

Thrilling Romance

by

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Chapter One:

In Which We Meet Our Heroes



Casey looked at Alan and shook her head. Just how, she wondered, had she let herself get into this? Every man she'd ever met, nursing them along. She'd never learn—they sure never did. The sidewalk was crowded but she kept the him moving, not too fast, attention being the last thing they needed.

Some way out of this being the first.



The low stone wall bordering the edge of Central Park lay broken at one point, the woody brush grown out luxuriantly, an urban gasp of wildness breaking through. Hidden beneath, a bearded figure sat crosslegged, watching the traffic and the street.

Craning his neck, he looked up from under three layers of parka hoods, each well-greased shell blessed in triplicate and precisely positioned for maximum repulsion of evil. Far above, the clouds

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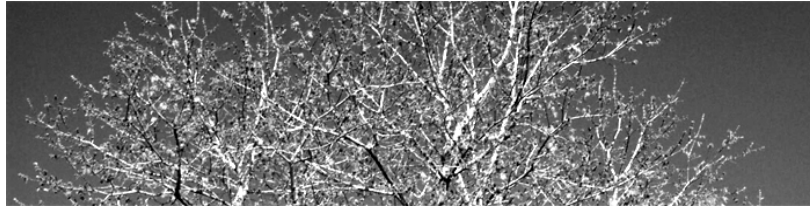
were gathering, great gray thunderheads pushing upwards through the sky.

In the shadowed warren behind him, the last snow melted into the dirt. That strange spring blizzard had been the harbinger, paralyzing this heathen metropolis for days. He smiled fondly with the memory... ah, the cold, the huddled masses, the city on its knees! It was regrettable, of course, for as a Prophet—as, in fact, *the* Prophet—spiritual etiquette absolutely demanded he regret it.

Peering at the clouds once more, he noted that their backlit masses glowed as if with fire from deep within. Could it be? His cracked lips stretched further in a spasm of righteous glee: Yes, those mighty, building clouds might well contain the burning rain of prophecy, a scouring punishment for every craven pleasure in the compass of his gaze.

For all good things, the voices said, must come in three. The snow, the coming storm, and, however regrettably, his own personal contribution.

The most crucial punishment of all.



Alan walked, sinking, burdened with the knowledge of the damage left behind.

Ahead was the park, a breath of escape at the end of one more narrow, brownstone-lined block, the bare trees shimmering in the slanting light that pierced the clouds. The unexpected sun warmed his wool coat, down through his sweater and shirt to his broad back, warmth for the first time on a cold, insane day. His shadow stretched toward the trees' haze of gold, but Casey's hand was pulling at his elbow, turning.

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Protecting him again, he knew that, because the park wouldn't hide them. They needed crowds, but all he wanted was to break away, pretend the world made sense—it did, didn't it? It always had before—and that nothing had happened. At least nothing that wasn't subject to rational explanation. He was a doctor and a scientist, after all; a man of reason, not of action.

He looked over and down at her, red hair and freckles, strength and fine bones, those legs moving—those legs—moving full speed ahead. Her heels kept the beat beside him, intent, percussive, ringing off the pavement in counterpoint to his longer strides. Connected by that rhythm, connected now as always, a connection as inescapable as their past. And so he turned with her, up Columbus, traveling towards some uncertain future. One no less unlikely, he suspected, than this strange day's events so far.



The Prophet pulled his knees close to his chest and rocked back in the mud, happily. Punishment, punishment, punishment indeed. And with those little blessings, three grunts of pure and unadulterated pleasure came from deep within his beard. He alone would be the pivot, a draught of bitter medicine to save the spirit of the world.

Or so the book had said.

Literally.

A delightful surprise, really, his Three Lords' triple-timbred Voices uttering from the opened pages of a common paperback, and one that had only recently fallen into his possession. Well, perhaps

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the book spoke aloud, or perhaps its holy proclamations merely registered in the admittedly labyrinthine corridors of his mind.

Reassuming the proper straight-backed posture for one of his calling, he studied the throngs that passed before him. Of course they couldn't hear those sweet utterings, no ordinary mortal could; they walked on through their lives, unknowing. He sighed with that, a cadaverous exhalation of relief. The Voices were private communications from a larger, unseen world; sibilant whispers aimed directly at his heart. He was, as he had always known, special and unique.

Satisfied, he reached back to caress the Protector, its studded blade pressed hard against his skin, jammed beneath the nylon rope that made his belt.



Casey stood at the curb and squinted towards the oncoming traffic. She didn't have time to stand here, waiting; let them swerve and stop. Flipping open her Department badge (the one she'd kept, not the one those bastards at her former precinct made her turn in), she held it out and walked into the cross-street, Alan just behind her.

Too close behind.

He didn't hit her hard, but a bump from someone Alan's size was enough to send anyone stumbling, in this case towards the speeding stream of cars. She recovered, naturally, but not before a passing rearview mirror knocked the badge from her grasp. It skittered along the pavement, giving up one last flash of gold-embossed silver before disappearing down a stormdrain.

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By then, Alan was reaching for her, helping her back to the curb.

“Gee, thanks!” Casey said brightly, then yanked her arm away and stepped to the drain’s iron grate, dropping to her hands and knees to peer down into it. Darkness, the smell of rotting food, the echo of traffic on cement.

“Sure; I mean, I—”

“Almost got me killed? Yes, you did.” So much for sarcasm. She got up, brushing the grit off.

“Oh,” he said, grimacing. “Sorry?”

“*Try* to pay a little more attention.”

“It’s just that I was looking, um...”

“Looking where, Alan?” Keeping the edge from her voice; this was no time to lose her temper.

“Up?”

Up, she thought. Unbelievable. “At what?”

“The clouds.”

She shook her head but he didn’t notice—he was staring at the clouds again. Leaving her staring at the ridiculous cleft in his chin. The one that had looked so good by firelight.

