

*The Adventures of*  
**Jesus Christ,  
Boy Detective**

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**J. BRADLEY**

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# The Hand of Fate

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## Introduction

Mathias looked at the cards in his hand: three 4s (♦, ♣, ♠), an Ace ♥ and a King ♠, then glanced at Joseph. “I’m all in.” Mathias pushed his chips into the pot.

“Call,” Joseph shoved all his chips into the pot, then crushed Mathias’s three-of-a-kind with a full house—three 7s (♥, ♦, ♣) and a pair of Queens (♥, ♠). “It looks like you’re out of the game.”

“God dam...” The petrification started with his mouth, spreading to his face, shirt, suspenders, pants, boots, until a statue of Mathias sat in his place.

The chair legs groaned as Daniel pushed himself away from the poker table. “What the fuck is going on here? What kind of fuckin’ game is this?” Henry buried his face in his hands, smudging his spectacles with clammy palms. Frank took a flask out of the inner pocket of his worn gray duster.

“This is gonna be a long night,” Frank said after a pull.

\* \* \*

Henry Wormwood stood next to a freshly covered grave, alone. He baked in his black bowler hat and sack suit, face swollen from grief.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” The sentence sneaked through Henry’s sobs. Henry turned around to see a figure, cloaked and hooded in white.

“Who...are...you?” The figure handed Henry a handkerchief. Henry cleaned his spectacles, blew his nose.

“What are you willing to do to get this person back?”

“I can’t get them back. No one can do that.”

“What if I can?”

\* \* \*

“I’m done with this! Deal me the fuck out!” Daniel yelled. He took five steps away from the poker table before a lightning bolt struck where he would have taken the sixth step.

*Only one will be allowed to leave this table.*

Frank drew the sawed-off double barreled shotgun out of his duster. “Who’s there?” The cards in Joseph’s hands began humming, the pitch growing louder. Frank clutched his head, Daniel his stomach, Henry’s glasses cracked. “Joseph, what did you just do?” Frank pointed his shotgun at Joseph’s chest.

“Nothin’, I swear to God, nothin’.”

“Frank, he’s right.” Henry said, putting his hand on Frank’s left shoulder. “It’s this game. Strange things have happened at the end of each hand. There’s something about those cards.”

“When I lost my showdown against Frank, I couldn’t see out of my right eye for a coupla hands,” Daniel said.

“Mathias said he lost that limp he had after winning a hand,” Joseph said. “But why did he die?”

“How did we get the chips?” Henry rubbed his chin, “We didn’t get an equal amount either. Some got more some got less.” Henry looked at the other men. Frank was in his mid-40s, a scar running like a tear beneath his left eye. You couldn’t tell Joseph had wrinkles until he smiled. Daniel’s cheeks looked like they were slapped by the doctor after birth.

*Only one will be allowed to leave this table.*

\* \* \*

Joseph’s back was to the wall. Four bad hands, two bluffs later, he was down to his last few chips. In the showdown against Henry, his two pair—Aces (♥, ♦) and

10s (♠, ♦)—lost to a straight—5, 6, 7 (♠), 8 ♦, 9 ♥. Joseph's last pose was his hands clasped in prayer. Frank couldn't move his left arm.

\* \* \*

Daniel was ahead in the chip count, Henry second, Frank third, slowly losing more and more chips after each round.

“Hot damn, I’m gonna win this whole thing,” Daniel yelled. “I’m gonna get cleared of the charges and go home to my wife.”

“Whareyoutalkin’about,” Henry slurred. The last hand he lost paralyzed the left side of his body.

“I was told if I won then what I did on the train is gonna go away. I’ll get to go back to my family, my little girl. You are almost done, old man. Then it’s just between me and the yellow belly. I’m gonna beat the Dutch, just you wait.” After his final showdown, the shotgun dropped out of Frank’s hand before he had a chance to fire at Daniel. His arm stayed outstretched. Henry picked the gun off the floor and opened the barrels.

