

T.R. LETON

*A COLD
BLOODED
RAIN*

BOOK 1 FROM THE FILES OF
MAXWELL FLOYD, PRIVATE EYE

PREVIEW EDITION

A COLD BLOODED RAIN

Book 1 From the Files of Maxwell Floyd, Private Eye

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By T. R. Leton

A Cold Blooded Rain

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The Maxwell Floyd Series

Book 1 – A Cold Blooded Rain

Book 2 – When Wolves Come Calling

Book 3 – *Coming 2020*

*For
Mom & Dad*

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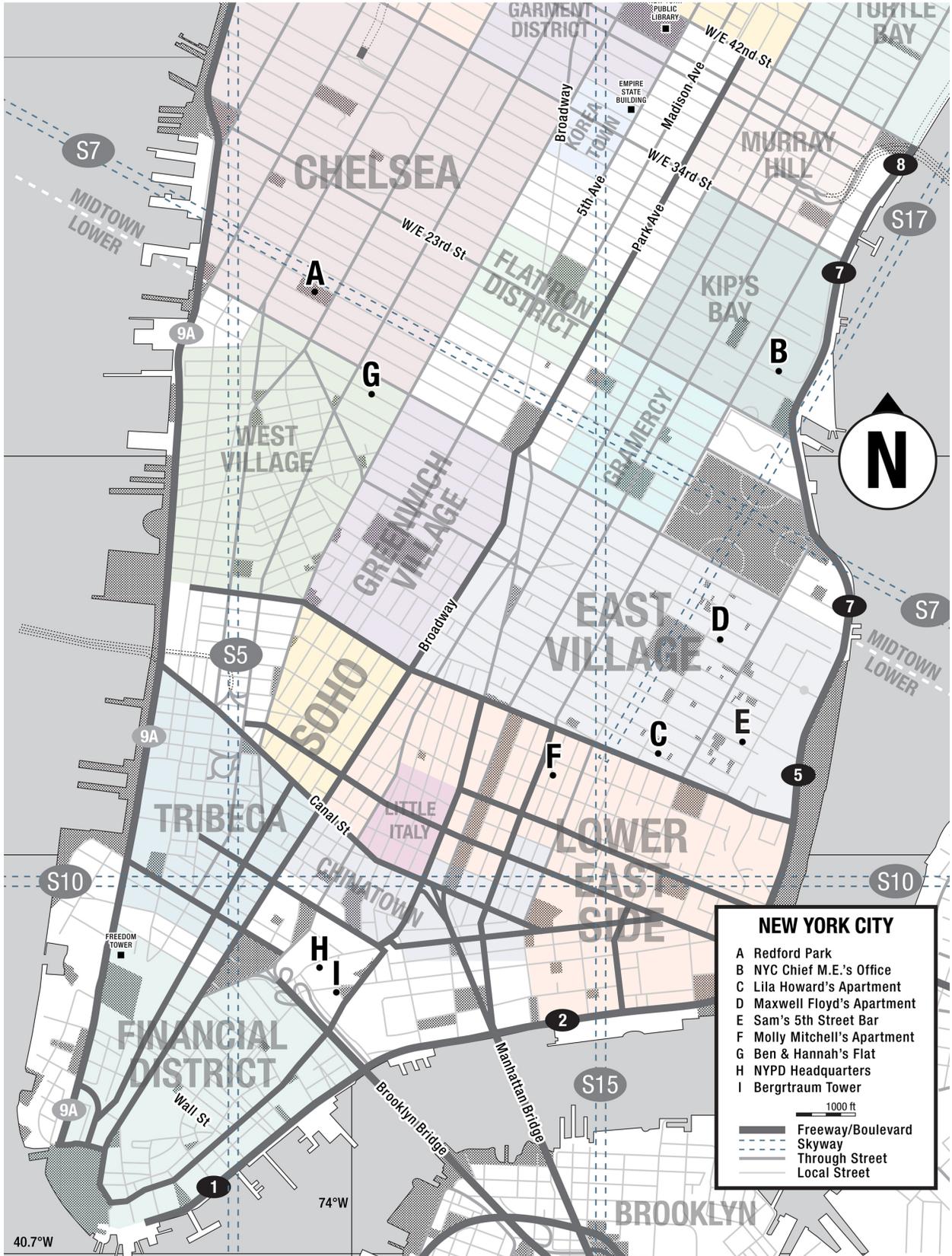
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Chapter 1 – A Broken Man

The massive fist came out of nowhere. It connected with my jaw in a bone-rattling and sickening crunch. My head whipped to the side, blood and spit went flying. Another powerful blow slammed me right in the gut. I hunched over as my innards bounced around inside me. I labored to catch my breath, coughing, fighting the urge to throw up. The blood in my mouth only provoked my gag reflex. I went down on my knees, then fell forward and collapsed to the ground.

Two enormous, calloused hands grabbed me from behind and lifted me up. The pavement passed beneath me in a blur. I looked up just before colliding with a fast-approaching wall of metal. I didn't hear or feel the collision, but somehow I knew I was in big trouble, just as everything around me went black.

—

I didn't know how long I was out. The first thought I remembered having as I started to come to was about the weather.

Great. It's raining again. That's all it ever seems to do in this stinking city.

Little by little, I re-entered the realm of the living. Thunder growled from somewhere in the night sky, miles away. A cold-blooded rain fell like a million tiny shards of ice, stabbing at my bare face. I blinked against the frigid assault.

A haze enveloped me, thick and stifling, and hung heavily in every corner of my brain. The intense throbbing in my head made me feel like I had just met head-on with a freight train. I groaned and rolled over to lie face down on the hard pavement.

Gasping for air, I pushed through the agony and looked around. I was lying in an alleyway. In one direction, I could see the exit to the street. In the other, details faded into the shadows. A dull blue glow came from a light that flickered under the eaves of the building behind me.

I was soaking wet, water streaming down my face and obscuring my vision. I stretched out a trembling hand and groped the ground around me, uncertain what I was searching for. But then my fingers brushed the damp wool felt of my old fedora. I grabbed it. As I put it on, a sharp pain in my scalp made me wince, but with my head shielded from the downpour, I finally felt some relief.

I rested my head on a forearm and watched blood drip from my face onto the pavement. It mixed with the rain, flowing off in a tiny stream and swirling away. I swallowed and gagged on my saliva, thick with the metallic taste of blood. As I teetered on the edge of unconsciousness, my heart raced, and I could feel panic begin to rise. Sweat seeped out of my pores despite the wet chill of the night.

Survival instincts kicked in. A sudden desperation took hold of me, a desperation to get as far away as I could from wherever I was. I forced myself to my knees, fighting to keep steady, then struggled to my feet. My brain spun like a child's top, and the feeling of the freight train came roaring back. My legs gave way, and I crumpled back to the ground and vomited.

A large metal shape sat before me, swaying back and forth with my surroundings. As I took long and steady breaths in an attempt to stave off another wave of nausea, something in my pain-racked mind suddenly clicked. I remembered that I was drunk.

Growing more frantic by the second, I fought to hack through the fog-like intoxication. I focused on the metal shape, willing it to stop moving, and soon realized I was looking at a garbage dumpster, dark-colored and overflowing with trash. Midway up the side facing me was a dent roughly the same size as my head. I slipped a hand underneath my hat. My fingers came away bloodied, and a fragment of memory came back to me in a rush.

Bowie. That son of a bitch, I thought. *What did he do to me?* Whatever it was, I couldn't dismiss the distinct possibility that I had deserved it.

I leaned forward and grabbed on to the side of the dumpster. Straining, my muscles shaking, I hauled myself to my feet. The closer I came to standing, the faster my brain ran laps around the interior of my skull. My legs wobbled beneath me as I stood, focusing on my next challenge. I had to walk.

I kept a tight grip on the dumpster and let myself get accustomed to standing again. After a weary few seconds, I let go, taking two steps toward the alleyway exit. I had no confidence in my legs but concentrated on the simple goal of making it out to the street. I took a third step. Then another. On my fifth step, my legs buckled and I fell face first back toward the ground. The swiftly approaching pavement was the last thing I saw before I blacked out.

—

My body shook as I came to for the second time. A low, muffled, warbling called to me from somewhere in the far distance. The sound grew closer and closer and soon materialized into a voice. The fog continued to dissipate, and I became aware that my body wasn't shaking on its own. I could feel someone's hands on my shoulders, giving me a gentle shake to bring me back to consciousness.

"Come on, Max. Come on back," the voice said.

My eyes fluttered open to a face, hazy and tinted blue by the light of the alley. My breathing was shallow, but with each passing moment, my vision cleared. The face came into focus, revealing the concerned expression of an old man.

"S-Sam," I sputtered. My voice sounded strange to my own ears. "Wh-what the hell happened?" A sudden awareness took over and I began to panic, squirming in an attempt to sit up.

The old man's hands were surprisingly strong as they held me down. "Take it easy, son," Sam said. "Don't get too excited. You're in bad shape. Bowie really did a number on you. More so than usual. I would've called the paramedics, but the block signal is down. *Again.*"

Fighting against Sam's hold sent a torrent of pain through my back. I gave up, moaning, and went limp.

"There you go," he said. "Just keep calm."

Sam's advice, despite its compassionate tone, was the last thing I wanted to hear at that moment. "I've got to get home, Sam," I told him, feeling more and more anxious and sick to my stomach.

Sam's expression turned from concerned to skeptical. "Why? Have you got a date?" he asked sarcastically. "Look at you, out here in the rain and soaking wet! Your head's bashed in, and you're lying in your own puke, for God's sake! You're not going anywhere in your condition. Let's get you back inside." He finally helped me sit up. "We'll get you dried off and sobered up."

I nodded, reluctant but still grateful to the old man. "Thanks, Sam," I said, reaching for my hat that lay on the ground beside me.

He stroked his mustache then gave a sympathetic smile. "I'm just sorry I couldn't stop him before things got so out of hand."

"Don't worry about Bowie, old man. I've taken worse from tougher cats than him before."

Sam chuckled as he lifted one of my arms over his shoulders. "You know what?" He helped me to my feet. "I believe you."

Sam Duggin's Fifth Street Bar was a lower-level dive on Manhattan's East Side. Over the previous two years, I had become a regular and spent most of my evenings there. As sad as it may have sounded, I considered Sam's my home away from home.

I sat at the bar and watched the steam rise from the mug of strong black coffee in my hands. My fedora hung alongside my raincoat on a stand in a nearby corner, both dripping onto a towel as they dried. I sat wearing nothing but my damp boxers as the rest of my clothes were in the back room getting tossed around in a dryer Sam used for towels and aprons. The place was empty, so it didn't matter to me that I was half naked. With the condition I was in, and the way I was feeling, I really wouldn't have cared if anyone saw me, anyway.

A makeshift bandage wrapped my midsection. Taking a deep breath caused a sharp pain in my side, so I figured I had a broken rib or two. Another bandage wrapped the crown of my head, covering an ugly gash that was the result of my collision with the dumpster. It explained all the blood I remembered seeing, and the incessant pounding in my skull. I had another bandage wrapped around the bloodied knuckles of my right hand. According to Sam, it was from a couple of well-placed but ineffective shots to Bowie's jaw. My nose hurt, bleeding but not broken, with a wadded-up tissue sticking out of my left nostril.

While I still felt nauseated and my head throbbed, I no longer felt drunk. I took a cautious sip of coffee, hoping the caffeine could pull me out of my misery. But as lousy as I felt, what I really craved was a shot of bourbon. At the same time, though, the thought of liquor repulsed me.

Sam came out from the back room. "You sure you don't want me to drive you to the hospital?"

I leaned back and forced a weak grin. "I'll be fine. Just keep the joe hot, and I'll survive."

"Can I get you anything to eat? How 'bout a bowl of hot soup?"

"No, thanks. I doubt I could keep it down."

"All right," Sam replied. "Let me know if you change your mind." He took several steps away, grabbed a towel, and started wiping down the bar top. I took a quiet moment to breathe and looked around.

Sam's was your average humdrum food and booze joint, like any other old dive found in the city. The dark woods and muted colors gave the atmosphere a rather closed-in gloominess. Signs and posters pushing different brands of beers and spirits littered the ivy-green walls. The bar counter was toward the back of the building, lined with a dozen high-backed barstools. Tables and chairs took up the areas closer to the front door. In one corner sat a pool table, with a couple of old dart boards hanging on a nearby wall.

Several old and dusty vidmonitors hung from the ceiling throughout the bar. The aging flat panels were always on, streaming live sports programs or gambling contests. Customers often flocked to Sam's whenever the Yankees or other hometown teams were playing. As I sat there, however, they all showed the same blue screen with the words NO SIGNAL flashing across the bottom. Though the memory was vague, I remembered Sam telling me out in the alley that the block signal was down. It happened all the time. It was probably why the joint was so dead.

I finally looked back over at Sam. “What was this one about, anyway?”

He turned his face toward me as he continued to work. “You mean Bowie?” I only nodded, and he winked at me, asking, “What else would it be about?”

“*Lila*,” I said bitterly.

Sam flung the towel over his left shoulder and came over. “You were pretty high after six slugs.” He made no attempt to hide the disapproval in his voice. “Bowie came in here and ordered a beer. You said to put it on your tab, and he told you to go to hell. I was over at the tap when I heard him call you a choice name or two. Accused you of messing around with Lila behind his back. It seems he’d heard about the two of you ducking out of here together Sunday night.”

As Sam told the story, I grew more and more pissed-off with every word. Hearing the accusations come straight from Bowie’s mouth surely had had the same effect. *No*. It was probably worse given the fact I was drunk at the time.

Sam rubbed the back of his bald head and continued. “Well, you said something I couldn’t hear, and before I could do anything about it, you two were at it.”

I tried to push my brain, badly wanting to remember the events as Sam related them, but the memory held only empty bits and pieces.

Sam went on. “You wrestled around a bit before you both ended up out the side door. It all happened so fast.

“Anyway, he threw you headfirst at the dumpster. You were out cold before I could finally stop him. He stood over you and warned you to stay away from her.” Sam held up his hands and shrugged. “I followed him back in here, yelling at him, making sure he didn’t do any more damage. But he just downed the rest of his beer and left.”

Sam went silent, stroking his mustache while watching me. I had nothing meaningful to say, so I only shook my head in disbelief.

Sam then asked, “What did you think would happen after all this time fooling around with his girl?”

The question set me off, and my anger flared. I leaned back in my stool, ready to unload on Sam in my own defense when a sudden burst of pain ripped through my back. With a gasp, I cringed, and my body went rigid. “*Goddammit, Sam!*” I roared through clenched teeth.

I slumped forward carefully and rested on my elbows, letting out a long sigh and willing my body to relax. “I haven’t been fooling around with Lila.” I finally muttered.

Sam cocked his head. “Max, everyone here believes you two have had a thing for one another all along.”

“And I suppose you believe that?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know what to believe. But I’ve seen the flirting. I’ve seen how cozy the two of you can get when she gets off work and joins you for a few drinks.”

“We’re friends, Sam. We’ve never had a thing for each other,” I replied, then threw him a stern look. “And I don’t flirt.”

“Well, what about Sunday night?” Sam countered. “Me and four other regs watched you and her, both stupid-drunk, stumble out of here together arm in arm. Hell, I may be old,” he lowered his chin, “but I have a pretty good idea of what might happen next.”

“Nothing happened,” I said. “Nothing has ever happened.” Sam raised an eyebrow, and for some reason I felt guilty despite telling him the god-honest truth. “Shit,” I spat and clumsily dismounted my stool. Hobbling to the end of the counter, I walked back behind the bar.

