

Darklighter

by
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Part Two

Chapter Two

Something Old, Something New

Striding through the double glass doors of the 49th Precinct like a bad omen, I jerked out my earbuds and headed directly for the stained coffee maker to the left of the doors. It was a canister coffee maker that made 32 cups at a time. Its shiny metal surface was dented and there was a crease that looked suspiciously like a close call with a bullet. There were Styrofoam cups for the public, but underneath in a cabinet, the officers kept their personal mugs stacked on a plastic rack. World's Greatest Dad vied for space with Bitch Until Coffee Added and Cat Person. I wasn't sure who cleaned the mugs and kept the coffee maker full, but they were diligent in their job. The coffee maker was never empty.

I left my sunglasses on and tucked my newspaper into one of my jacket pockets as I picked up my coffee mug, a white one that said 'This Shit Is Mine' on it in big black letters. My hands shook slightly as I hit the tap and filled my mug to the brim with steaming coffee. It smelled wonderful. It made a wonderful sound as it filled my cup. I swallowed hard as the liquid nirvana in my cup trembled and sloshed alarmingly. Watching it closely, to make certain I didn't lose a drop, I turned to the crowded room and carefully threaded the maze of desks, officers, citizens, and perps that filled the old precinct office to capacity.

It was a sea of people all intent on breaking the sound barrier and causing as much trouble as possible as they argued, struggled, cursed, gave statements, and shouted obscenities as overworked officers tried to do their jobs in a gothic style building that hadn't changed much since the 1920's. Aside from the addition of computers and a phone system, the peeling plaster, the cracked marble floors, tall, narrow windows with old frames, Depression era glass, and the inconveniently placed columns throughout the room, would have made Elliot Ness feel at home.

A big perp in a leather biker jacket, with a bald head and a tattoo of a skull on his forehead, looked offended when I stuck an elbow into his back and pushed him out of my way. The perp couldn't retaliate with his hands behind his back locked together with a zip tie, but his glare down at me was enough to melt paint off of steel. I ignored him as I continued to my desk at the center of the chaos.

The chaos continued onto my desk. Case files were stacked high and threatening to topple over in a metal IN bin that had probably serviced three generations of detectives before me. My desk was littered with more files, candy wrappers, and empty food containers. My computer screen was covered in sticky notes. An old style rolodex was full of business cards, notes, and hastily scrawled

names and phone numbers on bits of paper that looked torn from fast food bags. One phone number without a name had been scrawled on part of a Styrofoam cup.

I sat down in my chair, holding my mug of coffee in both hands. With my eyes still hidden behind my sunglasses, I sipped my coffee slowly, my face settling into an expression of utter contentment.

“The Chief—”

“Wait!” I barked the word without opening my eyes. I slowly sipped my coffee a few more times, savoring every swallow. It had a rich, nutty flavor that danced on my palette while its warmth took the chill of horror and cold rain off my thin body and damaged psyche.

I sighed and finally lowered my coffee cup.

“Okay, now.”

Officer Carl Sparks was a career, spit and polish, by the book kind of police officer. His blonde hair was cut in a severe crew cut and his blue eyes were always serious. He worked out regularly in order to execute his duties to the best of his ability. He was my complete opposite in everything, which made it hard for me to like the man, or understand why Sparks always seemed intimidated by me. There should have been contempt in the mix, but Sparks never seemed to work up anything beyond frustration.

“The Chief’s been looking for you.”

I grimaced. “That’s nice.” It wasn’t of course. Anytime Chief Hammond took an interest in me it involved shouting and threats.

“You’ve been a no show for four days. You’re on his shit list for sure this time.”

I finally looked over at Sparks sitting at the desk next to mine. His desk was, of course, neat and organized. Sparks looked genuinely anxious for me.

I leaned a little towards Sparks and said in a low tone, “Want in on a little secret, Sparks? I’ve been on his shit list since I started here. My name is in big black letters on that list. It’s punctuated with voodoo hex symbols. There are holes in it because he stabs it with his pencil every time I do something wrong.”

Sparks looked concerned and then he frowned. “I never know when you’re joking.”

I chuckled and straightened. “Good. I like to be mysterious. The girls love it.”

Sparks looked dubious. “You’re not mysterious, you’re weird. That’s probably why I’ve never seen you with a significant other.”

I arched an eyebrow as I gazed into the delicious depths of my steaming coffee mug. “You mean girlfriend?”

Sparks replied uncomfortably, “If that’s how you choose to identify today.”

I felt a wave of irritation. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with Sparks or anyone else.

“That didn’t make any sense, Sparks. What happened? Did they make you take that bullshit sensitivity class?”

Sparks was clearly offended. “I volunteered. There’s nothing wrong with learning to better serve the people I interact with on a daily basis. Now that our force is becoming more diverse, it also doesn’t hurt to learn how to respect my fellow officer’s life choices as well.”

I stared at him for a full beat. “Make a note, Sparks. I intend to identify, lifelong, as a man who really wants to get it on with women.”

“The force is changing, Jack. You can’t work like this is a 1950’s detective show. We’re inclusive, now.”

I growled in disgust, “I’m pretty sure you don’t know what ‘inclusive’ means. You sound like a damned parrot, Sparks. You’re just regurgitating everything you heard. Are you trying to get promoted? Is that why you’re trying to find your inner—”

Sparks cut me off with a sharp hand motion. He spun his seat, causing it to make loud squeaks, and turned away from me. “You know what? You’re an asshole!”