“Daniel, I think Frank was the man they called Eureka in the papers a while back. The barrels are full of pyrite, ‘Fool’s Gold’. He was the scourge of the Union army. Killed 120 men before going into hiding after the war was over. Wasn’t even a solider, just a vigilante. Before he shot someone, he yelled ‘Eureka’.”

“That’s horseshit, Frank, horseshit. Now, sit down and let’s get this finished. Got a wife and a little girl waiting

for me.”

\* \* \*

After the next few hands, Henry’s glasses looked brand new, Daniel coughed and wheezed every so often. The chip count on both sides looked fairly even. Daniel’s last hand was a Jack-high flush (♦). Henry shuffled and dealt. Daniel looked at his hand and smiled.

“I’m goin’ all in.”

“Are you sure you want to do that, Daniel?”

“Hell yeah, I am. I won with a flush last hand. Diamonds. Every time one of us won with lots of Diamonds in their hand, somethin’ mighty good happened. I’ve got a good feelin’ about this hand.”

Henry pushed all of his chips in the middle of the table. “Call.”

“Read ‘em and weep. A straight, Queen high.” After Daniel saw Henry’s hand, he froze, mouth puckered in ‘no’.

“Well done.” The figure cloaked and hooded and white walked toward Henry. “You have one more hand to play.” The green felt table cloth from the poker table disappeared, revealing a pentacle carved into the table top and a new stack of chips. *Only one will be allowed to leave this table.* The figure took off the hood, revealing slicked back black hair, dull brown eyes, a Roman nose, and a weak jawline. “Hello, Henry. That was a nice funeral you did for me.”

“How did you...”

“A potion that simulates death. Two days after I died, my assistant dug me up and revived me. He was the one who gave you the last invitation to the game. You were the last ingredient.”

“Last ingredient for what?”

“To unleash the true apocalyptic power of the deck, I need the life force of five sinners of different degrees. Daniel was a thief, Joseph was a grifter, Mathias molested little girls, Frank was a killer, and you laid with men.”

“But I thought you loved me, Benjamin.”

“You were just a pawn for a greater good.” There was a loud bang, then blood spilled from Henry’s ruptured back before collapsing. Daniel held the smoking shotgun.

“You fuckin’ Sodomite. I hope you burn in Hell for what you’ve done.” Daniel spit on Henry’s face.

“What have you done?” Benjamin yelled as he pointed at Daniel. His index finger shivered.

“What are you tryin’ to do, poke me to death?”

“No.” Benjamin thrust his arm again, his index finger strained. “No. You’ve broken the pact.” The poker table cracked. The ground beneath fissured, the broken table falling into the earth. Daniel aimed the shotgun at Benjamin. Click.

“I’m glad I used both barrels on your friend. What you’ve got comin’ is gonna be far worse.”



“We’re going to the same place, you know.”

“Yeah, well I’m ready to pay for my sins. I reckon you aren’t.” Daniel watched Benjamin fall before the ground gave way beneath him. The floor righted itself, leaving only the deck of playing cards. A gray cloaked and hooded figure picked up the deck, placed it in a black tin, then put the tin in a pocket. The figure walked out of the building, never looking back.

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## Chapter 1

### 1.

Tom Hightower gripped the wheel of his pearl colored Range Rover. The rain turned the highway into a shallow, raging river. Mary Hightower peered through the windshield, looking for the exit to her mother’s house. Timmy Hightower looked through his pocket notebook, trying to piece together the clues regarding the case Marie Swanson hired him for to find out who would forge a love letter in her handwriting to Carlos Francisco, Parker Lewis Middle School’s token pariah.

“Mary, do you see the exit yet?” Tom sighed. The sweat slowly knitted wet gloves around his hands.

“No, I don’t Tom. Why don’t we just pull over and sit a

bit until the rain stops.”

“We’re running late as is, baby. There’s no need...”

