

## Episode 1 – The Agents

People said FBI Special Agent David Seskin looked like Wesley Snipes. At six-foot-four and 240 pounds, David was physically imposing, but today he was in a hospital cafeteria, dressed as a clown and entertaining sick kids.

The bright colors of his outfit and the makeup were silly enough to elicit laughter and not fear from the kids, many in wheelchairs, all in pajamas of one sort or another. David loved clowns, and it always made him a little sad (not that he'd let anyone know that) when people talked about how scared they were of them.

David blew up a hot dog balloon, then was starting in on a happy-looking elephant when FBI Special Agent Pritchard walked in. Pritchard frowned at David for a moment, and then he grinned.

“Jeez, Seskin, is that you?” The incredulous tone was due to Seskin being known around the office as a hard-ass.

David blew up a balloon, made a donkey out of it, and handed it to Pritchard. “I do this because the kids in here need to laugh.” His sharp, carved features were made comical by the silly clown grin painted on them. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see my niece Sally.” Pritchard nodded in the direction of a serious-looking girl. Her warm chocolate features were accentuated by her lack of hair. She held an orange giraffe, looking at it as if to divine its meaning, perhaps hoping it might be a talisman designed to ward off the evil spirits invading her body.

“She’s a tough audience,” David said. “I’ve been trying to make her smile since I got here. Look, Pritchard, don’t say anything to the office, okay? I got a reputation to keep.” Pritchard crossed his heart and nodded, then went over and sat with his niece. She did smile at her uncle, which made David feel a little better, even if he’d have wanted that smile to be for him. Sally could die. Many of the kids on this ward would die. Kids he got to know. Kids whose laughter he loved eliciting and hearing. If he were an average guy, he’d be okay with showing that, with everyone knowing, but he wasn’t an average guy. He was a goddamn special agent for the FBI. Putting the fear of god into bad guys was hard enough, let alone if it should get out, he actually had a heart.

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The next morning, David walked into the FBI's Chicago field office and everyone had a red nose attached to their faces. He walked to his desk, grinned ferociously at all of them, and said, "Fuck you Pritchard."

Pritchard replied by squeezing a clown horn twice. The team kept the noses on until lunch time.

Later, at lunch with Special Agent Fachez, his partner, David ordered a salad. Salads generally didn't end up on his shirt. David was not exactly a messy eater, but he had this sort of tic. No matter how hard he tried, he would almost always come away from a meal with a blotch of something staining his tie or his shirt. He went so far as to skip lunch most days in order to avoid mishaps. Today, however, he had woken up late and missed breakfast.

"Davey, your hands shaky or something?" Special Agent Fachez asked in mock surprise. They had finished lunch and were walking towards the exit. Fachez pointed to the knot on his tie, and David scrunched up his neck to try and see what she was pointing at.

"What? Where?" he asked.

Fachez laughed. "You need to go check a mirror." She nodded toward the restrooms. "Give me the keys, I'll wait in the car."

Fachez loved ribbing David. Especially after finding out that he had dressed up as a clown. She had been relentless in joking about his hair.

David's hair, in his defense, had always been unruly. To avoid the razzing, he had started sporting a buzz cut, the edges squared off like some drill instructor in the Marines. He hoped it added to his intimidation factor. He was a people person, but liking people didn't fit well when you were dealing with psychopaths. Instead, he grinned at them. He had a grin like a wolf, a grin that set big bad career type criminals to squirming.

David could sit across from hardened, lifelong law abusers and use his grin to make them sweat. They all tried to keep up the pretense of being tough, but if his haircut and well-muscled frame didn't put fear in them, then his grin usually tipped the scales. Men and women alike squirmed when he grinned that grin. And he almost always got what he needed.

That morning, his boss had texted him for a meeting. He thought he might be getting fired. He had no particular reason for thinking this; it was just his normal social anxiety. He sometimes dreamed that someone would discover he was a fraud and that inside he was mostly made of marshmallow goo.

His boss, Christen Jansen, knew about the clown business and that he volunteered every week to feed the homeless. Maybe his soft spots had finally caught up to him, he thought. He growled at Pritchard as he walked past the man's cubicle towards Jansen's office. Chris Pritchard could be an asshole, but they had pulled weapons together. Both knew that when it came to the tough spots, they had each other's back.

Pritchard was on the phone. He used his right hand to mime honking a clown horn. David was sure the bastard kept one in his desk but was smart enough not to use it very often. The joke was only good when used sparingly.

As usual, Jansen was all business when he walked into her office, which was large for the FBI but normal for the Special Agent in Charge.

"Sit down, David," she said. She was dressed in a navy-blue suit. Tasteful and feminine. Christen had taste. She was very by the book and always aware what pleased her superiors. She was calculating and worked hard to climb the ladder. She answered to D.C. and was well liked there, as far as David knew.

"D.C. wants someone assigned to a joint task force," Christen said as David sat.

"For what?"

"It's need to know, and apparently I don't need. You'll be briefed by the Homeland operative." She handed him a brown sealed envelope.

"You still seeing your shrink?"

David looked at the open office door, then back at Christen.

"You have to let everyone know I'm seeing a head doctor?"

"David, half the office, including me, is seeing a therapist. Our close proximity to killers and other various forms of human scum are reason enough to combat desensitization."

"Sure boss, but we don't talk about it. Christ, it's bad enough everyone knows I dress up like a fucking clown now. I don't want to know who's crying to a shrink, and they don't want to know about me doing it."

"Yeah yeah, get out of here." David stood and opened the office door.

"And David", Christen added. He turned.

"Stay in touch, okay?"

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The address he had been given for this meeting was a dimly lit restaurant/bar. It had red velvet on the walls and round tables big enough to seat four, with plastic red and white checked cloths. He sat down at an empty table in a corner and facing the door. He set his hands on the tablecloth, then lifted them immediately.

*Fucking sticky*, he thought to himself. He set his hands back down and lifted them again.. A waiter came over. He was dressed in a white suit with black Kentucky Colonel tie. David thought he looked bored.

“Anything to drink?” the waiter asked.

“Just bottled water, thanks.”

The waiter nodded and tossed a couple menus on the table.

“Tonight’s special is linguini with clam sauce”, he said in a bored voice that had obviously repeated the refrain 20 or 30 times that night already. “I’ll get your water and some bread. Are you expecting anyone?”

“Yes, a Shasha Harrings.”

The waiter’s eyebrows went up. “Shasha is coming tonight?”

David thought the waiter sounded masculine; he couldn’t help but be curious.

“Yes, you know her?” he smiled, showing teeth. Not the grin; he didn’t want to scare them after all, but pearly whites and perfect mouth position.

He picked up the menu, but just then there was movement at the front door. He looked up and sat stunned for a moment. The woman walking toward him had long straight black hair, parted in the middle. She looked a bit Native American, but her skin was as pale as cream. She was tall, maybe five ten or so. She was wearing a black pencil skirt with a light powder blue blouse. She looked around a moment and then saw him. David felt skewered in body and soul as their eyes met. He might have shivered if he’d had less control.

She noticed him staring and walked over to him.

“Agent Seskin?” she asked.

David blinked and hesitated a fraction of a second before standing and extending his hand.

“Yes, you must be Shasha Harrings.” He seemed frozen, waiting for her to take his hand. Her look made him feel incredibly awkward, like a schoolboy about to ask the girl of his pent-up adolescent infatuation if she’d go to the dance with him.

“Sorry, I don’t shake hands.” She sat. “Please, sit down.” She grabbed a menu.

He sat. She looked at the menu and said, “You been briefed?”