I smiled. Sparks wasn’t usually brave enough to confront me on my behavior. “I was starting to think you forgot that fact.”

Sparks didn’t look at me, but he said insightfully, “You’re arguing with me to avoid talking to the Chief. It’s just going to make him more pissed off.”

I put down my mug in one of the few clear spaces on my desk and stood up. I said irritably, “You’ve finally said something I understand.”

Sparks ignored me as he began to work.

I straightened my coat, smoothed down the black material with the palms of my hands, and then settled my shoulders and my mind. My coat was still dotted with rain drops and my hair was partially wet, still spiked but flattened in places. My hands were still trembling slightly, but it wasn’t because the old precinct had a crappy heating system. I looked at them, tried to still them, and then turned my hands into fists as I began walking through the crowd towards the Chief’s office.

Separated from the rest of the room by a low wall and a three foot, frosted glass partition on top of that, the Chief’s office always made me think of bank teller booths. If I stood on my toes, I could see over it. The door was short as well and seemed a ridiculous attempt to give the illusion of privacy and security when there was neither. It was never locked, but few people dared to enter without knocking. I was one of those who dared.

The old Chief had been before my time, but I’d been told the man had loved displaying his stuffed fishing trophies on the low walls and smoking his big cigars. I could appreciate the latter. I enjoyed a smoke myself from time to time to calm my nerves. There was still the thick smell of cigars clinging to everything despite

intensive cleaning, years of no smoking regulations, and the present Chief's air fresheners. Gone were the stuffed bass. The office was neat and clean and filled with upscale furniture that included a large, black mahogany desk. There were awards on the low walls. A candy dish and a picture of the new Chief shaking hands with the mayor vied for space on a desk corner where a picture of his family should have gone.

Chief Candy Hammond was fashion magazine perfect. He looked fifty-something, his blonde hair going stylishly gray along with his close shaved beard. His gray, designer business suit didn't hide that he kept himself in shape. His jacket was unbuttoned and a well-worn shoulder holster appeared briefly as he gestured and talked heatedly with whoever was on the other end of the line. That worn shoulder holster reminded me that Hammond hadn't always sat behind a desk.

"It's bad enough we don't have our own forensics unit, but having to wait two weeks for results from Tri-City General on the Murphy case—yes, I know—appropriations, budget cuts, and the economy—you can stop the replay, Jones, I'm tired of hearing it."

Chief Hammond glared at me and motioned me to wait until he was done with his call.

I didn't believe in being uncomfortable while I waited. I grabbed a modern design, dark leather chair from a corner of the office and pulled it across the floor. It made a loud crapping noise. I settled it in front of Hammond's desk and sat in it heavily. The springs squeaked and the expensive leather made noises as I settled.

Hammond glared at me through the entire process, but he wasn't willing to interrupt his conversation to criticize me. "I don't know how you expect me to run this place on Band-aids and Bactine. Bactine—it's an antibiotic spray."

Something suddenly slid out from beneath Hammond's desk. I started badly and almost pulled my gun from its holster at the small of his back. Heart pounding, I watched a white, very fluffy cat stretch and yawn. It was wearing a fake diamond collar with its name spelled out in a sparkling oval. It read PUSS. The cat rubbed up against me black pants leg, leaving copious amounts of white fur behind. With a low curse, I irritably shooed it away. I tried in vain to brush the fur off with my hand. I looked for the cat, intending to point at it while I complained about its presence, but I couldn't find it.

I straightened and tried to look nonchalant, but my gut clenched as I tried to recall if I had done anything that would make Hammond call the staff psychiatrist. Luckily, Hammond wasn't paying attention to me.

"I have three detectives," Hammond was saying. He picked up a pen, thumped the point on his desk blotter several times, threw it down, and sat back in his chair. "All I'm asking for is one more. No, I won't fire two patrol officers to pay for him. In case you've forgotten, we are in a high crime neighborhood."

Puss suddenly appeared again, jumping into Hammond's lap. While he petted it absently, I let out a soft, slow breath, relieved that the cat actually existed. I wasn't prepared when the cat suddenly changed into a beautiful woman.

I bit my lower lip to stifle my first reaction, to shout holy shit! My hands gripped my chair arms hard.

The woman wasn't in Hammond's lap. She was standing and leaning towards me, her naked, ghost like figure bathed in light and occupying the same space as the desk. Her long white hair was flying out behind her as if in a high wind and her hands were reaching out to me with slim fingers tipped with claws that looked razor sharp.

I shuddered, my eyes wide. My visions had never harmed me, but I couldn't be sure this wasn't going to be the first time. I'd spent my life being terrified by them. I had become an expert at looking calm and unaffected... usually. A shape changing cat was the last thing I had expected to see in my Chief's office, though.

Her eyes were like a cat's, but white with red irises. She grinned at me with a mouth full of sharp teeth as if enjoying my fright. Between one blink and the next she was a cat again, lounging in Hammond's lap and still being petted.

I rubbed a shaking hand over my face and tried to regain my composure.

Hammond was still oblivious. He was frowning. "A detective on loan? Well, it'll certainly solve my shortage until we get a permanent detective. Great! I'll expect him as soon as possible. Stuff him in a car and get him here, now. Yes, now. Send the contents of his locker and his desk later. Yes, I need him that badly. I owe you one. No, I won't eat your wife's Pasta Fagioli and tell her it's good. That's asking too much."

Hammond hung up his phone looking thoughtful. He stroked his cat a few more times and then glared at me. As if that was its cue, Puss jumped off his lap and went under the desk.