The burst of the Range Rover’s right front and rear tire interrupted Tom’s sentence. Tom furiously turned the wheel as the Range Rover spun out before a Mack truck tapped it just enough for it to flip and roll until it stopped, wheels spinning in the air. The horn cried like a dirge as a figure in a raincoat walked over to the ruined Range Rover.

“Hhheellp...hellllp ssuss.” Tom’s broken ribs fractured his plea. The figure walked to the back seat, crouched to look. The seatbelt kept Timmy in his seat, the blood trickling from his forehead onto the roof. The figure picked something shiny out of the back right tire before walking back and picking something out of the front tire. The figure crouched down, looked into Tom’s desperate gray eyes before covering his mouth. Tom’s arms wanted to move, slap the figure’s wrist. Tom’s eyes fluttered, his body slacked.

“The vessel is ready.” The figure said to the rain.

“Good.” The rain hissed back. “You have done well.”

\* \* \*

“How...is he doing?” Leopold Franz’s question came out in a faint German/Christopher Walken drawl. The night nurse stared at the man’s slicked back black hair, salt and pepper handlebar mustache, the tattoo creeping from the collar of his shirt.

“Who are you?”

“I’m...his uncle.”

The night nurse stared harder, her brow furrowing. Her cheeks quivered, trying hard to fight her fear, her awkward surprise. “Wait, you’re...”

“I am, yes.”

“Pardon me for asking but how are you related to the Hightowers?”

“Every family...has a wolf...they’d rather forget.” Leopold tackled the night nurse as the lightning bolt came through the window and struck Timmy Hightower. The EKG flattened, moaned. “Are...you ok?” Leopold helped the night nurse up.

“I am. Thank you.” The night nurse noticed the monotone of the EKG. She punched a button over Timmy’s head. The loudspeakers chanted “Code Blue, Code Blue, Code Blue.” Doctors, nurses, ran past Leopold.

“Sir, you’ll need to wait in the waiting room. We’ll let you know what happened when we’re done.”

Leopold turned, walking calmly from Timmy Hightower’s hospital room, into the nearest men’s room. He looked around to make sure he was alone before running the water and dunking his face. “I know you know what you’re doing,” Leopold thought to himself. “I hope one day...I understand.”

2.

Three of the playing cards laid face up on the kitchen table (8 ♥, King ♠, King ♦). A charcoal pinstriped suited man peeked at his cards before looking back at the 12-year-old boy. The boy ran his tongue across his braces, peeking at his cards slightly.

“You’ve played well so far, Larry. So well, far better than I thought you would. It’s a shame this game has to end.”

“Dude, are you gonna shut up or are you gonna make the turn?”

The charcoal pinstriped suited man slipped his hand beneath one of the face down cards in the middle of the kitchen table, revealing it as a King ♥.

“This is quite interesting. Your move, Larry.”

Larry’s chips glowed brighter as he pushed them all into the rest of the pile. “I’m all in, dude. You got the balls to follow me in or are you gonna fold like a pussy?” The charcoal pinstriped suited man’s chips glowed just as bright as he pushed all of them into the pile.

“It’s time to see what the river brings.” The fifth card is an Ace ♠. “Call.” Larry revealed an Ace ♥ and a 5 ♣.

“Full house, dude, Aces and Kings. Think you can beat that?” The charcoal pinstriped suited man revealed a King ♣ and a 7 ♥. Blood trickled out of Larry’s mouth, each drop that touched his skin turned it to stone.

“Wghah ghav yoah don to me?”

“The same thing you just did to your friends. You all knew the stakes going in.”

The blood poured faster out of Larry’s mouth, stone creeping up his body until he was a statue sitting at the head of his family’s dining room table. The chips melded into a column of light, shattering the ceiling above. The charcoal pinstriped suited man collected the cards, placed them in a black tin, then sealed it tight. He didn’t look back at the other statues sitting at the table as he left Larry’s house.