Sam watched with an amused look on his face as I passed by. I stopped at one of the liquor shelves and looked him dead in the eye. With a defiant glare, I pulled down a half empty bottle of

Jack Daniel's Red Barrel Bourbon. I grabbed a shot glass from a nearby stack, slammed it on the bar, and began filling it to the brim. A few drops of the precious amber-colored liquid slid down the outer sides of the glass.

Sam didn't move. He only watched. I could only imagine the disappointment on his face as I raised the shot and knocked it back in one gulp. The liquor singed my insides, rushing down my gullet to slosh around with the shame and embarrassment and whatever else was in my stomach.

"So much for making a full pot of coffee," Sam mumbled.

I wiped away a small amount of bourbon that had trickled down my chin, slammed the glass back down and filled it again. "Look," I said, tapping my fingers on the bar top, desperate to find the right words. "Lila's a great gal. She's a rare bit of fresh air down here in this lower-level dump we call home. I'd like to think that her and I are friends. But do you want to know what I really believe?"

Sam knew I didn't want him to answer.

"I'm just another pathetic dope who comes in here to drink my sorrows away," I continued. "Maybe Lila has singled me out from the others and gives me a little extra attention, but I'm not dumb. I know the attention your pretty bartenders dole out on us barflies is just a means of filling up the tipbank. They all do it, some more than others. I get it. It's business.

"But, yeah, sure. I think Lila's a doll. She's easy to talk to and easy to look at. But if I'm honest—"

"I suppose you're gonna tell me that she's not your type?" Sam asked cynically, cutting me off. "That's bullshit."

Sam rarely cursed, so I knew he was only trying to make a point. But the snide remark angered me nonetheless, and I slapped my hand hard against the counter—the hand wrapped in a bandage. *Ouch.*

"Honestly," I said, grimacing. "I'm not interested in anything more. I can't handle anything more. Nothing is going on between us. Nothing ever will."

I could see by Sam's expression that I still had a long way to go to convince him. I swore under my breath, then said, "Do you want to know what happened Sunday night? I walked her home. We said our goodbyes on the sidewalk. Once she was safely inside her building, I turned around and went home. That's it."

"That's it?"

"Yes, *that's it!*" I snapped back at him.

Sam was the last person I would have thought it necessary to explain myself to, and I was at my wits' end. I had grown weary over just how much time we had spent going back and forth on the matter. Still, I supposed it was better to quash any rumors right then and there while I had the chance.

I felt tired and frustrated but found myself longing to see Bowie come walking back in through the front door. I was thirsting for a rematch, glancing at the windows near the entrance, hoping to see his hulking, ogre-like form headed my way. But only cars passed by and I looked away, disappointed.

Sam surveyed the bar top, pulled the towel off his shoulder, and attacked a spot he had missed earlier. "You know what?" he asked.

I downed another slug and looked at him wearily. "What?"

Sam took a step closer and leaned toward me, putting his hand on my shoulder. "I believe you."

I knew Sam well enough to know that he wasn't merely patronizing me. I sighed in relief, eager to forget the whole thing and move on, and gave the old man a grin of appreciation. After

all, he was the closest thing I'd had to a father. I had spent most of my life without one. In the two years that I had known him, Sam had taken on a small part of the role.

At forty-one, I wasn't a young man anymore. But Sam had many more years and much more experience than me. He was someone to look up to, someone to ask for advice whenever I found myself needing it. I could disappoint him, and felt remorse whenever I let him down. I loved the old man for that.

After a quick squeeze of my shoulder, Sam shooed me out from behind the bar. I went back to my stool, where he poured me another shot. "You know," Sam said, looking thoughtful, "you should still be careful."

I lifted the glass to my mouth, then stopped. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you might think you're just a barfly and Lila's your favorite bartender. Might think you're just pals. But you do seem to give each other a lot of attention, not that any woman who looks like her doesn't deserve it." A smirk crossed my face, and Sam saw it. He laughed and held up his hands. "Look, I'm old, not dead!"

We shared a chuckle.

Sam wiped his forehead. "She's what, twenty-five, twenty-six? Younger dames can sometimes get wrapped up with older guys who give them attention. I've seen it before. And you're right, she has singled you out. It all may be innocent from your point of view. But just because you're not interested in anything more doesn't mean she isn't."

I swallowed the shot and noticed the pounding in my head had lessened. My buzz was coming back. I motioned for another drink, which Sam reluctantly poured. "I know what you're saying," I replied. "But there's nothing there. Lila loves Bowie. And she's smarter than that. She knows my life's a mess, that I'm broke and out of work, that I'm still in love with my ex."

Sam stroked his mustache again. "Sounds to me like you need fixing. Some women like the idea of fixing a broken man." He let his words sink in for a moment. "Just be careful. That's all I'm saying." He tossed his towel into a bucket on the counter behind him. "Besides, I don't want to see Bowie taking a knife to your throat next time."

"I can handle him," I replied, relieved that the conversation had moved away from Lila. "We'll probably be in here tomorrow night, drinking and laughing it up."

"I hope so. Can't have the two of you getting into fights and scaring off paying customers."

I rubbed my temples. "Yeah, well, sorry about tonight, Sam."

He sighed with a smile and shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Weren't any customers tonight to scare off, anyway." Sam looked off, and I followed his gaze over to the old clock on the far wall. The antique digital timepiece, set on bar time, read 11:15 PM, which meant it was only eleven.

A loud, annoying buzz went off from somewhere in the back near the kitchen.

"Your clothes should be dry now," Sam announced in response to the alarm. "I'm hoping for a late-night rush if the weather doesn't keep them in. They should start showing up anytime, so," he chuckled as he walked away, "I can't have you sitting there in your skivvies."

As if on cue, the bell above the front door jingled as someone walked in. Sam disappeared into the back, while I turned my head toward the entrance and the newcomer. I expected either a look of amusement or a look of horror on their face upon finding a half-naked man, wrapped in bloodied bandages, sitting at the bar. The look on the person's face, however, was neither, and a sudden dread took hold of me. I knew the face and the expression on it well.

Oh, no, I groaned in my head, just when I was starting to believe the night couldn't have gotten any worse.

Chapter 2 – The Vixen

The young woman's slate-blue eyes locked on to mine with a cool, unwavering stare as she approached. Her smoldering gaze dared me to try and look away. Any other sap unfortunate enough to catch sight of her would have been wise to run if only to save his own skin.

Her dark brown hair was long, pinned back on one side with a clip just above her left ear. The rest cascaded down the other side of her pretty, soft-featured face. She carried a small black leather clutch in one hand. A gray fur stole hung around her shoulders, the dead animal's skin on display as though it were her latest trophy kill. A tight black dress sheathed her petite body, and pinstriped stockings clung to her legs while her black Oxford heels clicked on the hardwood floor in a slow rhythm as she walked closer.

Within seconds, she stood in front of me with a hand on her hip. Her face showed little expression until a slow grin spread across her red-painted lips. "Bowie do this?" she asked in a low, raspy voice.

I downed my shot of bourbon, trying to look indifferent as I set the glass back down on the bar. "What's it to you?"

She shrugged and took a step closer. "Absolutely nothing. Only, I would've loved to have watched."

I sighed. "I bet you would have."

She smiled impishly and looked me head to toe. "Max, Max," she cooed with twisted delight, "one of these days, you're gonna get yourself into some real trouble." She then leaned in close and spoke in my ear, her voice almost a whisper. "And I'm going to be there to see it."

Her perfume tickled my nose with cherry blossoms and a hint of cinnamon. The scent, together with her words, sent an involuntary shudder coursing through my body. It wasn't entirely unpleasant.

Using her index finger, she lightly traced several small circles on the top of my bandaged hand. It almost hurt. She then dragged her finger midway up my arm, triggering another shudder. She took a step back and eyed me coyly for a moment, savoring the unsettled expression on my face.

But then, after half a heartbeat, she broke down into a fit of giggles. With the flick of a switch, the seductive temptress disappeared. In her place, the spirited young girl I knew too well stood laughing at me.

"You dumbass," she said.

I grinned. "Nice to see you too, Molly."

Molly Mitchell, one of the other bartenders at Sam's, was about to start her late-night shift. I knew from experience that the sultry and provocative vixen persona was a front she put on to hook new customers into becoming regulars. She was good at it, and she knew it. Sam knew it too. Hiring her was a smart move.

In truth, Molly was just a twenty-something-year-old kid, working at Sam's to help pay her way through nursing school. She was spunky, cheerful—with a tendency to swear like a sailor—and always eager to meet new people and hear their stories. While she was lively and outgoing, I was the complete opposite, but that never stopped us from becoming good friends.

The talk among the regulars suggested that Lila was my favorite bartender. If that were true, then Molly was a close second, though there was a distinct difference between the two. If Lila had singled me out for extra special attention, Molly had singled out damn near everyone.

“Holy shitballs, Max,” Molly said, her brow furrowing, her expression softening to reveal a genuine concern. “Seriously, are you okay?”

I shrugged. “I’ve felt better.”

Molly let out a loud sigh. “Bowie think you’re screwing around with Lila again?” she asked as she headed back behind the bar to stash her belongings and clock in.

“Something like that.”

She smiled and tapped the tip of her narrow nose with a forefinger. “Uh-huh.”

Sam walked out from the back, my clothes in hand. He greeted Molly as he approached and laid my things on the bar. “Here you go, son,” he said to me.

I thanked him and slid an arm into one of the sleeves of my shirt. It hurt, my arms and back shrieking in protest, but I finally managed to slip it on. I fumbled with the buttons, unable to use my bandaged hand.

Molly came back around to my side of the bar and began fastening the buttons for me. “Well, I guess the fun’s over,” she said, disappointed. Then, with a wicked grin, her inner vixen reappeared, saying, “I’d much rather see you sitting here in next to nothing.” Fastening the lowest button, just below my waistline, she threw me another grin that made me flush.

I cleared my throat and fought off another shudder.

Molly stifled a laugh as I stood up from my seat. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said demurely. “Am I making you uncomfortable?” She already knew the answer.

“Sure as hell are,” I replied and grabbed my trousers. As I tried to get a leg into them, I almost fell over.

“Here,” Molly said with a chuckle and held my arm to steady me. It was a battle of wits, but I soon had my pants on, making it a point to fasten the zipper myself.

Sam stood by and said nothing. His expression, a mix of concern and amusement, told me everything. I was a sorry sight to behold. Molly brought over the rest of my things and held my hat and raincoat while I finished getting dressed.

Sam gestured to me from where he stood behind the counter. “Let’s get you a cab.”

I shook my head. “I’ll walk. I could use the fresh air.” Sam then threw me a skeptical look, probably guessing that I needed a walk to sober up. “I’m okay, really. I’ll be fine.”

I took my hat and coat from Molly and turned to leave. At that moment, all the vidmonitors in the building flickered back to life. The screens, many set to different channels, caught everyone’s attention. It appeared the block signal was back up and running.

“Well, that’s good news,” Sam said.

“Thanks, you two,” I said, facing them both. “I’m going home. I can’t wait to forget about tonight.”

Molly laughed. “Like I’m going to let that happen.”

“I know, I know. If I—” My thoughts froze in mid-sentence and I stopped short, my attention glued to one of the monitors hanging above the bar. Set to a news channel, it was streaming some breaking story.

The live footage centered on police officers standing in an area cordoned off by yellow tape, in the flashing strobe of red and white lights. The words that ran along the bottom of the screen lit up in my brain like muzzle flash. Such words always did. They were the type of words no one ever

wanted to see or hear, but for some sick and twisted reason they drew us in like moths to a flame. Or maybe it was just me.

I had seen such words before. Too often, in fact. It was a different time and place, but the words were nearly always the same. The only difference was they hit much harder than they used to. I had my reasons, after all. As I stood there staring up at them, a void grew somewhere deep within me. Old wounds ripped open. I took one feeble step closer to the bar, fixed on the words that blazed across the screen. **WOMAN FOUND MURDERED.**

Chapter 3 – A Life Once Lived

“Hey, Sam, turn that up, will you?” I asked. Sam reached up and pushed the volume slider, and the audio from the stream filled the bar.

“... found by police at approximately 10:15 PM this evening in Redford Park, Chelsea. Unofficial reports from sources close to the case are telling us that the victim is twenty-two-year-old Claire Hemsley, daughter of the wealthy coal mining tycoon, Albert Hemsley. Sources also say it appears to be foul play. Again, the woman’s identity has not been released by the police, but we’re being told unofficially that the victim is Claire Hemsley. A representative with the NYPD will be making a statement shortly.

“We’re now looking at live footage from our affiliate, News.i27, with reporters on site ...”

Sam turned the volume down when a group of young people walked into the bar. As he went off to help them, I stood frozen in place, watching the stream continue on in silence.

“I heard about that on my way over here. So goddamn sad,” Molly said. I had forgotten she was still standing beside me. “She was my age,” Molly added solemnly.

I took a breath and stepped back as a horrible feeling stirred inside me. The uncomfortably familiar feeling hit me anytime news of that sort came along. I felt a dire and overpowering need to bring the victim’s killer to justice. A long time had passed since I last felt that need. Pursuing justice was, after all, what I used to do for a living.

“It’s terrible,” was all I could think to say. The thought that the girl’s murder might have happened while I sat wasting away at the bar sickened me.

Sam soon returned after delivering a pitcher of beer to his new customers. He took something out of his pocket and handed it to me. “Here, I almost forgot. This was in your trousers. Lucky I found it before it went in the dryer. I turned it off to save the battery.”

I took the hand-sized rectangular device that looked like a thin pane of heavily tinted glass. It was my jack. “Thanks,” I replied, not bothering to remind Sam that batteries weren’t as they were back in his day. Slipping the device into my pocket, I turned back toward the breaking news report.

Sam noticed. “What are you thinking, Max?” he asked with suspicion in his voice. I shook my head, still glued to monitor, though in my peripheral vision, I could see Molly glance over at Sam.

“I’ve seen that look before, Sam,” Molly said. “Bad news ...” Her voice trailed away as she headed off toward a customer who was waving her down.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, shooting Sam a look.

He held up his hands. “Hey, we all know how you get when something bad like this happens. The old homicide detective in you wants out. You can’t let him, so you wind up in here drinking yourself silly.”

A long sigh escaped my lips, and I bent forward, resting my hands on the bar. Sam leaned in a little closer. I could see the deep wrinkles around his gray-green eyes. “I know you miss it,” he said, lowering his voice. “What’d you call it once? The chase? You want justice for people who’ve lost loved ones to bad people. But you’re not the big time New York City homicide detective you used to be. You’ve said it yourself. You’re an out-of-work private eye, and you’re broke. Speaking of which, I don’t even want to know what your bar tab is up to these days.

“Anyway, you’ve got more important things to think about. Can’t go worrying about some girl who got herself killed, horrible as it may be. Who you used to be and what you used to do, that’s all ancient history. Dwelling on it will only lead to trouble. Worry about the life you have now and getting it back together. Stay out of trouble, Max.”

The old man’s words hurt. They also made me angry, not at Sam, but at myself, because everything he said was true. I wasn’t a homicide detective anymore. A drunken brawl tended to ruin one’s career. Especially when it ended in a badly botched case that had gotten thrown out of court as a result. That was exactly what happened two years before.

Following my dismissal from the NYPD, I thought I could make my way as a private detective. While it seemed like a good idea on paper, my reputation preceded me. Even more, private dicks were already a longtime dying breed. The venture was a complete failure and things only got worse. My marriage, my finances, and my sobriety were all shot to hell and left to die in the aftermath.

It was hard to even reflect on the events that ruined my life, and alcohol helped mask the pain. When the smoke had finally cleared, I was nothing but a loner and a drunk. I spent my days with a scant cast and crew of bar folk whom I sadly regarded as family. It was often difficult to even get out of bed in the morning, knowing what my life had become.

