

SCYTHE AND PEN

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COUNTERPOISE
PRESS

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To my husband Mark, my strong tower.

PART ONE

Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening room.

– *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald

CHAPTER 1

23 OCTOBER 1924

EASTGATE

WHITE WALL TIRES slogged through the rain. Streetlights slithered over the Packard's fenders as Harriet Gale pulled into the Central Station trainyard. Gripping the wheel, she peered into the dark. Engines squatted like sleeping beasts on the tracks.

Harriet released a measured breath. "Where have you brought me, Boss?" she murmured. Harriet glanced over her shoulder at the canvas-draped form occupying the backseat.

"This is no place for ladies, is it, honey?" she asked.

She guided the Packard between two resting engines. They loomed over the car like sentinels at a gateway. "Jesus, Boss." The Packard bumped over rail ties, and the corpse jostled. Harriet's eyes snapped to the rearview mirror. "Hold still, girl. I better not hear a peep out of you, all right?"

Empty freight cars stretched on either side of the path. Ahead, a car marked WALTON DRY GOODS blocked any exit. Her headlights wavered over the corrugated metal, down the painted letters, and struck a figure. Harriet's gloved fingers curled tight on the wheel.

A man stood at the end of the tracks, his shadow stretching above him like the wings of a bat. His body itself seemed composed of darkness: black overcoat, black fedora, black suit.

The Packard's brakes whined as Harriet stopped, then cut the engine.

The man did not move.

Harriet swallowed. "Well, here we are, honey. End of the line." She stepped out of the car. Gravel crunched beneath her buckle shoes as she marched forward with more bravado than she felt. "Fancy meeting you here, Boss."

The fedora tilted in greeting.

Harriet motioned to the car. "Signed, sealed, delivered. Just for you, honey."

The Boss gave no answer, simply strode past her to the vehicle. As he passed, moonlight struck his features: aquiline nose, harsh cheekbones, the severe down-turn of a scowl. The car door squeaked as he leaned inside to inspect the delivery. Harriet frowned at his stooped back and pulled her manteau cloak tighter around her shoulders.

"Bit of an odd meeting place, isn't it?"

"Any trouble?" The Boss' voice rumbled from the car, deep and harsh as the surrounding night. At Harriet's headshake, he grunted: "Good."

Harriet leaned against the Packard's warm hood. "Care to explain this?" She waved her hand at the body. "Ferrying dead girls across town isn't in my usual job description."

The Boss hoisted the corpse like a sack of flour. As the body bumped the door frame, Harriet's stomach flopped. *Nerves*, she realized with some surprise. It had been a long time since Harriet Gale had felt nervous on a job. "Boss?" Her voice wavered.

And that single note of concern made him look up. The fedora concealed his eyes, but Harriet felt the weight of his glare.

"I saw her face," she said softly. "Only a fool would deny what happened."

The Boss scoffed. "Fools run this city."

Harriet's nose wrinkled. "I don't like this. Moving her. And here?" She spread her hands. "How does this help?"

The car door slammed. "We aren't trying to *help*," growled the Boss, his voice strained under his burden. "We're trying to send a message."

"To whom?"

His voice filtered back as he trudged into the dark. "It's time those bastards in the Tower paid attention. Before it's too fucking late."

Harriet's chest tightened. His answer was exactly what she'd feared. They had operated in the shadows for so long...and now he was claiming center stage. *Isn't that just what we need?* she thought bitterly. *Every suit setting his sights on Eastgate. All for some dead whore.*

"Where are you taking her?" asked Harriet.

She turned but found herself alone, the railyard empty save for slumbering

trains and empty cars. The Boss and his grim burden were gone, as assuredly as if they'd vanished into thin air.

Harriet's skin crawled. "Jesus-saints, I hate when he does that."

CHAPTER 2

24 OCTOBER 1924

THE CAPITAL

334 ALL SAINTS ST.

SENATOR B. RASKE

INCIDENT REPORTED IN CENTRAL CITY. POLICE
DISPATCHED. DEFENSE MINISTER NOTIFIED.

