I'm sure they still considered me a person of interest in the case.

"You're tied up in it," Sam said vehemently. "I don't know how. I've never seen anything like it before. You weren't there watching it, but you were still there, present, the whole time."

"I was working the entire time," I told her hotly. "You can check the in-store cameras."

"I know you were here," Sam replied, clearly as frustrated as I was. "I don't know how you're connected. Just that you are. And you need to be careful of what you see."

I rolled my eyes. Great. Was she about to go off into some pre-cog loop like Angela? Just what I fucking needed.

Cops might haul me down to the station out of spite if I got their prize post-cog all in a twirl.

When Sam didn't add anything after that, I asked, "Any idea what I'm not supposed to see?"

Sam shook her head. "Nothing. Everything. I don't know. I'm not a pre-cog. Just whatever it is, it's strong enough to break through to all the *blessed* in the area. I had a friend come down and check."

Figured she'd call herself that, and not the more secular term. If she even knew it.

"Well, thank you for that news flash," I told her.

"I'm trying to help you here!" Sam insisted.

"How?" I asked. "By giving me these half-assed warnings?" Seriously. What did she expect

me to do? Keep my eyes shut for the rest of the night? The week? The year?

Sam gave an exasperated sigh. “Look, I know this isn’t making any sense. But just—be aware! Hopefully it will make sense before it’s too late.”

“Ain’t that the story of my life,” I told her. I was never fucking aware of *anything*: not of my ex, Natasha, double-dipping with that whore Frieda right here in the store; not of just how frigid my own mother was, how inflexible she would be when it came to her own daughter’s sexual preferences; and not even of that time at Kitty’s when that asshole I’d met for a first date had tried slip me a roffie and the bartender had saved me by “accidentally” knocking over my drink, then talking to me later when she’d gone to the bathroom.

I never figured out anything until well after the fact. Never saw anything coming, despite my name. Might have just been irony, or the gods fucking with me.

“Here,” Sam said. She opened up her mink and drew an embossed white and black business card out of an engraved silver case.

I didn’t have to hold it up to my nose to catch the sweet scent of her lemongrass perfume.

Great. Now Thai food was going to make me horny.

“Text me,” Sam commanded. “If anything unusual starts happening to you. If you start to see things.”

“What, do you think I’m suddenly going to start having hallucinations or something?” I’d never been into hallucinogenic drugs. That just always seemed like a straight line to the loony bin. I’d heard too many stories of losers who’d ended up taking a long walk off a short bridge after taking a few hits of windowpane.

Plus, there were rumors that the right combination of hallucinogenic drugs would unlock your paranormal abilities.

I liked being fully human, a mundane, thank you very much.

“No. Yes. I don’t know,” Sam said. “But just—text me.”

“For anything?” I asked. Might as well see if I could get a rise out of her. “Maybe just for coffee?”

“Out of your league,” Sam rearticulated. “I don’t do mundanes.”

“Maybe you just haven’t tried the right one,” I suggested flirtatiously.

“Please,” she said, rolling her eyes as she refastened her coat. “And no, you won’t be having visions if you try to touch me. Just visitations from the cops.”

“Hey, it’s okay. I know. You’re *special*,” I told her. “One of the *blessed*.”

“You know why we call ourselves that, right?” Sam asked. “It’s the only way to get through the damned training. To believe that you’re better than everyone else, smarter, more capable. There’s a high flunk-out rate, and an even higher suicide rate. You have to tell yourself you’re special. Make yourself believe it. Otherwise, you won’t make it.”

Like I was going to feel sorry for the poor little over-indulged rich girl.

I’d been one, once. I knew all about being *special*.

“Don’t let me spoil your evening, princess,” I told her. “I’ll just remember to be careful what I

see.”

“You do that,” Sam said. Her face froze in that air of superiority her kind had. That *specialness* wrapped itself around her as snugly as that fur coat.

But now, I could tell that it was a mask. I knew her attitude would never keep her warm. Damn her for making me see even a little bit of her life.

There wasn't as much down time at the store that night as I would have liked. Idiots kept coming in, stumbling out of the cold, looking for smokes (which we sold, and the cause of my current nicotine habit) and for drugs (which I didn't sell because I valued my skin too much) and for sex (which again, I didn't sell, though I did direct a few of the less idiotic assholes down toward Angela's corner).

I kept calling people on the phone in between interruptions, standing in the empty sex & toy shop, the heat cranked up and soft rock ballads playing in the background. I talked into the phone like it was a mic, though I generally hated when people did that. I just couldn't bear to hold the headset closer to my ear—that made everything seem too personal.

