

THE NIGHT WATCHMAN RETURNS

by

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A Thesis

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of

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Creative Writing

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The Night Watchman Returns

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my father.

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I would like to thank my family for their support and encouragement. My classmates in all of my workshops over the last four years—and Elizabeth, Tim, Collin and Alyson on this novel in particular—have been vital in figuring out what my voice is, what works and what really, really doesn't. Greg Voigt was a valuable resource to bounce ideas off of and a great first reader. My thesis committee, Steve Goodwin, Courtney Brkic and Helon Habila, have been great teachers throughout the MFA program, and Courtney and Steve provided much-needed guidance and advice in the writing of this story. Finally, I want to thank Airlie Henrich for her seemingly endless patience.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE NIGHT WATCHMAN RETURNS

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This thesis contains the first sixteen chapters of a novel about retired urban vigilante Ted Walker and the nephew who unwisely chooses to follow in his footsteps. When a night of crime-fighting ends with his nephew in the hospital, Ted takes it upon himself to seek justice, an investigation that will force him to face the mistakes of his past and the consequences he still can't escape today. The story spans nearly 30 years of Ted Walker's life, revisiting the highs and the very, very deep lows of his career and following him into today's real-life superhero subculture. Along the way, he faces angry relatives, a former sidekick, an old nemesis and the new world of 21<sup>st</sup> century online media. It's a novel about family, responsibility, atonement and what happens to American heroes when we don't need them anymore.



1983

I look out over my city.

The full moon shines above. The uneasy calm before whatever adventure awaits in the night. I listen for the cry of injustice to ring out from the streets below.

I wait.

Silence.

It's 11:30, it's about 25 degrees up here and if I was smart I'd be in bed.

This isn't where I ever expected to be, but it's where I am now.

The costume itches and chafes. The balance between form, function, comfort and style isn't quite right yet. It's my first night. Adjustments will be made.

The black wet suit squeezes my waist. I don't think it fits. A bitter gust of wind chides me for cutting the sleeves off my sweatshirt—one of my few sacrifices to the gods of impractical coolness. The bandana covering my nose and mouth may not be as suffocating as a mask, but it's not as protective either. Goggles shield my eyes. I raise the sweatshirt's hood in an attempt to fight off the cold.

Nevertheless, my ears, unguarded, go numb. Superheroes don't wear earmuffs.

We all have our calling, our purpose in life, and, about 30 years in, I've finally figured out mine. Right now, I just wish I hadn't figured it out in the middle of winter.

Two hours of this sentry duty on the roof of my building and I'm still waiting for my first chance to do some real crime fighting. I mean, you don't need a costume to harass litterers and jaywalkers, and that's about all the evildoing I've stopped so far.

Downtown White Plains on a Tuesday night isn't exactly bustling with activity, that much is clear. A neon sign hums over the doorway of the bar on the corner. A drunk couple stumbles out, cackling and pawing at each other. I can hear their every word from five stories up, and, considering their sexually explicit flirting, I wish I couldn't. The owner of Nicky's Pizza down the street locks up for the night. I should have brought a snack. But a superhero's costume has no space to spare for a Snickers bar.

An apple, on the other hand, could double as a projectile weapon in a fight.

If I ever find a fight.

Where the hell is all the crime?

Doesn't anyone just rob banks anymore? Seriously, there are two of them on this block with hardly any night security. I could go rob one right now, damn it. Every five or ten minutes, I see maybe a woman walking alone, her purse hanging loose from her arm, or a well-dressed but out-of-shape businessman who'd never put up a fight, all these slow-moving targets practically begging to be mugged. And yet, nothing.

Everything is tinted yellow through my goggles. I didn't really think of that when I found them stashed with my old high school swim team gear. It's distracting. I've already made a mental note to swing by the sporting goods store after work tomorrow and pick up a new pair with clear lenses.

I hear sirens in the distance and immediately perk up. It takes a few seconds to figure out which direction they're coming from, and a few seconds more to watch the flashing lights of police cars speed through an intersection two blocks south and turn down a side street, out of sight and, even if I ran my fastest, already far out of reach.

The wind picks up again and I start to regret leaving behind the flannel bed sheet I tried on as a cape this afternoon. I stood in front of my bedroom mirror for nearly an hour, adjusting, tinkering, striking heroic poses—hands on the hips, fists clenched, various basic fighting stances, that kind of thing—and the sheet seemed cumbersome. Besides, it gives an enemy something easy to grab and take you down. Also, choking after my cape gets caught on a tree branch or a railing is one of the more embarrassing ways I've imagined this whole hero thing ending.

My left leg cramps up. I must get used to this. Perching on rooftops, ready to strike evil like lightning, brooding in the shadows, that's what this job is all about. It'd be pretty sweet, though, if I could find a building with some gargoyles to crouch next to instead of these groaning, steaming vents and TV antennae.

I walk a few laps around the roof to loosen up my muscles.

More tired than I thought I'd be, too. Tomorrow night, bring a thermos of hot coffee. If I don't drink it, I can splash it in criminals' faces. It's all about thinking outside the box like that.

This is all going to take some fine tuning. I'm not even sure the name is going to stick. "The Night Watchman" sounds pedestrian; it's so security guard, so old-time comic

book. Christ, it's like something I fished out of Stan Lee's garbage. I need a name with zazz, something fresh and memorable.