COME PREPARED.

SEN. P.A. ROSE

1:15 PM

204 ROCKWELL AVE, ALL SAINTS, CENTRAL CITY

DEMETRIUS RASKE

REPORT TO PRECINCT. HOSTILITY EXPECTED.

SEN. B. RASKE

1:45 PM

DEMETRIUS RASKE CHECKED his pocket watch simply for the pretext of having something to do. He hovered in the bustling lobby of Central City Precinct, his only companion a frowning policeman. Ten minutes prior, Demetrius had attempted sitting on a lobby bench, only to have the copper glare so severely that he leapt back to his feet.

“You know,” drawled Demetrius, “I’m not going anywhere.”

The copper grunted.

Demetrius quirked an eyebrow. "Suit yourself."

A shout echoed through the lobby. "Mr. Raske!"

Demetrius jerked upright. An inspector approached, hand extended. "My apologies for the wait," he said with an air of hurried injustice.

Demetrius stepped forward. "Inspector Cleveland?"

"Guilty as charged." Cleveland sniffed as he eyed the young suit.

Based on his attire, the boy (to the detective inspector, no one under the age of thirty should be called a *man*) was wealthy but not ostentatiously so. His suit was bespoke; his boots polished but well-worn. A trim figure, broad in the shoulders while lean in the waist. Clean-shaven, no jawline shadow despite the late hour. Yet the boy's most striking feature was his eyes: as blue and cold as winter frost.

And who in the bloody hell are you? Cleveland frowned. *What stunt has Rose pulled this time?*

Then he shook the young man's hand and understood.

Ice cold.

Cleveland's eyes narrowed. "Well. I'd say you're the man for the job."

Demetrius' pleasant expression froze. "Senator Rose seemed to think so."

"Well, if you're here for information, I'm afraid there's not much to share.

The coroner hasn't concluded his examination."

Demetrius inclined his head. "As it happens, that's why I'm here."

"I hardly think it appropriate for a consultant to be involved in a medical—"

"Quite the contrary. I'm at your full disposal," Demetrius interjected smoothly. "The Defense Minister indicated that he wanted this...ah, *incident* resolved as quickly as possible. Bad press for the police. For the entire Defense Department, really."

Cleveland arched an eyebrow. "Rather bad press for you and that senator father of yours too, I'd wager." *That's why you're really here. Ol' Gunfort has nothing to do with it.*

Demetrius shrugged, a *What can you do?* expression on his handsome face. Cleveland's mouth pursed.

A heartbeat passed in which Demetrius wondered whether the inspector would refuse. Worry prickled his skin. He needed to examine the body and, in so doing, get a handle on the situation before the press spun their own horror story.

A curt nod was Cleveland's only response, but it was enough.



WHITE TILES STRETCHED down a narrow corridor. A picture window waited at the end. Demetrius hesitated.

Even vampires shivered peering into morgues.

Beyond the window loomed a small amphitheater. A raised platform occupied the center, as if the morgue were a stage upon which magicians performed unholy arts. Demetrius supposed there was a certain dark elegance to the operation: exposing the secrets of the human body and the killer's mind.

Framed within the window, a medical examiner in his dark apron stooped over a sheet-clad form.

"Our examiner is top in his field," boasted Cleveland. "Citadel students attend his lectures. Hence all the..." He indicated the seats ringing the room. Reaching past Demetrius, Cleveland jabbed a button mounted onto the wall. A metallic buzz grated through the morgue.

"Coming in, Doctor," he barked.

The examiner startled; his eyes were two white coins, bright and round, above his mask. "Inspector, I really must protest—"

"Doctor, this is Demetrius Raske," interrupted Cleveland. "He's here on the Senate's orders. To speed things along."

Demetrius held up a hand. "Oh no, please. I'm just here to help—"

But the damage had been done. With one hooked finger, the coroner lowered his mask. His glare raked Demetrius from collar to brogues.