*You did well, Nathaniel.* The words buzzed in the charcoal pinstriped suited man’s ears as he walked to the faded midnight black Camry parked adjacent to the outside curb of Larry’s house. Nathaniel opened the driver’s side door of his Camry, settled in the driver’s seat before putting in the keys. The local talk radio station played the news about the death of the Hightower family, of Timmy Hightower still struggling to wake up from his coma.

*Nathaniel, start finding players for the next game.*

“This quickly? We need to lay low for awhile.”

*Make it happen, Nathaniel. Do you understand?* Nathaniel nodded as he turned the ignition, set the Camry to D, and drove normally out of Larry’s neighborhood.

\* \* \*

“How’s the father doing?”

“Not so well. He had to be sedated and taken to the hospital. You wouldn’t be doing that well either if you found his kid and four of his friends...”

“How did they do it though, Chief? Did each kid slit the others wrist and then watched each other die? Where’s all the blood?”

“All of these are good questions. This is just too damn weird for our detectives to handle. I mean, they’ll have to try and figure out what happened. It’s their job, but I don’t think they’ll solve this. I might need some outside help.”

“Outside help? Like FBI?”

“No. I think I’m staying local on this one.”

“Wait. If you’re thinking who I’m thinking, this might even be too weird for him. Besides, he...”

“I know. I know. I hope he makes it. We need him more than ever.”

### 3.

Leopold Franz watched Timmy Hightower’s eyes flutter beneath his eyelids before snapping open.

“You’re...awake. Thank God. I thought...I lost you.”

“Where...am I?”

“You’re at...St. Joseph’s. You, your mom, and dad... got into a really bad accident on the highway.”

“But my mom’s already dead and my dad is...”

Leopold placed a finger to Timmy’s lips. “Good... you’re in there. I need you to...relax. In a minute or two, the night nurse is going to come in and check on you. You...need to act like the boy as best as you can.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because he’s asked me...to make sure I watch over you while you are in this body.”

“I can escape this body. Watch.” Timmy Hightower gritted his teeth, clenched his fists, shut his eyes. The EKG beeped faster. Timmy opened his eyes and noticed that he was still tethered to his hospital bed. “Why isn’t this working? Why am I here? What have you done,” Timmy asked the ceiling.

“We’ve got about...thirty seconds. The boy’s memories...are intact. Access them...and use them. You’ll need to play along...in order to get out of here.”

“Why?”

“Do you trust me?”

“I don’t have a choice do I?”

“You do. If you say who you really are though, it’ll be written off...as brain damage. You’ll be in here...a lot longer.” Leopold heard the sneakers of the night nurse squeaking closer. “Well?”

Timmy closed his eyes again, thrashed beneath his eyelids before opening again. “Uncle Leo, is that you? What happened?”

“Timmy, thank God. I thought...I lost you. You, your mom, and dad...got into a really bad accident on Highway 27.”

“Are...they ok? Where are they?”

The night nurse walked into Timmy’s hospital room, watched Leopold take Timmy’s hand into his. She held back her own tears as a slowly sobbing Timmy dived into Leopold’s chest, Leopold’s shirt muffling Timmy’s questions, snot and wails.

\* \* \*

*The boy is awake now. You know what to do.*

Nathaniel took five random playing cards from the black tin, placed each one in a white envelope, then sealed them. The mailing addresses slowly appeared in gold cursive, with a subtle crimson outline around each letter. He placed a Forever Stamp on each envelope, then stacked them in a neat pile. Nathaniel placed them in his inner pocket before walking out of the motel room, to the mailbox at the front of the hotel, feeding it the envelopes.

4.

Timmy and Leopold sat in the left front pew of the viewing room, listening to the priest giving Timmy’s mother and father their eulogy. Timmy heard the pew behind them creak as a new person slid in. Over his shoulder, Timmy noticed the new person in a formal police uniform, the length and width of his black beard,



and the mahogany pipe sticking out of his pockets. He leaned into Timmy's right ear.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Tim. This was terribly tragic," the man whispered. Timmy shut his eyes for a moment.

"Yes. Yes, Chief Donaldson, it was." Timmy numbed the words.

