



Daemonia – Draft Preview

Daemonia

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This is a work of fiction set in an alternate timeline. Many of the names, places, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Where they are not, they are used fictitiously.

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Part 1: Cursed

1.

From her vantage point on the roof, Maddy had a good view into the offices of the Associated Investigation Services in downtown Portland. The day had been chilly and gray, but that was the kind of weather you would expect in the Pacific Northwest in mid-March. At least it wasn't raining anymore, and since the sun had set half an hour ago, many of the lights were on in the building across the street. But she knew Chris almost always worked late, and she watched with a heavy heart as he discussed a case with his administrative assistant, Janet.

Maddy liked Janet. Of course, she had never met her personally. But she had done some investigating of her own and therefore knew the clever, pretty, and unpretentious, middle-aged brunette was always friendly and reliable. The woman had been with Chris's company for almost ten years now, and Maddy had even spoken with her a few times on the phone when she required the company's services for one of her own clients. Besides, it was apparent how much Janet admired Chris, and Maddy wished the woman had gotten up the courage to make a move on him. He wasn't that old, and it would have taken his mind off...well, other things.

Maddy sighed. Okay, in this society and for someone like Janet, a man in his mid-sixties probably was quite a stretch. But despite his age, Chris was still very handsome. He was well built, his rugged, Germanic features were framed by thick, graying hair that fell to his shoulders, and he kept his goatee neatly trimmed. And because his profession as a private investigator and owner of one of the most prestigious detective agencies in Portland demanded it, he always tried to stay in good shape. He might have had a few careworn lines in his face here and there, but all in all, he didn't look so different from when Maddy had first met him almost thirty-five years ago. Janet really didn't know what she was missing.

Maddy's vision blurred, and she rubbed her eyes. "Dammit, you silly old man. Why won't you stop looking for me?"

Of course, the question was pure rhetoric. She knew why. It was for the same reason she always checked up on him whenever she had to travel to Portland on business. She still cared about him more than she was prepared to admit, and it was obvious how much he still cared about her. When

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she had up and disappeared all those years ago, she had really thought it was for the best. Or had it just been cowardice because she couldn't bring herself to tell the man she loved she wasn't quite human?

But as the years went by and Chris never committed to any long-term relationships, let alone gave up his search for her, she began to wonder if she had done the right thing. Her heart ached at the thought of the pain she must have caused him, and she swallowed to stifle the tears she felt pushing to the surface.

Forcing herself to turn away, she dragged herself to the other side of the roof, where she jumped up on the ledge with a single beat of her wings. When she closed her eyes, the mind-numbing drone of the metropolis besieged her from all sides. She hated big cities. They were a cesspool of grief and suffering, and there was always far too much of it. Of course, Portland wasn't anywhere near as bad as Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Seattle. But even here, she sensed all the turmoil and agony rising from the streets, throbbing in her brain, and threatening to suffocate her.

Her eyes popped open. Somewhere across the river, in the distance to the east, a young woman screamed in pain and terror. To Maddy, the sound was excruciating and wrenched at her heart. A tear must have somehow broken through her pitiful attempt at emotional restraint and rolled down her cheek, and she narrowed her eyes and set her jaw before brushing it away in frustration. Then she glanced around one more time to get her bearings, spread her wings, and glided off into the night.

2.

Chris threw the file back on the pile on Janet's desk. "Do Hank and John have everything ready for tomorrow?"

"They're your best digital imaging specialists," said Janet, "and as former photographers, they've been able to train their people well. Let them do their jobs."

"The courier will be making several drop-offs, meaning we'll have to be prepared for multiple scenarios and have to meet at the staging area early."

"Don't worry, they'll be there."

Chris sighed and shook his head.

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“Look, Chris, I know you’re concerned. I would be too. You have a lot riding on this operation. But you guys have been working together on the Thorsten project for weeks now. You’re ready for this, and our people know what to do. Besides, you’ll be there to step in if anything goes wrong. Have a little faith.”

“You’re right, as always.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

“Mind if we go through it one more time?”

Janet smirked. “If that will make you happy.”

“Background?”

“Several board members of the Thorsten conglomerate have become suspicious and believe someone may be defrauding them, and our company has been engaged to assist them in figuring out how it might be happening. Carl Thorsten will deploy his son-in-law, Theodore Van der Haagen, as a courier to transfer the savings bonds allocated to the conglomerate’s investment buy-ins at several drop-off locations during the day, and we’ll be on-site to document the transfer process.”

“Execution?”

“The operation is set for tomorrow, Tuesday, March 17th, 2020. The first drop-off will occur at precisely 9:00 am. You, Hank, and John will assign the appropriate teams for the first location, who will then document the scene. The same will happen at each additional location, and our operatives will be rotated as necessary. You three will remain at the central staging area to coordinate and monitor the operation.”

Chris shook his head. “We have more than twenty people involved. There are just too many variables. So much can go wrong.”

“You guys have always been professional during such maneuvers, and you know our agents are reliable. And since Mr. Van der Haagen hasn’t been informed of the operation, you shouldn’t have to worry about him getting nervous or doing anything out of the ordinary.”

“I hope you’re right.” He sighed. “Anyway, Tony’s the lead on the Evelyn Carson case, and I wouldn’t mind an update. Do you know if he came in today?”

“He was in all day, but Isabella had plans for them this evening, so he left early.”

“Oh, right, their youngest daughter’s wedding is this Saturday. Are you going?”

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“Of course. Aren’t you?”

“I really want to.”

“He’ll never forgive you if you bail on him.”

“I know.”

“Look, Chris, we can’t save everyone. We’re all hoping little Evie will be found, and Tony’s doing everything he can.”

“Yeah, but it’s not enough. What we need is a psychic.” Chris shook his head. It was always so heartbreaking. When the police lacked the necessary evidence to continue working on an abduction case, families with sufficient funds sometimes engaged the services of private investigators. In some situations, it was justified, because PIs could often go where the authorities could not. But in this case, Chris despaired they would ever find anything useful. He got up.

“Oh, Chris, before you leave, I came across something that might interest you.”

He turned back to Janet. “Regarding?”

“Well, it’s about, um...Maddy.”

Chris immediately perked up. “Really! What did you find?”

She pulled a file from her drawer and handed it to him. “I highlighted the relevant passages with a yellow Sharpie.”

The first document in the file was a brochure advertising the services of the Esprit Galleries in Ashland. The highlighted passage read, “Just as language is used to express the thoughts of our rational minds, art is often the emotional expression of our hearts and souls. The impact of a work of art on the human psyche is therefore greater than the effect of its individual components and, just as with a piece of music, can never be exhaustively described in words.”

He looked at Janet. “Okay, that sounds somehow familiar. But what does it have to do with Maddy?”

“Take a look at the next sheet. I printed it from the PDF copy we have in our digital archives.”

Chris lifted the page and stared at the highlighted section. It was taken from the doctoral thesis of one Madeleine Morrison titled “On the Aesthetics of Surrealism,” which the candidate had completed in June 1988. Needless to say, she had never received her PhD because she had disappeared into thin air before she could turn in her dissertation. Chris gaped at Janet. “It’s word for word what Maddy wrote in the introduction to her thesis.”

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“I thought you would find that interesting.”

“Who is this art broker?”

“Her name is Danielle Michaels. She lives and works down in Ashland, but she sometimes comes to Portland on business. I’ve actually talked to her a few times over the years.”

“Do you have a picture of her?”

“No, and that’s a bit mysterious. I can’t find a single image of her online. I asked her assistant Sue about it once, and she said Ms. Michaels is a very private person. You won’t find any LinkedIn, Facebook, or Twitter accounts for her, either. On the other hand, Sue told me Ms. Michaels is only in her late twenties, or early thirties at the most, so it can’t be our Maddy. But it still might be worth looking into.”

“I agree. Do you have the gallery’s address?”

“It’s on Main Street in Ashland, but that’s in the file.”

“Hmm... 1609 Rogues Mill Avenue.”

“That’s Ms. Michaels private address.”

“I really appreciate this, Janet. Thank you. And don’t stay too long.” She gave him a quick nod, but Chris could tell she was already immersed in her work, so he took the file she had given him and left the office.

3.

Caroline knew she had made a mistake. Her best friend Stacy had warned her to stick to busy streets with enough lighting and not cut through the park. Why did she have to be so stubborn? Looking over her shoulder, she got a leaden feeling in her stomach when she saw the two men gaining on her. She almost shrieked when another dark figure suddenly appeared before her.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” he said with a grin.

The two men behind her blocked her retreat. “Hey, all we want is to get to know you,” said the taller of the two.

“Yeah, you know, in the Biblical sense,” said the other with a smirk.

“Leave me alone!” she cried and tried to push by the guy obstructing the path in front of her.

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But he just laughed and clutched her, his vise-like grip so brutal she thought he had broken her arm. She screamed in pain and terror and tried to tear herself away, but the other two men grabbed her and dragged her away from the path and down among the trees. She squirmed in their grasp, but they threw her to the ground, almost knocking her senseless.

The two of them held her down, while the third man towered above her and grinned as he unzipped his fly. “Danforth says hi.”