The whole night turned cruel, regardless. First de'Angelo, then Tess, then Andre all assumed that I was calling about some party or another, wanting to get together over the holidays. It was nice to have so much support. More than one wanted to come over, hang out, make sure I'd be okay for the next couple of days.

I didn't want company, though. I needed...I don't know. Maybe to process or some such shit on my own, first. Then maybe in a few days we could all get together. Mourn. Curse. Bitch about how unfair life was.

Sometimes I didn't mind the idiots coming through the door just so I could get off the damned phone.

No one had heard anything, though, about other prostitutes getting hurt, other people getting killed. I didn't know if anything bad was going down, if that had been why the cops had asked about Kyle tricking, or had asked about Helen.

But I'd grown up in Minnesota. I understood *prepared*. Winter taught you that, particularly when you first hit the streets.

So I warned everyone I could, despite not knowing anything. On one hand, I felt like a drama queen. I really didn't know anything concrete.

On the other hand, better safe than sorry.

I almost let Tommy come over, escort me from the shop to my place as he gallantly offered. I knew that I should be more concerned for my own safety. But I was more pissed than anything else. Heaven help the poor bastard who tried to take me on tonight.

In addition to the idiots and the phone calls, Chinaman Joe's list of online orders kept piling up. Besides being a penny-pinching bastard, he was a smart businessman. While the storefront was important, it didn't cover all our bills, so he ran an internet shop as well.

Every minute I wasn't busy with the customers standing in front of me, I was supposed to be filling orders. Right behind the counter was a second table stocked with boxes, plain brown wrapping paper, tape, and enough bubble wrap to cover the North Pole, Santa, and all his reindeer. We had discreet stickers for the packages that all said, "CJ LLC."

Like every other business in the Western Hemisphere, we were running Christmas specials.

Chinaman Joe had done a lot of experimenting. As I said, he was smart. Just a set of free condoms or a couple of packages of lube wouldn't boost sales.

Throw in a butt plug, though? You were golden. A lot of people were into that kind of shit but didn't want to admit it. They'd never buy something like that for themselves. However, if they could say, "Oh, look, honey! It came for free! Let's try it!" then it was okay.

So sales were through the roof. I should have been happy. It meant I still had a job. Hell, maybe the cheap bastard *would* give me a holiday bonus.

But my mind kept drifting, seeing Kyle's body in the alley. Thinking about Ferguson asking about Helen. And yes, damn it, about Sam as well, with her perfect teeth and skin and hair and how she really wasn't my type despite the fact that I didn't really have a type beyond *female*.

Since my lying, cheating ex Natasha had left, I hadn't bothered looking for another girlfriend. Natasha hadn't just broken up with me, no, she'd torn my heart out and gleefully stomped on it with her spiked heels.

I still couldn't believe I'd been such an idiot, that I hadn't seen she'd been cheating on me. Particularly since she'd been doing it right under my nose, with one of the girls at the peep show out front, that skanky bitch Frieda.

Though I knew Natasha had been friends with Kyle, I didn't bother to call her. I figured I'd let her find out on her own.

Of course, because that was my luck and my life, Natasha called just as I was closing up the store for the night.

I just looked at my phone when her name popped up on the screen. Damn it. Why hadn't I blocked her number?

Calling myself all kinds of fool, I answered. "Hello?"

Maybe Natasha was hurt and someone else was calling all her contacts.

"Cassie? Honey? Is that you?" Natasha's warm voice flooded the line. Chills ran down my back. I flicked off the last of the lights and stood in the dark, just listening to her.

"Yeah, it's me," I told her.

"You okay?" Natasha asked. "I heard about Kyle."

I shrugged, knowing she couldn't see the gesture, knowing she'd know I made it anyway. "I'm all right," I said.

"I'm so sorry," Natasha said.

I couldn't hold back the bitterness in my laugh. "For what?" I asked.

"For your loss."

Ah, there was the chill back in her voice, the coldness I'd come to expect.

“Thank you,” I said. I wasn’t about to engage with her. That way just lay more heartache.

“Look, I heard you were warning people about walking the streets this week,” Natasha said. “And I know you think you’re indestructible.”

I snorted. Bitch had no idea how close she’d come to destroying me.

“But you be careful, too,” she warned. “If there’s someone out killing sex workers, they could be taking other people, too. Anyone who keeps the kind of hours you do.”