"Is there anything I can do for you, at all, anything?"

"I don't think so, Chief."

Chief Donaldson began scooting out of the pew before leaning into Timmy's ear again. "I hate to do this to you but there's a case I need your help on."

"Chief, my mom and dad just died. Can't this wait a few days?"

"This can't wait a few days. I'll talk to you after the burial, ok?"

"What is so damn important...about this case?" Leopold hissed. Chief Donaldson pulled out a manilla folder, handed it to Timmy.

"Once you look in here, you'll understand."

\* \* \*

Timmy, Leopold, and Chief Donaldson walked through Larry Kreg's parents' house, ignoring the lazy '70s decor and color choice. They stopped in the dining room.

"Why do you need me for this again, Chief? The file

said murder/suicide. This is something your CSI team should be walking through, not a twelve-year-old boy.”

“We had to put something down, Tim. Didn’t you read through all the report?”

“Yeah...there wasn’t any blood found and...” Timmy looked up at the plastic tarp bandaging the hole in the roof above the dining room table.

“You’ve dealt with weird cases before and we’re all stumped on how all of this happened. A murder/suicide without any traces of blood. A giant hole in the roof but no gunpowder or traces of explosive chemicals. I need a fresh perspective, Tim, and you’re the best option I’ve got.”

Timmy walked around the dining room table, looking at it, ducking underneath it. He noticed Chief Donaldson’s shined shoes marring a faint curve on the floor. Timmy used one of the dining room chairs to step up to the top of the dining room table.

“Chief, does your phone have a camera?”

“It does, why?”

“Throw it to me.” Chief Donaldson pulled an iPhone in a police blue case, handed it to Timmy. “I need you both to step away from the dining room.”

Leopold and Chief Donaldson walked out of the room. Timmy took pictures all around the dining room floor, connecting the curves of the circle in his head. *Is this why you put me here in this body? You could at least answer me.* The only thing Timmy heard in response was

## The Hand of Fate

the built in sound effects of the camera taking picture  
after picture.

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## From the Hips

Timmy Hightower crouches over the body, its eyes and mouth weeping vinyl.

“Whatever was used to do this is gone,” Chief Donaldson puffs on his pipe while leaning against the empty record shelf. “Randall had a very unique collection. It’s too hot for the usual fences.”

“Who would have motive to do this to him?”

“Ex-wife maybe? Jealous record collector? I just show you...”

“...the bodies. I have to be the one to follow the leads. I know.”

“Speaking of bodies, where’s your uncle?”

“Painting the town red, as you’d say. I mean that figuratively, of course.”

“Leopold Franz is out at night? Having fun? I didn’t think that was possible.”

Timmy straightens himself up, turns and faces Chief Donaldson. “In order for Uncle Leo to truly reform, he has to reconnect with humanity. Love can do just that. Or some really good sex.”

Chief Donaldson’s pipe drops out of his mouth, his jaw unhinging. “Um...I thought...”

“Chief, I was married, despite what you may have read. I never required my followers to be celibate either. My father, however, believes if his followers aren’t getting laid, then they use that pent up sexual energy to serve his purpose. The means behind an end don’t really matter to him, as long as he gets what he wants.”

“I don’t think Leopold knows how to talk to a woman, let alone how to hold a conversation. Who is he out with?”

“Does the name James Decatur ring a bell?”

\* \* \*

Chief Donaldson settles into the couch in Timmy’s basement crime lab, watching Timmy drag and drop crime scene photos across the large, flat screen monitor.

“Don’t you have other cases to work?” Timmy asks.

“I’m merely an administrator. The last time I solved a case was five years ago. I’ve always wanted to see how he worked. What is he having you do, anyway?”