He saw the waiter hurrying over. “I read the file. There’s not much there.”

She nodded and was about to say something when the waiter showed up.

“Ms. Harrings, it’s so nice to see you.”

Shasha smiled. “Hello, Harry. How are things with you?”

“Very good, Ms. Harrings. Will you have your usual?” The waiter was much more attentive than they had been with David. And also much more formal.

“Yes, Harry, and please be sure to say hello to your wife.”

“You can say hello yourself, Ms. Harrings. I’m sure Merry is going to rush right out when she finds out you’re here.”

As if on cue, a short, caramel-skinned woman came out the server door. She had on a white popcorn chef’s hat and coat. The woman grabbed Shasha before she could even stand up. As it was, the chef was short enough that she was just barely a head taller than the seated Shasha.

“How are you? It’s so good to see you again, Shasha.”

“Merry, I was just here last week.”

“Has it only been a week?” The chef put her hands to her cheeks. “Feels much longer than that.”

The pleasantries continued for a few more minutes while David sat patient and mute. Finally, they ordered—David deciding the grilled salmon would be the least likely thing on the menu to jump onto his shirt—and the couple left.

“Nice people. You come here a lot?”

“Harry and my father are longtime friends.” Shasha said picked up her umbrella-draped, nuclear-red drink. “They went to school together and still hang out with a bunch of people that have known each other for years.”

David nodded and went to rest his arms on the table as he leaned forward. He thought better of the gesture at the last second and put his hands under the table instead. “What is this task force all about? Why are Homeland and the FBI on the same cases?”

“It’s ‘case’ right now, and the CIA is also sending someone.” She sipped and fell silent. She seemed to be contemplating the mixture she was drinking.

“What is that?” asked David, nodding to her drink. “Hawaiian Punch?”

She smiled. “No. You want to taste it? It’s a specialty of the house.” She picked up a paper-wrapped straw from the dispenser at the side of the table.

He shrugged, took it, unwrapped the straw, and dipped it into her drink. He held his finger over one end of the straw until the other was in his mouth. It tasted like fresh vegetables straight from the garden, like his grandmother had served in mid to late summer when she was alive. She’d go out to the garden, pick tomatoes, bell peppers, onions, whatever else was ripe enough, and make the best meals David had ever had.

He closed his eyes, relishing the sensation and the memories of Nana it brought, when his eyes popped wide open.

“Holy fucking shit!” he said. “What the hell is in this?” His mouth burned. His lips burned. His throat burned.

Shasha laughed and handed him the saltshaker. “Here, sprinkle this on your hand and lick it off. It will help with the burn.” She coughed, trying to disguise amusement. “Nona’s Devil juice takes some getting used to.” She smiled, then apologized. “I’m sorry, I have this deep mean streak in me. I couldn’t help myself.”

“Jesus, I’m afraid to think what you might do to me once we get to know each other.”

She added a slight tilt to her head to go with the smile. “You think we are going to get to know each other better?”

The salt had helped a tiny bit. He gulped his water, distracted enough he didn’t pay attention to the flirtatiousness in her voice.

“If we are going to work together, I suppose it can’t be avoided.”

She laughed again. “I like you, David Seskin. Now, to business. We have intercepted some chatter about terrorists bringing in some new weapon to the U.S. We need inter-agency cooperation to find out what that is and who is bringing it.” She sat back. “The CIA has assigned an agent. Merle Huguenot. She called off meeting us just as I was on my way here. She couldn’t make it here today but will meet us at HQ.”

Harry brought a plastic basket with a piece of butcher paper lining the bottom. Inside were some biscuits. He set them down in front of David.

David picked up a biscuit and bit into it. It tasted faintly of butter and cheese.

“Chew it slowly,” Shasha said. “Fill your mouth with it.”

He did as she said, and the burning subsided a bit more.

“Damn.”

A bit later, Harry brought their dinners. Shasha had some sort of pasta thing David had not seen before. The pasta appeared to be stuffed with sausage and was smothered in a cream sauce.

David had to ask. “Why are we meeting in this ... place?” He wanted to be polite to Shasha’s friend.

Shasha swallowed. “I just wanted us to get to know each other a bit before we met and talked about the case. This is a place that’s familiar and safe. Maybe not the usual place for a top-secret meeting, but that will come later at my home.”

“So what can you tell me?”

“CIA intelligence has solid evidence that something is going to happen soon. I don’t want to go into too much detail here. You are to be team liaison to the FBI’s resources. I have connections with the NSA and military intelligence. Merle will provide international intel and liaison.”

David tasted his salmon. It was delicious. A hint of dill and lemon and cooked just enough so the meat was pink but not dried out. Perfection. There were red potatoes served with it, cut into bite-sized chunks and sprinkled with herbs. David tasted rosemary and oregano, maybe some thyme.

Shasha finished a bite of her pasta and swallowed. She put down her fork, plate half full still, and motioned for Harry. He shuffled over and picked up her plate.

“Wasn’t it prepared right, Ms. Harrings?”

“Harry, I’m told you changed my diapers when I was a baby. Can you please call me Shasha?”

Harry winked. “Not here, Ms. Harrings. Not here. Now, what was wrong with your meal?”

“Harry, have you ever known me to finish a meal anywhere?”

“I have hope, Ms. Harrings. I have hope for you!” Harry smiled and took her plate, examined David’s salmon and smiled as he looked at David’s tie. Harry didn’t say a word, but David knew what that look meant. He sighed and deflated a bit. He finished his meal a few minutes later as they talked about their work a little more. When he was done, Shasha got up from the table and opened her purse.

“Meet me here tomorrow evening.” She handed him a card with an address out in Kenilworth.

On the way out, David stopped in the men’s room and examined himself. There was a little oil or maybe butter on his shirt right next to his tie. He sighed, blotted as best he could, and left.

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The next evening, David drove to the address he was given and was buzzed through a gate. He parked his car on a baseball diamond-sized horseshoe driveway with a fountain in the middle of it that looked like Niagara Falls cascading over white marble and walked up to large sturdy carved oak doors. He looked for a buzzer or knocker, found none, and lifted his hand to knock when the door opened.

“Yes? What do you want?” Someone opened the door just wide enough for David to see a tall wiry haired man with deep brown eyes and skin the color of coffee with cream.

He opened his creds and showed them to the man. “I’m special agent Seskin. I’m here to see—”

“Yes, yes, I know who you are.” The man opened the door, revealing himself dressed in black from head to toe, in what David could only call “hotpants,” with garters holding up fishnet stockings, five-inch heels, and a black leather sleeveless top. David blinked, but his training kicked in and he showed no surprise.

The man yelled, “Shasha! Your FBI man is here!”

From up the staircase came a voice.

*Nice marble*, thought David as he admired the staircase. If he had been able to stop himself from gawking at the man dressed in fishnets and heels, he had a bit more trouble refraining from admiring the surroundings he found himself in.

From up the stairs came a feminine voice say something like ‘Arrrrggh!’ in apparent annoyance. Then Shasha appeared slowly descending towards them.

“You would be on time, wouldn’t you?” she said irritably.

Shasha too was dressed in black. A suit with stove pipe pants and a seersucker jacket that accentuated the perfection of her hourglass figure. Her eyes pierced his, skewering him straight back into his amygdala.

“Uh huh,” he said stupidly. Then he blinked and came to. She was much more attractive in the light than she had been in the dim interior of the restaurant. She came all the way down the stairs as a chime sounded. She went to the door and opened it. Several men dressed identically to the older man clicked through the door and came in.