“I’ve never seen them boil inward quite that way,” he said. “Cumulus, obviously, but they’re so much darker, more... ominous.”

“It’s *weather*, Alan.”

“Darker than on the roof, I mean. More than just before—”

“Forget that,” she said firmly. “Forget all of that right now.”

“Why?” He looked down from the closing sky, eyes wide but blue, deep blue, a blue she couldn’t let herself get lost in.

“Because we’ve got work to do. We’ve got to disappear, remember?” Her badge was gone but the street was clear; she walked across and Alan followed.

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There beneath the screen of branches, the Prophet scratched his knotted beard, searching for one of the tiny animated morsels the Holy Triumvirate so thoughtfully provided, and reflected on what, until the book, had been most sacred possession—in fact, his only one—the Protector.

He'd found it more than a year ago, and, if not for its invisible radiations, might have mistaken it for nothing more than an ordinary mortal object—in this case, a shattered baseball bat. But he and only he had seen its role, seen its future as a relic glowing all about it. Nearly three feet of stout ash, the rough plane of broken wood sheared off flat as a machete, its broad, splintered edge now worn smooth, waxed by the sweat of his hands, scraped sharp as the blade of any heathen's tribal totem. It was beautiful, an object of worship in itself: the bent and rusted nails he'd pounded in with rocks, the shards of colored glass he'd gouged into the creviced wood, the pale grain stained black by blood, the blood of his own palms punctured with his work, and then the blood of others. Like Tommy, the little ingrate, trying to wrest it from his—

He stopped himself. Possessiveness was undignified in a man of the cloth. Particularly one chosen to the prophet's role. In fact, he regretted it profoundly, as profoundly as Tommy did, or would, when he woke up from the culvert where he lay sleeping. He'd tucked his acolyte in there (stuffed, if truth be known) after Tommy's little encounter with the Protector, then covered him with a thick blanket of dry leaves, to keep him warm while the broken part of his head healed up.

In any case, there were more important things at stake. He was doing Their work, after all, whose rituals and appeasements were known to him alone. And whose Voices had given him his holy orders.

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Alan knew she was right, he should forget it all. Worry was a luxury they couldn't afford. But the memory remained stubborn, fading only slowly, a ghost behind his every thought.

The image of one hand raised, a wave farewell, as the body—his friend's body—toppled backwards into empty sky.

The sound when he hit the terrace below. Alan could still hear it: not so much the snap of bones, but a soft flat thump, the undramatic sound of cells and tissues rupturing from sudden deceleration. Laymen didn't realize how short a fall it took to generate an impact capable of mortal injury. The blood was hidden underneath that passive form, but had he smelled it even then, faint and copper in the clear air of his rooftop? No, he couldn't have, purely his imagination; Casey and he were at least fifteen feet above, helplessly staring down. By the time that scent of life and death was close enough to wrap itself around them, they'd climbed down and were on their knees at his side, confirming the worst.

They ran, of course; Casey's old employers liked to keep the story simple, and their story was anything but. Yes, we knew him, Officer. You're right, I shouldn't have said 'possessed', that's entirely irrational, I'm sure he simply lost control. Honestly, I thought he was going to hurt her.

He closed his eyes for two brief paces and tried to calm himself. When he opened them she was still there, intent and balanced, clear eyes watchful but her brow unfurrowed; she was ready for anything, moving in pursuit, not pursued. Perhaps they'd even get away. But not from one thing: the knowledge that his foolish curiosity had started it all. A guilt that he was certain, if there was any justice to this random, careening world, he would carry to his grave.

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Orders, the Prophet reminded himself, were still orders. Even if they weren't terribly *specific*. And so for all the day he'd sat there, watching, not even leaving his post to perform the basic bodily functions that might have distracted the less committed. And perchance, he thought, the long night before. And the day before that? He shook his head to clear it. No matter. Watching and waiting for... who? He shook his head again to chase the doubts away, more violently this time, his decades-long dreadlocks spinning, his taped smudged glasses nearly flying from his face. He must not doubt—no, never that, his Three-tongued Lords did not treat doubters kindly.

Stretching both arms behind him, he grasped his hands together and, with a coarse groan, squeezed the solid length of the Protector hard against his back. It was a kind of prayer, as the little sharpnesses pressed deep into the suppurating flesh, breaking the old crusted wounds here and there, reminding him to stay focused and alert.



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Casey had nearly reached the corner of Ninetieth and Columbus when the drunk came stumbling across the sidewalk, full-tilt in their direction.

Just what My Hero needs right now, she thought.

They pulled back as he sailed within inches of them in a cloud of expensive scotch and a staggering, half-crouched run, head aimed straight at the side of the bus shelter until, inches short of breaking his neck, he veered upright and slammed face-first into the plexiglass. She expected him to slide down to the pavement at that point, but he stayed standing, if unsteadily.

An outraged weightlifter in a Yankee's cap—the bartender, she supposed—crossed his arms and glared from an open door. Red neon letters above him spelled out The Ball Hole. His sodden ex-customer straightened, sniffed loudly, and reached for the monogrammed white linen handkerchief flopping from his pinstriped suit's breast pocket. Missing it on the first try, he snagged on the second and brought it to his bleeding nose. Then stared back at the bartender with as much dignity as he could manage, given his open fly and the shellacked gray comb-over that now hung cantilevered over his face.

A welcome gust of stale beer, peanuts and damp wood floors caught her; deep inside, the howl of a crowd blared from a projection TV. The Ball Hole, she could tell, was a sports bar, but the name you could take the wrong way.

Whatever the misunderstanding, both clowns started in on a fairly impressive round of insults, quickly covering a nice spread of relatives and barnyard animals, plus a few more orifices than the usual. The drunk's slurs were delivered in a snotty British wheeze right off PBS, the bartender's straight down from the Bronx. She put a hand on Alan's back and navigated the safest course between them.

"This city's a zoo," she said. "Always has been."

"It's coming closer, Casey."