Caroline gaped up at him in horror, too dazed to even scream anymore.

“Yeah, that’s right, sweetheart,” said the man as he got down on his knees, forcing himself between her thighs and unbuckling his belt. “And remember, this is just a little preview of what you can expect if you don’t keep your damn mouth shut next time.”

Suddenly, there was a rustling sound, and a figure with huge, bat-like wings and yellow, glowing eyes landed behind the man and hissed. The guy looked over his shoulder and shrieked. One of his buddies holding down Caroline shouted, “Oh, god, it’s that winged demon thing!”

The monster grabbed the man preparing to rape Caroline and tossed him aside as if he were a rag doll. A flap of its wings, and the creature hovered over her and kicked the other two men, sending them flying backward.

The man the being had flung aside managed to get up and draw a semi-automatic. “Take this, you monster!”

The creature landed by Caroline’s head and threw its wings over her to protect her as the hoodlum fired shot after shot in their direction. The demon was glowing with an ominous light, and Caroline thought she caught a subtle hint of spring flowers coming from it. When the man had emptied his magazine, the creature spread its wings, and Caroline saw its sharp, white fangs as it hissed at him. He threw his gun at it and ran off, while his two friends scrambled to their feet and rushed after him.

The creature stooped down to Caroline and looked at her with its gleaming, yellow eyes. As Caroline watched, its eyes turned dark brown, and if she hadn’t seen those deadly fangs, she might have even thought the being looked pretty. In the faint glow falling on them from the lanterns lining the footpath, she saw that its skin was of a crimson hue, it had massive, curved, black horns on its head, and long, black, wavy hair. The creature was wearing a dark, tight-fitting outfit. If

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Caroline, who was a bit on the stocky side, hadn't been so terrified, she would have felt almost envious of the way the suit accentuated the demon's generous curves.

Caroline's eyes widened as she watched it retract its black, claw-like fingernails and put its hand on Caroline's arm. Just moments ago, Caroline thought she was going to be raped, but in her shocked state of mind, she now feared she would be ripped apart by whatever this thing was.

"Hey, are you all right?" said the creature in a pleasant, female voice.

"Please, don't hurt me!"

"I'm so sorry I frightened you, Caroline. I promise I would never hurt you. My antics were just a show to scare those guys off. I usually don't hiss like that."

She gaped at the creature. "How...how do you know my name?"

"Look, there's a couple approaching who must have heard the shots, and it seems they've already called 911. If you think you're going to be okay, I'd rather not stick around."

Caroline just stared at it.

The creature sighed. "Well, I guess I'll be off, then. I really hope you'll be all right. And please don't go for anymore walks alone in the park at night, especially in this neighborhood." It gave Caroline's arm an encouraging squeeze, unfolded its wings, and flew off into the darkness.

Caroline heard footsteps hurrying toward her. "Holy crap!" said a man, running up to her with his girlfriend. "Was that thing what I think it was?" They both seemed to be in their mid-twenties.

"I...I don't know. But whatever it was, I think it just saved me." Caroline could already hear sirens in the distance.

The man's girlfriend crouched down beside her and helped her sit up. "We saw those guys running off. Did they try to rape you?"

Caroline nodded. The shock of what had happened to her was setting in and forced tears into her eyes. One of them slid down her face.

The young woman must have seen it and put her arm around her. "Oh, honey, don't worry. Doug and I'll stay with you until we know you're safe. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

Her boyfriend had gone up to the path and flagged down the two responding officers. As they came closer, Caroline heard him explaining his view of the events. "At first, we heard lots of gunfire. We thought there was a gang war going on and ducked behind some bushes. But then the

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shooting stopped, and these three guys came running from the trees. Angie and I came down here and saw that winged demon thing everyone has been talking about beside the girl there.”

“Really!” said the police officer. “Where is it now?”

“Well, it flew off.”

The two officers exchanged a glance.

“I saw it, too,” said Angie.

“What about you?” said the first police officer to Caroline.

Caroline nodded. “They’re telling the truth. It flew off.”

The second officer shook his head. “What is this town coming to?”

The policemen helped Caroline up and took a preliminary statement. They were surprised when she told them the man who had fired the shots had thrown his gun at the creature. They searched the area and quickly found it. One of the officers called it in, and when the paramedics arrived, they helped her to the vehicle so the EMTs could take care of her. Fortunately, she only had a few scrapes and bruises.

A while later, one of the officers walked over to her, grinning. “It seems the three perps who assaulted you were found not far from here, hanging from the top of a streetlamp. The fire department had to be called in to get them down. The hoodlums were raving about the winged demon you described, and they had been roughed up quite a bit, so there must be at least some credibility to what you saw. Do you think you could pick them out of a lineup?”

Caroline remembered how the man who had almost violated her had towered over her, still felt the pressure as he forced her legs apart, and his warning words to keep her mouth shut echoed through her mind. With a shudder, she dropped her gaze and shrugged. “I don’t know. Everything happened so fast, and it was dark, so I didn’t get a good look at their faces.”

“You were able to describe that demon well enough.”

“Yeah, but she was really close, and there was a moment when she even glowed. That’s not something you forget.”

“So, it was a woman?”

“Well, in the least, she was female, and she seemed quite pretty.”

“How can you be sure it was female?”

“Her breasts kind of gave it away.”

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“And how big?”

“At least a size D, or maybe even larger.”

“No, I mean, how tall was she?”

“Oh, well, she seemed about as tall as the guy with the gun, but I’m not sure. It may just have been her huge wings making her seem taller.”

“A pretty, red demoness with wings, fangs, claws, and horns. Does that about sum it up?”

“I guess.”

“Well, in the least, we’ll probably be able to match one of the perps’ fingerprints to the gun we found. That should be enough for an indictment.” He paused. “So, she really glowed?”

Caroline shrugged. “Sorry, I just don’t know how else to describe it.”

The officer shook his head and walked away.

It wasn’t until an hour later that they finally took her home. Her parents had been worried and were shocked when the police arrived with her at their apartment on the fifth floor. Caroline didn’t know what to say and locked herself in her room, where she dropped on her bed and started crying. It took her hours before she was finally able to fall asleep.

4.

Amber felt her eyelids drooping and blew a strand of her mussed-up, auburn hair out of her face to keep herself awake. She had been staring at the same paragraph of an article for the past five minutes but couldn’t seem to process anything. “This is hopeless,” she said and pushed herself away from the screen.

Her arms had goosebumps, so she rubbed them to get warm. She had always been on the slim side, which might have been the reason she often felt chilly. Besides, during the colder winter months, she and her roommate Patty kept the temperature in their apartment as low as possible without making them feel too uncomfortable. It was their way of saving on heating costs, just as they tried to save on anything that would help them get by on their meager salaries. But then, being a reporter in your late twenties and an allegedly rising star at the Oregonian wasn’t as lucrative as it might have sounded. It was the thrill of chasing after what might possibly be the next big story that kept her going.

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“Hey, Amber, you need to get over here and watch this.”

Amber hauled herself out into the hallway and leaned her head against the doorframe of Patty’s room with a barely concealed yawn. “What’s up?” she mumbled.

“Geez, you look awful,” said Patty, gazing up at her. “Not sure if I should compare you to a zombie or a scarecrow.”

“Gosh, thanks. At least you didn’t call me Pipi Longstocking again.”

“Okay, how about Anne of Green Gables?”

With a smile, Amber said, “Come on, admit it. You’re using a glamour to make yourself look so beautiful, you horrid witch.”

One side of Patty’s mouth twisted upward in a crooked smile. It was just a bit of friendly rivalry and a running joke between them that Amber had always been a bit jealous of her roommate’s looks. Contrary to Amber, who had a slender figure, shoulder blade length, auburn hair, a freckled face, and green eyes, Patty was nicely padded in all the right places, had jet-black, shoulder-length hair, a creamy complexion, and blue eyes. But Amber’s greatest annoyance with Patty was that she somehow always managed to look gorgeous, no matter the time of day or night or how tired Patty claimed to be.

As an administrative assistant for a paper company, Patty didn’t really earn much, either. But together, their two incomes were just enough to afford them a comfortable little two-bedroom apartment in a slightly better part of town. Amber had moved in with Patty five years ago, right after Amber had received her master’s degree in journalism, which was also when Amber had decided she no longer wanted to depend on her father’s financial support.

Amber sniffed and gnashed her teeth at the thought. There was no reason why she would ever want anything to do with her father. She had only seen him a couple of times when she was little. And he had made it perfectly clear he would only support his illegitimate daughter financially but otherwise didn’t want any contact with her whatsoever. John Hughes lived in New York City and had sent Amber to live with a distant relative in Portland, Oregon, when she was six. The move put Amber clear across the continent and with about as much distance between himself and her as possible without leaving the contiguous United States. Even worse, he always blocked any attempts Amber made at finding her mother.

Patty studied her for a moment. “No luck, huh?”

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“None whatsoever.”

“How long have you been looking for your mom now?”

“Ten years, maybe?”

“And you still don’t think it’s time you started using all that energy for other projects?”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, thought so. You’re as stubborn as a mule, you know that?”