“Shasha!” they said in chorus. Each did a cheek peck to avoid smearing makeup. Seskin recognized one of them as Harry. Harry grinned at David.

“So, Shasha, you and the hunky guy going out again, huh?” Harry winked.

Shasha laughed. “No, this is work”, she clapped her hands. “Everyone, this is FBI Special Agent David Seskin. He and I are assigned to a joint task force.”

“What you working on, Shasha?” someone quipped. David noticed Harry wiggled eyebrows at him. “Pole dancing?”

Everyone jeered, but in a good-natured way, David thought. He smiled and waved.

“Hello, everyone, it’s nice to meet you all. Have fun wherever you are going.” This brought laughs and shakes of the head from everyone. He heard a couple of them mutter *damn kids* under their breaths as they walked out.

Shasha looked down at her feet and noticed the paper bag with brown paper rope handles.

“Dad!” she said in a loud but not quite yelling voice. “Your supplies!”

The older man who had greeted David turned carefully on his five-inch heels and grabbed the bag, kissed Shasha on the cheek, and hurried as best he could, looking like he had a lot of practice on those heels. David frowned when he realized he hadn’t been introduced to her father and didn’t know the man’s name. He was about to ask when they were interrupted.

“Did I miss the party?” The woman who spoke was as tall as Shasha and had lots of long curly blond hair, a prominent nose, and interesting dark eyes, almost black. David thought she must be wearing hair extensions. No one could have that much hair.

“Come in, Merle. This is Special Agent David Seskin. Sorry about the commotion. My father and his friends enjoy going to interactive movies. Tonight is Rocky Horror Picture Show night.”

“Oh, I love that movie! I didn’t know it was playing tonight,” Merle said in a husky voice.

“Private screening.” Shasha turned to David. “David, this is Merle Huguenot, CIA. Please, both of you follow me.” She strode off down a hall. There was a windowed room to David’s left. He glanced in and saw a traditional Dojo, Mr. Miyagi style.

Shasha led them into a spacious kitchen with a large oak dining table that looked polished and expensive. The kitchen was a large cavern of culinary arts perfection. David knew, because he loved to cook and he was nearly salivating at the appliances, the stove, the ovens. Ovens—plural! What he would give to cook in this place.

Shasha gestured to a door and led them to a panel. She had each of them press their thumbs to a plate as she did something on her smart phone. They entered, then Shasha closed the door to the kitchen, locking them inside a low ceiling room that would have been at home in a police station if it had had a two way mirror on one wall.

Shasha sat, facing them both. There were three folders in front of her. They looked rather thin, which told David this would most likely be a short meeting. She passed one to each of them and broke the seal on hers. David and Merle looked at each other and then broke the seal on their own folders.

“You’ve been chosen for this task force because you were available,” said Shasha.

“Isn’t that special?” said Merle dryly.

Shasha smiled. “Neither of you have any pressing assignments, and you are both veteran law enforcement agents with excellent records.” She turned to Merle. “You know many of the people who run things in Africa.” She turned her attention to David. “And you have a good relationship with the SAC here.”

She looked at her file. “There have been some rumors of a lab somewhere in the Congo that is being funded by the Chinese, the Russians, and Iran. Supposedly they have been working on some secret weapon they hope will wipe out the U.S.”

David blinked. “Wipe us out?”

Shasha nodded. “That’s the goal, although no one has been able to find out exactly what they are working on. We surmise it’s biological in nature, but there is no proof of that. The Chinese scientists who have been seen there are mostly experimental physicists specializing in quantum physics. We know there are other scientists in there, and the CIA has operatives working to find out who they are. We think it might be a synthetic virus they are working on to target our population. How they would ever restrict it to U.S. soil, however, is enough of a

mystery that the brainiacs don't agree on this. It could be something quite different. Something we've never seen before. "

"So have they managed to get it into the U.S.?" David asked.

"We aren't sure, and that is our mission. To run down leads given us by Homeland Electronic Surveillance."

"Why do you need me?" said Merle. "You know the CIA doesn't operate on U.S. soil."

"I'm instructed to have you get in contact with Supervisor Everly to answer that question." Merle's mouth dropped open at this. "You know Supervisor Everly?"

"Yes, we have worked together in the past."

"Before?" asked Shasha.

Merle squirmed a little and blinked. "Before what?"

"I'm sorry," Shasha said quickly. "Is it going to be a problem for you reporting to Everly?" She flipped a page in her file. Merle appeared to decide and spoke up.

"Okay, look, I'm transgender. Until last year I was physically male. Everly was my supervisor before my transition."

"He's a bigot?" asked David.

"Well, we kind of parted on less than good terms, let's say." Merle smiled. She turned to Shasha. "How did you know?"

"It wasn't anything major. I mean your makeup, your hair, your outfit are all wonderful. Where did you get those shoes by the way?"

Merle smiled and lifted her right foot high enough for them all to admire. "Fluevog's. There was a sale."

Shasha nodded. "Very nice. Anyway, it's your shoulders."

Merle sighed. "I can change the clothes, the makeup, even got the Adam's apple shaved, but there's no way to hide the shoulders."

Shasha's phone buzzed. She looked at it and picked it up.

"Yes?" she said. There was a pause as the other person spoke. "I see. Text me the address. We are all together, so we can leave now." She punched 'end' and looked at them.

"Seems we have an interesting murder at a tech lab company. They want us to go check it out."

"What's interesting about it?" asked Merle.

“Well,” Shasha started, spreading her hands, “It’s located in a building of high-tech labs, and it seems there is a torn-up corpse with no blood.”

“And?” Merle asked, knowing there had to be more.

Shasha looked at her. “The building houses the Dayton Institute. They specialize in archaeological forensics. They recently received artifacts from Ethiopia.”

“But you said the enemy’s labs were in the Congo,” David said.

Shasha shrugged. “It’s possible the weapon was moved to disguise it with items from the dig.”

They all packed up to leave.

“Leave the documents here. I don’t want them out of this house for now.” Shasha said.

David and Merle each frowned at her. “I’ll need to read them,” they said in unison.

Shasha smiled. “You two are in tune. We leave them here, that’s not negotiable. You are both cleared for entry at the front door and here at any time night or day. You won’t be disturbing anyone by entering the kitchen.” She stopped for a moment, then added, “Unless a meal is being prepared, and I assure you that you will know if you are not welcome when that happens.”

David thought it strange to use a kitchen for a secure meeting room but decided to leave that for another time. He followed the women away from the kitchen to a storage closet with a state-of-the-art safe tucked behind some cleaning supplies and kitchen sundries.

Shasha coded both their thumbprints to the lock and led them out of the room. She pressed a button near the door on her way out.

When they got to the driveway, Shasha indicated a large black vehicle. “You’ll both leave your vehicles here, and we will all go together in the SUV.”

## Episode 2 - Arrival

*Oh, Rhonda Steppe thought to herself as she picked up the small package. My life is going to change.*

The package didn't give off any obvious clue to give her this thought. There was nothing special about how it looked. It didn't thrum with energy or anything supernatural. There was no heat coming from it. No smell or anything at all that spoke of what was inside it. To the world, it was just another boxed-up artifact.

As chief forensic scientist at the Dayton Complex, Rhonda had seen thousands of packages like this one. Just that morning, a shipment from Ethiopia had arrived. Doctor Salis, the leader of the dig there, had called her personally. Something about parts of an ancient dwelling that shouldn't have been where they found them.

This package, though, this one called to her as soon as she heard Max open the back door of the loading dock. She had grabbed it as soon as she felt the "something." Max had given her a raised eyebrow, but he was used to her eccentricities and didn't comment.