She raked her curls back and looked sidelong at him. "Get real. Not everything revolves around you."

He kept staring straight ahead.

"Out of town, had a few, came on to the wrong guy," she continued. "Been there lots of times myself."

He still wasn't saying anything.

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“Only kidding.” Well, almost. “Come on, snap out of it.”

They turned the corner, moving again towards Central Park. “I shouldn’t have gotten you involved,” he said.

Jesus. She couldn’t make the right decisions if she was worrying about Alan, and how could she duck that if Alan was worried about *her*? You had to shut up, concentrate on the moves.

So she just breathed out, easy, and said, “Relax, everything’s under control.”

He almost looked like he believed her.



It was an ancient nasal discipline, though one the Prophet had divined—using the deepest of deep meditations—only this very morning. A single, loud, reverberant sniff to clear the sacred passages, and then another, soft and almost stealthy, with broad, receptive nostrils, to taste the very tendrils of the air that drifted by. Leaning forward slightly, he tried it: once... twice... and then, feeling a bit light-headed, that very special third time... and... Heavens! it worked! A scent in the wind, still distant, but within which he could certainly discern the acid tang of *hubris*, and, if his Latin served him well, a heady mix of *angris* and *fearum*, and was that the floral musk of *eros*? The last was unexpected—some devilish necromancy, to be sure. He peered down the line of rush-hour traffic. Yes. A faintly aching glow across the far intersection, moving, coming closer. Reaching under the deepest of his parkas, he arched backwards to free the Protector from his belt.

Now nearly at the light, that crowning aura was clearly visible, a fluctuating grey-black nimbus, the normal human radiance faded away, occluded by an oppressive, shadowed rationality. His last

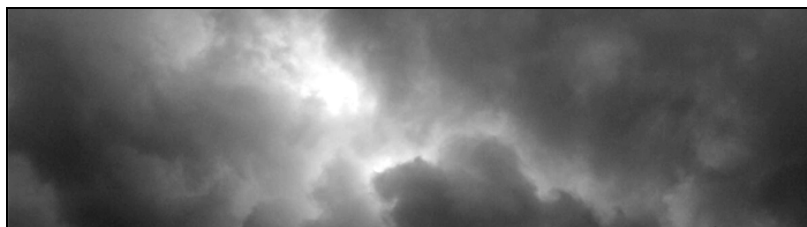
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doubts were happily banished; this was most certainly the one. But he could not get the blessed Protector free! He leaned forward on his knees and sucked in his stomach, trying to shift it to one side where he could snag it. Perhaps he'd been a bit over-indulgent in his prayers; it seemed to be stuck wetly to his skin. Never before, and now, at a time like this!

There was no further time for concealment. He stood up, popping his head through the rough privet, its branches pricking his neck as he worked at the knotted nylon rope that held his pants. When it finally came undone, they sagged heavily; he reached back to grab the now-liberated wooden shaft, discreetly keeping it hidden beneath the longest of his garments.

But the discretion may have been wasted, because, as he looked downwards, he was horrified to see not only his well-worn trousers, but the redolent pajama bottoms and long johns that lined them, all three holy layers of his lower raiment in a thick, moist pile about his ankles. This would not do! With a gasp, he bent and pulled them upwards with one hand, holding the Protector ready with the other. He knew he was attracting too much attention, and so smiled benignly, with a modest, Papal nod to calm the passers-by.



Alan's mind, at least, had momentarily escaped, retreating into the most intellectual of detachments, miles away as he walked beside her.

What was it Freud had said? 'No coincidences.' Or was it, he asked himself, the good Dr. Jung? Who said it didn't matter. But coincidences did: take that rushing drunk three blocks ago. He could

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have knocked them to the ground; as it was, the close encounter sped them onward. A simple accident? Yesterday, Alan would have sworn it.

Perhaps there really *were* no coincidences. Was that what all this was about? The alignment of incidence, of seemingly individual reactions, of identity itself? Casey was treating this ill-starred day as just another challenge, another test of strength against the bitter, hostile world she occupied, but Alan knew there was more to it than that. You couldn't get around the pervasiveness of it all. No one could.

Nothing, he decided, could surprise him anymore. And then noticed that while his thoughts were elsewhere, his hand had drifted up to lightly hold her arm, near her elbow, near its hidden heat and pulse. No surprises? Not a chance; she was the essence of surprise. And he was infected far beyond a cure.



As the Prophet stared, the light changed and the mass of traffic surged forward, leaving a clear path across the four lanes between. That aura-cloaked abomination was strolling arm in arm with a flaming-haired young woman—a she-devil!—and he knew in a flash that his punishment must be delivered to her as well.

And that, no matter how regrettably, the moment for both of them was now.

Stranding tall, he strode bravely from the bushes and, gray beard flying as he gathered speed, across the curb and into the empty lanes. He grasped the Protector in a rock-solid grip, raised it above

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his head, and, with an otherworldly cry, ran like a mighty wind towards that devil and his succubus.

But then, halfway across, he realized his sacred energy was not flowing on the righteous path it should. His Lords' triglossal Voices sputtered something but he missed it, concentrating instead on the hand holding the Protector. It was the left, of course, *that* was the problem! The hand of darkness, not of light! Now They were truly roaring in his head, but he knew that They were only testing him, knew full well the forms that must be followed. After all, he had discovered Their holy creed himself! Not slowing for an instant, he switched his instrument of vengeance to the other hand, but in doing so unfortunately released the waistband of his pants.

As they slid downwards, his majestic strides were hobbled, twisting him towards the sky until he found himself blindly running backwards with the Protector thrust out overhead. In that one last shining moment he was still sure he had somehow been successful, that his aim had carried true and struck this black evil from the earth, for the trumpets of the Host were sounding in his ears, and with a bright flash of yellow-gold he was carried upwards, finally, up to his reward.

And then, with a grim, Newtonian inevitability, back down.