"A doctor I presume?"

"No, sir. Just a lawyer, I'm afraid. But I do have some experience in this area."

"What? In autopsy?"

"Ah, no. In vampirism."

The coroner's mask snapped back into place. "A *lawyer*, is it?" Disdain dripped from the word. "Very well," he muttered. "I hope you're not squeamish, Mr. Raske. Masks are on that table. Let's investigate why those politicians believe a *lawyer* more capable of performing my job than I."

Demetrius slipped on a mask. "She was found alone?"

Inspector Cleveland grunted. "Dawn patrol noticed her lying on a bench. Just outside Central Station. Thought she was a passenger what missed her train. Went to wake her and—Well, you'll see."

The coroner peeled back the sheet. Demetrius' mask stirred as he sucked in a breath.

Any beauty the woman may have possessed had shriveled. Cheekbones

jutted through skin taut and yellow. Hollows caved in melted cheeks, betraying the planes of her skull. Her lips puckered, as if tasting a perpetual sour. She was a cruel caricature of a woman: paint plastered onto a morbid, skeletal doll.

Demetrius' eyebrows shot to his hairline. "Exsanguination."

"And severely so, I would say," said the coroner.

Demetrius' throat worked. "And ah"—blinking rapidly above the surgical mask—"were any items found on the body?"

Cleveland plucked a clipboard from the table. He rattled off a list: "Silk chemise. Two oxblood pumps. One necklace, brass with fake rubies. One lace glove. And a change purse with two pounds in coin, a one-way train ticket, a tube of lipstick, and a handful of red rose petals."

"Red rose petals?" Demetrius asked.

Cleveland shrugged. "The random riffraff of a woman's purse. Contrary to what the penny dreadfuls would have you believe, not every item is case-shattering evidence."

Demetrius' eyes darkened, but he did not reply. Like a pot nearing boil, the coroner watched with crossed arms.

After a silent minute, Demetrius asked, "May I view the bite wounds?"

Primly, the coroner folded the sheet to expose a white swath of torso and thigh. "Help yourself, Mr. Raske. I daresay you do have experience in *this* area at least."

Cleveland chuckled. Demetrius' jaw clenched, but his gaze remained focused on the victim. Gently he rotated her arm to expose her wrist. Two puncture wounds, blackened at the edges, marred the white flesh.

Cleveland cleared his throat. "So, if the lass was murdered by a vampire, do we have to worry about her, ah, turning on our hands?"

Without looking up, Demetrius replied, "Does she look capable of resurrection?"

"Well, no, not exactly..."

"Then, no. I would say it's not likely."

Across the table, the coroner scoffed. "There have been cases of resurrection with victims in worse condition than—"

"No scientifically documented cases, though. Isn't that right, Doctor?" interrupted Demetrius. His glare was an ice-blue dagger. "Horror stories won't help this poor woman." Then, unable to keep the rancor from his voice: "*Contrary to what the penny dreadfuls would have you believe*, she was simply murdered."

Businesslike, he reached for the woman's other wrist. Helping himself to a pair of calipers on the coroner's carefully laid table, he measured each bite

mark, muttering under his breath. In his peripheral vision, he caught Cleveland craning forward.

Demetrius addressed the coroner. "Were there also wounds on her neck, ankle, and inner thigh?" At the coroner's startled affirmation, Demetrius flipped back the sheet and measured those wounds as well. After a moment, he straightened and covered the body.

"She was killed with the initial bite to the neck. Afterward, she was bitten repeatedly. Marks on each wrist, one on her left ankle, and one on her right thigh. Each bite measures differently."

The coroner turned startled eyes to Cleveland, who barked, "She was attacked by *multiple* creatures?"

If the barb *creatures* stung, Demetrius did not betray it. He tossed aside his mask. "Doctor, feel free to verify my findings, but I imagine you'll find them to be accurate. In the meantime, do you have any other information for the Senate?"