She had no idea how she knew, except for a small tickle in her mind, just a slight impression of a foreign emotion. She would not have been able to explain it to someone even if she wanted to. It was a whisper she couldn't quite hear or understand. Like a foreign word whispered in her ear by an intimate, unintelligible friend. Not that she had any intimate friends. She had her colleagues in the institute, but none that she considered close enough to share whispers with. All she understood was there was now a wind inside her, and it brought change.

Rhonda heard a noise. It was like a bird warble, but there was emotion in it, *elation*, she thought. Something that connected with her, the sound of a like mind, or kindred soul. She heard it again, but she couldn't tell where it was coming from.

She examined the package, turning it over and over in her hands. Plain brown paper wrapped around the box. Inside the box would be a soft blue cloth wrapped around plastic wrap that would be wrapped around some old item that hadn't seen the light of day in thousands of years. Rhonda's specialty was in dating and identifying such things. She was the expert, the top of her class, the envy of all in her field.

She had no particular interest in being the best. She just was. It had never been any type of passion. In fact, though she didn't know it yet, she hadn't felt passionate about anything up to

this point in her life. Life was just a series of people, objects, and events. As a little girl, her various stepparents would try to get her excited. While the other kids in whatever home she found herself in got all excited over Christmas, Rhonda would do her best to fake it. But always, the uneasy looks of one or more of the people around her let her know that not everyone was fooled. She got better, as anyone will get better at anything with practice, but still she knew what she was faking seemed to be real to others. They felt and experienced actual euphoria, anger, excitement and all those other strange emotions. Rhonda had no idea what it was like to be excited about something.

That she was more intelligent than anyone she had ever met or even read about was also just something that was. It did nothing to make her feel important or proud. In fact, the only consequence of her intelligence was that she could barely stand being around other people. In school, she would daydream or read a suspense novel buried in a textbook while the teacher droned on and her fellow students asked obvious and stupid questions.

She was never caught. If a teacher was about to call on her, there were always tells, and even if they did manage to surprise her, all she had to do was ask for the question again, and then give the answer. She didn't feel superior so much as alien. She was Heinlein's stranger, only she long ago gave up trying to grok humanity.

She had once owned a dog who she had been fond of. At least Shippie had been loyal and loving to Rhonda. Mr. Reynolds, who lived below her, complained endlessly about Shippie's barking until the manager called the animal control people on her. She had lost Shippie. That was the story of her life. Other people were selfish, uncaring idiots. Revenge was even too much bother for her to get worked up about. Life was just, well, life. That others got all emotional about it was something she found mildly confusing. That others found her strange because of this was something she no longer let bother her.

Yet, she instantly felt *connection* to whatever was in this box.

There was another melodic sound. She looked up thinking maybe a bird had flown in from the loading dock.

"Max, you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Max was carefully trundling a cart filled with carefully wrapped boxes. He didn't look at Rhonda. He was busy trying to be careful. Max Farnslow was like that. Always careful. At lunch, Max would unwrap the folds of his brown paper bag with slow precision, pull

out his sandwich, set it just so on the table in front of him, unwrap the plastic as if it were a priceless treasure, and then with well-rehearsed movements, eat it without dropping a single crumb.

“Sounds like a bird got in here.” She looked around.

“I don’t hear any bird, Rhonda.” Max kept walking.

Rhonda sighed and placed the boxed artifact with another that had come from the dig. She secured them in the cart and carefully wheeled them behind Max. Then she felt something. Something between a caress, an itch, and a scratch, almost a shuffling in her head. It was a strange sensation, one that had no context. It unsettled her, and then she felt elation that nearly made her swoon. She had never in her life felt something so powerful, so strong. She thought that perhaps this was what she had been missing out on her whole life.

“Hey, let’s take a break.” Max was leaning against the door. “We’ve been here four hours without one. You want some coffee?”

She nearly told Max that she was skipping coffee, but she was unnerved and decided maybe a break would give her time to settle and absorb whatever this was. In a life spent swimming in the lukewarm, being suddenly sprayed with cold water made her gasp. She felt her body tingling with sensation, like the time an old boyfriend had talked her into going swimming in March. They had both dived in and been instantly stunned by the power of the chill water. She fought for enough control to not give this feeling away to Max. Besides, she should mimic normalcy. Go take a break the way a good little human would.

Fucking humans.

She again felt like cold water had been thrown on her. Where had that thought come from?

“Sure, Max, let’s go have coffee.” She wheeled the cart just inside her office door, then followed Max down the hall as the disappointment that surfaced with Max’s comment began turning into rage. A rage that startled her, as she knew it wasn’t hers. She settled as the foreign emotion grew quieter the further away she got from the box.

“You reading anything good?” Max said and then took a sip from his mug.

“I downloaded the next Jack Reacher novel. It’s every bit as good as the others. That Lee Child fella might be British, but he sure writes his characters as American as they come.”

“I’ll check it out. I’m near the end of the new In Death book. That Nora Roberts may be American, but sure can write American.” He deadpanned.

Rhonda wondered if she should laugh. This was the problem with being alone with someone. She sometimes had no way of knowing what the right response should be. Max wasn’t a standup comedian in her view, but people seemed to think he was funny. She decided to give a non-committal hrrmph and leave him to interpret it as laughter or not.

Rhonda and Max were both voracious readers. Ironically, Nora Roberts was his favorite, for her it was Lee Child and Jack Reacher who maintained the #1 spot on her list. In her opinion no one came close to being the badass that Lee Child had created

About halfway through her cup, Rhonda had calmed herself. By the time her cup was empty, she was ready. Then Stephanie Rohm came clacking up in her high heels. Stephanie was another forensic expert in the complex.

“Hi Max, you going to the bar later?”

Stephanie’s perfect smile, and her dark tight curls framing her oval face, made everyone in the complex orbit around her. Though her skin was darker than Rhonda’s, Stephanie was fond of telling people she was mixed race. Indeed, her white mother and black father had visited a few times. Rhonda didn’t understand why Stephanie thought it made her special, it was just another human behavior she didn’t understand

Rhonda did, of course, wonder about her own heritage. She had been raised in foster homes her entire life and had no idea who her birth mother or real father were. She had made up stories about them, giving them grandiose lives and esoteric reasons for abandoning their daughter. Her favorite was that an African national leader had had an affair with a diplomat from Romania. The leader had been obligated to marry for his country, but the Romanian diplomat got pregnant. They fought about the pregnancy, but the diplomat refused an abortion and fled to the U.S. where she had the baby, gave it away, and returned to her native country. Rhonda liked the idea of Romania and might even visit the country someday.

She felt no anger that she had not been given the joys of growing up in a real family. All of her foster parents had been kind to her and accepted her as one of theirs. But, of course, she was often moved just as she got settled in. From movies and television, she knew that foster care was generally considered to be hard on children, with shabby homes and abusive stepparents. The reality, at least for Rhonda, had been homes that were well kept and child safe. Adults who

cared enough to see that the children in their charge were fed, clothed, and educated. Some did it for the extra money and were unable to give the children what a real mother and father might, but the ones Rhonda had been put with had been responsible, and once in a while, they were also loving.

Growing up an orphan was just a part of who she was. She did wonder, though, from time to time about her parents and who they might really be. Maybe she would get that genetics test done just to satisfy her curiosity. Probably not though, she liked her daydreams of being from exotic places, and that her parents had left her because there was no other way for them.

She noticed Stephanie looking at her like she was expecting Rhonda to answer some query.

“I’m sorry, what?” Rhonda asked.