Bearing witness, first, to the hood of the honking yellow taxi that had struck him, then the corroding chrome of its grill and bumper sliding by, and then the cold grit and dirt beneath him as his head bounced against the curb at his erstwhile victims' feet.



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“Jesus Fucking Christ,” Casey said, stunned. Even she wasn’t ready for that one. And Alan, staring at the figure spread out on the pavement, looked like he couldn’t let himself believe what happened. But it had. Which was turning out to be her specialty: dealing with what had already, undeniably happened. Not planning the next move—that was easy. It was sweeping up the bad things, the too-past and too-tense recent history. The things that Had.

Like this. A gentleman of the street. She tried to be respectful, always; her life was so much easier than theirs. But the term was way too polite for the raw stench this one was putting out, not to mention that gargling as he’d come at them, or the nasty studded club in his hand. Even as he lost consciousness, his lips still moved, silently—some kind of curse, she bet. Given their little adventures today, it was no mystery what the curse would be about.

The taxi driver was leaning back inside his cab, screaming something Hindi into the microphone. This was her old beat, and Casey thought of St. Roosevelt’s, only blocks away. They had a minute, maybe two before the ambulance arrived.

Things were certainly going from bad to worse. Just as she’d expected, actually, despite the lies she’d said to keep Alan in one piece. He wasn’t used to life’s violence, unthrottled.

Then Alan turned and she looked back up at him, noticing how he was actually doing all right, considering, and feeling a sudden surge of, well, *something*. Not just the way the kid looked: the bottomless eyes that searched back down the crowded sidewalk, those shoulders, the long loose chestnut hair. She’d gotten used to the whole accidental movie star thing—more used to it, she guessed, than Alan. No, she had to face it, she was simply drawn to him. And not by any simple hunger; it was too late for that now.

But those blue eyes, blue eyes searching—searching for what?

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There he was again, Alan thought. The homeless psychotic at his feet had been a shock, but this, unfortunately, wasn't. The same drunken Englishman: so much for coincidence, so much for hanging on to that small shred of sanity. Casey, who was staring at him for some reason, whipped around to follow his gaze down the long block.

Shirt untucked, suit jacket flapping open, and still holding a bloody handkerchief to his nose—red spreading though the pristine white—the drunk was stumbling down the sidewalk in their direction. Eyes glazed and barely open, sleepwalking through the throng. Until he spotted them. And visibly began to pick up speed, steps coming quicker until they built into a shambling jog.

"Shit, Alan, you were right," she said, astonished. For an instant he thought he saw the steel shutters of her confidence fall away.

"We're not going to get out of this, are we?" Alan asked softly. The Brit gracefully wove around the intervening pedestrians as he broke into a full-out run, his eyes now fully shut, guided by some other, unearthly perception. He carried an anodized aluminum briefcase of a hefty, British design that Alan recognized and had, in fact, once yearned to own. A carefully-manicured hand tightened on its handle as he swung it back behind him, winding up. Even half a block away, Alan could predict the point at which its arc was intended to enter his own very personal space.

Recovering fast, Casey reached under her jacket. "This guy's nothing."

Alan put a hand on her arm. "Please. Someone could get hurt."

"Yeah. Us." But she shoved her gun back in its holster, grabbed his arm and pulled him, hard, towards the yawning entrance of a parking garage.

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He felt a sweeping rush of air beside him, as the metal briefcase neatly transected the place formerly occupied by his head. Encountering only empty air, it continued on its arcing passage, spinning his attacker down the sidewalk in a grey blur of worsted wool and flapping comb-over that flew into the crowd of Japanese tourists gawking at his unlucky predecessor, still motionless on the curb.

A siren cried in the distance as they ran down the ramp into the cool, fluorescent-lit recesses of the garage. The attendant yelled something at the two of them, but they were already beyond his dingy glass-walled cabin. Casey headed towards a half-flight of concrete stairs leading to a metal door set into the rear wall beneath a battered 'Exit' sign.

She took them at a leap and threw her weight against the lever of the handle. Nothing. By the time he hit the bottom step she was backing up, holding her .38 in both hands, squinting down the barrel at the latch.

"Hey," he said, and reaching over her, slammed the heel of his palm against the red fire-alarm mounted just beside the door. As its shrill wail joined that of the ambulance outside, he tried the handle again. The door opened easily.

"Oh, great," she said. "They'll never find us now."

"Like your blasting off that cannon wouldn't have brought them?" Then winced as she looked over: she wasn't happy. Casey was never easy, but Casey unhappy was worse.

"Just shut up until we get out of here, okay?"

Without waiting for an answer, she stepped out into the dim, trash-littered passageway between the adjacent buildings. As he rushed after her, his eyes were drawn to the sudden illumination of the slice of sky above them: a bolt of lightning stitched the heavy underside of the clouds, and as the first fat cold drops fell, a boom of thunder echoed down the close brick walls on either side. They'd reached the street and turned the corner before the garage attendant's head stuck out the door.

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The narrow walkway emptied onto Ninety-sixth Street. Casey pulled Alan back beside a crumbling brownstone stoop, out of sight. She allowed herself a glimpse, not thirty yards away at the intersection, of the gathering crowd, the tourists now giving way to ordinary vicarious pedestrians, pushing in. All trying to see the final chapters—Would that one die? Would this one live?—of the unlikely events she and Alan had somehow brought into play. As the flashing orange light of the emergency vehicle played over those nearly-hypnotized faces, she also saw their hunger for excitement, for drama, and especially for the suffering and pain bound to accompany it. Something to fill their empty moments; something for later, after the local news but just before they opened up their paperbacks and read themselves to sleep in cozy beds.

“Vultures,” she said.

“You know they can’t help it.”

Alan was standing beside her in the rain, watching the emergency techs load the two unconscious bodies. She found his presence strangely comforting, for all the help he needed to survive.

“Don’t be so understanding.”

“Understanding is the key.” The rain was darkening his jacket, clinging to his hair.