“Yup.” Amber rubbed her eyes. “But what did you want?”

“Come here, you need to see this.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a video someone posted on YouTube a few minutes ago.”

Amber groaned and slapped her palm against her forehead.

“All right, Amber, what’s going on?”

“Look, it’s late, and I can hardly keep my eyes open as it is. And you made me haul myself over here for some stupid video? Why would you do that?”

“Because the couple in the video are talking about the only other thing besides your mom that you’re really interested in.”

Amber was suddenly wide awake. “The winged demon?”

“Yeah, get over here.”

Amber immediately moved over to Patty’s laptop and stared at the screen. Patty hit play, and they listened to a young man named Doug and his girlfriend Angie rant about how they had seen the winged demon save a girl from getting raped. The assault had happened in a park near a certain eastside neighborhood of Portland, an area you usually didn’t want to be caught in alone at night.

“Who’s the girl they’re talking about?”

“I don’t know. Some high school student.”

“What was that poor girl thinking?” said Amber. “Has this been authenticated?”

“Hell if I know,” said Patty.

Amber dug her phone out of her jeans pocket and dialed a number.

“Who are you calling?”

“A contact at the Portland PD. I need more information.”

Patty shook her head. “You reporters. Can’t you just take something at face value for once?”

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“No, the Oregonian could never print anything like this if it hasn’t been verified.”

“Hello,” said a person on the phone.

“Hey, Mike? This is Amber Hall from the Oregonian. I’m sorry to bother you at this late hour, but could I ask you something?”

“Sure, Amber, what’s up?”

“I just heard there was a sighting here in Portland of that winged demon of which there have been alleged reports all along the West Coast for decades. Do you know anything about that?”

“Well, I know you’re really interested in that stuff, but I’m not sure how much I can tell you.”

“Just tell me if it’s true. I can get the details later. I just heard the demon saved a girl from getting raped.”

“Okay, well, what I can tell you is that a seventeen-year-old high school student was assaulted by three men, but the attack was thwarted by an unknown entity.”

“Unknown entity? Is that the official term now?”

“Um, well, the officers didn’t want to put anything specific on record, but the witnesses as well as the suspects testified to seeing pretty much the same thing, which was a red demon with huge wings, massive horns, claws, fangs, and yellow, glowing eyes. The girl who was assaulted insisted that the being was female.”

“Female? I’ve heard that before, and it’s certainly interesting. Thanks, Mike. Have a good night.”

“You too, Amber.”

When she had hung up, Amber stared into space, thinking.

“Well, what did he say?”

“He pretty much confirmed it. The girl who was almost raped identified the demon as being female. That would be pretty cool if it were true.”

“You going to bed?”

“No, I’m going to try to get more information on the assault. Maybe I can get enough lines together for a short article and get it on our website before morning.”

“You’re kidding! You want to work now?”

“The news doesn’t wait.” She went to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee.

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5.

Chris tapped the steering wheel of the van with one hand and stroked his goatee with the other. It was 10:52 am and still a bit foggy, but at least it wasn't raining. John and Hank were busy in the cargo area of the van with their communications and digital imaging equipment, but he could tell they were just as antsy as he was. Janet had told him last night to trust in his employees' expertise and professionalism and not to worry, and she was right. Being of Bavarian descent and taking pride in the fact that he was a distant relative of composer Richard Strauss, Chris had inherited the strict sense of duty and penchant for precision for which the Germans had always been known. He therefore ensured his employees were trained accordingly, and they had proven their competence often enough.

But thinking of Richard Strauss reminded him of the composer's introduction to "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." As a result, the theme echoed in his mind and evoked scenes from Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey," which was really irritating. Since he didn't want the tune running through his head for the rest of the day, he turned on the van's stereo system. He had connected it with his smartphone via Bluetooth earlier that morning so he could listen to his own playlists if the opportunity arose. As the first soft bars of Paul Hindemith's symphony "Mathis der Maler" trickled from the speakers, he felt himself relax a bit.

"Hey, Chris, come on!" said John with an exasperated look in his direction. "I mean, we all know you love Hindemith, but this is sensitive equipment, and we're trying to work here."

"Oh, right. Sorry." Chris pressed the power button and was again surrounded by aggravating silence. He looked at his phone. 10:53 am. "Damn, what's taking him so long?"

They were parked just south of I-84 near Providence Medical Center, a medial position in regard to the four drop-off locations, meaning they could reach any of the sites in about the same amount of time if the situation required it. The courier had completed the second drop-off of the day and had stopped at his favorite coffeeshop near Pioneer Courthouse Square. Carl Thorsten had informed them his son-in-law did so on a regular basis, so Chris shouldn't have been surprised or worried. But because there was a lot riding on this venture, the break in the operation bothered him more than it should have.

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Their client, Carl Thorsten, was one of the leading construction tycoons in the city, who had diversified into investments, many of them in real estate. In the past years, Thorsten and his colleagues of the board of the Thorsten conglomerate had realized someone was defrauding them. The culprit would somehow skim off a small percentage of any investment buy-ins. The sums weren't large enough to cause any ripples, which was why it had taken them so long to discover that something was amiss. The ongoing operation was only one of many in the board's attempt to figure out what was going on. The task was to get as much photographic and video documentation of the drop-offs as possible, including all steps in-between, and might have seemed trivial but was nonetheless vital to the whole process.

For this operation, Chris had deployed six teams of three specialists each in various locations around the city. As the time for each drop-off neared, the assigned teams would converge on their designated locations, with one team taking lead on site, and the other teams remaining at a distance but ready to follow the courier to a new location at a moment's notice. Their people had been instructed to get as many covert shots of the location as possible but to concentrate on Theodore Van der Haagen, who would be carrying the briefcases to be transferred. The first two drop-offs had been successful, with the third drop-off scheduled at an office building near Pioneer Courthouse Square at 11:00 am.

"Team 3 Leader, has the courier finished yet?" said Chris into the radio.

"Negative, Central, he's still in the shop."

"Damn Europeans and their coffee," Chris muttered to himself. "Why do they have to be so fanatical about it?"

"Hold on, he's getting up," said a Team 3 operative. A moment later, he added, "Courier has left the shop and is continuing to the exchange site."

"Finally," said Chris.

"Wait," said Team 3 Leader, "an attractive blonde female in a white dress and dark coat is approaching the courier. She's in her early to mid-thirties. He seems to recognize her and is surprised to see her. Whoa! She's really getting into it with him. Now she's hitting him with her handbag. Should we intervene?"

"Team 3 Leader, absolutely not!" said Chris. "Any idea who the woman is?"

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“Sorry, don’t recognize her, but they’re having quite an argument, and I can only describe the woman’s state as hysterical. If I correctly understand what she’s screaming about, I believe she’s demanding to know what he’s done with her daughter.”

“Damn pervert,” mumbled John.

Chris shot him a warning glance in the rearview mirror as he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “This shouldn’t be happening in public. Why isn’t he trying to diffuse the situation?”

“Mr. Van der Haagen hasn’t been informed of the operation,” said Hank from the back of the van. “He thinks he’s alone and doesn’t know the woman’s presence might be a disruptive influence.”

“Hold on,” said Team 3 Leader, “she’s leaving. Huffing off and in tears would better describe the situation, but she’s leaving. Mr. Van der Haagen is staring after her, and he seems angry. Okay, he’s shaking his head and continuing to the third site.”

The team waited for a moment.

“Courier has arrived and is entering the building,” said Team 4 Leader. “Target at the front desk has taken possession of the package. Courier is confirming transfer and leaving the area.”

Everyone sighed in relief.

“Okay,” said Chris, “Teams 1 and 2, as soon as the courier leaves in his vehicle, follow him to the fourth location, rotating tails. Teams 5 and 6, converge on your assigned locations. Team 6 Leader, you’re in charge on site.”

The rest of the operation went off smoothly and took another hour, after which the crew returned to the company offices to evaluate the data. By the end of the day, Chris knew they had enough material to hand over to their client.

6.

Caroline’s parents had called the school in the morning, and the vice principal had told them that, after such a traumatic event, Caroline could remain at home for a couple of days. She had therefore not left her room at all. But besides a couple of bookcases, her closet, a dresser, and her

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desk with the computer, the room didn't really have much going for it, and she was glad when Stacy came over in the evening, even if they just sat on the bed for a while.

Caroline had always felt Stacy was much prettier than she was. They were both on the small side, but Stacy was a cheerleader and had the appropriate athletic figure and dark hair that dropped to below her shoulders. Caroline's full head of shoulder-length, muddy curls and stocky figure were no comparison, although she felt she did have a good set of breasts. But her trademark torn jeans and gray, washed-out sneakers probably didn't do her any favors, either.

"I still can't understand what you were thinking," said Stacy.

"Don't worry, I'm never doing that again."

"But you really saw it? The winged demon?"

"She's not an it. At least, I can't really think of her that way anymore. I was totally scared at first, but she was so nice to me. But I was in shock and didn't treat her very well."

"I probably would have freaked. What was she like?"

"From the way she talked, she seemed normal, like you and me. Um, well, to be honest, she was actually kind of pretty, and she sounded smart."

