

Darklighter

by
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Part One

Chapter One

(Dancing with the Crazy)

The run-down apartment buildings and marginal businesses were a hodgepodge of styles from different eras. In their decay, they appeared to slump towards the street full of cars that were bumper to bumper and expelling exhaust in white clouds. The good elements of society rubbed elbows with the worst in a miasma of humanity; shopping, taking their kids to school, going to work, or standing on street corners ready to rob the weak or start a fight. They all parted like the Red Sea to let one man through, though. Me. They moved away from me as if we were polar opposites repelling each other.

Maybe height had something to do with it? Though I'm slim, I'm nearly six feet tall. Or maybe it was my edgy and dangerous appearance? Okay, in reality I look more like a tall, skinny raven, my wings the fluttering of my black trench coat around my long legs. My spikey black hair and dark sunglasses couldn't negate my non-edgy or dangerous looking long, rudder like nose either. I imagine they felt my strong aura of dislike for everything in general. That aura and my long strides, keeping in time to the pounding beat of the heavy metal band coming through my earbuds, probably gave people the impression that I just might walk right over them.

Ahead of me, two young men came careening out of the crowd as they did their best to pound each other into oblivion. They were dressed poorly for the weather, as if trying to show their machismo. Tattoos covered their bodies in intricate designs, symbols, and inflammatory words. Some were engraved crudely, as if done with a sharp instrument during a drunken night of grief or rage. Piercings and holes peppered them in places that were designed to cause conversations about the decline of youth, morality, and common sense.

The crowd wisely gave them space.

Without breaking stride, my mind on nothing in particular and my 'don't give a fuck' a lot stronger than theirs, I challenged their claim to a piece of urban territory that had been theirs by right of might. They almost collided with me, but then seemed to veer off at the last possible moment as if repelled by the barrier of my indifference. They broke off their fight and wore mirror expressions of wariness as I passed between them and continued down the sidewalk. In the next moment, they collided together as they began their fight again, two elemental titans of muscle and negative emotions hell bent on mutual destruction.

The adrenaline rush caused by my moment of danger made me tingle and my heart beat strongly. It was like taking a hit of a drug, a pick me up to get my day started. The rush let me know I was alive. Sometimes I doubted it. Being Jack

McGuire, homicide detective and the resident weirdo of the 49th precinct didn't make for days filled with sunshine and unicorns after all.

Light rain began dripping from the sky as if God was personally taking it into his own hands to make everyone's morning commute a little more miserable. Some people pulled up their hoods. A few better prepared souls raised and opened umbrellas. I had neither and nor did a blind, crippled beggar.

Sitting in his wheelchair by the wall of a boarded up business, the beggar's dark sunglasses were looking hard at nothing. His thick, gray brows were drawn down in a frown. His dark skin was wrinkled and leathery. His clothing was made up of thrift store specials. The sign he wore was cardboard. Its message, scrawled in black marker, was either a plea or a condemnation; Need help. It was placed in front of a plastic cup. It was the generic cup that came from a gas station drink fountain that gave reduced refills if you returned with the cup. Rain drops covered the old man like diamonds.

I didn't give a fuck about the beggar. I was more interested in a paper machine. They were becoming rare. I despised online news, I liked my news on paper I could turn and fold with bits that I could tear out if I liked or needed them. My morning wasn't complete without a stop to get my paper. Only this time, my pockets were devoid of change. My coins were back at my apartment by the front door, in a little blue plastic dish, on a badly painted red table

“Fuck me!”

I searched every pocket again, wondering how I had forgotten such an important part of my routine. My pockets were deep and repositories for every kind of object, some needed and others not. Change was not among them.

From the perspective of a citizen on the street, my next move probably looked heartless in the extreme. It begged intervention from some passing hero of justice. No hero appeared as I turned and strode over to the panhandler and began searching in his cup for coins.

The beggar made his outrage clear and he was loud enough to be heard over my music. “Hey! What are you doing? You're stealing from the blind, you fucker!” He jerked the cup away from me, but not quickly enough. I had taken enough money for my newspaper.

Ignoring the beggar's curses, I returned to the paper machine. Putting in the coins, the machine made satisfying clinks. Opening the rusty door of the machine, I retrieved my paper and tucked it under my arm.

The beggar was furious now. He began to rise from his chair, but then restrained himself and settled into his seat again. His quick, covert glances at the crowd revealed his intent to defraud the public. After repositioning his cup and his sign, he glared at me and spat on the sidewalk. His spit mixed with the rain as I strode away uncaring.

Only a few feet down the sidewalk, I felt a sudden, hard grip on my arm. I yanked my earbuds out with one hand and raised the other to grip the ragged coat of the man who had grabbed me. I was ready for a fight, ready to defend myself against a thief. Instead, I was confronted by another homeless man. I relaxed my defensive stance and released his coat, grimacing in disgust at the filth on it.