“The key that got us into this, Alan.”

His face fell and she watched it coming back to him, everything he’d been working to forget. As she wondered if she would ever learn to watch her mouth, the clouds cracked completely open, and the crowd, tearing themselves away, began to disperse. A few walked in their direction.

“Time to go to ground,” she said, “And I know just the place.” It looked like hiding in the crowds was out, and the least popular

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greasy-spoon in the city was hardly half a mile from where they stood.

She'd first been there as a rookie, eating free like all the other uniforms, until a rash of food poisoning drove the lightweights away. If the loss of that blue patina of safety hadn't done enough to kill the diner's trade, the building's stone cornices had started falling off. As a killing blow, the city put a shelter over the sidewalk, blocking nearly all the daylight and almost any chance of an unsuspecting culinary victim noticing the buzzing neon sign and wandering in.

Later, as a plainclothes detective, she'd meet the odd informer there. It had gotten that quiet; like a very private club. The place, in other words, was dead.



The rain pounded down as Alan ran after Casey, who'd disappeared through a grimy aluminum and glass door that was already swinging closed. It seemed like he'd been in pursuit across half of upper Manhattan, never quite catching up as she rounded this corner or that, her choices seemingly random but somehow leading to the most deserted, marginal blocks in this no doubt soon-to-be-developed part of town. He knew she was keeping a close eye; every time he looked she was turning away, goading him to keep up through the lightning-shot darkness.

Inside was worse than the neighborhood outside, but at least they were the only customers in the place. The overhead light was brutally harsh, showing every flyspeck on the light-green walls and every sour wrinkle on the face of the woman in a hairnet and stained uniform behind the counter.

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Laying a tabloid next to the cash register, she folded her arms and stared at the two of them, eyebrows raised.

Casey returned her stare for a moment, then looked away, out the door, and said, “Still open?”

A slow, noncommittal nod.

“Got any coffee?”

“Depends. You want it hot?”

Casey didn’t reply.

The waitress waited a beat, then said, reluctantly, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“We could cross over to the University, go to Star—” Alan shut up as Casey’s elbow hit his ribs.

Ignoring his offended look, she grabbed his arm and walked him to the furthest booth in the room. It was up against a plate-glass window, but sheltered by a head-tall wood partition covered with layers of chipped glossy paint, the last few decades’ choices all apparently lime-green. He hung his soaked tweed jacket next to Casey’s parka. They slid across worn, cracked vinyl to face each other. Or, rather, each other and what lay beyond—Casey’s eyes were on the empty diner as he stared out the window to the street.

What he saw was the last of the day’s commuters rushing north to the bridge, driving fast up Amsterdam through these nearly deserted blocks, their speeding tires leaving dull trails on the rain-slick pavement. And that was it.

“Isn’t this just *excellent*?” Casey asked.

“Where is everybody?” He’d never been in any part of the city this quiet.

“It’s the construction, the covered sidewalks. Both sides of the street. Perfect place to get jumped, this far uptown. Any reasonable human being would go blocks out of their way not to walk down this one. That’s what makes it the place to meet, well, *people*. Or not meet them.”

Looking out through the metal framework holding up the sodden plywood, he could see it was true—there wasn’t a soul around.

They were interrupted by the slap of two yellowed menus on the Formica. “You got to eat to sit here,” the waitress said, leaning forward, hands on the table. “Just coffee’s not enough.”

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They quickly ordered; toast seemed safe, and Casey nodded her approval. Alan made the mistake of asking for whole wheat; the woman glared at him and then moved off, muttering.

Casey watched her go back behind the counter. “That’s my pal, Mildred.” An evil smile. “She knows me and she knows it. I must’ve been here forty, fifty times. But it’s like I’m nothing, every time, always the same. Like being friendly—”

“—would ruin the atmosphere?”

She turned back to him. “Right. I’d have to go get mistreated somewhere else.”

“It doesn’t seem to bother you.” She was so much stronger than him. And beautiful, there was no denying it, her face still fresh somehow, despite the volumes of bad behavior she had to have witnessed as a cop. And buried deep—he knew it was there, no matter what she said—a lingering fragility, the part that still hoped to care for anything.

“What doesn’t?” But she knew what he was talking about.

“Any of it,” he answered.

She was watching the counter again. The long, mirrored wall behind it, filthy as it was, gave her a clear shot of the door and anyone that might come through it. “You did all right back there. For a beginner.”

He nodded, somehow grateful. “So what do we do now?”

“Nothing, for awhile,” she said, still looking away. “Then we’ll see.”

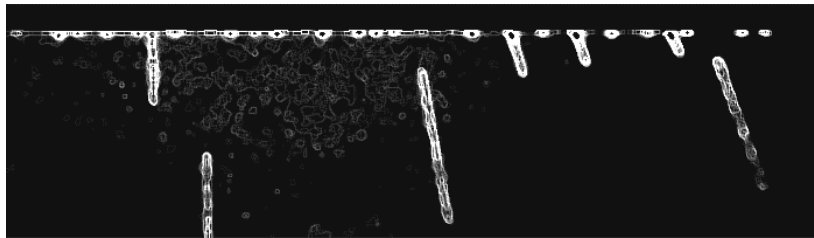


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Chapter Two:

The Dissection of the Heart



It was still pouring, staccato silver lines against the streetlights, and the excitement of their flight was fading fast, fatigue and fear creeping back into Alan's bones. Everything had been running out of control for days—his control, anyway. And Casey's control as well, as much as she hated to admit it. Someone, *something*, was pulling all the strings. They were dancing like puppets, their reactions to one bizarre incident creating the next, each unpredictable in nature but strangely right the moment that it hit.

A raw-skinned waitress's hand slid a cup of something steaming and dark in front of him. It looked like coffee but smelled far worse. He didn't look up, just murmured a few words that sounded marginally grateful and sank his chin deeper in his hand. Staring out the window, trying to make sense of the memories flooding in. And knowing that, for all her vigilance, Casey's mind was reaching back as well, reaching to build her own rhyme and reason out of the past four weeks.