“Do you want to come for a drink with us after work?” Stephanie looked friendly. Everyone liked her. Rhonda knew that was reason to hate her more than normal, and she knew some of the other women did. But Rhonda, like with everything else couldn’t see the point of getting worked up over the woman.

“Thanks, I might just do that.” Rhonda smiled back. Something in Stephanie’s eyes seemed to change when Rhonda smiled.

“You okay?” Rhonda asked. Rhonda knew that look. The confused look of someone who knew Rhonda was not right.

“I’m fine. It’s nothing.” Stephanie’s expression softened. “I’ll buy your first drink if you come!” She glanced at Max. “You have those objects from the dig in South Dakota? I’ve been waiting for them. Dr. Hofland says they’re unusual.”

Rhonda stiffened. She was not about to give up the ... whatever it was. It was hers.

“I’ve got this one,” she said with more venom in her voice than she normally felt. It surprised her. It seemed to surprise all of them.

Stephanie got that look Rhonda often saw in the eyes of people she talked with. Part fear and part confusion.

“Okay, well...” Stephanie searched for words and finally said, “I’ve got work to do.” Her smile was now warm but with a little stiffness. “I’ll see you at the bar.” She clacked away as hurriedly as she could manage in her heels.

Rhonda noticed Max looking at her with a stony expression he often took with her.

“What?” she asked him.

“I thought you were going to have Stephanie examine these artifacts. I thought you were too busy with the overseas stuff.”

Because of her reputation and expertise, Rhonda got her pick of anything that came into the complex. The Ethiopian artifacts were interesting, but now she had something beyond interesting. She felt around her mind to find that tickle again. The whisper in a foreign tongue but it wasn't there now. Maybe she had to be near the artifact for it to manifest.

“Well, I changed my mind.” She got up with a quick movement, signaling the end of the conversation, walked back to her work room, and closed the door. She approached the work bench and touched the package. She heard the warbling once more, stronger now as though it filled the whole room. She smiled and caressed the package, thinking about change.

She forced herself to open the other package first. She unwrapped the paper, lifted the cloth wrapped object out, and put the paper in a container at the side of the bench. She slowly unraveled the cloth, being careful not to disturb whatever was inside the wrappings and saw carved wood. She unraveled the cloth further and exposed an ancient pipe of some sort. She swiveled a magnifier over the object. It was definitely old. Notes from the dig placed the age of the village at around 6,000 years. Certainly, something made of wood could not be that old. It would have been eaten by microbes and insects long, long ago.

She increased magnification. Yes, it was definitely oak. She could see the marks where the knife had carved out the figure of the bear.

She wondered if it had been placed there at a later date. Some other people had settled there, perhaps, and this got confused as being of the same time period. There had been that dig a few years back out of Utah, she remembered. Everyone getting so excited about a clay pot. It had been found in an ancient, pre-clay village. Because it had been found among other objects from the older time period, everyone thought it meant moving back the invention of fired utensils in North America. But when she had studied the dish more carefully, there were small remnants of corn. This alone would not have been significant except that the strain she found hadn't been developed until long after the dates of the other artifacts in the dig. So, the pot had to have been placed there by a more modern human.

She knew Dr. Hofland was no idiot. He would not have sent this thing to the Complex if he could be sure the artifact was not from the same era as the rest of the dig. Still, there was to be no assumptions in her lab.

She heard another warble. This one was loud and definitely coming from inside her head.

She went to her computer and called up the notes from the dig. One picture was of fossilized remains of a skeleton with this wooden pipe caught at an angle about midway down the torso. It looked to have been placed there with the person's burial remains. It would be unusual, she thought, for something like that to have been put there thousands of years later. She read the notes and shook her head. The dig had been methodical, with no indications of any later period humans having lived in the area.

She went back to the workbench and touched the pipe. Carved into one side was a figure. The stem was carved into the shape of a bear. The legs were carved so that they morphed into a large tree root. She would examine it closer later—right now, she wanted whatever was in that second wrapping.

Carefully, she cut the tape with Dr. Hofland's initials on it. She began unwrapping the paper. She had to stop a couple times to get control of the trembling in her hands. She got the paper unwrapped and placed it in the receptacle with the other wrapper.

She caressed the soft blue cloth now covering whatever it was that called to her. With great care, she moved her expert fingers to the edge of the covering and very slowly unraveled the object underneath. Rolling it toward the middle of the bench, she stopped as she caught sight of wood. Another wooden object. She noticed a scar on this one. She looked at and pulled the magnifier over and examined. It was charred. The object had been burned at some point in its long life.

Careful not to touch the object, she used forceps to strip away the last of the cloth. It was another carved bear. This bear was standing on two feet. She could see tiny teeth in its open mouth. She thought she could hear it roar, but it wasn't the sound of a bear she heard. Not that she had ever encountered a bear. Once, she had been set to go to a zoo with her classmates, but her stepmother at the time had gotten sick, and Rhonda had ended up staying home to take care of her.

But she had seen enough bears in shows on cable. These sounds were more birdlike, but strangely human as well. Like one of those stupid comic book characters, Bird Man or whatever.

The sound crept from her brain down her spine to reverberate through her entire body. She shivered. She had no experience, no memory of anything quite like this. If she had to guess, she'd have identified the feeling as excitement.

She touched the bear talisman and her workspace disappeared.

There was blood. Lots of blood. Horned talons and blue eyes. It was exhilarating and breathtaking. Her existence mattered for the first time. She had found what she had not known could exist. Something for her to care about, to obsess over even. Blood, and the demon. Yes, that was what she was experiencing. A demon. She felt its power now as a thrumming sensation through her entire body. She saw tents, native American tents, entrance covers flapping and blood trickling out. There were dozens of them. Quiet, bleeding tents. Not tents, she thought, but teepees, the blood staining the grass near each entrance.

She heard the sound of retching, but though it was close, she could not see who was vomiting. There was more warbling, now like laughter, and blue eyes over a large beak, but not a beak, a human-like face, stretched out to make the mouth almost triangular, with large, pointed teeth protruding from black gums. The demon was laughing, blood dripping from its mouth. There was no sign of any blood anywhere else on it. She wondered briefly about that, but she supposed this was some sort of hallucination, and who knew what the rules were? Maybe blood wasn't important to the scene, so there just wasn't much of it.

She let go of the bear, and the hallucination ended. She got out her black light to see what it could show her. That's what she told herself, although she knew there was more to it than that. She wanted the lights out, or maybe it was the demon who wanted the darkness. It was disorienting, having these wants, desires, feelings that weren't her own. She stopped a moment as the room swam a bit around her. She gripped the table and closed her eyes for a few seconds. Then the dizziness passed. She was fine again. She moved to the door to hit the light switch.

She wasn't yet sure what thoughts were hers and what were from the demon. She cut the lights and shone the black light over the bear. It shined, a luminous essence as if coated in phosphene.

She heard a noise and looked to her left. Her breath left her. She clutched her chest. She had never seen anything so ... so ... magnificent. Yes, that was exactly the word. Magnificent. Terrible, powerful, unspeakable. Magnificent.

The demon did have blue eyes and horned talons. The eyes looked human and sad. The sadness made her uncomfortable. She couldn't look away, but something felt wrong about staring into such sad human-looking eyes. She wondered at that sadness. Or perhaps it was just a ruse. Like some insects that look like something else in order to fool predators. But this was not something that had any predator she thought. This was *the* predator, the top of the food chain. Its sadness couldn't be real. She could feel this demon in her mind and body. There was nothing but an insatiable hunger there now.