"Huh! Do you think she's some kind of superhero?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But I think I need some air." Caroline walked over to the window and opened it, then leaned on the windowsill looking out. The cool, night air had cleared some of the clouds away, and she even saw a few stars.

Stacy joined her. "It's a nice evening. Doesn't usually clear up like this in March." Her hand edged closer to Caroline's, and she touched her little finger. Caroline had always wondered at Stacy's need for physical contact, but she kind of liked it and didn't move her hand away.

There was a strange rustling sound, and the demoness who had saved Caroline last night suddenly hovered in front of them, her wings beating gracefully to keep her in place. "Hi."

The girls recoiled and gaped at her.

"I'm so sorry," said the demoness. "I didn't mean to startle you. Do you mind if I come in?"

Caroline backed away from the window, pulling a gawking Stacy with her. With an elegant flap of her wings, the demoness landed in Caroline's room and folded her wings against her body.

"I don't mean to be rude, but what are you doing here?" said Caroline.

"What you experienced last night was traumatic, and I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

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“I never thought I’d see you again, but I’m so glad you came. I wasn’t very polite last night and never got a chance to thank you for saving me.”

“That’s all right. You were in shock. I’ve even had people attack me after I saved them. But I’m glad I was able to help.”

Leaning toward Stacy, Caroline whispered, “Didn’t I tell you she’s pretty?”

Stacy finally closed her mouth. “Pretty? You’re kidding, right? She’s absolutely stunning!”

The demoness looked surprised, and if her face hadn’t already been crimson, Caroline would have guessed she was blushing. “Oh! Um...well, thanks, that’s...really sweet of you. I don’t think anyone’s ever paid me a compliment before.”

Stacy moved toward her. “Do you mind if I touch you?”

“Um, okay.”

Stacy tentatively put her hand on the demon’s arm. “You’re real.”

“Well, I certainly hope so.”

“Would you, um...turn around?”

The demoness gave her a puzzled look. “All right.”

She started to turn, but Stacy stopped her. “Spread your wings a little.” The demoness obeyed, and Stacy turned her around so her back was toward them. “Whoa.” To Caroline, Stacy said, “Do you see that?”

“Yeah,” said Caroline.

The demoness turned her head to look over her shoulder at them, her brow in folds. “What’s going on? Is there something on my back?”

“No, but...how in the world did you get a figure like that?”

The demoness turned around, raised her brow, and her mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding. I fly in here on wings and look like a demon from hell, and all you care about is my figure?”

“It’s just...we’re kind of jealous,” said Stacy.

The demoness sighed. “You girls really don’t need to be. You’re both quite beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you.”

“That’s not true. Your auras are glowing in the most radiant colors. It’s not just your outward appearance that’s important. Your souls need to be beautiful, too, and I can see that you both have

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a lot of love to give. Why do you think I came here tonight? I wouldn't just show myself to anyone." She turned to Caroline's friend. "You're Stacy, right?"

"You know, that's something else I don't understand," said Caroline. "How do you know our names? I mean, how did you even know where I live? Can you read our minds?"

"Yes."

The girls exchanged a shocked glance. "Oh, god, no!" said Stacy.

"Don't worry," said the demoness, "I usually don't read people's minds. It's a violation of your privacy. But there's a lot of information just on the surface that's sometimes thrown at me and therefore difficult for me to block out. That's how I knew both your names, and where you live, Caroline. And now, of course, I know where you live, Stacy."

"Oh, god! I'm so embarrassed," said Stacy. "I have such impure thoughts."

"No, you don't," said the demoness. "You wouldn't believe some of the things I pick up from other people's minds. You girls are saints compared to them."

"But when I look at you, I'd kind of like to..." Stacy dropped her glance.

The demoness gasped. "Oh!"

Caroline's gaze wandered back and forth between them. "What? What would she like to do?"

"Um...kiss me?"

Stacy's face scrunched up in a comical expression. "Yes?" In a low voice, she added, "Well, among other things."

Caroline gaped at her. "Stacy!"

"That's okay," said the demoness to Stacy. "I mean, I'm flattered, and for that reason alone I'd probably let you kiss me. But it wouldn't really be fair to you since I'm pretty straight. And since my heart already belongs to someone else, I wouldn't want you to get your hopes up, and..." She took a deep breath. "Geez, now I'm just babbling. Besides, I know you'd rather kiss Caroline." Looking at Caroline, she opened her mouth to say something, but her expression suddenly changed to one of dismay and she dropped her gaze. "Oh, no. I'm so sorry, Stacy. I shouldn't have said that. I know I'm a bit flustered, but that's no excuse." She looked from one to the other and shook her head. "You girls really need to talk."

Caroline and Stacy stared at each other.

"Stace, are you gay?" said Caroline.

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Stacy couldn't quite meet her eyes and studied the carpet instead. "You mean 'lesbian.' I'm sorry I never told you." She sighed. "This really isn't the way I wanted you to find out."

"It's okay, Stace. I don't mind. But...why would you want to kiss me? You're a cheerleader, and you're so beautiful. You could probably have anyone you want. Me, I'm just a nerd."

"Yeah, but you're my nerd."

"Okay, now I need to sit down," said Caroline, and let herself plop onto the edge of the bed, where Stacy joined her.

"Would you mind if I use your office chair?" said the demoness. When Caroline shook her head, the demoness took the chair from its place at the desk and sat down facing them.

Stacy took Caroline's hand. "Please, Care, just tell me. Do you feel anything for me besides friendship?"

Caroline squeezed her hand and shrugged. "I don't know. Right now, I'm mainly just confused. This is all new to me, and I'm still in shock because of what happened last night."

"Oh, god!" said Stacy, gaping at her. "I'm so sorry! Here I am, going on about my feelings, when you're clearly still traumatized."

"Like I said, it's okay. But how long have you felt this way about me?"

"Well, how long have we known each other?"

Caroline stared at her. "You've been in love with me for six years?"

Stacy sighed. "Yes, from the first moment I laid eyes on you, I just knew I wanted to be with you and no one else. Is it horrible of me to say that?"

"Of course not. Do your parents know?"

"You know how open-minded they are. But yes, I've always told them how I feel about you."

"Gosh, I don't know what to say." Caroline gave the demoness a helpless glance. "You seem to know about this stuff. Why didn't I ever realize what was going on?"

"I think you did," said the demoness. "I'm sure Stacy gave off enough vibes and tried to get closer to you than a friend normally would. But it seems you didn't mind, or you wouldn't be friends anymore."

Stacy looked at Caroline with her mouth open. "Is that true? You didn't mind?"

Caroline took a deep breath. "Sorry, but I really don't know. Maybe. But when did you try to get close to me?"

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“We’ve had plenty of sleepovers, and I suppose I did like to cuddle a lot or stroke those beautiful curls of yours. I was actually a bit surprised you never figured out how I felt about you.”

“Huh.” To the demoness, Caroline said, “How can I tell if I’m lesbian?”

The demoness shrugged. “You’re still young and likely don’t quite know yet who and what you are. It takes even longer if you’re more of a rational person, like you are. And sometimes, you need to experiment a bit to figure out what you really want. But ask yourself this: are you in any way disgusted or offended by the idea that you might be lesbian, or that Stacy has such feelings for you?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, that’s a good place to start. It means you’re at least open to the idea. But just be honest with yourself, and with Stacy. And please, whatever you girls do, don’t try to manipulate each other or be too disappointed or resentful if your friend realizes she’s on a different path.”

Caroline took a deep breath. “Okay.”

With a timid and slightly mournful glance toward Caroline, Stacy said to the demoness, “That’s a cool outfit. What’s it made of?”

“It’s a specialized foam latex emulsion with a thin mesh layer and a black, matte finish. I had it made to my specifications. There are even elastic openings in the back for my wings.”

“Why are they elastic?”

“So my wings can push through when they sprout. It’s no fun, constantly tearing through nice sweaters. But the openings are also reinforced so they’re taut and stay closed when I don’t have wings. I’m glad because then my back isn’t exposed, and I don’t get so cold when it’s chilly out.”

“I see. Interesting. Would you mind if I feel the fabric?”

“Of course not.” The demoness rolled closer and stretched out her arm,

Stacy slipped her fingers under the sleeve and let her thumb rub over it in a circular motion. “It feels so soft and comfortable.”

“It is.”

“Could we look at your hair?” said Caroline.

“Sure, why not.” The demoness turned the chair around so her back was toward them.

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Stacy seemed to be intimidated by the demon's huge wings and ducked away a bit as she let the woman's black, wavy hair glide through her fingers. "I wish my hair were as great as yours. It's so thick and shiny and goes all the way down to your waist."

"Hey, let's braid it!" said Caroline.

"That's a good idea," said Stacy. "I think I saw a really pretty cascading waterfall braid on the Missy Sue website that would be a good fit." She walked over to Caroline's desk and hit the spacebar on the keyboard.

"Hey, girls, do I have any say in the matter?" said the woman.

"No," said Caroline with a laugh. "This is your punishment for outing Stacy. Now, shut up and hold still."

"Look, I found it." Stacy pointed to the screen. "What do you think?"