All their stories lay open now, connecting up despite themselves. There, reflected in that mirror, or beyond the window's glass, there for the reading. The darkness of the sodden scene outside fading, in his mind's eye, fading into white...

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A white room, filled with white machinery. The illusion of sterility. Even white jackets, the Neurophysiology Dean so excited about the new medical scanner that she'd made Alan and his grad students dress up like doctors. Ironic for him, a failed clinician, but perhaps comforting to their research subjects. Who thankfully provided a little color—like this one, Grace, dressed in every shade of purple scavengable from a recycled clothing bin. Possibly her clouded brain had managed to anticipate some coming wave of fashion: the Twenty-Layered Look, or Jewel-Tones of the Street. Right now she just looked colorful, as colorful and as crazy as she was. Alan sighed and continued adjusting the scanner.

For the huge metal beast that filled the center of the lab was the true focus of his attention—and the reason the Dean had let Alan, a natural with this kind of software, run the project.

He ran a hand along a broad, enameled flank. It was slightly warm to the touch, giving off a faint vibrational hum and the clean scent of ozone. He had to admit he loved the complex instrument, loved it for itself as much as for what it could show him. Even the terminology: Positron Emission Tomography. PET, for short, and for him it almost was one. He certainly spent enough time grooming out the tangles in its code. But there was nothing soft or lovable about the technology.

Starting, he guessed, with the look of the thing. The lead-shielded operator's console, the bundled cables snaking across the floor to the computer processors in his office, the unfortunately florescent green radioisotope in its robotic, screw-operated syringe. The isotope looked a little scary but was harmless—well, nearly so—only positron-charged atoms bonded to common glucose molecules. The body's sugar, with a punch. It was how the scan

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worked: seconds after injection, billions of hungry brain cells consumed the compound, and the more active the cells were, the more positrons shot out through the skull to strike the receptor crystals. That electronic pattern of hits was then processed to draw a living map—a picture of life, right on the screen in front of him.

But the real problem was the Patient Restraint System. The loading bed was standard enough, a padded metal slab that slid the patient into the receptor array. But in this new prototype, the receptors were mounted externally, on an armature of thick metal bands. The ones arcing close over the forehead and mouth were fixed in place, of course, but the bands enclosing the rest of the slab opened nicely in the middle, hinging out like splayed ribs for easy entry, then clicking securely shut for the scan. Though coated smooth and white, the light color could not disguise their undeniable mass.

Alan had been in it a few times, standardizing the scans, and didn't find it *particularly* claustrophobic. In fact, he'd found its steel embrace almost comforting, and had felt more protected than trapped. Luckily, few paying patients had felt the same, which was how the research lab ended up with the ridiculously overpowered contraption.

Unfortunately, the images even this scanner produced had only been incrementally sharper than the old-school PETs and combination scanners, mere washes of color—until he'd gotten at them. It was his hidden talent, the thing that lay behind his skill at writing code: making the vague precise. Tweaking the scanner's code to make it read at finer levels than he'd ever seen published, until each sequence of images was transformed into a seamless cinema of the processes of life, the engines of cognition and the occult currents of the heart.

They said you couldn't dissect the rose without destroying it, but here that rule was being broken. Beneath the flesh, beneath the bone lay the most complex flower existent, a thing of mystery and beauty he was finally seeing into. No, not like the rose, dissected. Not harmed in the least.

All very well and good, but first he had to do the research. Alan turned back to Grace, who was dancing in place, eyes closed and

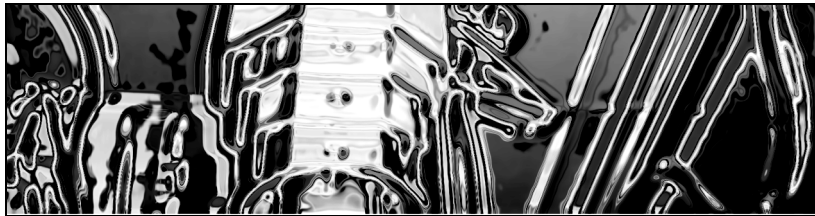
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softly singing, “...come on, come on, come on now...”, her body moving on the padded sliding bed. The manufacturer had built in tiny speakers and a CD player in the hope of relaxing patients during the long, frozen minutes of the scan, but the CD wasn’t on, and the only sound came from the dull clunking her head made against the slotted metal headrest as she followed her own beat.

Reaching through the armature, he touched a fuchsia sleeve. “Grace,” he began, stopping when she turned her head and stared at him in panic. He quickly put his hands in his pockets, the least threatening posture he could think of. “Just lay still and read the words on the screen above you, please.”

But she wasn’t interested. No longer distracted by the melody in her head, she put her palms flat against the curved white surface arcing over her and pushed hard, the effort squeezing out a barely audible but still pungent micro-fart. The heavy steel, however, didn’t budge a millimeter. And she obviously wasn’t happy about it.



The doc just wasn’t having a good day, Cosmo thought. Neither was his latest victim, but she’d be fine once she got back to Sunshine House, once she settled into the nest of purple blankets they let her keep in the corner of the TV room, and ate the purple mashed potatoes the staff had dyed for her, plus the grape juice and whatever else of the appropriate color they could dig up. That being the only way they’d broken last week’s hunger strike. All of which was fine with him: he figured hey, whatever it takes to get you through the night—or day—to keep those scary dreams of any hour at bay.

Hey, day, bay...

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Wow, he was a poet.