*'I am Night Warrior and I seek death.'* She heard it in her head and knew it was not coming from her brain.

*'Find me life so I can make death.'* There was emotion attached. The thing was not asking for its death. No, it wanted to give death to someone else. She could feel its lust, and it felt so good. She let that lust fill her with longing and desire. She had never felt like this for a man. Her sex drive was a pale imitation of the deep-seated longing that sat now in her bones and made them ache with anticipation and unsatiated desire.

She looked at the demon now. She reached out to touch its face. It shied away, chittering. Like a bird, she thought. Its face was stretched out so that the only human thing about it were the eyes. Its extended mouth made the thing look cartoonish. A hideous caricature drawn by the mind of a disturbed artist. The head was triangular, almost like a bird's beak but fleshy, dark colored black gums holding those extraordinary teeth. Just like in the hallucination. Its arms ended not in hands but in talons. Bird talons.

*'Find me life so I can make death.'* It demanded again.

"Yes, my friend. Yes." She smiled at it and reached out to caress the thing again. Again, it shied away this time hissing.

*'No touch,'* the demon said. Rhonda began to think. Where could she take it? How would she hide it? It was huge, at least seven feet tall, maybe eight.

She was contemplating how she might coax it into a crate when the light came on in the outer office, through the open workroom door. The light hit it square and the demon disappeared. She looked around the space, but there was nowhere such a large specimen could have hidden. *The light!* She thought, and then grinned. It was going to be easy-peasy lemon-squeezie to hide the demon.

"Hello? Rhonda? You here?" Max called from her outer office.

Rhonda smiled and looked at the light switch.

### Episode 3 - Bonding

Rhonda shivered with the hugeness of the emotions rocking her. Without thinking about Max being a friend, she called out, “Back here, Max. I’m black lighting the artifacts. Turn off that light.”

The light went out, and Rhonda could hear him walking into the workroom. She grinned and held herself, trembling like a new bride as she heard the demon hiss in appreciation and move toward Max. Max’s face glowed briefly in the soft light. He looked confused when he saw the demon. In the darkness, Rhonda was sure Max couldn’t tell what he was looking at. He seemed to be processing what this large thing was facing him.

Rhonda felt like she thought those other kids must have felt at Christmas. While she waited, confused by their excitement, they tore into the wrapping on their gifts. She would sit quietly and unwrap hers, all the while wondering what the fuss was about. It was toy or clothes. Who cared?

But now.... oh yes, now she understood. Max was her gift, and she felt she must be dying with excitement. This was the moment; this was her Christmas. Why hadn’t she seen this before?

She tried to remember if she had ever been excited by death. She remembered finding dead cats or squirrels walking to the store or to some friend’s house. She wondered if she had been too insulated maybe, or maybe it was because she wasn’t present for the creature’s moment of transition. She thought that must be it. Now, here was transition. Here was the big moment she could not explain if she tried. Her mind brought up Ed Sullivan: a black and white, TV image of a tuxedoed corpse-like man exclaiming *We have a really big shoo tonight!* Her heart raced, her breathing was heavy.

Max opened his mouth to scream, but Night Warrior shot out a talon with unfathomable speed and skewered Max under the chin and deep inside his skull.

Rhonda enjoyed sex. She got the urge from time to time and was attractive enough she had never had any trouble finding a partner when she wanted one. She would get dressed up and hit one of the singles bars near her home. A few smiles, and men came running to buy her a drink. She’d laugh at their stupid jokes, and determine which of the attractive ones was the least moronic, and then she’d take him home, scratch her itch, and kick the bastard out. But she had never orgasmed before.

She thought it might be the lack of skill of her partners at first, but when one after the other failed to finish her, she knew it must be something physiological. One poor sap told her he couldn’t cum until he had given her an orgasm. He tried and tried, his heavy breathing and urgent thrusts making her less interested as his pale white face mooned over hers. He’d then traversed her from neck to crotch with his tongue, but the more he tried, the less she felt like continuing.

She had finally stopped his urgent attempts and kicked him out. He had dressed, tied his shoes, and left without looking at her or speaking. She saw him once or twice in one of the bars she often visited. He always studiously avoided eye contact and left soon after her arrival.

She had tried masturbation, but maybe she wasn't imaginative enough to bring herself to orgasm. While diddling with her vagina and clitoris felt nice, it never got her off for some reason. She finally stopped worrying about it and just went out and found a man when she felt like being fucked.

She concluded long ago it was just physically impossible for her to orgasm. She hadn't cared enough to discuss this with a doctor. She had no idea that it was not impossible, but that she had been going about it the wrong way. She enjoyed having a man fucking her and that had been enough.

But what she experienced now nearly made her faint. Her breath grew heavy and it was as though she couldn't gulp down enough air. She watched Night Warrior tear into her friend and felt warmth and tension build and build inside her. Max made a soft gagging sound, and Night Warrior used his other talon to gut the man from crotch to chest. Blood spurted all over the place, but nothing got stained.

Rhonda was confused at first, her brain insisting there were splatters of red everywhere. But there weren't. She saw the blood coming out of Max, but it never hit anything. It seemed to all be drawn to Night Warrior as if the demon was a magnet. When no more blood squirted from Max's corpse, Night Warrior seemed to glow. It dropped the body on the floor, lifeless and bloodless. Now, seeing the life leaving Max's body, she shuddered in orgasm. It was so strong it took her breath away and froze her for an instant. She broke out of her surprise and breathed in deep gulps of air.

Max's body lay on the floor. She laughed and grabbed a stool. She felt elated and dizzy. She laughed out loud at the expression on Max's face, at the body sprawled on the floor like a carelessly tossed string puppet. She got control of herself after a minute or so.

Blood. So much blood. Blood that had disappeared into the demon. She picked up the black light and swept it around the room. Most of the blood wasn't there. She looked down at herself. She looked back at Max. She blinked and looked at the demon. Night Warrior was clean as well.

*Neat trick*, she thought. It was as if Night Warrior was a blood vacuum cleaner, sucking it all up before it could mess up the place.

She took a breath and gathered herself. The demon rocked back and forth, chittering to itself as it looked at its handiwork. She took another deep breath. She would have to get them out of here.

Her thoughts clicked and clattered at the speed of sound, moving like one of those Japanese trains she'd read about down the tracks of her mind. Using the black light to find a clear path, she moved to the wall and turned on the light switch. As she did so, Night Warrior gave an annoyed chitter and disappeared. She felt it inside of her, its desires—and something else. Arrogance? It was foreign to her, maybe not even a human emotion, she decided.

Well, she wouldn't be needing the crate, obviously. But she would have to be careful to avoid darkness if too many people were around. She smiled. There would be time for others, but now she had to get out.

She looked around, then grabbed the bear from the table, forgetting the pipe, which had been knocked off the table during the commotion and was now lodged behind a cabinet

Rhonda moved to the outer office, closed the door, and locked her workspace. She got her coat and purse. No one would be looking in here for a while. She had at least the night. A night to find more excitement. She felt the demon chattering in her head. '*Like me,*' she heard in her thoughts.

"Yes, I am like you." She laughed as she sauntered to the elevator. The night was young. She was going to enjoy her next orgasm and she knew exactly where she was going to find it.

She had been acquainted with a few druggies in her time. Many of the children who came to the foster homes were there because their parents were addicts. They were often quiet and morose. Having been exposed to things most grownups had never encountered tended to make most of them shy of people in general. But there were exceptions.