“Timmy’s instincts are telling me there’s a pattern

here.” He points at the photo of a woman choking on stamped envelopes. “Carleen Clavin, rare stamp collector. The estimated value of the stamps on one of those envelopes was \$20,000. The rest of her collection went missing.” Timmy clicks on the mouse to bring another photo to the forefront: wrists and throats slit with tiny, jagged incisions. “Edwin Denson, three-time *Magic: The Gathering* national champion. The estimated value of the deck used as murder weapon was a grand. The rest of his collection, gone.” Timmy clicks on the mouse to bring the man weeping and drooling vinyl up on the screen. “And now, Randall Fringston. The part of his collection used to kill him was estimated at \$5,000 and the rest is gone.”

“We have someone who likes to kill collectors with their own collections and take the rest?”

“That’s part of it. I did a little more digging.” Timmy presses a few keys on his keyboard, bringing up three official-looking documents. “Each one is divorced, the reasons for the divorce attributed to their obsessions regarding their collections as the deciding factor.”

“Wow. What next?”

“Tomorrow, after school, we go to Sandiego’s and have a chat with the owner.”

“We? Leopold’s gonna be back late. He should be recovered by the time you get out of school.”

“Leopold is off this case. He needs some time to himself to recharge. And since all you do is administrate...”

“Wait a minute, Timmy. I need to clear this with your father.”

“I already did. Meet me at Sandiego’s tomorrow. Plain clothed.”

\* \* \*

Timmy threads the bike lock through the spokes of the back wheel of his BMX bike, around the tree, through the spokes of the front wheel, connecting the lock. He notices Chief Donaldson across the street in front of Sandiego’s wearing a white polo shirt and light khaki pants, puffing his pipe. “That’s your idea of plain clothed?” Timmy yells, as he walks toward Chief Donaldson.

“Yeah, so? Were you expecting me in a suit and tie, oiled shoulder holster hidden beneath my sport coat?”

Timmy stops in front of Chief Donaldson, looks him over. “Uh, yeah.”

“This is your investigation, Timmy. I’m merely here to assist and protect you outside of my official capacity as the Chief of Police. While I am operating as your protector, I’m going to be comfortable and before you ask...” Chief Donaldson reaches into his left pocket, pulling out a .38 Special. “...yes, I’m carrying.”

“Aren’t you afraid that will go off in your pocket?”

“Pocket’s cut out, letting me draw from a holster strapped to my thigh.” Chief Donaldson puts the .38 back into his pocket. Timmy notices the outline of the

gun bulging through Donaldson's khakis after he holsters it.

"Yeah, incompetent gun owner is a good cover for you," Timmy says as he opens the door. Timmy and Chief Donaldson watch a string tied to the doorknob inside pull the trigger of a crossbow balanced on a rack. The bolt skewers through the hood cinched on the man's head tied to a chair behind one of the glass cases. Chief Donaldson runs across the room, takes out a pocketknife, and cuts the hood around the arrow sticking through the body's right eye.

"Timmy, meet Santiago Sandiego. How does it feel to kill a man?"

Timmy runs out of Sandiego's, vomiting onto the curb.

\* \* \*

Timmy sits on the back of the ambulance, blanket draped around his shoulders. He stares at the Sandiego's front door. Chief Donaldson snaps his fingers in front of Timmy's face until the boy's eyes flutter and look up.

"Ever heard of a Scorpio?" Donaldson asks.

"A what?"

"That's what killed Sandiego. It was an artillery weapon used by the Romans. Sandiego's specialty was ancient weapons and only that part of the store is gone."

"Divorced?"

"Yup. Because of the money he spent collecting these



weapons.”

Timmy slides off the back of the ambulance, letting the blanket fall from his shoulders into the street. He walks over to his bike, kneels, and begins unlocking the bike lock.

“This wasn’t your fault, Tim,” Chief Donaldson yells as he closes the distance between himself and Timmy. “How could you have known this was going to happen?”

“I should have been more careful,” Timmy replies into the sidewalk. “Timmy’s supposed to be more careful.”

Chief Donaldson gently places a hand on Timmy’s shoulder. “Timmy’s never dealt with cases like this. Take the night off.”

“I can’t. I have a case to solve.” Timmy wraps the chain around the bike’s frame, snaps it shut. He jumps on, pedaling furiously away from the crime scene.