The coroner blinked, caught off guard by Demetrius' rapid change of pace. "Yes, ah— Where is—" He scrambled for his clipboard. Skimming notes, he motioned toward the woman's lower half. "Abrasions on the wrists indicate she was bound. No evidence of sexual assault. Although, interestingly, the victim appears to have been the recent recipient of an abortion." Here, he peered over his clipboard.

Cleveland tutted. "A whore?"

"Most likely."

Demetrius blinked. "Because she had one abortion?"

Cleveland and the coroner exchanged a long-suffering look.

"So. The killer, what? Hires her, murders her, then dumps her body?" said Demetrius.

Cleveland's eyes cut sideways. "You have the most in common with the murderer, Mr. Raske. Why don't you tell us?"

Demetrius smiled, thin and cold. "Well, if she is a prostitute, as you assert, I assume you'll start your investigation in Eastgate. Maybe someone will recognize her. Or remember her last client."

Cleveland's whiskers bristled. "I know how to do my own job."

Demetrius inclined his head. "I defer to your expertise. I'd like a copy of that report when it's complete, please. Now if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I'll see myself out."

The men exchanged curt goodbyes, and Demetrius left, steps fading down the hall.

The coroner cocked an eyebrow at the inspector. "How'd you get stuck with that kid?"

With a smoldering glare, Cleveland pointed to the clipboard. "You give me that report first. I'll be reading it before that boy. Or any damned politicians."



OUTSIDE THE PRECINCT, Demetrius stepped to the curb and whistled for a cab.

Automobiles whipped past. Horns bleated. Pedestrians rushed to catch a departing trolley, hail a passing cabbie, find their wide-eyed way to the nearest tourist attraction. The city roared all day and all night.

A slow grin spread over Demetrius' face. He loved it.

Although born to the fierce mountains and seven-month winters of Northern Europa, he'd adored this raucous city from the moment he'd arrived, sixteen and gangly, gawking at the steel-flanked buildings, the multi-colored multitudes, the rank smells, the ceaseless sounds. With one inhale of smog, he had fallen in love with the Capital. Now, eleven years later, he belonged to it the way a part of oneself always belonged to one's first love: the first heart-racing touch, the first heart-breaking scorn.

A black cab careened to the curb. Demetrius leapt into the backseat. "Tower Black."

They lurched into traffic mid-stream. Behind, a truck blasted protest. Oblivious or indifferent, the cab driver whipped into the next lane, then the next, until he attained whatever hidden jetstream would send them rushing to their destination.

One hand gripping the front seat, Demetrius unfolded his newspaper. The grisly headline blasted its alarm: GHOULISH DISCOVERY IN CENTRAL CITY. His stomach twisted. Earlier that morning, on his way to the precinct, he'd prayed reports had been incorrect, that superstition had fueled sensationalism. But one glance at that poor woman had erased every held-out hope.

A vampire murder. The first in decades.

Demetrius closed his eyes. *This will change everything.*

The cab lurched. Demetrius gripped the seat as they wheeled left, shot down a one-lane alley, then burst back onto a main street.

"Short cut," grunted the driver.

Demetrius released his death-grip and glared out the window.

Marble and glass, steel and concrete zipped past. Greco-Roman buildings

opened to a glittering ribbon of water. Canal boats pattered by, steam tufting into the autumn air.

A white-columned bridge spanned the canal. Cars inched along its length, reflections glimmering beetle-black on the water below. Demetrius' cab merged into the crawling line of traffic. As they slowly turned, Demetrius was afforded a full view of Tower Island.

A manmade spit of earth straddled the intersection of canal and river. Atop it loomed three skyscrapers: one white, one red, one black. The tallest, glistening like a beacon, was Tower White, the seat of the United League of Nations.

As he fished in his coat for his access badge, Demetrius' mind raced. He needed to relay his findings to his department, but first there was someone he needed to speak to. Someone who could make this entire problem go away.