I looked up at Sam, not sure if he could see the tears welling in my bloodshot eyes. “Thanks, Sam,” I said, trying my best to smile. “See you next time.” With that, I shook his hand and limped for the door.

“Bye, Max!” Molly called from somewhere behind me.

I kept on walking, too angry with myself to turn around. “Goodnight,” I muttered aloud, unsure if she had even heard me. I struggled into my raincoat and carefully put on my fedora. Pushing through the door, I walked out into the cold, rainy night.

—

The rain continued to fall as I staggered along Fifth Street. Either the late hour, the piss-poor weather, or both, left the streets devoid of life. Raindrops spattered the ground, leaving behind a misty sheen that reflected the glow of nearby lights and passing cars. Shop signs and advertisements flashed and buzzed angrily around me.

Steam vented from building orifices and gutter grates, drifting through the air like ghosts. The occasional whiff of urine or rotting garbage seeped out from shadowy corners. The streets were a complete sensory onslaught, and just another facet of life in the darker, lonelier parts of the city. None of it phased me, though. It never had. I was born and raised in the slums—the lower levels of New York City and its boroughs. It was home.

Keeping my head down, my coat collars up, and my hat pulled low, I warded off the rain and pressed on. I smoked a cigarette along the way, my exhalations trailing behind in wisps.

Leaving Sam’s and the humiliating events of that evening behind, I soon lost track of my thoughts. I quickly gave up on trying to determine where they headed and let them roam. At times, they seemed to connect in a logical and meaningful string. Other times, they were a confused mess of lost and tumbling fragments lacking any rhyme or reason.

Walking in a straight line was a challenge, as banged up as I was. Or maybe it was the residual booze-induced stupor that still had a gentle, loving grasp on me. Regardless, I gave instinct the task of putting one foot in front of the other in the direction toward home. Unfortunately, instinct failed me as I crossed a street and was almost hit by a cab. The near miss left me with no choice.

I had to reserve some small amount of awareness for the sole purpose of getting me and my instinct home in one piece.

After rounding the corner onto Tenth Street, the wail of a siren faded in from somewhere in the distance. The roar of fan-jets soon joined in, and I stopped to listen. The clamor grew louder, echoing between the surrounding buildings. It drew my gaze toward the sky.

The sleek, angular shape of an NYPD flyer came soaring overhead at high speed, screaming by in a blur of flashing red and white lights. It was an Air Patrol Interceptor, no doubt on the glorious hunt for dangerous criminals. It banked between two tall buildings several blocks ahead and disappeared. Seeing it only reminded me again of the life I once lived as a member of New York City's finest.

Disheartened and alone in the rain, I stood in silence for several moments before moving on.

Two minutes later, I was limping up the steps to my building, a five-story walkup and not anything special. It looked just as old and as plain as the other buildings that surrounded it.

At the entrance, I pulled out my jack, waved it in front of the lockpad, and waited for the chime of the unlocking door. Nothing happened. I then remembered Sam said he had turned the device off to save the battery. I fumbled with it in the dim light and turned it back on, waving it at the lockpad a second time. The panel's lights lit up with the accompanying chime. After one last look at the empty, wet and gloomy street, I stepped inside.

My legs and arms burned in agony during the grueling climb to the third floor. My wet clothing dripped onto the carpet with a pitter-pat as I made my way down the hall. I waved my jack at the lockpad mounted in my apartment door. With a click, the door unlocked, and I trudged in.

I hung my hat and raincoat in the entryway and stripped down to my boxers, leaving everything in a pile in the middle of the floor. With only the city lights outside my window blinds to guide me, I headed for my liquor cabinet. I poured myself a glass of bourbon, then collapsed into my big, leather armchair, careful not to spill my drink.

The rain started coming down in sheets, joined by rumblings of thunder. Glad to be inside, I leaned back and stared upward, letting my mind go blank.

A subtle, blue glow bounced off the walls and ceiling, flashing on and off in the darkness. I was too tired to wonder what was causing it. I only watched it. *On. Off. On. Off.* The rhythmic flash almost seemed to match pace with my own, slow heartbeat. I didn't know how long I sat there, transfixed on the gentle flashing before finally seeking it out. The light was coming from my jack, laying on the coffee table, alerting me to a new message.

I actually had four new messages, all from Lila. With each one, the urgency in her voice increased as she called to warn me about Bowie. After the last frantic message ended, I chuckled in spite of myself and put my jack down.

"You're a little late, sweetheart," I said aloud into the emptiness of the room. I downed the rest of my drink, then headed off for a long shower.

The steaming, hot water felt good against my skin. It soothed my injuries and washed away the blood and grime caked to my body. I watched the mess run down my legs and swirl around the drain before it disappeared.

After drying off, I redressed my wounds with fresh gauze, then went straight to bed. I was eager to put as much distance as possible between myself and that miserable night. Naked but for the bandages, I fell into bed and was asleep seconds after my head hit the pillow.

Nightmares. The disturbing dreams plagued me ever since the horrific event that ruined my life. The gruesome imagery was always the same, drawn from my blackest fears. The long hallway. The screaming, the laughter. The stale and putrid stench of death often reeked its way into my subconscious sense of smell. Rivers of blood. Floating, rotting corpses. Drowning.

People from my life, both past and present, alive and dead, appeared as ghosts. They mocked and berated me, accusing me of the most vicious atrocities. And one ghost in particular never failed to show. It took the form of a frail little girl, her face blurred out, soaked to her pale skin and dripping wet. I knew why it haunted me, why she haunted me. What was worse, I knew I would never be able to escape her. The guilt I felt would never go away. The little girl would haunt me for the rest of my life.

It happened every night. The menagerie of gruesome and terrifying visuals churned. They blended together into a mosaic of horror and raw, bloodied emotion. My dreams terrified me. That night, it was no different.

I awoke with a jolt that sent pain lurching through me. I let out a terrified cry, gasping for breath, intensifying the pain in my side. My heart pounded deep within my sweat-soaked and broken body. I sat up straight in bed, shivering uncontrollably, and fought off the horror.

It's only a nightmare, Max, I had to remind myself. *Only a nightmare. Well, most of it, anyway.*

As the memory of the nightmare faded, my breathing slowed. My heart, however, wouldn't stop pounding in my chest, and I considered another bourbon to calm my nerves. Then again, that would have involved getting out of bed, and I was simply in too much pain. I laid back down and pulled the blankets close, despite the stifling heat in my bedroom. I thought of nothing and waited for sleep and the terror dreams to take me once again.

But then I heard a noise. At first, I mistook it for thunder and dismissed it. Then I heard it again and listened more intently. It wasn't thunder. The sound was faint, but definitely there, and it took me a moment to realize that someone was knocking at the front door.

I pushed the pain aside, sat up, and swung my legs over the edge of the bed. I slid open the top drawer of my nightstand. My old revolver sat inside, unused for years, among a clutter of other things. I reached for it and noticed my hand was shaking. *Great.* After unholstering the piece, I checked that it was loaded, then hobbled to my dresser and pulled on a clean pair of boxers.

Another round of knocking came as I tiptoed down the dark entryway. Light from the outside hallway slipped in under the front door, revealing the telltale shadow of someone standing on the other side.

Bowie. It has to be.

I glanced down at the weapon in my hand, and a sadistic thought took shape. *Perhaps my gun will finally convince the brute that nothing is going on between Lila and me.* After unlocking the door, I cracked it open, ready to point the piece in his fat, ugly face.

Chapter 4 – The Late-Night Visit

It wasn't Bowie's fat, ugly face on the other side of the door. I relaxed, my shoulders dropping, and let out a sigh. I hid my revolver behind my back and leaned against the jamb, letting the door swing open wide.

Lila Howard, looking on the verge of tears, locked her swollen blue eyes with mine as she walked into my apartment without a word.

I slipped the gun into one of the pockets of my raincoat hanging nearby, then reached for the doorknob and turned wrong. Pain shot down my spine. Grimacing, I shut and locked the door and quietly followed Lila into the living room. The sweet scent of honey and lavender hung in the air behind her.

"Hub, lights on," I said. The lights around us flickered on one by one.

Lila stood in my living room with her back to me, hugging herself. She wore a thick blue coat and black jeans with sneakers. Her blonde hair was damp, appearing darker and more curled than usual. She looked cold. I leaned my aching back against the wall and waited. When she finally turned around, our gazes locked again. Her lips quivered, and I knew it wasn't because she was cold.

Several more moments of silence passed before either of us finally spoke.

"Why didn't you answer my calls?" Lila asked quietly.

"My jack was turned off. I didn't get your messages until I got home."

Lila swallowed, stifling back tears as she turned her head away. "It was obviously too late."

"Yeah," was all I could think to say, feeling bad for how clearly shaken up she was.

When Lila looked back at me, I saw her emotions start to unravel. Her lips tightened and turned downward. She inhaled sharply through her nose as a tear slid down her cheek. Taking two steps closer, she sought out the bandages that wrapped the injured parts of my body. "My God," she choked on the words, "What has he done to you?"

She broke down into tears and rushed at me, wrapping her arms around me and squeezing. I bit my lip and let out a grunt as her hug reignited the pain in my ribs. Lila quickly pulled away, mortified. "Oh, Max," she gasped, putting a hand to her mouth. "Max, I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking—"

I gently put the fingertips of my bandaged hand to her lips and she went silent. "It's okay," I said, trying to smile. "Come here." I pulled her back into my arms under my own terms and held her as she cried. She buried her head in my chest, her tears soaking into my bandages. I watched the storm outside the windows, the young woman in my arms, for many long quiet moments.

When Lila finally regained her composure, I led her to the sofa and had her sit while I limped over to the liquor cabinet. I poured a finger of Irish whiskey for her, and a bourbon for myself.

Lila took off her coat, revealing a tight-fitting beige sweater underneath. I handed her the glass, and she sat back, taking a long, slow swallow followed by a deep breath.

Over the next hour, we talked about what had happened. We talked about the fight. Most of what I could remember came from Sam's account. Bowie seemed unusually relentless, and it appalled her. I told her what I had told Sam, that I'd taken worse from others before, but I wasn't so sure it was true. She asked about my injuries, where I hurt. *Everywhere*. The only injury not worth mentioning was the damage to my pride.

The worst part was how terrible Lila felt about it. She blamed herself. She was upstate visiting a girlfriend when she got a call from Bowie. He accused her of being unfaithful, calling her a cheating whore. He then went on a tirade about going after me. Lila tried to call, unaware that I usually kept my jack on silent and calls often went unnoticed. She left several messages. She even tried to call the bar but wasn't able to get through. She couldn't have known that the block signal was down.

Her inability to reach me was the result of a handful of unfortunate variables—just rotten luck. Still, she begged me to believe that she had tried everything she could. But Lila didn't need to beg. I believed her. And while there was no way she should have blamed herself for what happened, I knew her well enough to know she would anyway.

The storm continued to rage outside, but Lila and I paid it no mind. We were in our own little world, talking into the early hours of the morning. Eventually, with nothing left to say, we found ourselves listening to the rain hitting the windows.

Lila sat with her legs bent to one side, her shoes nearby on the floor. Leaning an elbow on an armrest, she fiddled with a lock of her blonde hair while staring off into space. I watched her, recalling the long conversation I'd had earlier with Sam.

Lila was a beautiful woman. Gorgeous, in fact, despite the weariness on her strained face. She was a small-town girl trying to make her way in the city. She had moved from Texas the previous year, following her childhood dream of living in The Big Apple. It wasn't easy for her in the beginning. She was meek, timid, and people like that usually didn't last long. But Lila had the nerve to stay, and soon found her place. And though she still faltered at times, she was always quick to pick herself back up and carry on. She had a certain determination that, if I was honest, made her all the more unique and attractive.

Everything I had told Sam, however, was true. As beautiful and charming as Lila was, I had never considered pursuing anything more than her friendship. I had never even entertained a single provocative thought about her. I just never thought of her in *that* way.

I was wrong about one thing, though. Our relationship was more than a barfly and his bartender, as I'd suggested to Sam. The fact she worried and cared so much to check on me made that much clear. We were friends after all. Maybe close friends, but nothing more, and that was just fine with me.

My thoughts churned as I slowly smoked a cigarette, and were finally interrupted when she yawned. I looked at her, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. "We should get some sleep," I said as I mashed my spent cigarette into a nearby ashtray. "You're welcome to stay here tonight if you want."

"Thanks," she said. "I need to sleep."

"You can have the bed. I'll take the couch."

Lila threw me a dubious look and smiled, dimples forming on her cheeks. It was the first time she had smiled that night. "That's sweet, but you need the bed. You shouldn't sleep all cramped up in your condition. The couch will do me just fine."

I shrugged my shoulders, smirking. "Have it your own way."

It was a struggle getting to my feet. Lila got up and came over to lend a hand, the smile still on her lips. Face to face, we stood in silence for a moment before she looked down at the floor. The dimples faded.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I'm just glad things didn't end up any worse than they did," she murmured, keeping her head down. "I'm so sorry for what Bowie did to you."

“It’s all over and done with,” I told her.

She looked back up at me. Her blue eyes shimmered, mesmerizing me, and for a moment, I lost myself. “I’ve been wanting to tell you—” Lila began, then stopped, biting her bottom lip.

I waited quietly for her to continue. Instead of saying anything more, though, Lila stepped closer to me. She reached up and placed her hands on either side of my face. Before I could realize what was happening, she stood on her toes, leaned in, and pressed her lips against mine.

Lila kissed me. And it wasn’t the kind of brief, affectionate peck shared between mere friends, either. It was much more. Her mouth lingered on mine, and my utter shock gave way to a nerve-twisting elation. I let my eyelids drift closed and kissed her back.

Lila’s lips, and soon enough, her tongue, danced around with my own. Her breath was warm and sweet, eliciting a desire for her that I had never thought myself capable of having. Her hands slid to my neck, then down to my bare chest. My heart was racing. She gasped for breath, fanning a fire that was swiftly spreading inside me. The passion and the fervor between us increased with every heartbeat.

Then, as cruel luck would have it, a sudden thought jumped into my head.

Sam was right.

To make matters worse, the words I had said to Sam only hours earlier began to echo from some shadowed corner of my conscience. They were the very words I had used to defend myself and the innocent relationship I thought I had with Lila. They repeated over and over again in my brain, heckling me.

Sam was right. Just because I wasn’t ever interested in anything more didn’t mean that she wasn’t. *Damn it!* Sam had told me to be careful.

What are you doing, Max? I asked myself.

I couldn’t believe what was happening. With a jerk, I pulled away from her, suddenly feeling guilty for allowing things to get that far. “Lila,” I said, sucking in a breath. “I can’t.”

She stepped back, looking lost. “Why not?” Her voice, laced with confusion, was almost a whisper.

I swallowed. “Because I care about you too much.” It was corny as hell, but it was the truth. I had no other reason to give her.

Uncertainty darkened her face as she considered my words for several seconds. Then, peering up at me, she forced a grin. “I-I understand.”

It was a lie, I knew. She had no idea what had just happened. I didn’t either.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized.

I gently squeezed her hand. “Don’t be.”

We stood there for many long, awkward seconds, neither of us knowing what to say.

I hid my frustration and embarrassment by going to fetch her some blankets and a pillow. While doing that, I also retrieved my gun from my raincoat and put it back in my nightstand. I soon returned to help Lila get settled, then we said goodnight. With a final word, I turned off the lights, went into my bedroom, and shut the door.

Blowing out an exasperated breath, I leaned my back against the door in dire need of a drink. Or a cold shower. Or both.