\* \* \*

Chief Donaldson shuts the door behind him, turns on the faucet, twiddling the knobs until the water is slightly warm. “We need to talk.”

“We have nothing to talk about,” the running water hisses.

“Yes, we do. I didn’t sign up for allowing a 12-year-old boy to accidentally kill someone.”

“You know he’s not a boy.”

“I know he’s not, but Timmy is. Whatever allows him

to use Timmy's skills and abilities has to be getting back to him wherever you're keeping him. When you're done with his body, his mind will have to cope with all that has happened."

"I have that covered, Craig, as I have everything covered. Where's your faith?"

"Not in you."

The faucet twists until the mouth aims at Chief Donaldson, the knobs twisting clockwise until they crack. The water slams into the right side of Chief Donaldson's ribcage, pinning him against the bathroom door.

"This is a warning. I can find someone to replace you easily. Remember that." The water trickles to a stop.

Chief Donaldson clutches his ribs, heaving.

\* \* \*

Timmy ducks under the police tape, opens the front door of Sandiego's, his hand encased in a questionably clean tube sock. Timmy removes the sock, takes a flashlight out of his backpack, and turns it on. He shines the light on the wall across the room, stares at the faded crimson blotch. Broken glass cracks with each step he takes. Timmy stops in front of one of the broken cases, taking inventory of the knives and swords.

"I'm surprised you came back." Timmy turns, facing a shadow with glowing green eyes. The flashlight dims in Timmy's hands. "Why didn't you believe Chief

Donaldson when he said only the weapons were stolen?”

“I needed to see if he missed something. Donaldson and his crew always miss something.”

“Dear boy, your haste is going to cost you.”

Timmy throws the dying flashlight at the shadow, running toward it at the same time. He drives his shoulder through the shadow’s shins, sending it crashing to the floor. Timmy runs outside, then turns. He stands in front of Sandiego’s, bouncing on the balls of his feet, fists clenched in a fighting stance.

“Let’s see how you do out here.”

“Another time.” A grenade breaks through the front door’s glass pane. Timmy sprints across the street, ducking beneath the nearest car. The grenade settles to a stop on a sewer grate, waiting.

\* \* \*

“I said take the night off, Tim.” Chief Donaldson winces as he takes a slow drag off his pipe.

“A man died, Chief. A man died by my hands. I won’t stand for it.”

“Haven’t people died because of you already?”

Timmy crosses his arms; his eyebrows slant. “Really, you are going to ask me that here?”

“Alright, fair enough. There weren’t any prints on the practice grenade your attacker threw out of Sandiego’s. However, whatever you did finally gave us something

we can use to track this bastard.” Chief Donaldson takes an evidence bag off the roof of his car and hands it to Timmy. Timmy holds it up, watching the tooth slide down inside, following a thin trail of blood.

“Our suspect also may have a limp.” Timmy hands the evidence bag back to Chief Donaldson. “If our suspect is smart, they’ll avoid the ER or emergency dentists to fix either one of their problems.”

“Could you tell the gender of the suspect?”

“It was too dark. I also couldn’t tell based on the voice. They changed their voice deliberately to make it harder to figure them out.”

“If our suspect profiled you well enough to figure you’d double back to look at the crime scene, they might be waiting for you at home. I can have a couple of officers take you home and accompany you inside.”

“I don’t think they’ll be a need but I will. For your sake.”

\* \* \*

The officers standing on each side of Timmy collapse. Timmy crouches, looks at the tranquilizer darts sticking in their necks. A dove lands on one of the officer’s chests.

“It’s not safe here,” the dove coos. “Get back to the station and work from there.”

Timmy stands, turns, looks around. “Who is doing this?”

“I’m not even supposed to be warning you. Get back

to the station.” Timmy watches the dove fly towards the moon.

\* \* \*

“Timmy...what are you...”