In her last home when she was seventeen and ready to graduate, Rhonda had met Emily. While Rhonda had obtained a scholarship and was going to enter Princeton at the end of the summer, Emily seemed content to just party and have fun. There wasn't any meanness in Emily; in fact, anyone who met her would soon be smiling if they weren't made of granite. Emily just had a fondness for drugs, sex, and rock and roll. She had safety pins stuck in her earlobes and nostrils, and a few more through her upper lip. Her stringy blond hair was always cropped short, so Emily didn't have to mess with it. She was thin, almost emaciated, as she often forgot to eat.

Rhonda had rather liked her new roommate. Not as much as Rhonda Sue; after all, Emily was pretty much a moron like the rest of the human race, but she was a sweet moron, a "wouldn't hurt a fly" kind of moron, who had a talent for making the people around her feel good about themselves.

Emily would sneak out of the house most every night and always tried to get Rhonda to go with her. Rhonda always refused, even on the weekends. She was busy studying or reading. She just couldn't see the point of meeting a bunch of strangers and making small talk or smoking j's.

But on their very last night together, Rhonda had packed up her stuff and was ready for the morning's journey to the bus station to start her trip to Princeton. Emily had given her a bright pink, yellow, and blue yarn bracelet that she had made. Rhonda was touched. She hadn't thought to get anything for her roomie. If she had been a normal person this would have bothered her, she supposed.

Emily wanted one thing from Rhonda before she left. She wanted Rhonda to go to a party with her. Rhonda had declined at first, but Emily was insistent and told Rhonda that she could make up for not having a gift by coming with her to some party somewhere.

“Come on, Rhonda, you can sleep on the bus. Come have some fun with me tonight. It’s probably the last time we will ever see each other!” Emily’s insistence and her smile had worn Rhonda down.

Rhonda was not ready for sleep. She knew she would just be lying in her bed thinking of Princeton and how her life was going to change.

So, they snuck out the basement window and peddled off on their bikes. The night was warm but not yet hot. Spring was over, but summer was still too new to have become oppressive, and the air still had the memory of chill to it.

It had been a small adventure, Rhonda now thought as she looked back on it. They rode through quiet streets, lit by strategically placed streetlights. The moon had been full, Rhonda remembered, and that had added soft lighting to the field they rode through on a path worn by countless generations of young people on bicycles.

Eventually they had ended up under a large concrete bridge spanning three major highways and one major river. There, they found Emily’s friends already partying. There was a boombox playing music, and a dozen or so young people sat in a circle around it passing a joint.

Rhonda sat with them, inhaling the joint as it was passed to her, though she never really got much of a high. She did it mainly to fit in and not stick out. The crowd seemed not to notice her quietness. Emily was, of course, the light of the party, telling stories that cracked everyone else up.

During one of these, Rhonda had noticed a rather dirty old man with a shawl over his shoulders pushing a shopping cart from Kroger’s Grocery while holding a rounded squarish bottle, which Rhonda guessed was a pint of some sort of alcoholic beverage.

The old man shuffled over to them. “Got any spare change for an old man?” he asked.

Emily’s friends weren’t bullies. Most of them had looked uncomfortable and shook their heads, but no one had been rude. Emily had gotten up and dug through her pockets, finding a five-dollar bill. Rhonda knew this was most likely Emily’s lunch money for the next day, and Emily really couldn’t afford to skip a meal. Still, Emily had smiled, saying “Here you go, old timer” and handing the money over.

“Where did he come from?” Rhonda remembered asking the group, which had fallen quiet while they listened to the old shopping cart squeak away from them.

“There’s a homeless village down there and around the corner.” Emily said, pointing to where another bridge crossed under the one they were partying under.

There was probably still a homeless village down there, Rhonda thought. A convenient, and quiet, location for the next killing. This would be a multiple homicide, she smiled to herself. But first she needed to do some research.

She drove home, restraining her desire to hurry. No one was going to go into her office, and it would be hours or maybe even days yet before Max was discovered missing. Max had lived alone and, as far as she knew, wouldn't be missed at least until he didn't show up tomorrow morning. There were no guards at the facility. It was secured with key cards and thumb print access plates for the more sensitive locations like their labs. Rhonda made a check list in her mind as she drove. She would need to find another car. She wondered if she could find a used lot which would take her cash and forego the usual niceties of identification. She doubted this, which left her with trying to find a vehicle that wouldn't be missed and which she could easily steal.

Rhonda knew she would have to run. Eventually Max would be found and there would be questions. She had decided she was going to head west, but first she would need to drain her bank accounts. She only had checking and savings. She tried to think of a way to access her retirement funds but felt that there wasn't going to be a way to get that money. She would just have to figure out how to use her newfound friend to acquire funds. She thought of becoming a hired killer, but had no idea where to even begin. How did one go about advertising death for sale?

She stopped at a bank on the way home and pulled out as much cash as the machine would allow. Once she had done a little research, she would continue finding banks heading north out of the city to stop at and pull out the rest of her money. Then she would head west without, she hoped, leaving any trace.

Before going home, she stopped at a pharmacy about ten miles from home and bought a few things, paying for them with cash and doing her best to avoid any cameras.

That was one of the things she planned on researching. Surveillance, and how to avoid it.

Once home, she set her purchased items on the bathroom counter and set about cutting her hair, then dying it blond.

She had a couple wigs which she would take with her. Her height was going to have to stay the same. She was never one for wearing heels, and she was fairly sure being quick on her feet from now on. She could pad her weight a bit. It was summer, but a windbreaker might not stand out. Maybe she could pad the insides to make her look heavier. She picked up the scissors and began cutting.

A few hours later, showered and blond, she gathered a few clothes into a suitcase. She considered simply putting a toothbrush in her pocket and heading out like Jack Reacher, but Reacher had never worried about being recognized. She was going to be on the run and thought bringing things to disguise herself was a wise decision.

Once packed, she sat at her computer and looked up a few things. She used her Tor browser and a VPN to access the internet. Once done, she would pull the hard drive out of her computer and take it with her. She'd find a way to destroy or get rid of it on the way out of the city.

First, she looked up how to break into a car. A lot of ads for lock smithing and locksmith schools popped up. She didn't have time for lessons, and she only briefly considered hiring a locksmith. She could lure him into her home and simply turn out the lights once she was done. But just how to coax lessons from whoever, and just how involved the lessons would be, discouraged this thought. Besides, she had neighbors, and if things got messy, there would be noise. Noise might be reported, especially from Mr. Bentel next door. He was always nosing around, looking for signs of trouble.

She found a couple sites that showed how to open a car when the keys were left in the ignition. She noted the few tools she would need and moved to a different search.

She found a few used car lots she could check out on the north side on her way out of town. She printed out information she thought she would need and then turned off her computer. Getting a few tools from her tool drawer, she opened up the casing, took out the hard drive and the motherboard, just to be safe, then put the cowling back in place so that nothing looked like it had been touched.

She stored the computer hardware, wrapped in dish towels, in her suitcase under her wigs, then looked at her list. Everything was checked off. She smiled, grabbed her baseball hat (go Cubs), and checked one more time to see that everything was locked up and turned off. She wouldn't be coming back here. She was okay with that. It had been home since she returned here from college, but it was still just a place to live. She felt no real attachment to it.

She got in the car and closed the door, and as the lights went out, Night Warrior appeared. It was cramped. Its head was bowed all the way forward, knees into its chest, and shoulders touching the window on one side and shoving her into the driver's side window on the other. It screeched. In her head, it registered surprise and anger. She saw it was about to start ripping its way out when she opened her door again and with the light, Night Demon disappeared.