I shook my head. She was wrong. No one would take me for a street girl. Or even a street boy. I didn’t look the part. And I did take care of myself.

“All right,” I grudgingly replied. “You take care of yourself, too.”

Her merry laugh came back. It made me nostalgic, suddenly. Remembering a time that was more warm and full of light. “I always do. Ciao.”

“Bye.”

I stood in the middle of the dark shop for another moment. Natasha had accused me of being too closed off. She’d gone and found someone more open. She took no blame for her defection.

I knew she was full of shit.

I was still glad she’d called, that somewhere in that calculating, gold-diggeresque heart of hers, she had some level of human kindness.

But that didn’t warm me any as I wrapped my scarf tighter around my neck, put on my hat and gloves and zipped my jacket closed, preparing to face the cold, feeling like a gladiator stepping into the ring.

I headed up toward the corner where Angela and the other girls I knew had been working previously, at an intersection of old converted warehouses closer to the Mississippi, but no one was there. The wind whipped down the empty street, scattering the remains of the prior dusting of snow. Ice crackled hollowly under my boots. The dark brick sucked up all the light between the streetlamps. A few cars passed, slowing as they went, but I didn’t look up.

I knew they were looking for the girls. I didn’t fit the bill.

I turned west, going toward the overpass, where Interstate 94 headed north. I knew Angela sometimes worked there, the cars thundering overhead. It was out of the snow and sometimes the wind, though the corners were darker, and frequently she had to chase off the homeless bums who camped there.

Two girls I didn’t know stood shivering on the corner. They were both more dressed for the weather than Angela had been, the blonde in a long, black duster-style jacket that went down to mid-calf, met by her sleek black boots. The brunette wore some kind of faux fur, just as long, but her feet must have been freezing in her flimsy gold shoes.

They both were wearing wigs with curls, like Angela’s, though in different colors. Must be the new thing. Plus that all-night makeup that hid the worst ravages of their profession.

I approached them slowly, with a soft, “Hey.”

“Hey, girly, how you doing?” the taller one, the blonde asked.

I reached into my jacket and pulled out a pack of smokes, offering them to the girls.

The blonde took one, while the short brunette shook her head.

“You two know Kyle Magnusson? Stripper, over at Richard’s?” I asked them after a moment.

“Nope,” they both said shortly.

“You don’t really look like the boy type,” the brunette added flirtatiously.

“He was a friend of mine. Killed tonight,” I told them. It had gotten easier saying those words, particularly since I’d had all those phone calls.

Still, it hurt. And the reality was finally settling in—Kyle was dead.

“Looking for some grievance counseling, girly?” the blonde asked.

“Now, not really. Looking for Helen, though. Helen of Troy?” I asked, trying to seem casual.

The blonde looked askance at me. “She’s gone, too. I know Patrice said she’d caught a ride out of town, but I heard she’d been found in an alley. Dumped. Some kind of crazy grin on her face.”

That detail sent a shiver through me to match the worst the winds could do.

“That wasn’t her,” the brunette said. “That was Lizzie. Across the river.”

“You know a working girl who died over in St. Paul?” I asked. *Shit*. There could have been a bunch of deaths over there and the cops would never connect the dots. We were called the twin cities, but St. Paul was a foreign country as far as the people who lived in Minneapolis were concerned.

“Girly, we’s dying all the time,” the blonde said. “Ain’t nothing to it.”

“It might be worse right now,” I cautioned them. “You need to be careful.”

The blonde stubbed out her cigarette. “If you’re finished with your warnings, Mother Theresa, you’re holding up traffic. We got work to do.”

I looked pointedly up and down the empty street. There weren’t any cars to be seen. But I knew when I wasn’t wanted. “Ladies,” I said with a nod of my head as I walked off.

How the hell was I going to find out what had happened to Helen? I didn’t want to go asking that cop, Ferguson, about it. And I sure as fuck wasn’t about to text Sam, no matter what she’d said.

Who could I ask about Helen? Who would know whether she’d just left town or been killed?

I didn’t like the answer when it came to me.

The only other person who’d probably know about Helen was one of the local drug dealers, this Hungarian guy named Csaba—rhymed with Jabba, like Jabba the Hutt.

I really didn’t want to go see him. Not because I owed him money or something stupid. However, I may have accused him of shoplifting and chased him out of the store, along with his dealers, once or twice. Guy liked his kink, his floggers and handcuffs.

I didn’t really have a choice, though. He was my only lead. I would have to go see him if I wanted to learn more.

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