The demoness studied the image. "That actually does look quite nice. Okay, go ahead."

"I'm going to put on some music," said Stacy, using the mouse and keyboard. When she had pulled up their favorite TuneIn station, she went back to the bed and got busy with the woman's hair. "By the way, what's your name?"

"I'm not sure it's a good idea if I tell you," said the woman.

Caroline elbowed Stacy. "You know, secret identity and all that."

"Oh, right," said Stacy, "because that might put your loved ones in danger. But we still need to call you something."

"You know, I've never really thought about it," said the woman.

"Well, you look like a demoness," said Caroline, "so how about something like 'Daemonia'?"

The woman looked over her shoulder. "Do you even know what that means?"

"Um...no."

"It's a plural form of the Latin word daemonium, which means demon or evil spirit."

"You know Latin?"

"I do."

"That's actually kind of cool," said Caroline. "But are you?"

"Am I what?"

"A demon or evil spirit."

"No, I promise, I'm really not. But I'm not just a normal woman, either."

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“Well, duh!” said Stacy.

“But the name ‘Daemonia’ still has a nice ring to it,” said Caroline. “Besides, lots of superheroes take on names that sound intimidating so they can instill fear into their enemies.”

“Do you girls really like it?”

Stacy and Caroline looked at each other. “Yes!” they both said at the same time with a laugh.

“All right, then, Daemonia it is.”

“May I ask why you’re doing this?” said Caroline.

“What?”

“Being here with us. I thought you just dropped by to make sure I’m okay.”

“I did. And I think my being here with you girls has already made you both feel much better,” said Daemonia with a smile.

“That’s true,” said Caroline. “I haven’t thought about last night since I saw you at my window.”

“But, to be honest,” said Daemonia, “I sometimes get lonely, too. There aren’t many people I can talk to while in this form. Actually, there aren’t any.”

The girls stopped braiding and looked at each other. “Really?” said Stacy. “You mean we’re your only friends?”

“No, I do have friends. Just none I can talk to at night.”

“That’s strange. Why not?”

“It’s...complicated.”

“Meaning you won’t tell us,” said Caroline.

“It’s probably best if I don’t.”

“Okay, we’ll let you keep your secrets,” said Stacy, her lips twisting up in a perky smile. “By the way, did you mean what you said earlier, about your heart belonging to someone else?”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” She sighed. “It just kind of slipped out.”

“Well, is it true?”

“To be honest, I’ve never really let myself think about it. I mean, it’s possible, but it can never be.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too dangerous, and I don’t want anything to happen to him.”

“What’s so dangerous? Your lifestyle?”

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“It can be, but that’s not it.”

Caroline and Stacy both gave her an expectant look.

Daemonia sighed. “Okay, I’ll tell you, but please keep this to yourselves. The thing is that I’m cursed.”

Stacy and Caroline both gasped and dropped the braid they were working on. “You’re cursed?” said Stacy.

“Don’t worry, it’s not contagious,” said Daemonia with a smile. “It’s just that I only look like this at night, after sunset. But when the sun rises, I change back into my human form.”

“Oh,” said Stacy as the girls took up their braids again. “So that’s why you said you don’t have anyone to talk to at night. Your friends don’t know about the curse.”

“Right.”

“But why would knowing about the curse be dangerous to the man you love?”

“Because our longing for each other could lead us to become too...well, you know, um...intimate. And that might actually break the curse. But if he doesn’t truly love me, or I don’t truly love him, he’ll die instead, and I just can’t risk that.”

Stacy seemed shocked. “Oh, wow! So, you’re a virgin, like us?”

“No, I’m not.”

“I mean, we are still virgins, right?” said Stacy with a hopeful glance in Caroline’s direction.

Caroline elbowed Stacy in the ribs. “Hey, I would have told you if anything had changed.”

“Good, just wanted to make sure.” To Daemonia, Stacy said, “So, in all the years since you’ve been cursed, you’ve never slept with anyone?”

“Oh, no, I have. But I no longer do it at night or in this form, because that’s always proved to be fatal to the person I was with.”

“Oh, wow. Okay. But shouldn’t the man you love have a say in the matter?”

“I never told him about the curse. I guess I was too much of a coward, and when he got suspicious, I disappeared on him. But that was many years ago.”

“That’s so sad. But it seems you still think of him, so don’t you ever regret having left him like that?”

“I do. And I’m not sure I did the right thing, either, because he never stopped looking for me.”

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“I don’t know,” said Caroline. “If I knew someone loved me like that, I’d probably go running straight into their arms.” She wanted to add something, but when she noticed the sorrowful look Stacy gave her, she dropped her gaze.

“Doesn’t it remind you a bit of ‘Ladyhawke’?” said Stacy. “That’s that film where the girl turns into a hawk by the day, and the man she loves turns into a wolf by night, so they can never be together. It’s so sad.”

“Daemonia’s situation reminds me more of ‘Shrek,’” said Caroline. “You know, the one where Princess Fiona is cursed and turns into an ogre at night?”

“What a horrible thing to say!” said Daemonia. She bit her lip. “Um, do you...do you really think I look like an ogre?”

“Oh, no, of course not!” said Caroline. “You’re beautiful. But that’s a frightening thought. What happens if you break the curse and wind up stuck in your night form, like Fiona?”

“Geez, that’s encouraging.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind,” said Stacy. “I like you in this form.”

“Thanks.”

“But I still think Fiona didn’t look so bad as an ogre,” said Caroline. “Kind of stocky, like me.”

“No need to fish for compliments,” said Stacy. “You look just fine, Care. You just have slightly broader hips for your size, is all. Like Daenerys.”

“What? You’re comparing me to Daenerys? But...she’s gorgeous.”

Stacy just smiled and kept braiding.

Daemonia looked over her shoulder at Stacy with a grin. “Broader hips, and larger...ahem.”

“Hey!” said Stacy. “That was private!”

“Sorry, couldn’t resist,” said Daemonia. “You girls are just so cute together.”

“We’re, um...not really together like that,” said Stacy with a fearful glance in Caroline’s direction.

“Could have fooled me.”

Caroline felt her cheeks grow warm and said to Daemonia, “So, um...do you like ‘Game of Thrones’?”

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“I do, although I felt the final season was a bit rushed, and the ending was just plain disappointing. I really didn’t like the direction they went with Daenerys. It didn’t make sense to me.”

“They do that a lot these days,” said Stacy. “Like with ‘Dexter,’ or that South Korean series ‘Black.’ In both cases, everything was great until the final episode, and then they ruined it all.”

They continued chatting as they braided Daemonia’s hair, and when they were done, Daemonia seemed quite happy with the result. A couple of hours later, all three girls were sitting on Caroline’s bed with their hair braided.

“My mom’s probably going to check in on us soon,” said Caroline.

“Then it’s probably best if I get going,” said Daemonia.

“Can you come back tomorrow?”

“No, I’m afraid I was only in Portland for a couple of days to take care of some business, and I really need to get back home. But if you want, I’ll gladly drop by the next time I’m here.”

“I’d really like that,” said Caroline.

“Is it, um...very hot where you’re going?” said Stacy with a guarded tone to her voice.

“Hey, I told you I’m not a demon! And I’m certainly not going to the place you’re insinuating.”

“Just checking,” said Stacy with a grin.

“It is quite a long drive, though, and I probably won’t get home until the early hours of the morning. But I will tell you that I live here in Oregon.”

“A long drive? You have wings. Aren’t you flying?”

“No, I took my car, so I’m going to have to drive back.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Is there any way we could contact you in case of an emergency?” said Caroline.

“I don’t have a way right now that wouldn’t compromise me,” said Daemonia. “Why don’t you give me your email address? I’ll figure something out and then get in touch with you, okay?”

“Okay.” Caroline wrote the address on a sheet in her notebook and gave it to Daemonia, who stored it in a pouch in her belt. “If you do send an email, how do we know it’s really from you?”

“I’ll use a word or phrase that only means something to us.”

“Okay, like what?”

“Waterfall braid?” said Stacy.

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“That’s good,” said Daemonia with a smile. “I’ll do that.”

“Can I make a suggestion?” said Caroline.

“Of course.”

“There have been rumors about a mysterious winged demon for years now, and people are going to keep asking questions. Wouldn’t it be best if we took a few pictures of you and sent them to the Oregonian? That way, people who need your help won’t have to be so afraid of you anymore, and they’ll be able to call you by a name of your choosing instead of calling you winged demon or demoness.”

“That’s actually not such a bad idea,” said Daemonia.

“But if we’re going to do this,” said Stacy, “then you need a mask.”

Daemonia opened a pouch on her belt and took out a black mask. “I actually had one made quite a while ago, but I don’t really like wearing it. I suppose this would be as good an opportunity to use it as any.” She put it on.

“Oh, wow!” said Caroline. “That looks really cool. It’s kind of like Robin’s mask in the Titans TV series.”

“Or the masks those kids wore in the Umbrella Academy,” said Stacy. “But with this one, we can actually see your eyes.”

“Right,” said Daemonia, clearly amused, “so how are we going to do this?”