With his own personal scary monsters. Who needed a different sort of remedy, and as there was none of that on tap right now, a little distraction might do the trick. But this particular distraction, though he liked the whole oxymoronic thing of being a paid volunteer, was running low and slow. Just sitting, all day, waiting—no needles (his old pals), no injections (good luck finding a clean vein!), none of the doc's green glowing shit (which probably wasn't nearly as fun as it looked), nothing. Still, this last bit showed some promise, even drama if he was patient. Cosmo craned his neck to look over the scanner, watching the doc back up like he thought it would keep old Gracie from flipping, and Gracie looking like she wanted to, and the monitors glowing and the big machines humming and the green stuff dripping out of one of them and filling up the intravenous reservoir...

But, no.

Must have been that sigh. Another big, long one from the doc, which somehow signaled Gracie that the metal monster wrapping around her wasn't going to tighten its coils, and in fact might not be any worse than all the other immobile and mobile creatures—she was even afraid of *him*, Cosmo—that filled her strangely tinted universe. No drama, then, from her just yet.

Crapola.



Sighing certainly wasn't going to help, Alan thought, as he began opening the machine to let her out. Why, he asked himself, did it have to be schizophrenics? But he knew why: they needed

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medications, expensive medications, so that was where the research dollars were.

In this case, one of the larger pharmaceutical companies had to prove their newest anti-psychotic drug worked, and prove it with convincing PET scan images from real live psychiatric patients. The scans—the output—were a challenge in themselves, but the real trouble, the human trouble, had been the input. He appreciated the volunteers from the local halfway facility, yet their ability to perform the basic tasks necessary for any objective study was, to put it kindly, less than reliable.

He'd figured it out, of course, like he always did. The trick was taking the standardized little paragraphs from personality tests, the ones usually followed by, 'And how does that make you feel?' A perfect picnic, minus ants, a butterfly landing on a blade of grass—that sort of thing. And darker ones, of course: Jimmy steals Tommy's lunch money; Mary's classmates make fun of her dress; or that rather frightening description of being lost in the woods. The beauty of it was, if he scrolled any of those emotive snippets across a good-sized monitor mounted just over his subjects' eyes, they simply couldn't *help* reading them. He didn't even have to ask how they felt, a question he thought a little intrusive, anyway; within seconds, each subject's deepest and most heartfelt response was right there in technicolor on the PET scanner screen.

Or, at least, a *picture* of the response. Which in itself was plenty for the study, as all the images were dramatically more florid, wild colorations spreading through every region of the brain, than those of healthy volunteers.

He powered the motorized bed from under the monitor and swung back the curved metal ribs; the armature was fully open. But now Grace lay contently, eyes closed.

"Excuse me... do you still want to get out?"

Her head moved infinitesimally to one side and then back.

It looked like a 'No', but she might just still be moving to her own dance, so he added, "Shall we go on with the study?"

She nodded slowly, up and down.

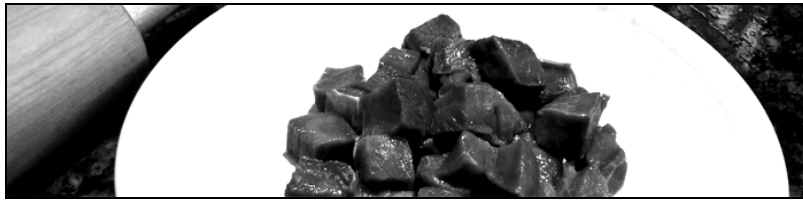
Alan sighed for the third time—this was turning into a day for it—and closed the scanner frame.

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The study had the usual protocol, with subjects randomized into two groups: one treated with the new drug (the rather melodramatically named ‘Product X’), while the other was not. His job now, in order to see if the drug made a difference, was to track a single output variable—in this case, their bizarre sensitivity to the sample texts. And so far it was going well, with the untreated subjects’ responses staying pretty much the same, and most of the treated group’s scans slowly dropping into the normal range.

The research was interesting enough, but Alan hadn’t been able to help broadening his investigations, going beyond what was strictly necessary for the drug study, trying to understand exactly what those pictures *meant*. He reassured himself that it would only improve the quality of the research. And if his growing obsession consumed a small fraction of the project’s resources, who was counting?

Nobody, he was sure.



Fifteen blocks to the south, Casey put her weight on the rolling pin, the muscles of her shoulders and bare arms working it forward, dragging it back, flattening the dough against the expanse of marble countertop. This was good; this was physical. And the fresh clean smell of the cut potatoes and the blood in the beef and the picture above the recipe of the way it would look, after; all of it real and enough to take her mind off things. But then she thought: A *meat pie*? and lost her concentration and squashed the dough into two barely-connected ovals, a figure-eight, and stopped and sagged down with her elbow on the cool marble and her chin in her hand, smearing flour on her face but she didn’t care.

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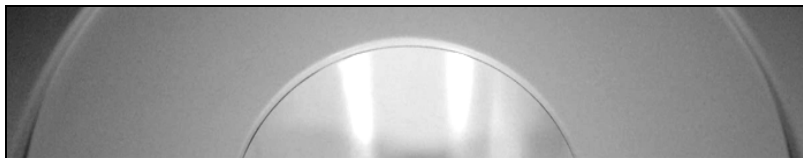
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People didn't eat meat pies where she was from; pies were dessert, period. *After* the meat. Okay, maybe a chicken pot pie, the little frozen kind, but that was clearly a desperation move. Meat should be laid out on the plate where you could look at it, make sure it wasn't some weird veiny piece, not hide it under pastry.

But the picture in the magazine did look good. Very European. Something for Mark when he got home tonight; something for someone with time on her hands, time on her hands right now.

Once she didn't have enough time. And now, no matter what she did, that former job kept coming back to haunt her. Lately it was one memory, a good one, heroic even. Back from when she was still a uniform, before things got complicated. It was streaming like a movie in her head again, starting with that fool cop behind her blasting one off, and the kid who might have been innocent (but probably wasn't) down on the sidewalk with a hole in his chest, breathing wet, and then kneeling beside him while his friends (who definitely weren't) ran back into the projects. And how her hand seemed pulled toward that pumping red cavity while Stan screamed "Put on your glove!" but there wasn't time and so her fingers were inside the boy, blood or not, the shattered ribs against her knuckles as she reached for the source of his life bleeding out, afraid she was already too late but—

She shook herself, realized what she was staring at: the plate of cut meat, floppy red cubes in a pile. Meat. Blood. Memory and association; people were primitive and so was she, primitive and sorry for herself and worst of all predictable. Now, anyway. Back then she'd only been doing her job, a different life and long ago.