*Hang on, I'll make room*, she thought at the creature. She reached over and moved the seat back as far as it would go, then started the car and slid the passenger window all the way down. Again, she closed her door and as the light winked out, the demon appeared.

It was still cramped, but she thought it would be manageable. Maybe she should look for a bigger vehicle. Like a panel van or a large box truck.

*Don't destroy*, she thought at it again.

The demon hissed but didn't think/say anything to her. She drove carefully off into the night. If anyone noticed the large, strange creature next to her, she didn't notice. It was late, and there wasn't much traffic.

She occasionally checked out cars she was traveling next to. She would glance over and see who was driving, who was riding. Never once in all the times she had done this had anyone ever been looking back at her. It was a cultural taboo, she had decided. Something innate that caused people to notice cars

and not the people in them. She thought it had a lot to do with road rage. When you could dismiss the human inside the tin can next to you, it became just a tin can.

People were strange. One time at night, she had driven by a middle-aged man driving naked with his overhead light on. Clearly the guy wanted to be noticed, but not once while she was alongside the idiot did he register her presence.

Rhonda pulled through an opening in a fence and into a weed-infested lot, the asphalt lined with dark scars where cracks had long ago been patched poorly. There were no other cars here. She pulled up near a hole in the chain link fence that encircled the lot and turned off the ignition. She got out and looked around. The lot was in even worse repair than she remembered it being on that long-ago party night. Some of the cracks had become large holes. Weeds grew here and there, grass poking through, with dark stains of burned trash strewn around the whole lot in random patterns.

The demon was still in the car. Silent and still, it sat and looked out at the river beyond the fence, across to the lit skyscrapers of the city beyond. Rhonda realized the demon had no frame of reference for what it was seeing. There was no memory that it could possibly have that would give it some familiar recognition, she guessed.

She walked around to the passenger side and opened the door. Night Warrior looked at the opening for a second, then bumped its head and hissed as it got out of the car. They began walking the same field she and Emily had walked through a decade earlier.

She saw the first bridge and noticed there were old barrels with fires lit in them. They continued walking, Night Warrior now chattering and hissing in anticipation. *Death, death, death and blood*, the words forming and melting in her head like a mantra.

As they got within about ten yards of the encampment, Night Warrior sprinted out and grabbed a sleeping figure off the ground. There was a crackling sound, like someone snapping a Kit Kat bar. She was far enough back she couldn't really see, so she started running. She didn't want to miss out on any of this. She made a mental note though, about the ten yards. That was its boundary, she thought. It couldn't go more than ten yards from her.

As she got near, she saw Night Warrior throw the body of a young woman at the trash can, toppling it and spilling the fire inside, making it grow brighter. The demon hissed at this but did not disappear. Rhonda wondered how she might test just how much light it took to make the demon disappear back inside her.

Night Warrior picked up another figure, this one smaller. Rhonda could see it was child. She heard bones snap, then a small scream, then blood drenched the demon before being absorbed. She knew that other people would have been especially revulsed by this killing, most likely getting sick at the child's brutal death. She couldn't figure out just why people were especially fond or protective of

children. To her they were just little people, and often obnoxious ones. Even the quiet ones freaked her out, especially the way some would stare at her.

There was another woman next to the child. Blood squirted in the woman's eyes, waking her. The woman didn't know what was happening at first but then saw the demon claw open the child's (her child's?) stomach, and blood gushed in the woman's face. She screamed and ran. Maybe it hadn't been her child, Rhonda thought. Wouldn't a mother try to attack the demon?

As the woman ran blindly away, Rhonda could make out something in the woman's path. A kitchen chair? Its back was towards the woman and had knobbed posts at either end sticking up. The woman tripped on a rock and fell onto one of the knobs, impaling her throat as she did. The knob stuck out the back of the woman's neck and the screaming was abruptly cut off.

Night Warrior was making a noise. Rhonda knew she had heard it before, then realized it was the laughter she had heard in the dream/vision she had had in the lab. Night Warrior had a sense of humor. They both watched as the woman gargled and tried to free herself. It was over fairly quickly. Night Warrior absorbed the blood as the woman shuddered and died.

There was something familiar about the woman's face. As the demon moved quickly to catch the running homeless, Rhonda bent down and peered at the woman. Safety pins in her ear lobes, eyebrows, and nostrils. She was older, and stockier, but this was definitely Emily she was looking at.

Huh, she thought. Imagine that.

Rhonda followed the demon, feeling the exaltation build in her. Each new corpse made her breathing grow heavier. Soft pleasure moans escaped her lips at intervals. She wondered how many people were here. She exploded inside. It was so powerful that her knees quit working and she went down to the pavement, watching the demon do its wet work.

There were six corpses now, and no one was asleep. If they weren't dead, they were running. Some seemed confused and ran right at the demon. Night Warrior slashed and grabbed, blood pouring out, while Rhonda felt wave after wave of pleasure wash over her. It was so good. So damn good.

In the back of her mind, she looked back at her gray life and marveled at how she had managed to keep from killing herself. The drabness of it all. This was Life, with a big fat capital L. She got up and walked closer to the demon as he held a man in his left hand, no claw, she thought. It had claws not hands. She was still getting used to its physiology. The man struggled and cried out. Rhonda couldn't tell what his race might be, he seemed covered in dirt. She got closer and decided from his features that he was white.

Night Warrior was chittering away, squeezing the man, who had quit screaming. There was a crunching sound as the man's ribs gave way. Night Warrior chattered some more, and with its other claw, it sliced off the man's head. Blood drenched Night Warrior, then disappeared. Rhonda wondered what

purpose this might serve to the demon. Was it food? But it couldn't possibly have eaten in the thousands of years it lay dormant in the grave of that ancient person. Some form of energy though, she was sure.

Night Warrior dropped the corpse, all its blood drained now, and looked around. Rhonda noticed that there were no more people. They had all scattered. She thought she heard splashes coming from the river, but it was far enough away that it could have been her imagination.

The two of them walked under the bridge towards the second span. This one crossed the river, so it had less room beneath it for shelters. Rhonda could see a few makeshift tents here and there. One had black plastic bags held up over kitchen chairs similar to the one the woman had died on. Night Warrior ripped through the plastic, exposing a man cowering underneath. The man tried to bolt away, but the demon skewered him through the back and out the front near his belly button. The man moaned, a sound very much the male version of what was coming from Rhonda, only for a different reason. Blood gushing from his abdomen, he died.

Rhonda felt another wave of ecstasy wash over her, and the dizziness returned. She blinked and shook her head, following the demon as it passed several more tents. It seemed to know which were empty and which had someone trying to hide.

Several people bolted from nearby tents, running towards the river. Night Warrior was on them before they got five steps away, slashing and biting, spurting blood into the night air. The smell of it made Rhonda giddy. She hadn't ever really smelled blood before tonight. It was like heavy wine, filling her head with sensations of life turned death. She followed on, breathless, giddy, laughing, moaning, a madness fallen over her that was at once welcome and wondered at.

One young woman was trying to crawl away. The demon had dropped her and chased after a man. Rhonda looked down at the woman. Blood was oozing from somewhere under her. She looked back and saw Rhonda.

"Please", the woman whispered. "Please."

Rhonda smiled and put her shoe on the woman's neck. With all her weight, she pressed down and heard the woman's neck snap. There was a convulsion that shivered through the body and then it lay still. Rhonda laughed, drunk on the power of death. Her first kill, every delicious moment seared into her memory. She would remember this for the rest of her life. Even if she died tonight, she would die happy.

An arm snaked around her neck from behind and squeezed until she couldn't breathe.

"Make it stop, or I'll kill you, bitch."

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