“I’ll put my smartphone on my desk and set the camera for ten seconds,” said Caroline, “and we can all stand together with you in the middle. Maybe you could put your wings around us?”

They did as Caroline suggested, and Caroline set it to take a few pictures. When they were happy with the result, Caroline said, “Now, why don’t you hover outside the window so everyone can see that you can actually fly?”

Daemonia glided out and hovered while facing them, and Caroline stepped back and snapped a few pictures of her with the window frame in view. Daemonia came back inside with an elegant swish and hugged Stacy to herself. “Thank you so much for letting me spend time with you tonight. I hope we see each other again soon.”

When she hugged Caroline, Daemonia whispered, “I know why those guys tried to rape you, and I know you’re scared, but don’t let Brad Danforth bully you into silence, okay?” Caroline gave

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her a tentative nod, and Daemonia said, “I’ll be in touch.” With that, she swished back outside, waved once, and disappeared into the night.

Caroline stared out the window. “Wow! I think that’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Stacy looked into her eyes as if she were assessing her mood. “I was kind of hoping this would be.” She took Caroline’s hand, leaned in, and gave her a tender kiss on the mouth.

Caroline was surprised, but she didn’t resist. When Stacy stepped closer and put her arms around her, Caroline realized she enjoyed the soft, warm pressure of her friend’s body against her own. She raised her chin and parted her lips, allowing herself to lower her defenses just a bit.

At that moment, Caroline’s mom knocked on the door, and the girls immediately separated, looking shocked. “Caroline, honey, it’s getting late.” She opened the door, and the girls looked everywhere, just not at each other or at Caroline’s mother. The woman hesitated. “Everything all right here?”

“Um, yes, Mom, we’re fine,” said Caroline.

“Okay, ten more minutes.” She shot them a puzzled glance before closing the door.

“I’m so sorry,” said Stacy, almost whispering. “I don’t know what came over me.” The girls finally looked at each other. “Do you think we could talk about this?”

Caroline took a deep breath.

Stacy’s expression seemed almost desperate. “Please, Care.”

“All right. Tomorrow, maybe?”

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

Stacy studied her for a moment and then nodded. “Okay.” She picked up her bag. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Stacy hesitated, but she finally stepped up to Caroline and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Then she walked to the door, where she stopped and glanced at Caroline one more time before turning with a sigh and heading for the front door.

Caroline shut the door to her room and stood there for a while, feeling confused and wondering what had just happened. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she sat down at her desk and went through the photos they had made of Daemonia. She decided to keep the ones of all three of them

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to herself for now and chose one of the pictures with Daemonia hovering outside her window, which she attached to an email addressed to the Oregonian.

7.

Halvorsen tightened his lips. He hated stakeouts, but it was a necessary evil in their business. Their employer had called in the early afternoon with new orders, and Halvorsen and his team had spent the rest of the afternoon at their base in Portland's Northwest Industrial District preparing for the mission. Toward evening, they headed out and tracked their target to a posh little club in Downtown Portland. The club had a glass front, making it easy to monitor the woman's activity, so he and his men had taken up position across the street in their dark Chevrolet Express cargo van.

Nola Carson was quite a beauty, easily distinguishable by her deep blue eyes, golden hair, and white dress, and was enjoying an evening out with her friends. Well, *enjoying* might have been the wrong word. *Enduring* would have been better. From the passenger seat, Halvorsen observed her through his binoculars as she attempted to join in the conversation and smile every now and then. But her smile almost always faded, and she mostly looked anxious and perhaps even a bit angry.

Because he was aware of her situation, he didn't think she would stay the whole evening. True to his prediction, she pulled on her coat around ten thirty, hugged her friends, and said good-bye. He watched her head for the back door, which opened onto the club's parking lot.

Halvorsen gave Lund the signal to drive, pulled on his skiing mask, and removed a syringe from a small leather case in the glove compartment. They curved around the building and drove into the parking lot just as their target was approaching her car. She looked around as they stopped the van, but Møller had already opened the van's sliding door and grabbed her, holding one gloved hand over her mouth. She squirmed and tried to bite him so she could scream, but her teeth couldn't get through the leather of Møller's glove.

Halvorsen jumped out of the van, thrust the syringe's needle into her neck, and depressed the plunger. Inside of seconds, she went limp and slumped into Møller's arms. They dragged her into the van's cargo area and slammed the sliding door shut. Lund accelerated, careening out of the parking lot and almost running over a shocked club patron.

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At first, they drove south for a couple of miles, where they threw her coat and her handbag with her keys and smartphone into the river, anything that would allow someone to track her. Then they got on I-5 and headed north. The drive to their base at this late hour only took twenty minutes. Møller carried her into the building and laid her on the table they had prepared earlier. Then he and Lund proceeded to strap her down with plastic wrap and muffled her so she couldn't scream when she woke up. The whole room had been covered in plastic and looked like something from a Dexter episode. But Halvorsen had been doing this for decades—long before anyone had even heard of Michael C. Hall—and he knew how to do his job.

“Hey, for hvad er alt dette; *Hey, what's all this for?*” said Møller, using their native Danish. “Why not just shoot her?”

“Det er bare barbarisk; *That's just barbaric,*” said Halvorsen. He loosened the strap on a sheath in his coat and drew out the black hunting knife with the serrated six-inch blade.

Møller shook his head. “Dig og dine knive; *You and your knives.*”

The woman was waking up. When her eyes fluttered open and she realized where she was, her eyes opened wide, but all she was capable of were muffled yells and screams. Halvorsen waited for a few more minutes. When he was certain the drug's effects had completely worn off, he stood beside her and felt her chest, pinpointing a location between her ribs just below her left breast. The woman shook her head as she struggled and tried to scream, and tears ran down the sides of her face.

Halvorsen regarded her with a grim smile as he firmly gripped his knife with both hands, holding it so the blade pointed vertically down onto her chest. Paralyzed with fear, the woman just stared at him like a frightened doe frozen in the headlights of the car bearing down on her. He knew that look, had seen it countless times on the faces of his victims when they grasped the finality of their situation.

He took a deep breath. Then he pushed down as his abdominal muscles contracted, forcing the air from his lungs. The blade penetrated the plastic and glided into her chest. Blood pooled around the knife as he drove it down to the hilt, and he almost gasped at the stunning contrast of dark crimson against the woman's pure, white dress. A sensation of immense fulfillment surged through him, making him shudder, and he thought her last teardrop was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, glistening on her temple like a solitary diamond framed by her golden locks. His gloved

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hand stroked her hair, and he bent down and whispered into her ear, “Farewell, my beauty. Now, go in peace.”

“Hey, Maestro, you about done?”

Halvorsen glared at Møller. Lund had been with him for years and had learned to appreciate his methods. He was watching quietly from a corner and nodded to him. Møller, on the other hand, was at least a decade younger, large and burly, but not much of a thinker. Good muscle. He had only been with the team for a few months. “Have some respect. She was a person and deserved a proper sendoff.”

“You call scaring her to death a proper sendoff? We could have just shot her in the parking lot of that club and have done with it. Why all the fuss?”

“That’s not how we do things. Our employer’s family is old and powerful, and we stick to their traditions whenever possible. You’ll learn. Now, wrap her up, and don’t let any blood drip on the ground.”

Møller sniffed, but he obeyed. With Lund’s help, they had everything cleaned up inside of ten minutes. Halvorsen had always wondered at that. Preparation of a proper kill site could take hours if done correctly, but it was all disposed of in a fraction of the time.

“Okay, what now?” said Møller.

“Take her south and drop her off the Morrison Bridge. Shouldn’t be an issue at this time of night. That way, they’ll find her by morning.”

Møller shook his head as he grabbed one end of the bundle. Halvorsen sat down, crossed his legs, and lit his pipe, watching him and Lund haul the body away. It had been a good night, and a grim smile played around his lips as he took a long draw on his pipe.

8.

Amber unlocked the door but let it slam behind her when she entered their apartment. As she listlessly hung up her coat, Patty yelled from her room, “Hey, Amber, you home?”

“Yeah.”

Patty appeared at her door. “That doesn’t sound good.”

Amber slouched down the hallway and said as she passed her roommate, “Whatever.”

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Patty held on to her. “Hey, what’s going on?”

Amber hung her head and shrugged. “Just tired, I guess.”

Patty squeezed her hand. “You followed a lead on your mom, and it turned out to be another dead end, right?”

Amber sighed. “It seems you know me too well.”

“I’ve been your roommate for five years. Don’t you think I should?”

“Maybe. But it’s been a long day, and all I want right now is to crawl into bed and pull the covers over my head. Might have a good cry while I’m at it, too.”

“Look, I know we don’t spend that much time together, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you, and I’m here if you want to talk, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And there’s some Rocky Road in the fridge if you want it.”

That finally produced a smile on Amber’s lips. “I might just take you up on that.”

“And I might just join you when you do.”

Patty squeezed her hand and Amber went to her room, where she sat down at her desk and logged in to the Oregonian employee website to check her office emails one last time before signing off for the night. But as she browsed through them, one email that read “Her name is Daemonia” in the subject line caught her eye, and when she opened it and clicked on the attachment, her eyes almost popped out of her head. “Oh, my god!”