I went into the bathroom and retrieved a bottle of pills from the medicine cabinet. It was a prescription for *cyclozophan*, something I often took to help take the edge off. It was especially good for the nightmares. I popped one of the small, white pills and swallowed. I put the bottle back and shut the cabinet, catching a glance of myself in the mirror. It wasn’t the bruises or fresh cuts

on my face that made me pause, it was how old and tired I looked. For several long seconds, I stared at my reflection, my thoughts about that night a jumbled mess.

But regardless of the turmoil within me, I did find one brief moment of respite. After such a dreadful and embarrassing night, I finally did something right. I resisted a beautiful woman's advances. I prevented a thoughtless and irresponsible mistake from becoming something worse. Something that could have quickly gotten out of hand. Something that would have only ended up hurting her. It was true—I cared for her too much to let that happen. For the first time in years, it felt like I had finally done something right.

I crawled back into bed and pulled the covers close. I expected more nightmares, but knew the medication would make them slightly more bearable. Letting myself relax, I waited for sleep, which once again, came quickly.

I had another dream that night. But it wasn't the same, terrible nightmare. The cyclozophan did its work and kept those wolves at bay. Through a thick mist, the memory came back to me in flashes as I began to wake the following morning. A serenity swathed my waking mind like a warm blanket. It was all because of the dream, a rather captivating dream, about Lila.

I had dreamed that I awoke to find her standing beside my bed, wrapped in nothing but a blanket. She gazed down at me. I could see what she wanted, what she needed. She leaned down to kiss me, whispering something in my ear, but the wind, rain, and thunder outside drowned out her words.

She kissed me again and pressed herself closer to me. With each flash of lightning outside, her sapphire eyes blazed with intensity. Closer and closer she came. Like water, the blanket around her body slipped effortlessly to the floor. She slid into my bed, while the wind continued to howl and moan.

With more lightning came brief glimpses of every line, every curve of her perfect figure. Her bare skin felt warm, smooth beneath my wandering fingertips. Her touch was a soft and gentle breath, drifting along the surface of my body.

As the storm raged on, I lost all control of my sleeping mind. I lost all sense of reason for what was happening and was powerless to stop it. Her electrifying stare was the last thing I saw before my vision blurred. In one fleeting moment, everything went black, and the dream came to a shuddering stillness and ended.

After a long, deep sigh, full consciousness came back to me, and I awoke to the beautiful dream playing over and over again in my memory. Although it was easy to admit that the dream was intoxicating, it also had me worried. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a dream that wasn't a nightmare. It made me start to think that maybe the kiss was an even worse mistake than I had first thought. I wondered if it had stirred some underlying desires in me—desires that maybe I wasn't fully aware of.

Damn it.

But for once in a long time, I'd had a pleasant dream. It was a nice change. Unfortunately, with each moment awake, the memory was growing vague and fading.

Chapter 5 – A Stranger Calls

It was half past noon when I was finally and fully awake. The storm had passed. The morning sun shone through the window blinds, bathing my bedroom in alternating slivers of light and shadow. I yawned and stretched. My muscles seized, and I yelped, cringing as bolts of pain surged through my core and out through my limbs. I was in more pain than I was before going to bed. Willing my muscles to relax and breathing deeply, I let my thoughts wander over the previous night.

Details about the fight itself, and what led up to it, were still hazy. But the pain and embarrassment in the aftermath was much clearer. I recalled most of the conversation with Sam. Needing Molly's help to get dressed was still humiliating. And then there was Lila. I didn't even want to think about what happened or what *could* have happened. Overall, it wasn't one of my better nights, and much to my dismay, too many of the memories were still clear and intact. I knew it would take more alcohol than existed in the world to forget that night.

I fought the urge to lie in bed all day and forced myself up and around. I opened my bedroom door and stepped out into the living room. Lila wasn't there, but I wasn't expecting her to be. She had a life better spent somewhere other than some older guy's dreary apartment. Her blankets sat neatly folded and stacked with her pillow on the sofa. The clothes I had left in the middle of the floor, also folded and stacked, were on the coffee table. A piece of paper laid on top of the clothes. I stepped over and, with a groan, bent down and picked it up. It was a note from Lila.

Max,

Thank you so much for letting me stay the night. I can't tell you enough how sorry I am for what Bowie did to you. I'm glad we got to talk. Things make a little more sense to me now. I'm also glad for everything else that happened. I hope you are too. Hopefully, I was able to help make things a little better.

I'll see you soon.

L

Her words sent a tingling through my body. After all, she did help make things a little better. A *lot* better. Even if the kiss—*everything else that happened*, as Lila had put it—was something of a mistake.

I sighed.

It may have been a mistake, but it was one incredible kiss. I could still feel her lips against mine. I could still smell the scent of her hair, her breath. A nervous twinge began to quiver in my gut. My mind flashed back to the dream and the fragmented scene of her body crawling into bed with mine. The mere thought of it was scintillating.

I stood for many moments, lost in a daze, before realizing I was smiling and spending too much time dwelling on it. On *her*.

Shit. This can't be good, I thought and snapped to, beginning to fear what I'd felt earlier, that our little mistake had stirred something to life inside me. The feeling was unnerving and entirely

unwanted. But it would have been a lie if I also said it didn't feel a bit exhilarating. Still, knowing myself as I did, the feeling could have easily spiraled out of control if I let it.

I stepped over to the liquor cabinet and poured a shot of vodka. I often started the day with clear liquor before moving on to the darker stuff in the afternoon. It was a weird quirk I had. I downed the shot and sighed again.

Lila and I are just good friends, I announced in my head. Thoroughly convinced of that particular sentiment, I turned my thoughts away from Lila and reminded myself that I was still very much in love with Hannah.

A day never went by that I didn't miss her. A day never went by that I didn't regret the mistakes I had made and cursed my damn stupidity for losing her. But it was likely my ex-wife hardly gave me a second thought anymore. She lived in a swank flat in West Village with a handsome, successful Wall Street jock. Even still, I had always held on to the hope that Hannah and I could reconcile one day. We were still amicable enough. We still cared for one another. But maybe it was pointless. We had too many years of heartache between us. We shared too many years of pain to make any hope of reuniting seem possible. I couldn't blame her for that. It was all on me.

My thoughts lingered on Hannah as I headed into the bathroom to get ready for the day. I turned on both the sink and shower faucets, then stripped down and removed my bandages. They peeled away, spotted with the maroon of dried blood. It pleased me to see that the worst cuts and scrapes had scabbed over and stopped bleeding. I turned back to the sink, poured some shaving cream into my hand, and lathered my face. After shaving off two days of growth, I popped another cyclozophan and hopped in the shower.

Ten minutes later, I stepped out into the living room, half-dressed. My usual daily attire was one of four three-piece suits, years old and well-worn. I went with the dark blue one. I laid the double breasted jacket and vest over the back of the sofa, then buttoned the cuffs of my shirt.

I could move a bit more freely, despite the fresh dressing of my wounds. The shower seemed to have worked wonders. Still, I had to be careful. If I happened to turn wrong or tilt my head in a certain way, my body would be quick to remind me that it was still in bad shape. I was fast in learning my limits, though, and exactly how I could and couldn't move.

With only one or two quick errands to run that day, I knew I'd wind up at Sam's sooner rather than later, so I bypassed the liquor cabinet. A rumbling in my stomach had me going into the kitchen. My cupboards were in desperate need of restocking, and the fridge was empty aside from an orange that had begun to mold, a half-empty bottle of ketchup, and something completely unrecognizable. *Pathetic*.

I chuckled in spite of myself.

Quickly giving up on the idea of eating, I started looking for my jack and found it on a side table in the living room. As I bent over to retrieve it, a motionless form nearby caught my attention. My heart skipped a beat while a hot surge of adrenaline shot through my veins. But rather than making any sudden moves, I froze, keeping the intruder in my peripheral vision. I held my breath and stood slowly while turning my head and my gaze in the person's direction.

A man sat in my sofa chair, silent, with a grin on his face. He wore a navy blue pinstriped three-piece and a light gray fedora. His pale green eyes watched me with an unsettling calm. They seemed to pierce my soul, contemplating all I'd ever done wrong in my life. The hair beneath his hat was black, with some graying at the temples. If I had to guess, he was in his early fifties. What struck me most, though, was a presence that radiated an exceptional confidence in his own character and ability.

I swallowed, remembering that I had put my revolver back in my nightstand, and cursed myself for not having it attached to my hip. Taking a calm breath, I asked, "Who the hell are you?"

The stranger's grin spread into a smile.

An acute sense of dread came over me with the sudden idea that he was a hired hitman sent to threaten me, or worse, send me to the bottom of the East River. *What the hell did I do to deserve that?* But then I glanced at his hands, and the idea left me. They seemed too neatly groomed for a hired thug.

I continued to pick out details. He wore a small, shiny round pin on the lapel of his jacket. I couldn't see it clearly enough to identify its markings, but it seemed familiar. A black attaché case sat on the floor beside him. Everything about the man, his appearance, his demeanor, suggested a person of authority. I started to bet on the odds that he was with some local or state government agency, maybe even the Feds.

A G-Man? But how did he get into my apartment, and why? How long had he been sitting there, waiting for me to get up and around? As far as I knew, I hadn't done anything wrong lately. *Maybe he's with the IRS,* I suddenly thought. *Shit.*

"Hello, Mister Floyd," the stranger said with a deep voice. "I hope you don't mind, but your door was unlocked."

How does he know my name? I took a moment and gathered myself. "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage," I replied, making a mental note to get after Lila for leaving without locking the door.

The stranger shifted in the chair, crossed one leg over the other, and shrugged. "No surprise there." He looked around the apartment and continued, grinning. "It seems you've fallen on hard times." He shot a look back at me. "... And landed on your face."

The brazen remark was an obvious probe to see how I'd react. But I ignored the quip about my beat-up face, and I didn't give a rat's ass what he thought about my housing situation. Maybe it wasn't a ritzy, upper-level penthouse, but my apartment was clean and cheap. I called it home, but I didn't know for how much longer. I owed two months in back rent and the remainder of what little savings I'd been living off were dwindling fast.

The stranger reached into his inner coat pocket. I tensed, half expecting him to pull out a gun. He paused, smiling again at my reaction, then slowly pulled out a silver cigarette case. He showed it to me, and I relaxed. The case looked expensive, adorned with ivory and intricate engravings. He opened it and pulled out a cigarette. I didn't care for the brand, so I declined when he offered me one. He closed the case, tapped his cigarette against it a few times, and slid it back in his pocket. He then pulled out a matching silver lighter.

"Mind if I smoke?" he asked. Before I even had a chance to answer, he lit up. A blue-gray cloud of smoke billowed into the air as he exhaled. With a snap, he flicked the lighter shut.

"What do you want?" I asked him, growing more impatient.

He cocked his head, squinting at me as he took another slow, deliberate drag. He formed a wide, open circle with his mouth, and blew out three perfect smoke rings. The rest of the smoke blew out through his nostrils as he leaned forward. The whole time, he watched me. "I'm here to see if you still have what it takes," he finally said.

It wasn't much of an answer, and it only left me more puzzled. I gave up on the IRS theory, though. Had he been a tax man, I was sure he wouldn't have been so ambiguous. My nerves began to settle, but only a little. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He gestured to my own sofa. "Why don't you have a seat?"

I hesitated, wary of the man. He only looked back at me with a mocking half grin on his face. Against my better judgment, I sat down.

The stranger leaned over the side of his chair and opened the attaché case. He rummaged around and pulled out a datapad. He turned it on and began flicking through different screens. From where I sat, I couldn't see the information. Without looking away from the device, he leaned forward, knocking the tip of his cigarette into the ashtray on the coffee table. He then sat back and started reading aloud.

"Floyd, Maxwell Robert," he began. "Date of birth, August eleventh, '25. Born to Robert and Vera Floyd, Saint Julien's Hospital, Newark. Only child. Attended Theodore Franklin Elementary, Hobart Middle School, and Delores High. Your father served in the United States Army for four years, during which he fought in The North War. Shortly after his discharge, he married your mother.

"Your parents were married for twenty-five years, before your father's, er, untimely death at the age of forty-eight. You were just seventeen years old. Your mother passed away twenty-one years later, just three years ago. She was sixty-nine."

The stranger paused and swiped at the screen. "Your father's death prompted you, as a junior in high school, to join the NYPD Law Enforcement Explorer Program. After two years, and a number of temporary menial jobs, you entered the Police Academy. Upon graduation, you applied with the NYPD and got accepted after meeting all requirements and passing all exams. You worked patrol for five months, before deciding to major in criminology and forensic sciences at NYUB.

"Top of your class, you received your masters and graduated with top honors four years later. You performed above and beyond expectations in the line of duty, made Detective at the age of thirty-four, and transferred to Homicide soon after. You were one of the city's top homicide detectives, with a long list of accolades and service awards, by the age of thirty-six." He paused again and looked over at me with a gleam in his eye. "You've had quite a distinguished career."

"Oh, it gets better," I said with a sneer.

The stranger grinned. "Indeed." He looked back to the pad in his hand and swiped the screen, reading. The moment I realized what he must have been looking at, my vision blurred, and a knot began twisting deep within my empty stomach. I knew what he was about to say and what he was about to do. He was about to lay my demons out on the table.

"At age thirty-seven," he continued, "you were assigned case number H211704."

"No ... No," I muttered quietly in protest, shaking my head.

He didn't hear me. "During your investigation, a rather tragic series of events occurred that would have a devastating impact on your life."

I sat there, suddenly unable to speak. My hands started to shake.

Chapter 6 – The Dawn of Nightmares

I didn't want to hear it. I couldn't bear to. It was the dawn of my nightmares. I had lived with it every single day since it happened. It shaped me into what I had become.

A lump formed in my throat. The stranger needed to stop talking. I should have stopped him. But I didn't. He went on, relating the information in his file, but his words went unheard. My mind had already started to relive the events as the terrible memory came rushing back ...

—

Gardner Percy, the prime suspect in the Ashton Riverfront murder case, landed a left hook on my jaw. I flew backward into a mess of garbage cans and trash bags while Percy took off back down the alleyway. He hopped into an old, beat up '47 Chevrolet Baron two-door coupe and sped off.

Percy was halfway down the street before I picked myself up and gave chase. I leaped over the hood of my department-issued Ford Jupiter sedan and got in, stomped down on the accelerator, and went after him. Percy's old coupe was surprisingly quick but was still no match for my newer and more powerful Jupiter. I shouted over the police comm-net, calling for backup.

"Affirmative, KP327," came the hollow response. *"We are dispatching AP flyers to intercept."*

"I'm in pursuit now. Heading west on Davenport, approaching the Wellington Bridge," I called back. My jaw ached, and a tooth felt loose after Percy's hit, but I ignored both and kept my hands on the wheel.

"Negative, KP327. Do not pursue. Traffic alert yellow. Repeat. Traffic alert yellow."

I swore out loud. "If I don't stick with him, we'll lose him!"

After a long pause, dispatch finally replied. *"Chevrolet Baron Coupe, dark blue, 10-38. Confirm lock on TraffSat. We have him. Disengage."*

"Can't do that, dispatch," I shot back.

Another pause followed. *"Wellington Bridge is at seventy-five percent. Repeat. Seven five percent on Wellington. Disengage, KP327. Order Alpha."*

"I am not letting him go! I'll be careful!"

I came up on Percy's tail just before crossing the Wellington Bridge, over the Hudson. Just as dispatch reported, traffic was high and slow moving. We wove in and out between the cars that crossed along with us. Soon enough, and without incident, we had made it through and were clear of the bridge.

Percy veered off on the first exit and headed north along River Drive. I found myself struggling to keep up with him. He drove recklessly while I had to pay a little more heed to the other cars on the road.

At the three-way intersection of River and Giuliani Avenue, he brushed two other cars. The two vehicles swerved and collided with a third. I alerted dispatch. In my rearview mirror, it appeared that any damage was minimal, so I continued the chase.