Timmy comes around Chief Donaldson’s desk, presses a couple of keys on Donaldson’s keyboard. Timmy’s basement/crime lab comes up on the monitor.

“I was told by a reliable source my house wasn’t safe.” Timmy moves the mouse to the left, the view of the screen changing to focus on the door leading back upstairs, then moves the mouse to the right, scanning the lab. “I don’t see anything. It might be on the other side of the door. Or somewhere else in the house.”

“Where are the officers I sent along to escort you?”

“Dreaming, thanks to a couple of well-placed tranquilizer darts. Peter made sure they wouldn’t walk into a death trap.”

“Peter?”

“You might know him as the gatekeeper. He normally operates unseen on my father’s behalf. If Peter’s stepping in to help, this is really bad.”

“I can get the bomb squad out to your house to take a look.”

Timmy opens a new window on the screen, enters a command. He pushes the keyboard back, walks out of Donaldson’s office. Chief Donaldson takes the gun from his front desk drawer, holsters it, and runs after Timmy.

\* \* \*

Timmy stares at the front door. He doesn't turn when Chief Donaldson's car parks against the curb, the engine quieting down.

"Tim, what are you doing?" Chief Donaldson says as he gets out of the car.

"Our suspect won't expect me to go through the front door." Timmy takes two steps before Chief Donaldson grips Timmy's right shoulder, pulling him back.

"You are going to get Timmy killed."

"Give me your phone?" Timmy turns, holding out his hand.

"What does my phone have to do with anything?"

"Just give it to me, Chief." Chief Donaldson fishes through his pockets, hands Timmy the cobalt blue encased iPhone. Timmy presses a couple of buttons on the phone, bringing up a photo of the man weeping vinyl, handing the iPhone back to Chief Donaldson. "What's missing on the body?"

Chief Donaldson squints. "The...left ear."

"Look at the next one." Chief Donaldson thumbs to a photo of a woman choking on stamped envelopes. "What do you see?"

"Blood...blood is coming out the sides of her mouth."

"Our collector killer isn't just killing collectors with the things they love. Our collector killer is also collecting body parts that focused on what senses were most needed

to be good at collecting what they did.”

“They’re after Leopold’s knives, then. The killer keeps coming after you, hoping Leopold steps up to them.”

“Leopold hasn’t allowed a collection to drive away someone he loves. Timmy has.”

“The newspaper clippings, the mementos encased in Lucite in Timmy’s basement crime lab. That’s what they’re after.”

“And Timmy’s right leg.”

Chief Donaldson walks to the trunk and opens it. He hands Timmy a set of yellow plastic earmuffs, before pulling out a riot gun and a set of yellow plastic earmuffs, placing it on his head. “Put them on.” Chief Donaldson watches Timmy put on the earmuffs before taking a few steps towards Timmy’s house, pumps the riot gun, firing canisters through the front windows. The earmuffs muffle the shrill howl coming from inside, a black figure jumping through what’s left of one of the front windows, writhing on the ground, covering their ears. Chief Donaldson walks up to the writhing figure, kicks its jaw to make it stop. Timmy kneels, removes the night vision goggles from the figure. Chief Donaldson takes the flashlight from his belt, shines it on the figure’s face, her green eyes rolling back, blood trickling from her ears. Timmy steps back, mouth agape.

\* \* \*

“I’m...going to lock my knives up better.” Leopold sits at the dining room table, cleaning his throwing knives.

“I’m going...to have to practice with these...to make sure they’re properly balanced. We’ll need...to improve the security system, too.”

“Chief Donaldson saved my life. If I would have gone in through the basement window or the front door, I would have bled out on the floor. Her attack on me at Sandiego’s after dark was part of her whole misdirection strategy to turn our house into a death trap. She knew that when I finished what she started, it would unnerve me.”

“You and her younger sister, Marie...were together for two years. She used...to babysit you. I hope she’s the last Swanson...to come after you or else...we’ll be dealing with more...*Home Alone* guerrilla style attacks.”

“*Home Alone?*”

“Never...mind.”





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