She heard the muffled patter of footsteps on a carpet, and an instant later Patty appeared at her side. “What?” She gaped at Amber’s screen. “Oh, my... Is that what I think it is?”

“I’m pretty sure it is.”

“Where did you get it?”

“A colleague at the night desk forwarded it to me. He knows me and has already done a simple graphic analysis for verification, but he says everything seems to be okay.”

“Who took the photo?”

“A girl named Caroline Parker. She says she’s the high school student from the other night who was almost raped. The demoness just dropped by tonight to make sure she was all right and allowed herself to be photographed. She calls herself Daemonia.”

“This is big, isn’t it?”

Daemonia – Draft Preview

“Big? Patty, this is huge! It’s the first photographic evidence that this demoness actually exists.”

“Well, at least it’s not another futile lead on your mom.”

“Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten about that. But this is more important right now.”

“You’re going to be up most of the night, aren’t you?”

“Well, what do you think? This needs to get out!” Amber immediately got on the phone to call the lead editor, since her boss was the only person who could make the necessary decisions about what to put on the front page.

9.

When Chris arrived at the office at nine in the morning, everyone was crowded around the computers and staring into the screens. Even Tony had come out of his office and was gaping at something at John’s desk.

“What’s going on?” said Chris, walking up to them.

Hank gestured for him to join them. “Come here, you just have to see this.”

When Chris looked at the screen, he was just as astonished as everyone else. The image was taken from inside and displayed a winged demoness hovering in front of the window outside. Despite the picture being taken at night, he saw the tips of pine trees behind her illuminated by street lighting, so he assumed the room was on the fourth or fifth floor of an apartment building. “What is that?”

“They say it’s that winged monster everyone has been speculating about for years.”

“Is it some kind of hoax?”

“It’s possible, but the Oregonian believes the photo is real.”

Chris shook his head. “What will they think of next?” Looking at Tony, he said, “Anything new on the Evelyn Carson case?”

Tony nodded, but his expression was grim. He winked for Chris to follow him into his office and then closed the door to give them some privacy.

Chris had always liked Tony. The man was a few years younger than Chris, Hispanic, and radiated vigorous competence. He used to be the commanding officer of the NYPD Missing Persons Squad, but an internal affairs investigation in the wake of a mysterious case combined

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with some bad PR had forced him to resign. He had moved to Portland in the mid-1990s hoping for a new start and had opened the Antonio Cardez Detective Agency.

Over the years, he and Chris had pooled their resources and worked several cases together, and ten years ago, Tony had taken Chris up on his offer to merge his company with the Chris Reinhardt Investigation Services to create the Associated Investigation Services. Since Tony couldn't provide the necessary funds, Chris had retained majority ownership. But Chris hated any kind of administrative work, so he had made Tony his CEO, and the company had flourished.

Tony took out a file and placed it in front of Chris. "I'm afraid they found Nola Carson's body on the east bank of the Willamette a few hours ago, near the Convention Center. The news hasn't been made public yet."

"My god! Evie's mother?"

Tony nodded. "One of our contacts in the Portland PD called me earlier. They still owe us, and since they know Duane Carson hired us to help find his missing daughter, they thought we should know."

"Was it an accident?"

"Well, CSU is still at the scene. But no, it was clearly a homicide. Single stab wound to the heart."

"That's tragic. Duane Carson must be devastated. First, his little girl gets abducted, and now this with his wife. Has he reached out to you yet?"

"No, but I think I'll get ahead of this and give him a call, let him know he can count on us for whatever he needs."

"Good idea. I don't envy you. But keep me in the loop, will you?"

Tony nodded, and Chris went to his own office, where Janet stopped him. "I heard about Mrs. Carson," she said. "That's just horrible."

"Yeah, I know. Anything else?"

"Yes, while we're talking about the Carson case, a contact notified us that someone may have seen Evie Carson."

"That's good, but why are you telling me? Shouldn't you give this to Tony?"

"We can still do that, but I thought you should see it first. The sighting was in Medford, but the address of the contact is in Ashland."

Daemonia – Draft Preview

“Ashland?”

“Remember the brochure from that art gallery I showed you the other day?”

“Maddy!”

“Right. I thought, since you’ll probably be checking that out yourself anyway, we might as well kill two birds with one stone.”

“That’s a good idea. How long will it take me to get there?”

“Here, I already mapped it out for you.” She handed him a file. “This contains the route and the address of the contact. The drive down to Ashland will take you about four and a half hours. The weather in Southern Oregon should be sunny the next couple of days. I’m sure it’ll be nice to get away from this constant drizzle for a while.”

“This is great. Thanks, Janet. Let everyone know I’ll be out of the office for a day or two. I’ll keep in touch and let you know how it goes.”

He packed up a few things but informed Tony about his plans before he left. When he exited the parking garage, he saw a suspicious, dark, Chevy Express cargo van waiting across the street. But he didn’t want to take the time to investigate and drove off. It only took him fifteen minutes to reach his home in Arlington Heights. Although Janet had, as always, been exemplary in her preparation, he wanted to do some more research on his own. He used Google Maps to memorize the geographic layout of the addresses he was planning to visit, but especially the gallery owner’s private address, which was 1609 Rogues Mill Avenue. He didn’t leave the house until sometime after ten. When he reached I-5, he set his cruise control, turned on some music, and relaxed into the comfortable, leather seat of his pearl blue Dodge Durango.

10.

Sue looked up from her keyboard when Danielle walked into their offices. The sun shone through the Ashland Esprit Galleries’ shop-front windows, brightening the room, and Sue saw a few cars driving by on Main Street outside. A quick glance at the digital clock in the computer’s taskbar told Sue it was already well past 10:30. “Good morning!”

Danielle was wearing her faded jeans and her favorite cream-colored sweater, but she looked tired. Sue assumed she was dressing casually because they weren’t expecting any clients today.

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Danielle's sweater accentuated her graceful figure and went well with her waist-long, wavy, dark blonde hair and misty gray eyes. When she had started working for Danielle four years ago, Sue had been entranced and attempted to flirt with her. But Danielle had been friendly yet firm when she informed Sue she was flattered but would rather keep things more professional. Danielle wasn't unsympathetic, though, and had hired Kendra soon thereafter.

If her friend wasn't usually such a sweetheart, Sue might have been jealous. Contrary to Danielle's good looks, Sue's features were plain, like Kendra's, and she always had her shoulder blade length, blonde hair pinned up in whatever hairstyle she was experimenting with, which was currently a chignon. Her slender, athletic figure was clad in an unimaginative, black skirt suit and white blouse, but since it contrasted her ice blue eyes and suited Kendra just fine, Sue didn't worry about it. Besides, at least one of them had to make an effort at a professional appearance, since you never knew if a client might suddenly pop in.

"Good morning, Sue," said Danielle, covering a yawn with her hand. "Morning, Kendra."

Kendra responded with a smile and sipped at her coffee. She kept her hair blown back and parted in the middle, and her shoulder-length, layered, chestnut locks framed her pleasant face and green eyes. Today, she was wearing a knee-length, khaki-beige cargo skirt and a red and black plaid shirt. Kendra didn't really care if she looked professional or not, but her independent spirit was one of the things Sue loved so much about her.

"Long drive?" said Sue.

"Yeah," said Danielle. "I didn't get home until almost four this morning."

"What kept you so long?"

"I made some new friends, and we talked until late."

Sue and Kendra exchanged a surprised glance.

"What?" said Danielle, looking from the one to the other.

"I've known you for at least four years now," said Sue, "and in all that time, I haven't once heard you say you were out late with anyone. I mean, you won't even go out for drinks with us after dark. Those must be some friends."

"Oh, right, well, um, there were...extenuating circumstances."

"What kind of circumstances?"

"One of the girls was almost raped."

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Sue felt the blood draining from her face, and she stared at Danielle. “Oh, my god! I’m so sorry. I really put my foot in it again, didn’t I?”

“That’s all right. You couldn’t have known. Kendra, I need my computer whiz. Could you look into something for me?”

“Sure,” said Kendra. “What do you need?”

“I need a way for someone to contact me without the call or email actually being traced back to me.”

“That’s not too difficult. For the phones, you can use a burner phone or a burner app. Or if you want, I can even provide you with a phone that has encryption, which would make it even harder to track. For email, you could use an anonymous email service, or I could set up a similar service on a dedicated server for you. Just let me know what you’d like me to do.”

“Why don’t we keep it in-house?” said Danielle. “I trust you, Kendra. How long will it take?”

“I can have something for you by tomorrow.”

“That sounds great.”

“By the way, Danielle, you should look at this,” said Sue. She pulled up the Oregonian website she and Kendra had been looking at earlier. “This was posted early this morning, and it’s taking the West Coast by storm.”

Danielle walked over and gazed into the monitor. But she froze, and Sue could almost watch as her face became devoid of color. “Whoa! Um...is that what I think it is?”

Sue grinned. “If you think it’s a winged demon hovering outside a fifth-floor window of an apartment building, then you wouldn’t be wrong.”

Kendra joined them, and they all stared at the image. The title of the article screamed, “Winged Demoness Revealed!”