The pursuit wore on, and fortunately the traffic began to thin out. With the Hudson on our right, we passed the entrance to Empire Stadium. I was lucky. If it had been a game day, traffic

would have been a nightmare. People would have gotten hurt. That day, though, very few other vehicles traveled the road.

I closed to within only ten yards of the blue Chevy when we came up on a brown, late model Tesker multisport utility vehicle. Percy swerved into the opposite lane to pass. Although there was no oncoming traffic, his driving was erratic, and he swung back into the right lane too early. He clipped the Tesker's front left quarter panel.

I cursed, watching in horror as the driver of the MUV lost control. The Tesker went off the road, heading straight toward the river. Time slowed as the vehicle jumped the curb. Crossing over the sidewalk and a strip of grass, it crashed through a metal railing. It soared through the air before hitting the inky waters of the Hudson. I slammed on the brakes, and my Jupiter came to a stop as I pulled over to the curb. With no time to think, I yelled at dispatch over the comm-net. I needed emergency medical personnel and water recovery teams to my location immediately. I didn't wait for confirmation. I pushed open the car door and scrambled out.

Percy sped off into the distance, and my curses followed after him. As I ran toward the riverbank, two Air Patrol flyers came screaming in from the distance. They soared overhead in pursuit of the fleeing suspect. Their wailing sirens and thunderous fan-jets provided only a brief satisfaction. But I couldn't worry about Percy anymore.

I ran as fast as my legs could carry me toward the mangled railing where the Tesker had broken through. I came to a stop at the edge and saw the MUV floating with only its back end sticking out of the water. My heart sank at the sight of the frantic hands, pressing and pounding against the back windows. I tore off my jacket and flung it aside. After a deep breath, I plunged in with a desperate hope that the help I called for would arrive soon.

The chill of the black water stabbed at me like a million red-hot needles. I almost gasped at the sudden shock of the cold, but knew it would have been an easy and dumb way to drown. I managed to keep my breathing under control and surfaced. Wasting no time, I swam toward the slowly sinking vehicle. What appeared to be a female's face stared out at me in absolute terror through the fogging windows. Muffled screams and the thumping sounds of pounding fists against glass echoed in my ears. I finally reached the vehicle and tried the driver's side back door. It was locked. I had no time to check the others, and doing so may have been pointless. It seemed that, out of sheer panic, the driver never thought to unlock them after hitting the water.

I shouted at the occupant inside, but terror had a firm grip on her. She couldn't comprehend the simple instruction to unlock the doors. The car's angle increased as it continued to sink, bobbing vertically in the water, its nose pointed almost straight down. I held on to the roof rack and pulled out my gun.

The rear window was only a few inches above the waterline when I took aim. I hoped to shatter the glass without endangering anyone inside. I squeezed the trigger and, with a deafening crack, the window splintered apart. A countless number of tiny shards fell down toward the front of the vehicle's cabin.

The car lurched and began sinking at an even faster rate. Water started to pour over the rear window frame and into the interior. As I holstered my gun, hands reached out toward me. They thrashed and grasped at whatever they could grab hold to. I battled the flailing limbs, trying to keep them under control. They sought me out as though they meant to drag me with them down to the watery depths. I fought back and finally got a firm grip on a forearm, and pulled.

A young woman in her teens came out, wild-eyed, with a bloodied gash running down her left cheek. She clawed and screamed at me as I pulled her clear of the vehicle. I shouted at her, ordering

her to calm down. I pushed her through the water and told her to swim to shore, only twenty or thirty yards away. She saw how close it was and, dog paddling furiously, swam off toward it.

I heard more screaming from inside the car. Looking in, I saw a woman moving about the back seat in a wild frenzy. It wasn't clear what she was doing, but I leaned in and grabbed her arm. The vehicle was almost completely submerged when I managed to pull her out. She was in her forties, sharing the same brown hair and brown eyes as the teenager. *Mother and daughter*, I suspected.

The mother appeared much worse off, though. She screamed and clawed at me as blood streamed down her bruised and badly cut face. I yelled at her to swim for safety, but she resisted and pulled away. Her desperate wailing only intensified, and she wouldn't let go of the vehicle. I was about to slap her face, hoping to jar some sense into her. That was when a single sentence materialized out of her screams.

"MY BABY IS DROWNING!"

A calm terror swept over me at the realization that another person was still inside the vehicle. I didn't take time to think about it, prying the woman away from the car and pushing her toward the shore. "I'll handle it! Get to shore, *NOW!*" The Tesker was many feet deeper underwater. I took several rapid breaths then took in a lungful of air and dove under.

The darkness was menacing and cold, like the chill of death in a bottomless grave. Through the murkiness around me, I could make out the vague outline of the vehicle and swam down after it. The rear window frame was soon within reach, and I grabbed on. I didn't notice the sharp remnants of glass or the underwater black-green color of blood that trailed from my hands.

I pulled myself into the vehicle's interior, using whatever handholds I could find. The dashboard lights still had power, casting an eerie, pale yellow glow. In the dim light, I saw the hazy shape of a small child, six or seven years old, sitting motionless in the back seat. I grabbed an arm, but the small form wouldn't move. The child was still buckled in. I groped for the seatbelt release and pushed. It jammed, refusing to disengage. Frantic, I tried again, jiggling the belt and the buckle receiver. One, two, three more times and it finally came free. I scooped the child up, twisting to get turned around and facing the back of the vehicle.

My heartbeat pounded inside my head. My lungs felt ready to explode into a bloody mess. But the desire not to drown in the foul, filthy waters of the Hudson was overwhelming. A floodgate opened, and adrenaline surged through my body. It prodded me onward, driving me to resist the urge to take a breath. The pressure squeezed my head, and I pinched my nose to clear my ears. Both popped violently, then with a loud squeal, one of my eardrums ruptured. I felt a sharp pain as a cold rush of water poured into my ear canal. A dizzying bout of vertigo came over me, but I fought it off, trying to find my way back out.

I reached the rear window with the child and gathered whatever strength I had left and kicked us out of the MUV. The surface was even further away, shimmering in the distance. I struggled to swim, kicking and paddling, desperate to reach the air above. As it came closer, I exhaled to relieve some of the pressure in my lungs. A stream of bubbles spewed from my mouth and trailed away behind us. I kicked even harder, clawing for the deep breath that was just within reach.

My vision was starting to go black when my head finally broke the surface. I gasped, sucking in more air than I thought my chest capable of handling. I coughed and choked, fighting to keep water out of my burning lungs, and rolled over onto my back. I lifted the child's head out of the water and could see then that it was a little girl. To my horror, her skin was blue. She wasn't breathing.

"Hold on, baby," I told her, repeating it over and over again through chattering teeth.

The current was strong and had already carried us many yards downstream. I aimed for a point on the shore further down the river and towed her awkwardly toward it. My feet soon touched the muddy bottom, and I spared a brief thought for the safety of the girl's mother and sister. I could only hope they were out of harm's way. At the forefront of my mind, however, was the hope that I could get the little body in my arms breathing again.

I was freezing, panting, as I pulled the little girl onto the riverbank. I laid her on her back and began administering CPR, struggling to recall the proper procedures for reviving children. My mouth engulfed her tiny blue lips as I pushed air into her lungs. I pulled back and started pumping her chest with both hands in rhythm. At one point, I felt something within her crack under the force. I was only vaguely aware of the mother and sister as they came rushing up from behind, screaming and crying. They both fell to their knees beside the little girl. They were safe, but there was no time to feel any relief over it with my entire focus hell-bent on saving the pale, limp child before me. I leaned over and gave her another breath, then put an ear to her chest. Nothing. I resumed the compressions, desperate to stir her little heart into beating.

My surroundings melded into one deafening clamor. I could hear the crying women. I could hear sirens drawing near. An ambulance flyer set down behind me on the grass alongside the road. Warm gusts of air from its fan-jets blasted at us on the riverbank before dying away. But none of it registered. I had my complete attention elsewhere. Medics appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, while I continued the fight to find life in the child. I blew into her mouth again. I pumped her chest again. I put my ear against her and listened again. Nothing.

After what felt like an eternal struggle to save the girl's life, one of the medics pulled me off of her. "We'll take it from here, sir!"

I stumbled backward and landed on my rear as the medics surrounded her and went to work. They ripped through her pink t-shirt, her bare skin underneath had turned another shade deeper of blue. They set up a portable ER medstation and began attaching wire leads and hoses. They waved handheld scanners and other medical sensors over her. They spoke, chattering back and forth in their technical, medical jargon.

My heaving breaths drifted away in the cold winter air, and my wet clothing clung to me with an icy grip. My brain ached, and my ear throbbed. I wiped my mouth with the back of a shaking hand. It was only then that I noticed the cuts and the blood on my palms and fingers. But any pain I might have felt never even registered in my mind. I was completely numb, watching the action unfold before me. I didn't even notice the tears streaming down my cheeks.

A female medic dragged the mother and sister away from the frenzied activity. She kept them at a distance where she placed thick, gray blankets over their shoulders. She tried to keep them calm as she tended to their wounds. They ignored her efforts, watching helplessly, as the medics worked on the little girl. From where I sat, I could see their wide, trembling eyes, mirroring the intense fear we were all feeling.

I flinched when the sound of a defibrillator punched its way through the late-afternoon air. It was a sickening and deep electronic thump that seemed to resonate all around. Again, I heard more hurried medical talk, and then another thump. Through the commotion of the medics around her, I could see an arm and a leg of the little girl. Both jolted violently as another blast of electrical current hammered its way into her.

The female medic appeared by my side and placed one of the same gray blankets around my shoulders. She spoke to me, but her words fell on deaf ears as the entirety of my being centered on the girl, willing her to spring back to life. I wasn't sure who it was to, but I said a small prayer. I muttered it over and over again in my head.

The dim light of the cloudy afternoon continued to fade away. We were soon left in the bright white landing lights of the ambulance flyer. The pit of my stomach turned in a fleeting instant as the frantic movements of the medics came to a standstill. Moments later, one of them began removing the wires and hoses. The other medic looked up and over at his colleague standing with the mother and sister. It was then that I noticed the patch on his chest that identified him as the medical team's leader, the active-crisis emergency field doctor. The AED slowly shook his head, a mournful expression on his face. He then looked down at a device strapped to his wrist, tapped its screen and muttered something to the medic next to him. I couldn't hear his words, but I knew what he had said.

With tears welling in her eyes, the female medic whispered something to the two women beside her. It took a silent moment of realization before the pair collapsed into each other's arms. The sound that erupted from their mouths was something I would never want to hear, ever again, in my lifetime.

I staggered to my feet, gripping the blanket around my shoulders, and stood over the small, lifeless body. The AED placed the little girl's shirt, covered in blood from my hands, back together over her chest. His partner stood and draped an oversized white sheet carefully over her body, dwarfing the small form beneath it. The girl's peaceful and pretty little face was the last thing I saw as it disappeared under the sheet.

The crying shrieked through the air. I didn't even try to fight back the tears and broke down, my sobs wrenching my body. At that moment, I knew the tragic event would change me. It would be the spark to ignite the nightmares that would haunt me for a very long time to come.

Chapter 7 – Worth the Risk

The horrific memory ended. My thoughts re-entered the present when the stranger in my living room cleared his throat. I looked down at my trembling hands and tried to slow my rapid, shallow breathing. I felt flushed and sick to my stomach.

After taking another drag on his cigarette, the stranger tapped his screen. He skimmed over the information brought up before he continued speaking. “An investigative panel concluded that you were not at fault for the death of seven-year-old Amanda Keegan. This was even despite your disregard of an Alpha Order. Given a leave of absence, you ignored it, driven in your pursuit of Gardner Percy.

“You finally collared him two weeks later. He was convicted of all crimes related to the Ashton case, as well as new charges for the death of the Keegan girl. He is currently serving out the remainder of his life sentence at Bedford.

“Two months after the girl’s death, you began a series of sessions with Dr. Rigel Stevens, a psychiatrist at the Malmsteen Institute. He prescribed cyclozophan, an antipsychotic. You underwent several months of therapy to help you cope with the tragic event.” He suddenly looked up at me. “Unfortunately, Dr. Stevens couldn’t help you to cope, could he?”

I kept silent, the guilt I felt over the little girl’s death hanging over me. *If only I’d followed the order to disengage, she’d still be alive*, I had told myself countless times since it happened.

“You started drinking to help you cope, and things only went downhill from there. Your marriage and your job became adversely affected. Twice, in two separate performance reviews, your superiors reprimanded you for multiple infractions. Adding to your troubles, your mother passed away during the winter of ’63.

“Everything came to a head on July 12, ’64, in New Rochelle, where you got into a drunken brawl with two prime suspects in the Gallagher case. It was a brawl that put one of those suspects in the hospital, and that witnesses say you started. The trial judge threw the case out of court, and the suspects walked free.”

I stared at the floor as the greatest of my life’s failures were coldly laid out before me, one by one.

“You were immediately suspended from active duty. Only two days later, the commissioner himself personally had you removed from the department under NYCPS disciplinary statute 471.3C, Misconduct While Intoxicated.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the stranger was no longer reading from the datapad. He was recalling the events from memory.

“Sometime after, you had the bright idea of starting your own private detective agency. It failed. Your wife of fifteen years filed for divorce, and you moved into your apartment here. You currently spend your days drinking and getting into fights at Sam’s Fifth Street Bar. You still take the prescribed cyclozophan to help with anxiety and recurring night terrors.” He stopped only to mash his cigarette out in the ashtray. “Have I missed anything?”

I found that the sickness in my stomach had warped into complete contempt for the man seated in my armchair. “That’s about it,” I sneered in reply, trying to contain a sudden rage that had awoken inside me. “Are you planning to write my life’s story, or what?”

He didn't answer. He only watched me in silence. Reaching up, he started rubbing his lapel pin between his fingers. I could only guess what was going on in his head, but I knew he had no trouble discerning what was going on in mine. The disdain had to be plastered on my face, clear as day. I silently cursed myself for not running the bastard out of my apartment when I first had the chance.

The stranger then sat up, turned off the datapad, and put it back in his attaché case. When his hand reappeared, it held a file folder which he then set on the coffee table. He leaned forward and took off his hat, holding it in his right hand. "I'm here to offer you a small measure of redemption."

The statement caught me off guard. "What are you talking about?"

He grinned as he slid the folder across the table. I hesitated, then slowly reached over and retrieved it. Sam's words rang out clearly in my head. *Stay out of trouble, Max.* With no small amount of suspicion, I turned my attention to the folder's contents.

Inside was a clear sheet of poly-digital paper. I double tapped its surface. Text and images immediately began filling the page, and it wasn't long before I realized it was a copy of a police report summary. Each line, each word that appeared on the page captured my rapt attention as I scrolled down the paper. The report contained a few short paragraphs and two reference photos. It wasn't until I'd read it three or four times that I stopped and looked up at the stranger in confusion.

"This is the Claire Hemsley case," I said in shock, recalling the breaking news story at Sam's the night before. The stranger kept his gaze on me as he sat back, tilted his head, and said nothing. Again, he started stroking the pin on his lapel.

I glanced back down at the report. "What the—" I couldn't find the words. I stood and began pacing back and forth, staring down at the sheet of paper in my hand. *Why is he showing me this?* I thought. *What does this have to do with anything?* I stopped and turned back to him. "This is a joke, right?"