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“Poetry!” Grace barked, and Alan turned back to her, startled. She was staring at him again. Her behavior today was odd, remarkably odd, especially given Sunshine House’s promise that this group was stable—more or less.

A voice came from across the room, “She’s right, Doc.”

What now? He looked over. It had to be one of the other two volunteers, sitting in the row of old waiting-room chairs lined up near the door. It couldn’t be Tim, the young catatonic who Alan had already run through the day’s scans. With the giant shoulders and white-blond coloring of a Viking warrior, he sat bolt upright, as always, and as always never said a word. Tim was in the medicated group, but, unlike most of them, the experimental drug didn’t seem to be having any impact: he remained as deeply withdrawn as ever.

So it must be the older guy next to him. Who was new, and, up to a moment ago, quietly awaiting his turn. Scruffy-looking, short and thick around the waist, with a thinning tangle of gray laying lank on his scalp, he was dressed in ragged gray pants, an ancient pair of red high-tops and an enormous black overcoat, buttoned at the neck despite the warm, scanner-heated lab. Obviously from Sunshine House, and the last of the evening, after Grace.

“Excuse me?” Alan asked.

“Poetry. That junk you’re giving her to read.”

Great. Alan put on his most professional manner, tried to pick something pertinent out of the spiel he’d given all of them. “As we told you when you registered,” he said, “these are standardized assemblages of words, each designed to generate a measurable emotional response.”

His listener rubbed the stubble on his chin for a moment, then said, “Words.”

“Right.”

“Connected up. Oh, *excuse me*, ‘assemblaged’.” He was grinning now, his few remaining teeth less than a pretty sight.

“Of course.”

“And they’re supposed to make you *feel* something?”

“Yes,” Alan said, trying to forget how long of a day it had been. And remember how much he needed every research subject he could get.

“Face it, Doc: it’s poetry. And poetry is scary shuff.”

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“Thanks for pointing that out,” he said dryly. “But I don’t see what it has to do with her feeling stuck in there.” Or me in here, Alan thought, talking to you. The last of the winter light was fading from a velvet sky outside the window.

“Everything has to do with poetry. And poetry has to do with everything.”

Alan sighed once more. At least Grace had grown quiet, mesmerized by their exchange. He started again, patience wearing thin. “Look, if you knew the first thing about poetry, you’d realize it’s not about everything. It’s about quite specific things, all carefully and precisely thought out.” Pedantic, admittedly, but this was something he had studied. “Like the meaning in the exact color of the light, as it glances off, say, the—”

He stopped. His new research subject was laughing, head down and hands on his knees. His legs were spread on the folding metal chair, opening the lower half of his overcoat to reveal a loosely pocked belly, naked and hairy and overflowing the waistband of his tattered pants. And, worst of all, bouncing up and down like flesh-colored jello. Just my luck, he thought: a laughing Buddha.

“What’s so funny?”

“Not knowing the first thing. All I ever got to was the first thing—just letting it happen without asking why—and it was plenty enough for me. Enough to fuck me big time. Too close to the flame, I guess you could say.”

“Perhaps I could. If I had any idea what you were talking about,” Alan added, then mentally kicked himself. This was a psychiatric patient, after all.

“Hey—read the book. You seem to be good at figuring things out. Nail it down for both of us.” He pulled his coat together and settled in his chair, staring at his clasped hands and humming some sort of mantra. The conversation seemed to be officially over.

What book? Alan wondered dimly, then shrugged it off and turned his attention back to Grace.

She was still calm, neither singing to herself nor trying to escape the scanner’s embracing armature again. Just staring at him, transfixed.

“Ready for the next reading?” Alan asked her, quietly.

Grace nodded, once.

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He reached over, turned on the scanner, and glanced at his computer screen. Colors blossomed on its flat, rectangular face, deep reds and flaming oranges rimmed in midnight blue; brilliant shades coruscating over a roughly symmetrical map of her brain.

That was fast.

He recognized the pattern—the sample reading had to be that awful lost-in-the-woods one. Didn't they use that on her yesterday, too? Its stimulus phrases were the heaviest of the bunch, with one passage he vividly remembered. Of course, his memory was generally reliable—excellent, actually—but this was different, the words almost hanging in the air:

...His eyes were open but he could not see; he strained to hear a sound, any sound, to guide him through the fog. At first there was only his heart, pounding, but soon, between those beats, he perceived the faintest susurrations: two sounds, in fact, repeated, indecipherable but oddly familiar as they slurred and tumbled upon each other, growing louder, nearer until he recognized them, finally, disbelieving, as nothing other than the endless mumbling repetition of his name...

An involuntarily shiver; no matter how sophomoric the Poe rip-off was, it certainly could crank out an identifiable mood, even in him. Though he was still puzzled that it was in the testing sequence again tonight.

Leaning over Grace, he craned his neck to check her text monitor. Oddly, it was completely blank. And she wasn't looking up at the screen; she was looking at him. He glanced at his desk monitor: still the same pattern. Then back to Grace—a tear had formed in her left eye and hovered, balanced on the lashes of her lower eyelid. As he watched, it joined and traveled the full curves of her face.

Alan pulled back. Whatever the cause, Grace was clearly in too aberrant a mood for any scientific measurements. And if he kept on violating her personal space (she probably needed a yard or two, like the others) she'd end up losing all control, and then the Sunshine

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House driver would refuse to take her back, and he'd waste an hour waiting for the ambulance to come. The sky outside the lab's high window had darkened to black, and he was tired. The decision was easy...