“This is so cool,” said Kendra. “There have been rumors about some horrific, winged monster all along the West Coast for years, no, decades even. And now, instead of a monster, we get this picture of a crimson goddess who calls herself Daemonia. I mean, just look at her! She’s absolutely stunning!”

Sue elbowed her. “Hey!”

Daemonia – Draft Preview

“You know you’re the only one for me.” Kendra put her arm around Sue, drew her close, and gave her a peck on the cheek. “I’m just saying, if this Daemonia ever decided to join us in bed, I wouldn’t kick her out.”

Despite Danielle being pale, Sue could tell she was doing her best to suppress a smile.

“Are her eyes really glowing yellow,” said Sue, “or is that just the mask?”

“No, I think it’s really her eyes,” said Kendra.

“How did they get this picture again?” said Sue.

“It was taken by a high school student,” said Kendra. “She says she was almost raped the night before, but Daemonia saved her from the three goons who assaulted her. Then the demoness suddenly appeared at her apartment window last night, just wanting to check up on her and make sure she was okay.”

“I wish the police had service like that,” said Sue. “But I think they at least confirmed that the goons had been apprehended.”

“Well, yeah, it seems Daemonia tied them up on top of a streetlamp, and the Portland fire department actually had to cut them down.”

“All right, well, is there anything else we need to look at?” said Danielle a bit too hastily.

Sue studied her. Not only was Danielle pale, Sue also wondered why she was deflecting. “Did you ever get a chance to look at our newest brochure? It’s been out for a few weeks.”

“I’m not sure,” said Danielle.

Sue handed it to her. Danielle quickly scanned it, but her face suddenly became even whiter than before. She stared at Sue. “Where did you get this?”

Sue looked at the paragraph Danielle was pointing at. The first sentence read, “Just as language is used to express the thoughts of our rational minds, art is often the emotional expression of our hearts and souls.”

“It’s from some woman’s doctoral thesis I found in an ancient digital archive of yours,” said Sue. “Is there a problem?”

“You can’t use it! Please, Sue, you have to destroy any existing copies of this brochure.”

“I don’t understand. What’s wrong with it?”

“You don’t have to understand,” said Danielle. “Just do it!” She stormed off and slammed the door of her office.

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Sue exchanged a glance with Kendra.

“Danielle has never acted like that,” said Kendra. “What do you think is going on?”

“I don’t know. But did you see the way she reacted to the article about Daemonia?”

“Yeah, that was a bit strange. She suddenly became very quiet.”

“And pale.” Sue narrowed her eyes. “Didn’t she say one of her new friends had almost been raped?”

“Just like that girl in the article? You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking, are you?”

Sue shrugged.

“Really? Danielle?” Kendra made a dismissive gesture. “Nah!” She paused. “But...hmm... I mean, maybe. But...you really think so? Our Danielle?”

“To be honest, I don’t really know what to think,” said Sue.

Kendra gasped. “Oh, no! I made that comment about Daemonia joining us in bed. Oh, god, would that ever be embarrassing.”

“At any rate, it seems I have a new brochure to design. Not sure how that’s going to help, though. This brochure has been out for weeks, and I’ve already mailed it to dozens of clients.” She sat back down at her computer and double-clicked the file that would allow her to edit her original layout, but the questions coursing through her mind made it difficult for her to concentrate on her task.

11.

Chris stopped for an extended lunch at a quaint little restaurant he knew in Roseburg and arrived at his destination at about half past three in the afternoon. He usually took some time to acquaint himself with an area, and he therefore drove around Medford and Ashland for another couple of hours before finally pulling up outside the Esprit Galleries on Ashland’s Main Street. When he stepped inside, a pleasant voice said, “Welcome to Esprit Galleries. What can I do for you?”

Chris glanced at the name shield on the counter, which said “Sue Warner, Administrative Assistant.” Sue was a plain blonde and dressed in a professional-looking black skirt suit. “Hi, I’m looking for some information on one of your brochures.” He took the brochure out of the file and showed it to Sue. “Can you tell me where you got this passage?”

Daemonia – Draft Preview

Sue shot a glance at the only other person in the room, a young woman with chestnut hair and green eyes, before looking at him. “I’m not quite sure, but you should probably talk to the owner about that.”

“That’s Danielle Michaels, right? Is she here?”

“No, I’m afraid she’s already left for the day. If you want, I’ll be glad to tell her you were looking for her. She should be back in the morning. Could you come back then?”

Chris immediately decided to spend the night. “Yes, I can make that work. When would be a good time?”

“She usually doesn’t get in very early, but I can schedule an appointment with her at 11:00 am. Would that be all right?”

“Yes, that would be fine.”

“May I tell her who she’s meeting with?”

“Yes, my name is Chris Reinhardt.”

“Chris Reinhardt? Are you the Chris Reinhardt from the Associated Investigation Services in Portland?”

“That’s right. Have we met?”

“No, but I’ve spoken with your assistant, Janet Newcomb, on a few occasions.”

“Well, I hope we were able to help you.”

“Yes, we’ve always been very happy with your company’s services. But your meeting with Ms. Michaels is about the brochure, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“Okay, then you’re all set. We look forward to seeing you again tomorrow morning at eleven o’clock.”

The next address was near the SOU campus, and he found it quickly. It was a quaint little residential home in a quiet side street. But when he rang the doorbell, no one answered. He decided to check into a hotel first and come by again later. Maybe they were at work and didn’t get home until sometime in the evening.

He was walking back to his car when he felt that ominous tingling sensation at the back of his neck. Instantly alert, he let his gaze wander around his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was

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the same dark van he had seen when he left the office that morning. It was slowly approaching from farther down the street.

Too late, he realized someone was behind him. He tried to jump away, but two men in skiing masks, who must have been hiding behind the hedge, grabbed him. He lowered his center of gravity and stomped on the one goon's foot while grabbing the other's hand and twisting it back. Chris spun around, and the first man got the full force of Chris's elbow in the face and went down. Chris immediately turned and slammed his fist into the second man's solar plexus, following it up with a hammer blow to the back of his head.

But in the tumult, he hadn't seen the third man get out of the van, which had, in the meantime, pulled up and parked behind his Durango. As Chris turned toward him, the man shot him in the abdomen with a silenced semi-automatic. Steeling himself against the shock and pain, Chris kicked him in the knee and smashed his knuckles into the man's nose, rewarding Chris with a satisfying crunch.

With all three men briefly down, Chris put pressure on the wound in his gut and dashed off, jumping over a couple of fences to put as much distance as possible between himself and the team that had tried to take him. He had hit them hard, and the men weren't following him just yet, so he ran through a few backyards, down a street, and ducked behind a tool shed. A glance at the wound in his belly told him he quickly needed to get somewhere safe. Peering around the corner of the shed, he saw the men farther down the street heading in his direction.

Where should he go? An image of a street somewhere in the opposite direction materialized in his mind, and he raced off at a right angle to his previous route. He must have seen the street on a map when he was studying the area on his laptop that morning, but he couldn't remember the context or the name. He managed to keep up the pace for a while, and when he was a few streets over, he doubled back on his original direction to throw the men off. He tried to maintain his speed, but he felt dazed, was having trouble breathing, and sweat was building on his brow.

At one point, he looked up and discovered he had no idea how long he had been trundling along. For no apparent reason, he turned into a street on his right with a sign that had the name Rogues Mill Avenue on it. But he realized he was getting much too weak and could hardly keep himself upright, let alone run. Even worse, he couldn't keep as much pressure on his wound as he should have, and blood was dripping onto the sidewalk.

Daemonia – Draft Preview

Despite the pain, Chris kept his hands on his abdomen as he stumbled forward. He didn't have to look down at his blood-stained shirt to know he wouldn't make it much further. His labored breathing, blurred vision, and lightheadedness already told him as much. A sweaty strain of his graying hair fell into his face. He wanted to wipe it away, but he had to keep pressure on the wound if he didn't want to bleed out.

Squinting against the light of the evening sun, he could just make out a black, metal gate ahead to his right displaying the number 1609. The gate was partly opened, so he pitted his shoulder against it, almost falling onto the footpath up to the mansion. A hedge blocked his view of the house, but he saw the turrets of the building rising above it, encouraging him to continue his lumbering trek along the path, despite each step being filled with agony. When he finally reached the stairs leading up to the front door, he no longer had the strength to climb them, and he collapsed on the steps.

He didn't know how long he had been out, but he turned his head when another black, metal gate on his left creaked and then banged shut. A young woman in a cream-colored sweater, who seemed to be in her late twenties or early thirties, came up the footpath from the driveway, carrying a brown grocery bag in her arms. She froze when she saw him. Then she dropped the bag and rushed over. Crouching beside him, she nudged his hands aside, lifted his shirt, and carefully examined the wound in his belly. With a toss of her head, she rid herself of a lock of dark blonde hair that had fallen in her face. A tear spilled down her cheek. "Oh, Chris, you silly old man, what have you been up to get yourself shot? And how did you even find me?"

"Maddy?" he gasped, gazing into her misty gray eyes. Then his head drooped to the side, and he lost consciousness.