It had to be. I considered the whole, bizarre situation. *A stranger suddenly appears in my apartment. He has full knowledge of my past. He gives me information about the murder of Claire Hemsley. Why? What does he want from me? Is he asking me to take on the case?* Try as I could to make any sense of things, I couldn't. It had to be a joke. *Who would do such a—*

I shot him a stern look. "Did Sam and Molly put you up to this? They did, didn't they?" I couldn't come up with any other explanation. It all had to be some elaborate practical joke. But I couldn't believe that Sam would do something so cruel. I couldn't believe that Molly could be so utterly heartless. They both knew me as well as anyone. They knew enough about my past. They knew about my failures. But how could they stoop so low, using those things against me for no other reason than a laugh? How could they—

Suddenly, something the stranger mentioned popped into my head. My eyes went wide, and my thoughts froze dead in their tracks.

Cyclozophan.

Nobody knew I took the medication except my ex-wife and my doctor. Sam and Molly didn't know, a fact I was dead sure of, but the stranger who sat before me did.

"Who are you?" I asked for the second time.

A slow smile took shape across his face, and he spoke. "I'm with the Commissioner's Office." He then promptly produced an ID badge.

"You mean the same office that had me thrown out of the department?"

He nodded. "Same office, new commissioner, of course. You, on the other hand, are entirely my choice."

"Your choice for what, exactly?"

“Let me just say that the handling of this case is of grave concern to Commissioner McDowell. He wants the very best on it. Unfortunately, the Homicide Department’s current active roster leaves much to be desired. It’s been suggested that a person on the outside might be of some benefit. They might be more inclined to look at things from a different perspective. More inclined to think outside the box. That led me to suggest you.”

“But why me?”

“Your record before the Keegan tragedy proves that you were the best in the business. I think you still can be.”

His answer seemed sincere enough, but it didn’t ease my skepticism. “So, you’re granting me full access to the case? Police reports, the autopsy report, everything?”

The stranger shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s not going to be that easy.” I didn’t like the sound of that. “The department has already assigned a lead detective,” he went on. “One thing we want to avoid is any interference with his investigation. Bottom line, this is not a reinstatement. This assignment is not sanctioned. It is entirely off the books. You’re going to have to use your own resources. You’re going to have to stay out of the NYPD’s way. However, do me a favor, and just see if you can’t make heads or tails of this one.”

The explanation made sense in a strange sort of way. I just had no idea how effective I would be with the few resources I had on my own. What could I have possibly hoped to accomplish without any inside information?

I glanced down at my hands and noticed they were starting to shake again. I needed a drink. “What about expenses?” I asked, setting my focus back on the man before me. “I’m gonna need something up front.”

“I’m taking a big risk here. Nothing up front. You will, however, be compensated for any expenses incurred during your investigation. Dare I say it, that excludes any visits to the bar.”

Damn. He must’ve seen me look at my hands.

I turned my back to him and stared out the windows at the city beyond as I thought about the proposal. *Is this what I’ve been waiting for?* I asked myself. *Is this my big break?* The man said it wasn’t a reinstatement, but I couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if I solved it. Could it have helped get me reinstated? Maybe. Then again, what if I couldn’t solve the case? What if I just screwed everything up again? Was it even worth the risk?

My thoughts were spinning in circles as I considered all the possible results of success, overshadowed by the countless more possible results of failure. Still, whether I succeeded or failed, I would be doing what I loved. I would be doing what I was once good at one more time.

As for the stranger in my living room, I already knew I didn’t like him. He was brash and arrogant. Something else about him made me wary, a feeling he wasn’t telling me everything. But the prospect he’d laid out before me was one I couldn’t pass up. If I turned him down, I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life.

“What do you say, Mr. Floyd? Interested?”

My mind was quick to decide. There was really only one answer to give him. I had to take the gamble, despite my misgivings about the man. I could work for him, but I didn’t have to like him. I turned around, faced him straight on, and said, “I’m in.”

After hearing myself say it, I wondered if I hadn’t just made a huge mistake.

The stranger nodded and smiled and rose up out of the chair. He put on his hat and picked up his attaché case. Stepping over to me, he extended his hand. “Welcome aboard.”

We shook on it.

“As you might expect, I want feedback,” he said. “I want your thoughts, your theories, no matter how crazy you think they might be. More important, I want constant updates.” He then took the file with the case report from me. “I’m afraid I can’t leave this with you.” I nodded dumbly as he put it back in his case. The expression on his face then turned serious. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you to keep your personal problems under your hat. You’ll have to pull the reins back on your little drinking habit. The first whiff I get that it’s interfering with your work, you’re off the case.”

I swallowed and nodded again. “I understand.”

“Good,” he replied. I followed him to the door where he paused, hand on the doorknob, and looked over his shoulder at me. “Remember, this is off the record. I was never here, and we never had this conversation.”

“You got it,” I replied readily.

He opened the door. “I’ll contact you again soon.”

The stranger walked off down the hallway, and as he was nearing the stairs, I realized something. “Hey buddy,” I called after him. “I never caught your name.”

He kept walking, but before he disappeared down the stairs, I heard his deep voice. “You can call me Mr. Fletcher.”

Chapter 8 – The Chase Begins

The city blocks were a blur of endless activity as I passed them by. Countless, seemingly faceless, human forms rushed along the sidewalks as the early afternoon street traffic hummed and honked about. Air traffic soared effortlessly on the skyways above. It was all the lifeblood moving through the arteries of the living, breathing city.

In the back seat of a street taxi, deep in thought, my gaze drifted upward to the taller buildings around me. A boundary, invisible from the street, divided the city, marking the so-called *upper levels*. These were the thirtieth floor and above, in the tallest buildings in Manhattan.

It was a different world up there, where the wealthiest and most influential citizens lived. Those types rarely ventured down to street level, the proverbial *other side of the tracks*. They spent their lives in the clouds, in a realm of opulence and excess with the highest standards of living. They lived in the most luxurious penthouses and rooftop mansions. Everything on the thirtieth and above, the posh shopping malls and fine restaurants, catered only to the upper class. Anything and everything they needed or wanted was at their fingertips, at a premium.

They had the best and newest technologies and conveniences, with capabilities far more advanced and too expensive for the rest of us. They weren't even on the same digital infrastructure. Their block signals never went out.

Upper-level swells didn't even have to set foot on the ground if they didn't want to. Flyers, vehicles far too pricey for us lower-level Joes, were their primary means of transportation. The wealthy roamed about, free of traffic, on the skyways that crisscrossed the city sky.

They even had dedicated emergency services and their own police precinct. But there wasn't a lot of crime up there, at least not of the mundane and dirty lower-level sort. Any buildings with thirtieth access had security gates and checkpoints to keep out us riffraff.

Many police academy grads dreamed to someday serve up in those parts of the city. That was something I never aspired to, personally. I wanted to be where the action was. The crime rate at street level was a hundredfold or more what it was in the levels above. I preferred the risk of turning a corner and coming face to face with any number of types of low-level scum. I felt my talents would have wasted away on all those safe, clueless sorts who spent their lives in the sky.

It was often said that if it weren't for the war, there would have been no upper levels. We would have all owned flyers. We would have all been on a more level playing field. But as it turned out, the rich and powerful lived high above, looking down on the rest of us in our misery on the streets below.

Claire Hemsley was an upper-level swell. Her family owned more than one high-rise penthouse and condo in and around town. I doubted they ever ventured down below the thirtieth. So, what was she doing in the lower levels? Why was she at Redford Park? What was she doing there at night?

Everyone knew something about the Hemsleys. To New Yorkers, they were damn near royalty. Albert Hemsley, Claire's father, was one of the richest men on the Eastern Seaboard. His wife worked with different charitable organizations. The family was often a regular fixture at the many high society functions held across town. I remembered hearing about one such event they had attended a couple of months earlier. It was some kind of fall charity benefit, with dinner and dancing, hosted by the NYPD and a slew of corporate sponsors.

It never mattered where they went. The newshounds and paparazzi followed them everywhere like hyenas looking for scraps. Entertainment and gossip columnists wrote about them on countless news feeds and blip streams. The topics of conversation were usually fluff, though. But like a goddamn feeding frenzy, the net exploded over the latest event in the lives of the Hemsley family. It was something truly newsworthy for the piranhas to feed on.

I didn't follow the entertainment columns, but I wasn't unfamiliar with Claire Hemsley's life. A buzz had been following the young socialite from her youth on into adulthood. I couldn't have avoided the random photos or articles written about her, even if I had tried.

But the hacks were no longer writing about what designer rags she wore. The gossipers weren't spewing on about who she'd been seen snuggling up to. It was a terrible shame. She was a young, beautiful woman, her life taken far, far too early. It was an act of pure evil, and I aimed to find out how, why, and by whose hand it occurred.

It was still hard to believe I was actually working the case, even if only unofficially, whatever that meant. I had so many questions for the mysterious Mr. Fletcher. Too many. Still, there I was, about to leap blindly into the Claire Hemsley case. With little to go on, solving it wasn't going to be easy. I had to trust in the process and in myself to get it done. If I could remember my training, my procedures, then maybe, things would pan out. I knew I had only one shot at it.

My thoughts were a churning mass when the cab pulled up to my destination. I waved my jack in front of the paypad, thanked the cabbie, and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

A herd of people had gathered around the area outside the park's main entrance. Gawking civilians dawdled about. A few newshounds were taking photos, videos, and interviewing random people with their annoying, buzzing microdrones. Three uniformed police officers stood nearby for crowd control.

Two large red brick pillars flanked both sides of the entrance. Decorative wrought iron spanned the top between them, with black, iron letters spelling out the park's name. Redford. At the foot of each pillar, small shrines sat made up of flowers, cards, and candles. Nameless people, adoring and saddened fans, had left the tokens behind in memory of Claire.

I readjusted my hat, took a breath, and headed toward the entrance. One of the unis turned his head and watched me from where he stood, leaning against the nearest pillar. I expected him to stop me and ask to see my credentials. I didn't have any. My nerves tightened, my thoughts rampant, trying to figure out something to say if he challenged me. I kept calm and tried to appear confident as I strode closer to him. To my astonished relief, the officer simply nodded at me as I passed. I could only presume he took one look at my attire and thought I was just another detective arriving on the scene. But had he taken a closer look at the threadbare condition of my suit, he might have had second thoughts.

It was quiet in the park. The sun was shining through a high, thin layer of cloud cover that draped over the city like a finely woven veil. The temperature and humidity were unusually high, a stark contrast to how it used to snow every winter in years past. I could have easily gone without a coat, but for the occasional gust of a frigid northern breeze. Still, the muggy air was just enough to make my clothes cling to my skin and my hat feel like a ten-pound weight on my head.

I walked deeper into the park, not quite sure where to go. Dead leaves sprinkled the sidewalk, swirling and rippling around my feet whenever the wind picked up. The ground on either side was dark and muddy from the heavy rains the night before. The trees were bare, and the grass looked ill, haunted and dying—just another reminder that it was winter.

Continuing on, I passed a park bench here, a lamp post there, until the path split. A narrower sidewalk branched off to the left toward a thick grove of trees.

Another uni was standing at the fork. He gestured at the smaller path as I approached. “This way, sir,” he said with a nod.

I found it alarming how no one had stopped me, asked who I was, or what I was doing there. While I wasn’t technically at the crime scene yet, the police had closed the entire park. The officer in front of me must have assumed his colleagues at the entrance had validated me. I wasn’t going to tell him otherwise. I only nodded in return and headed down the path he indicated.

After a few dozen steps, the silence and emptiness around me had me feeling that I’d gone the wrong way. As I rounded a slow, lazy bend, though, I entered into a clearing and a flutter of activity. Just up ahead was a large area, cordoned off with a wide yellow tape with block lettered words printed on it. I knew well what the words read.

POLICE LINE. DO NOT CROSS.

Yet another officer stood watch on the sidewalk, just inside the taped-off perimeter. Beyond him were four other men in either uniforms or suits. They moved about, examining the area, taking notes, and conversing with one another. Twenty feet overhead, a police oversight drone hummed back and forth. Its many cameras and scanners aided in the analysis of the crime scene below. Several yards further on, an NYPD transport flyer sat parked in a clearing between the trees.

The uni at the perimeter held a datapad. He was young—couldn’t have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five years old. As I approached, he raised a hand. “Hey, buddy, I’m gonna have to see a badge or some other identification before I let you through.”

There it is, I thought. *The proper response*. It didn’t change the fact that I had no idea how to get past the kid without any official clearance. I remembered what Mr. Fletcher told me, that I needed to use my own resources.

I took a closer look at the young man. His hair was black and cut short. His navy blue uniform was clean, crisp, with iron-sharp creases. His shiny gold badge gleamed proudly, stuck to the left side of his chest. His black shoes looked brand new and as if he had spent too much time buffing them. But it was his sidearm, a standard six-shot service revolver, that told me everything I needed to know. It meant that he was either a freshman rookie or a sophomore, and that gave me the advantage.

Drawing myself up, I kept my expression cool and level. “Hello, there,” I said with a quick nod. “I’ve been consigned to appropriate and facilitate an effectual consideration of these premises to secure a successful consummation of this case.” I spoke quickly, not even sure if what I said actually made any sense. I only needed him to fall for the bluff.

The young officer seemed unfazed. “Need to see a badge, pal.”

I tilted my head, thinking and trying to keep calm. *Come on, Max*, I urged myself. *You can do this. Play the kid for a sucker*. “Left it at the office,” I lied. I didn’t have a badge anymore. I didn’t even have my private investigator’s license, not that it would have done anything for me. It had long since expired. The kid wanted to see a police badge, and I didn’t have one. It was only a small technicality that I chose to ignore. “Anyway, I’m here on behalf of—”

“You ain’t gettin’ in here without a badge or other proper authorization,” he cut me off. “NYPD personnel only, pal.”

Shit, I thought, looking blankly back at him. It seemed my luck had finally run out.

Chapter 9 – Old Friends, Old Enemies

It was my first roadblock. I shouldn't have underestimated the kid. He was a young cop, trying to make a name for himself, so he did everything by the book. It made sense. Why should it have been any less difficult? It was stupid to think I could have snaked my way in. There was no way in hell the NYPD would let some cat off the street poke his nose around a crime scene. Especially in a case that was so high profile. I had to try, though. I steeled my resolve and fought off the despair that was beginning to creep in. I needed to change tactics. I needed to get tough.

I narrowed my eyes at the young officer and tried to put on an air of authority. "Listen to me, rook," I snapped. "If you think—"

"Hey, Maxie!" a voice interrupted me, calling out from several yards further back beyond the tape. I instantly recognized the voice and the old nickname that, being honest, I hated. On the bright side, only one person ever really used it.

I looked up and past the kid. A thickset Italian man in a dark green suit and black fedora came walking my way excitedly. "Vinnie!" I called back as a smile broke out across my face.

Vince Mazzetti approached and stood beside the young officer. Grinning from ear to ear, he stuck out an eager hand. I grabbed it, and we shook vigorously. It had been a little more than a year since I'd last seen my old partner and more than two since I'd last worked with him.

"You still chasin' down lost kittens for little old ladies?" Vinnie joked. He'd always had a dry sense of humor. Then again, my miserable occupation was notably less exciting than his, so maybe it wasn't a joke.

"Something like that," I replied.

He laughed. "Well, someone's gotta do it, right?"

I only smiled and thought, *It sure as hell isn't me.*

"What happened to your mug?" Vinnie asked, inspecting the scrapes and bruises on my face.

I shrugged. "Just a misunderstanding."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Vinnie released his grip and stood back, hitching up his trousers. He then nudged the young officer next to him. "This is former Homicide Detective Maxwell Floyd you're looking at, kid," he said, throwing me a nod. "He's the crazy bastard who single-handedly brought down the Stagnaros drug racket back in '59."

At the mention of the old case, the memories associated with it came back to me. I supposed it was as good as any of my past accomplishments to use as an introduction. The kid only grinned politely, unimpressed and unfamiliar with the case. It didn't surprise me. He would have only been a high school punk at the time.

"I had some help," I said.