“I’m not a faker like him. I’m the real thing, Buddy,” the man whined. “Maybe you don’t have change, but I could use a dollar or two for a cup of coffee.”

He was standing in a dark alley. Like the beggar in the wheelchair, he too was dressed in thrift store couture, but his was the real deal. He smelled like piss and months of missed baths.

I turned leveled my sunglasses at the man, trying to be intimidating. I hated being touched.

The homeless man let go of my arm nervously. He patted the material of my coat as if to say, there, I didn’t hurt it, before he stepped back. He was a lone, frightened figure waiting for charity or bodily harm. The rain slowly dripped from the sky, tiny drops dotting him and the refuse just visible in the shadows. There were a few, large cardboard boxes that had been flattened and leaned against a wall; a makeshift shelter that was slowly soaking up the wet. A smell was coming from the ally; the reek of rot and death. It wasn’t human death, though. Being a homicide detective, I was well acquainted with that smell.

I rubbed my nose in disgust as I pulled out my wallet.

The homeless man’s attitude changed from fearful to hopeful. He was rubbing his cold hands together, watching me go through my wallet with avid interest.

“Yeah, you smell it? Terrible isn’t it? It’s not me, I swear.” The homeless man chuckled. “Some guy dumped trash down there a week ago and the smell’s getting bad enough for me to move.” He looked worried suddenly. “It’s a good spot, though. People don’t bother me here.”

I pulled a small white card from my wallet, gave it a flourish to get the homeless man’s attention, and then handed it to him. It was the address of a recovery center, food bank, shelter, and a psychologist that worked with the homeless. See? I’m not a total dick.

The homeless man took the card with a bewildered expression. As he touched the card something slid out of the shadows behind him. As quick as a pouncing leopard it rushed forward to stand at the beggar’s back, towering menacingly over him. My grip on the card unintentionally tightened and I played a strange tug-of-war with the homeless man before I came back to myself and released it. I stepped back warily.

The creature met all the requirements of a demon from hell, except existing when it should have been a myth dreamed up to scare parishioners into attending church. Tall and naked, its skin was the color of hellfire. Its bulging eyes stared

down intently at the homeless man and its sharp claws opened and closed reflexively. Two small horns on its head completed its appearance and looked as if they had been borrowed from a goat. It was emaciated, as if there were a shortage of people willing to sell their black souls for him to eat.

I felt deeply disturbed, especially when the demon barred its sharp teeth and its drool dripped onto the homeless man's head along with the rain. Its drool seemed heavier, though, and it made definite plopping noises. There was also a smell that was stronger than the stink of the homeless man and the garbage behind him. It wasn't a fire and brimstone smell. It was more like stinking dead dog, a rat infestation, and rotten fish all rolled into one. The creature wasn't casting a shadow, even though the homeless man was, and it flickered like a strobe light, in and out of existence, as if it was having trouble staying outside of a nightmare.

I frowned sharply, ducked my head, and looked away. The normalcy of the street traffic and the pedestrians passing by was unnerving. I put my earbuds back in. The music started, the loud, heavy beat as numbing as a shot of whiskey. Without looking at the homeless man, I continued my commute to work.

I heard the homeless man scream, "Fuck You!" even over the music.

My sudden step to the left into a world where demons draw fetid breath and menace homeless people was not an unusual occurrence for me. My psychologist says they're a manifestation of a childhood trauma I'm trying hard not to remember. Since the childhood I do remember was pretty normal, we've agreed to disagree. I've managed to hold down a job and make the rent on a small apartment despite these phantom intrusions, but it hasn't been easy. If I didn't solve most of my caseload, I'm sure my superiors would have been less likely to put up with my unorthodox behavior and my bad habits. You don't see gruesome, demonic, supernatural entities without reaching for the bottle once in a while. All right, more than once in a while. It gets me through the rough patches. It's not my fault there are a lot of those.

I have a theory that has nothing to do with childhood trauma and a lot to do about getting an overdose of heroin from my dear old drug addict dad when I was nine. I almost died. I probably suffered brain damage. My visions started then... or my childhood trauma that caused my visions.... Okay, I'll admit I didn't have a completely normal childhood, but my dad had kept his drug use under wraps until he had wanted to share with me during a high. Like I said, I can agree to disagree on that point. Anyway, my visions seem to coincide with my brain working through something; a case, a sticky part of my life, or something subliminal that I didn't even know existed. My brain went 'click' and I was suddenly handed all the answers from somewhere deep inside my psyche.

The visions seemed to have some sort of passing connection to the answers. It helped me solve cases. Unfortunately, until I was given the answers by that deep

thinking part of my brain, I was being scared shitless enumerable times by these horror show, mythological, manifestations of my firing brain cells. Do you blame me for drinking now? At least I stay away from the bottle until after I clock out of work. Well, usually.