Vinnie held up his hands. "Hey, I pretty much just chauffeured you around town. That was your brain on the case."

"We worked together."

Vinnie shook his head, looking me up and down. "So, what are you doin' here, Max?"

The question caught me off guard, and my mind began to race. I never considered that getting a look at the crime scene would require me to pull one over on an old friend. "I heard you got the lead on this one," I lied. I had no idea who the assigned lead detective was. "Came down to see if I could lend a hand." It sounded good, but I needed Vince to buy into it.

He shook his head again. "This one's only part mine. I'm runnin' point for Corver."

The statement was a slap in the face.

Derek Corver, NYPD's so-called "star" detective, was an all-around pain in the ass. I couldn't believe my misfortune, that Corver was leading the Hemsley case. Things could have been a hell of a lot easier if Vinnie were in charge. That was because, unlike my old partner, Derek Corver utterly despised me. At least the feeling was mutual.

Vince chuckled when he saw the clear look of dread on my face at the mention of Corver's name. "Figured you wouldn't like that."

No, I sure as hell don't.

Derek Corver and I had a long history of bad blood between us. I was a target in his crosshairs from day one. The funny thing was I never really knew why. I suspected he was envious of me and my success in Homicide. He was spiteful, quick to belittle my accomplishments. After the little Keegan girl had drowned, Corver had the nerve to try and use the tragedy against me. He told Mazzetti, and others, that I was clearly at fault for her death, despite my exoneration from it.

Things only got worse, and Corver seemed to want nothing more than to tear me down whenever he could. He even attacked my marriage. It happened during an anniversary party for the captain and his wife of forty years. On the drive home, Hannah told me how Corver had staggered drunkenly up to her during the evening. He made a pass at her, telling her how thrilling such a torrid affair would be. While it disgusted her, Hannah had a way of dealing with things like that. She laughed in his face and walked away. When she told me about it later, however, I was furious. Hannah somehow made me promise to let it go, and I never confronted him about that night.

Time passed, and it became clear I was spiraling out of control, on the verge of losing everything. Corver was there with front row seats, waiting, eager to watch it all unfold. The son of a bitch even testified against me in a committee inquiry after the bar fight in New Rochelle. The fact that Corver testified wasn't the problem. I deserved what I had coming. The problem was his attitude toward me all along. His sworn statement was full of embellishments and half-truths. I didn't have a leg to stand on in my defense.

Much to Corver's delight, I got sacked. At the same time, though, the Gallagher case got thrown out of court. The idiot might have done differently had he known his testimony would help get the case tossed. Two suspected killers walked free. And while it was entirely my fault, Corver sure as hell didn't help.

In the end, Corver got what he wanted. He took my place in the spotlight. So, no, I wasn't looking forward to having to face the devil again, but it wasn't looking like I had much of a choice.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

Mazzetti pushed up the front of his fedora with his thumb. "Interviewin' the parents as we speak, at their penthouse up in Mornin'side. They flew in late last night to ID the body. Corver's takin' their statements, tryin' to find leads."

It was a relief to hear that Corver wasn't anywhere around. He would have had me thrown out of the park in a flash, wouldn't have let me step foot anywhere near the crime scene. Then again, I wasn't so sure Vince would do any different. "So, what do you say, Vinnie? Mind if I take a look? Maybe give you a different perspective on things?"

Mazzetti held up his hands. "You know I can't do that, Max," he said with a shake of his head. "You're a civilian now, ergo, you shouldn't even be in the park. You know I love ya, Maxie, but Corver would have my head if I let you in here."

“Come on, Vinnie,” I pressed, trying to contain my desperation. “You could use a fresh set of eyes on this. You know me. You know I’m good.”

Vinnie only seemed to grow more and more agitated as I spoke, his round face and bulbous nose reddening. “Yeah, and I also know that you’re probably drunk,” he shot back. The words stung a little bit, but I kept my cool. Vinnie sighed, looking off toward some buildings that towered over the trees in the distance. He then took a deep breath and looked back at me apologetically. “Look, I’m sorry, okay?”

“Haven’t had a drink all day,” I told him, not counting my morning shot of vodka. I also didn’t bother mentioning the flask full of bourbon in my coat pocket. He seemed unconvinced, but I could tell he was thinking long and hard about it. “Scout’s honor,” I added.

Vinnie took off his hat and ran a hand through his thick, curly black hair. “Shit,” he growled. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt this once.” I stifled a sigh of relief as he raised a finger at me. “Corver never hears about this. Right, Max?”

“You won’t regret it, Vinnie.”

He lifted the police tape, allowing me to step under. “I already do,” he muttered. Vinnie then turned to the nearby officer and pointed at the datapad in the young man’s hand. “This doesn’t go in the log. In fact, you tell anyone about this, kid, I’ll end you. *Capisce?*” The young officer nodded nervously and stepped aside as Mazzetti and I passed.

My old partner and I walked together side by side. It felt like the old days. I knew I couldn’t get too caught up in the nostalgia, though, and reminded myself why I was there. It had been a long time since I last worked a murder scene, so I needed to keep my head on straight. I gave the area a glance-over to get my bearings and got my mind primed to start working.

“Yeah, you think you’d get used to this sort of thing,” Mazzetti said as we walked. “A cute, young broad, gunned down and dumped in the bushes. I half envy you, Maxie. Not havin’ to deal with it anymore. Watchin’ firsthand as a poor girl’s body gets zipped up in a plastic bag and hauled off to get cut open and poked at. Not havin’ to tell her screamin’ parents that their little girl’s never comin’ home again. Yeah. I envy you.” He blew out a frustrated breath. “Damn it all.”

I didn’t reply to Vince’s comments, but they weighed on me. *No, Vinnie, I thought. I envy you.*

The truth was I missed the game. *The chase.* Although it came at a grave cost and terrible tragedy, it was something I once lived for. It was something I was once good at. One of the best, some said. It was a sinister game, played for centuries, between those who brought harm and those who brought justice. No matter how twisted it may have sounded, I missed it. Even its darkest parts.

“How did the media get wind of the vic’s ID before it was released, anyway?” I asked, breaking the silence.

Vinnie shook his head. “No idea, but the captain was beside himself. Says someone’s gonna have to answer for it when this is all over.”

“I can’t say I blame him.”

“And, of course, we’re gettin’ a flood of calls on this one. So far, just a bunch of crazies and wackadoos with anonymous tips. Nothin’ credible, but we still gotta sort through it. Cap ordered us to put all our other cases on hold.”

The sidewalk cut through an area with large rhododendron bushes on one side, a park bench and a lone lamp post on the other. A man was scanning the ground under the bushes with a device he held in his hand. He wore an NYPD windbreaker over a shirt and tie, tan slacks, and an ID badge clipped to his belt.

“Perkins!” Mazzetti called to him. “Dave Perkins is heading the CSU,” he told me as the man came over. “He can give you a rundown on what we’ve found so far.” Vince didn’t bother introducing us, no doubt a strategic move on his part to prevent Corver from ever knowing I was there.

Perkins looked like your everyday lab-squatter. He was a handsome black man with a balding head, a bushy mustache, and wire-framed glasses. Had I passed him on the street, I would have taken him for a high school science teacher. But his countenance revealed an analytical thinker with a sharp mind for details—exactly the type of man you would want to scour over a crime scene.

Mazzetti’s jack rang in his pocket. He pulled it out and answered as he stepped away.

“Hi, how’s it going?” Perkins greeted me with a nasal voice.

“Good. What have you got?”

Perkins looked back over toward the bushes. “Not a lot, I’m afraid. At approximately 10:15 PM last night, one female, Claire Danielle Hemsley, age twenty-two, five-foot-five, one-hundred-twelve pounds, was found by a patrolman. She was dead on the scene, lying beneath the bushes right over there.” Perkins pointed. “She had a GSW—”

I cringed and cut him off, saying, “Just say ‘gunshot wound.’”

“Excuse me?”

“Gunshot wound. Easier to say. Fewer syllables,” I told him. For whatever reason, that particular acronym had always been a pet peeve.

Perkins only looked at me, raising an eyebrow before continuing. “The vic had an entry wound in the middle of the forehead, and an exit wound out the back. Diameter of the entry and powder burns suggest a mid-caliber handgun at point-blank range. No bullet or shell casing has been found. Defensive wounds were present, and she had blunt force trauma on the crown of the head, received before the gunshot.

“She was three-quarters prone, wearing a heavy raincoat over a sweater and dress, with wool stockings and black pumps. No purse, jewelry, or any other effects were found on her person. No visible signs of a struggle in the immediate area. No blood spatter, so we can’t positively ID this as the kill zone. Either the rain washed it all away, or she was killed elsewhere and dumped here.”

I followed Perkins back to the sidewalk.

“That’s all we’ve got so far,” he said. “We’re just about to wrap things up.”

“The ME’s report come in yet?” I asked.

“Still waiting on it. We’re told it’ll be sometime tomorrow. Sorry I don’t have anything more to give you.”

“No, good job. Thank you.”

Perkins walked away as Mazzetti came back over and stood beside me. “That was Corver,” Vinnie said after slipping his jack back into his pocket. “He’s done with the parents and on his way back to The Plaza. Perkins fill you in?”

“Yeah. Not much to go on.”

“Ya got that right.”

“What about the parents?”

Vinnie sighed. “They’re in bad sorts, obviously. Corver asked the usual questions, but they didn’t have much to give him. They were all home last night, at their primary residence. The parents went to bed early. Last saw their daughter around eight-thirty. Security guards say no one came or went. No one was ever aware she left the house. They don’t even know why she would. She wasn’t a party girl. Wasn’t seeing anyone. Didn’t have many friends. The friends she did have

aren't troublemakers. They also couldn't finger any crazy ex-boyfriends or anythin' like that. Corver pretty much left empty handed."

"Their primary residence is out on Long Island, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, Sag Harbor."

"Any ideas on how she got herself all the way from there to here?"

"She didn't drive herself, we know that," Vinnie said. "TA is helpin' our people look through surveillance footage from the shuttle port and speed rail station in East Hampton, and the station in Sag. Also checkin' all the subway stations and citicams near here. Nothin' yet."

"She may have disguised herself," I suggested.

"Or met up with someone who gave her a lift," Mazzetti added.

"Abduction is ruled out, though?"

"For now," he replied. "Corver, says all signs point to her sneakin' out on her own accord. Just don't know how she ended up this far from home in such a relatively short amount of time."

I looked up after Vinnie's last remark. High above us, Skyway S7 North ran parallel to the park, stretching from one end of the horizon to the other. Air traffic whizzed by in both directions, soaring along their invisible lanes. "Could her body have been thrown out of a flyer as it passed over?" I asked.

Vince shook his head. "Nah. Perkins says it doesn't look like it. No signs of impact. The distance from the closest lane is too far, anyway."

"Perkins said an officer on patrol found the body," I said.

"Yeah." Vinnie pointed over at the young officer standing guard at the yellow tape. "You met him. The kid over there. His name's Gallo. Second-year flatfoot. Brooklyn kid, like you."

"Care if I have a word with him?"

Vinnie shrugged. "Go ahead. The kid's tough, but he's a bit shaken up. It's his first murder scene. Been at home all mornin', but we called him back out to give us a hand."

"I'll go easy on him."

Vince stared at me for a moment, then said, "Look, I still don't know why you're doin' this. It's not like you can just up and start workin' for the department again."

"Call it an insatiable bout of curiosity," I replied with a grin.

"Call it what you want, but remember, if Corver finds out, the shit's gonna hit the fan. It'll be my ass on the line, and you're the one I'm gonna want to thank for it."

"I'll be careful, Vinnie. I promise." The problem was, I wasn't sure I could keep that promise.

"All right. Look, I gotta head back. I'll leave you to find out what you can. They'll be pullin' down the tape and re-openin' the park soon. If you find anythin', you tell me first and then God. Got it?"

"Of course."

Vince straightened his tie and adjusted his hat. "Anyways, I have a feelin' this one's gonna be a bitch." He reached out his hand. "Good seein' ya, Maxie."

"You too, Vinnie," I said, and we shook.

Vince Mazzetti tipped his hat and headed off down the sidewalk. He passed by Officer Gallo, giving him a word or two as he stooped under the yellow tape. I watched him continue on his way until he disappeared around the bend.

I glanced at my watch and noticed that my hand was shaking again. Great. I let my gaze roam across the crime scene, ready to do some closer looking around. But as Vinnie had pointed out, it appeared the crime scene crew was finishing up. I needed to talk to Gallo before they all left.

First things first, though.

Turning my back on the crew, I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my flask. I unscrewed the top and knocked back a mouthful of bourbon. A slight feeling of guilt washed down with it but was soon burned up as the alcohol hit the bottom of my empty stomach. I took a deep breath, sighed, and put my flask away. I pulled out a pack of smokes, lit one up and exhaled, then headed over to the young officer.

Gallo stood with his back to me but turned at the sound of my approach. He was a lanky man, about my height, with a narrow face, pronounced cheekbones, and hooked nose. His hazel eyes reflected a certain weariness that I hadn't noticed during our first run-in.

"Officer Gallo?" I addressed him.

"Yes, sir?" It seemed his attitude toward me had changed after hearing about my *illustrious* career.

"I understand you're the one who found the body," I said.

Gallo thought for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Yes, sir."

"Mind if we talk about it?"

"No, sir."

I gestured back toward the bushes. "Why don't you walk me through it?"

He agreed, and we started walking. "Well, I was down here walkin' my beat last night," he began. "Entered the park sometime around ten which is, you know, the usual time. It was rainin' and cold. Miserable night, right? I was wearin' my rain gear but was still pretty soaked. Anyways, the whole place was empty. Nobody around."

We neared the park bench and lamp post, across from the row of rhododendrons.

"Right about here I thought I'd take a breather and sat on the bench." Gallo reenacted his movements and sat down. "I was pretty tired. Been workin' long shifts and all that. I started dozin', but only for a minute. The thunder woke me up. I went to stand and saw my shoelace was untied. I bent over—"

He leaned forward and mimicked tying his shoe. "Tied my shoe, and when I sat back up, saw this weird shape layin' over there." He pointed at an area under the bushes. "I could tell it was a person. I figured it was just some drunk bum, sleepin' it off."

Gallo stood from the bench. "Anyways, I got up and pulled out my flashlight. I called out, but they didn't respond. I pointed the light at them, and that's when I saw a pair of legs. Girl's legs. I rushed over and tried to wake her up, but it didn't look like she was breathin'. I rolled her over. She was just so white, pale, you know? And her skin was cold. She had a—" he stammered, clearing his throat. "She had a big hole in the middle of her forehead. I knew she was dead and that there was nothin' I could do. I laid her back down how I found her and called it in, right away." Gallo finished his account, and we were both kneeling at the exact spot where he had found the body.

"And, that's it?" I asked. "You never heard any screaming, gunfire, or anything like that before you found her?"

"No, nothin' like that. Just the rain and the thunder," he replied. "Anyways, I called it in, and AP had flyers here in about three minutes." Gallo's voice wavered, and I could see the grief in his tired expression. He might have been a tough kid from Brooklyn, but that persona had started to crumble. He saw that I noticed, and wiped at the tears that had begun to form. "It's just so sad, you know? And," he swallowed, "I've never had anythin' like this happen before."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "It'll never get any easier," I told him. "But you did good, kid."

Gallo took a weary, deep breath, choking back his emotions, as he pulled himself together. "Thank you, sir," he replied. We both stood up. "If you don't got nothin' else, it looks like we're

leavin'. Been here way too long. They's givin' me a couple days off. Gonna take advantage of it, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. Get some rest, kid."

Gallo walked away to rejoin the others, as one of them began winding up the yellow tape. The men had little to say to one another as they all headed over to the parked transport flyer and loaded up. In moments, the fan-jets roared to life. The craft lifted off the ground and soared away, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I spent the next two hours combing through the crime scene and, eventually, the entire park. It was tedious work. I followed every sidewalk and path through playgrounds, sporting fields, and picnic areas. I searched around every tree, and under every bench, bush, and hedge. In one corner of the park, I came across a small ornamental pond with a gurgling waterfall and a statue of some saint standing watch over it. I picked my way around the water's edge, among the rocks and reeds.

Redford Park had re-opened after the police left, and people started to filter in. I saw the occasional jogger or dog walker. Other random individuals often crossed my path, their purpose for being there clear. They might have been reporters, fans, maybe even amateur sleuths. They wandered about, exploring, wondering, trying to find where it happened. Trying to make their own sense of Claire Hemsley's murder. Trying to find for themselves where her body was found. I, however, was in my own little world, too absorbed to pay anyone any attention, and no one cared to bother me in return.

But all my rigorous efforts were to no avail. Canvassing the entire three square acres of the park had turned up nothing. I honestly didn't know what I had expected to find that Perkins' team would have missed. Six cigarettes and an empty flask later, I stood wallowing in defeat. I was right back where I started, near the park bench and the bushes where Claire's body had lain the night before.

I took off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves. My body throbbed with pain. I had forgotten what a beat-up wreck I was. With a groan, I sat down on the bench and slumped back, letting out a long sigh.

A woman with two small children went ambling by. While the children poked and prodded one another in play, the woman smiled at me. I gave her a weary grin in return, then looked back to her kids. The two little towheads, both boys and maybe a year apart in age, had the same disheveled hair and bright blue eyes. They looked so happy, so content with life. They were innocent, unaware of many of the dangers in the world, unaware of the atrocities some were capable of acting out on others. Watching as they disappeared down the sidewalk with their mother in tow, I remembered that was one of the many reasons I had wanted to be a cop in the first place. I wanted to help protect such innocence.

Things didn't turn out the way I had planned.

But before I let myself dwell any further on that matter, I turned my thoughts back to the case and my search of the park.

Nothing. The word echoed in my head. I had found nothing to provide any clue as to what happened to Claire Hemsley. There should have been other evidence. There was always other evidence. I found it unlikely that the rain could have washed *everything* away. So maybe there was never any other evidence in the park at all. I considered one possibility that Perkins mentioned. Did the shooting take place somewhere else, the body then dumped in the bushes right across from where I sat? The fact was, there were so many other possibilities. Each raised their own questions.

Why kill a girl and dump her body in a park, a place where scores of people frequent on a daily basis? Why not choose some empty alleyway or an abandoned warehouse? Why not put the body

in a sack full of rocks and throw it in the East River, where no one would ever find it? Something in my gut was telling me the murderer wanted the body to be found. But why?

Murders happened more frequently than one wanted to believe. Killings were often the result of a mugging or robbery gone wrong, or a gang-related shooting. Less common were those involving a bad business deal or a treacherous love affair. Others came by self-defense, insanity, or even mercy. In many a case, they usually left some kind of evidence or witnesses in their wake.

The murder of Claire Hemsley had neither. No hint of a motive. Was it a random act? Was she merely in the wrong place at the wrong time? Why? What the hell was she doing in Redford Park, late at night, in the middle of a rainstorm, to begin with? Why wasn't she home, where she should have been? Where her parents thought she was?

I mulled over the whole, upper-level matter again. By birth, Claire was an upper-level citizen. Girls from those parts didn't wander around a park on the seedy side of town at night. No, it didn't make any sense. So, maybe the killer also hailed from the upper levels. Was Claire killed up there, then dumped down below? Was it all meant to appear that she was a victim at the hands of a street-level low life? Claire had few friends and no apparent enemies, but she was a celebrity of sorts. Could I have been looking at a stalking case involving some obsessed and murderous fan? Just another possibility.

The Medical Examiner would provide more detailed information about her death. As far as where the shooting took place, I was leaning toward the theory that it happened somewhere else. Still, I couldn't just dismiss the possibility that it did happen somewhere in or around the park. I also couldn't ignore the idea that Claire went there intentionally.

The sun was close to setting. After all the time and energy spent in the park, I felt exhausted. Still, question after exasperating question kept coming up. My head was spinning, thinking things over and over again without any answers in sight. My instincts, though, told me a reasonable and sensible explanation was just waiting for me to discover it. I simply had to find the pieces and unlock the puzzle. *Easier said than done*. At a complete loss, I did come to one final conclusion for the evening. Mazzetti was right—the case was going to be a bitch.

The light faded as the sun inched closer to the horizon behind the skyscrapers in the distance. Lamp posts throughout the park sparked to life at random. I had no choice but to call it a day, smoking my last cigarette as I headed out. The truth was, I was feeling desperate, in need of answers. I needed something to go on. I needed a clue and a drink, one of which, I knew where to get.

Chapter 10 – Three or Four Won't Hurt

The day at the park took a heavy toll on me. My aching body was a reminder that I wasn't completely over Bowie's beatdown, and my side burned in protest with nearly every breath. I was mentally and physically exhausted, laboring to get out of the cab in front of Sam's. The cab pulled away as I limped to the front door, bathed in the odd reddish-green glow of the bar's signage. I had nothing on my mind but my favorite barstool and a double bourbon. I felt so out of sorts, I thought I'd order my drink on the rocks.

As I reached for the door, a voice called out to me from nearby shadows. "Hey, can you give me a light?"

The sudden sound startled me, and I turned. From the corner of the building, near the entrance to the side alley, the silhouette of a man approached. As it came nearer and entered into the light, the form materialized into the forbidding figure of the man I knew only as Mr. Fletcher.

"Shit," I muttered as he came near.

An unlit cigarette hung loosely from his mouth. "Expecting someone else?"

I pulled out my lighter, flicked it, and held it out for him. "Yeah, actually, I was," I replied, wondering where his own damn fancy, ivory lighter was.

The tip of his cigarette flared, and he pulled away, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "Mr. Bowie, perhaps?" he said with a smirk.

Shaking my head, I shoved my lighter back into my pocket. Fletcher was trying to push my buttons again. I knew then that I was only going to like the man less and less as time wore on, at least for however long the sordid relationship was going to last.

I sighed, tired and thirsty. "What do you want?"

"What did you find out today?"

"Nothing," I said. "I found out nothing. A rookie flatfoot found Claire Hemsley's body while walking his beat. She had a hole blown through her head. Police found no bullet, no casing, no blood. No clues."

As I spoke, he reached up and started rubbing his lapel pin with his fingers. The odd habit appeared to be something he did whenever he was in thought. Then he asked, "Are you sure you looked hard enough?"

"Go screw yourself," I spat.

"But you did get access to the scene." It was more of a statement rather than a question.

"Yeah, an old buddy of mine is on the case."

"Vince Mazzetti. Working with Derek Corver."

"It would appear so," I replied.

"The detective who testified against you in—"

"Your point?" I cut him off.

Fletcher paused as he took a slow drag and exhaled. "My point is that you're no good to us if working this case ends up being some blind-sighted quest for vengeance."

"It won't," I assured him.

"I certainly hope not."

“Believe me,” I said and held up my hands. “I plan on giving Corver as wide a berth as possible.” I glanced through the windows into the bar, longing for the conversation to end so I could be alone with my drink.

“Good,” Fletcher said. “Just keep it that way.”

At that moment, the door to Sam’s opened and a young couple came out onto the sidewalk. Fletcher spun around awkwardly and darted away, out of the light. I glanced at the couple, then at Fletcher who stood watching from the shadows, leaning against a wall, the brim of his hat pulled low. I shrugged at him.

The young couple paid neither of us any attention, chatting with one another as they hailed a taxi. Once the cab had driven off, Fletcher rejoined me.

“What the hell was that about?” I asked.

Fletcher glared at me and let out a sigh. “I’ve already told you, this arrangement of ours is off the books. I can’t chance anyone recognizing me while I’m talking to you. This case is too important. You might care to show a little more discretion yourself.”

“Right,” I said with a lopsided grin. “I’ll keep that in mind. Are we finished?”

He flashed a mocking smile. “For now.”

“Good, ’cause I’ve got a date with a bottle.” I turned away and started for the door.

“Max,” he called after me. I stopped in my tracks but kept my back to him. “You have a busy day tomorrow,” he continued. I threw him a scowl over my shoulder and said nothing. “You have to find out what’s in the ME’s report.”

“I know what I have to do,” I growled and reached for the door handle.

“Max,” he sang, condescending, as though he were scolding a dog. I kept calm as my anger spiked, my knuckles turning white as my hand squeezed the handle. Fletcher was pushing me to the edge, and he had to know it. “Remember what we talked about. Watch the booze.”

My jaw tightened and my nostrils flared. He was learning what buttons to push, after all. Livid, and without a word, I pushed through the door into Sam’s, leaving Mr. Fletcher out in the cold of the night. As the door swung shut behind me, all I knew was that it would have been better for him if he wasn’t there when I came back out.

Only a small crowd of customers filled Sam’s that night. Some sat at the bar, a few sat at tables, while others were off playing billiards or darts. Sam went about behind the counter, and I expected to find either Molly or Lila working with him. Instead, Shannon Hutchings, another of Sam’s bartenders, was on the clock. She rushed back and forth between the bar and tables, delivering food and drink orders.

Sam saw me and threw me a nod. I returned the silent greeting and headed straight for my barstool, growing even more irritated when I found some other random customer already sitting there. I cursed under my breath and looked for another seat, resigning myself to a barstool in the corner. I set my fedora on the bar, took off my jacket, and sat down as Sam placed a glass of bourbon down in front of me. I looked at it.

“Thanks, Sam, but can I get that on the rocks?”

The old man looked at me with humored surprise. “Rough day, huh?” He took my glass back and dropped some ice into it.

I grimaced, arching my back, stretching out my tired muscles. “You have no idea.”

Sam set my drink back down. I hastily picked it up and took a long, welcome drink of the reddish-brown fluid. Its smoothness coated my insides with a tingling warmth. Sam was quick to guess that I was in no mood to talk about my day, so he let me be. He went off to help and chat with other customers. I exchanged glances with another longtime regular, Larry, who sat at the

opposite end of the bar. We raised our glasses to one another in a friendly salute. I then turned my entire attention to the drink in front of me and let my mind wander.

No one bothered me for the most part. Sam came by every so often to check on me and refill my drink. Shannon gave me a hug and a greeting as she passed by at one point. Otherwise, I sat completely tuned out, sulking in my own little world. I hardly even moved.

The lack of human interaction was just what I needed. I grew numb as time went by, losing myself in my thoughts. Coming up empty handed at Redford Park had me feeling discouraged. I had spent all my brain cells in the desperate quest to find clues, and it was all for nothing. My weary mind needed a rest. I figured another drink, then maybe another after that would put my brain to bed for the night. *Hopefully.*

My anger at Mr. Fletcher had faded after a couple of stiff drinks. The man was becoming a pain in my ass, but I decided I couldn't let him get to me. I had to ignore the quips and the condescending remarks. After all, I was working for him.

That got me thinking. I pulled out my jack, curious if Fletcher's position in the commissioner's office was high enough for him to be listed online. I pulled up the NYPD's public netsite. On a page titled LEADERSHIP, Police Commissioner Charles McDowell topped a long list of deputy commissioners and bureau chiefs. I didn't see Fletcher's name anywhere. Thinking back on what he had told me, it sounded more like Fletcher may have had a role in the commissioner's personal staff, so his name likely wouldn't be on any list. With a silent shrug, I gave up and put my jack away.

Fletcher was such an odd cat, though. The whole situation was odd. He said I was his choice to investigate the Hemsley case. So, why did he act like he was expecting me to fail? Why did he even choose me in the first place? What was in it for him?

As hard as it was to admit it, he was right. I had an important day ahead of me and had to go easy on the booze. I wondered if he was somewhere nearby, keeping an eye on me, keeping track of how many drinks I had consumed. It seemed like something he would have done. But regardless of what he expected, and what he thought of my drinking habits, I decided it wasn't worth caring about. Three or four drinks wasn't going to hurt. And I wasn't going to fail, whether he wanted me to or not.

A sudden outburst of familiar, female laughter erupted behind me. I let it drag me away from my thoughts, and I turned to look out of curiosity.

Molly Mitchell sat at a table with two other women I didn't recognize. She saw me and waved. I only smiled in return as the embarrassing memory of the previous night crossed my mind. I didn't presume, though, that the women's laughter was at my expense. I turned back to the bar and looked up at the nearest vidmonitor and the hockey game that was on. The Drift were playing the Islanders, who were leading 2-1. I watched for only a few seconds before losing interest.

Another half hour had passed. Despite my earlier resolve to stick to three or four drinks, I had actually lost count. That familiar, welcome, warm and fuzzy feeling of euphoria had already kicked in. I felt much less caring about watching my booze intake. *Screw Fletcher*, I thought in defiance, after taking another swig. That was when a pair of soft, feminine hands swooped in from behind and covered my eyes.

"Guess who?" a sultry voice cooed in my ear.

"My favorite bartender?" I asked playfully. She uncovered my eyes, wrapped her arms around my midsection, and put her head on my shoulder. I couldn't help but smile. It was never difficult to tell when Molly had a couple of drinks in her.

“Oh, come on, Max.” I could feel her warm, soft breath in my ear, her lips only an inch away from my skin. “We all know who your favorite bartender is,” she teased. I sheepishly shook my head and sighed as Molly let go and took a seat on the barstool next to me.

Not in any mood to talk about Lila, I decided to change the subject. “Who are your friends?”

“Changing the subject, are we?” Molly asked, raising an eyebrow. *Damn it.* Her suspicious gaze lingered for a moment, then she laughed. “They’re friends from school. We went out for dinner after class, then decided on some drinks.”

“Sounds like you’re having a good time.”

“Yeah, they’re a hoot. You should come join us,” she suggested.

“No thanks. I’m not really in the mood for laughs.”

“Well, that’s too bad. One of them thinks you’re kinda cute.”

I chuckled in spite of myself. “Kinda? I must be losing it.”

Molly looked at me for a second longer than what felt comfortable, then her expression softened. “Trust me,” she said quietly, a hint of a smile on her lips. “You aren’t.”

I cleared my throat, suddenly feeling awkward, and tugged at my shirt collar. I wasn’t sure who had made the comment. Was it the somewhat normal and happy-go-lucky Molly, or her flirtatious, vixen alter ego? For once, I hoped it was the latter.

Molly hopped off her barstool. “They’re leaving after this round, so I’ll join you later?”

“Sounds good,” I replied hastily. Molly walked away and left me alone again with my drink. I yawned and tried to get my thoughts back on track. Details about the Hemsley case tried to surface and begged me to give them attention. But with the amount of alcohol in my bloodstream, it was becoming difficult to think straight.

Only minutes had passed when someone sat down beside me once again. I assumed that Molly’s friends had left and that she had come back to join me. While it was a distraction from the case, I really didn’t mind. I enjoyed Molly’s company—when she wasn’t being a tease. And hell, a break from thinking sounded good. I looked over, expecting to see her seductive smile, only what I saw was much, much worse.

The full version of
A COLD BLOODED RAIN
Book 1 From the Files of Maxwell Floyd, Private Eye
is available [HERE](#)

About the Author

T.R. Leton was born and raised in Northern California, where he currently lives with his wife and two children. He has spent the last twenty years in marketing, music writing & production, and graphic design.

His lifelong love of writing finally caught up to him in 2011 when he began working on the Maxwell Floyd crime fiction novels. *A Cold Blooded Rain*, his award-winning, debut novel was released in November of 2017. *When Wolves Come Calling* is the explosive, action-packed sequel and was released in August of 2019.

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