I need to be iconic.

Ted Walker. Paralegal by day. Costumed crusader by night.

It's more complicated than I thought. I don't have the right kind of fabric for a real superhero costume—not even sure what the right kind is—I don't have any sort of armor—besides my sister's old roller derby knee and elbow pads, which looked too ridiculous to wear—and the closest thing to weapons I was able to cobble together was a sack of baseballs and a set of freshly sharpened steak knives taped around my shins.

Where do you go to buy a grappling hook anyway?

There's no rulebook for this. Only one or two other guys in the country are doing it, as far as I know. Putting on a costume and taking the law into our own hands. Some people think it's crazy. Maybe. But America still needs heroes. We need symbols, images that can inspire hope and fear.

This right here, this is how you change the world.

I do a few stretching exercises before I return to the ledge and resume my watch.

A young man strolls up the block, sipping from a bottle of soda. He pauses outside the electronics store across the street—with its huge, easily-breakable display window. My eyes lock onto him. Come on, buddy...you know you want to smash it...come on.

He keeps walking. He takes one last gulp from his drink and tosses it toward the garbage can on the corner. It bounces off the rim, but he ignores it.

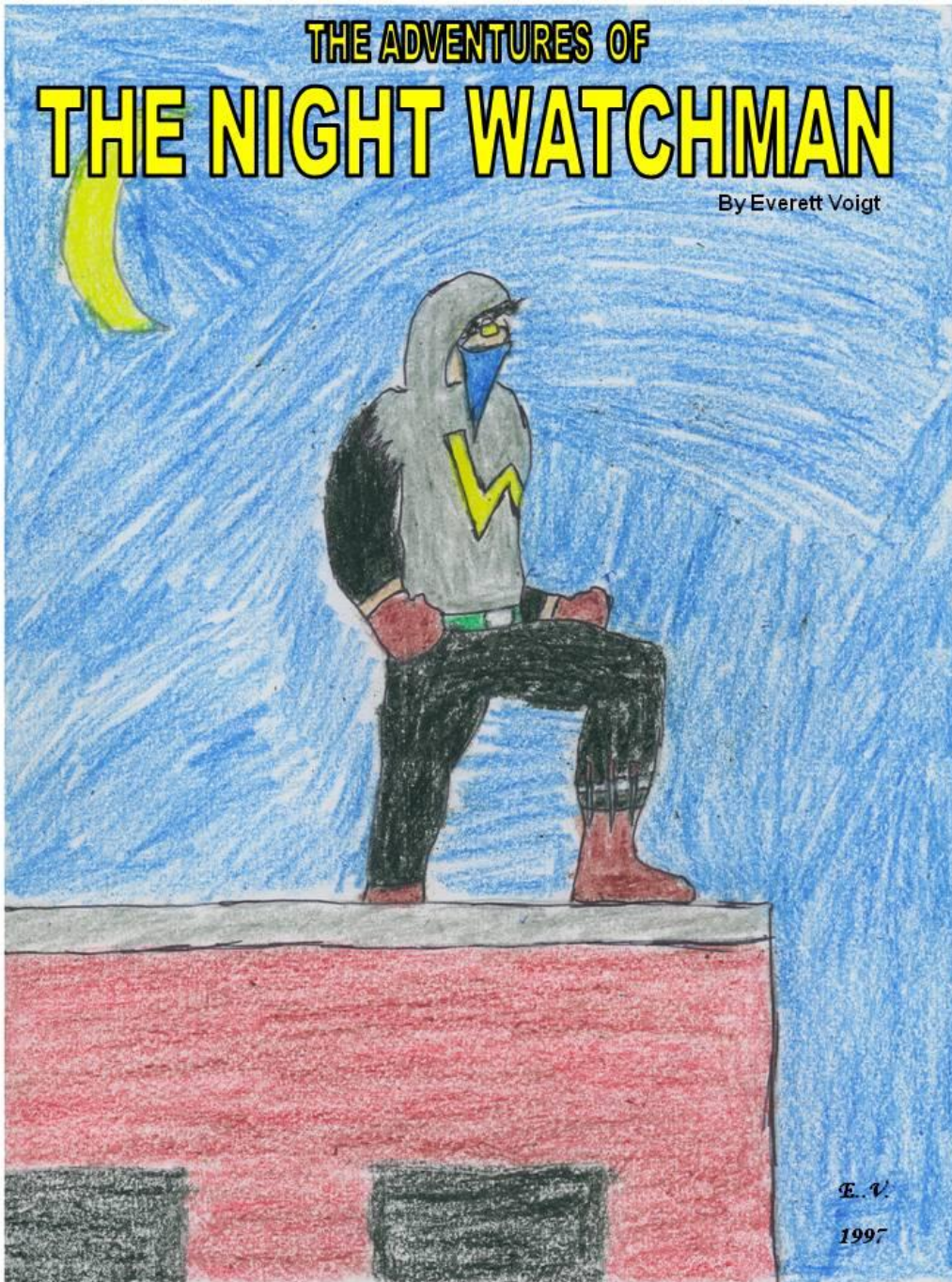
“Hey!” I shout. He pauses and looks up. “Put it in the can!”

The guy hesitates, confused or possibly frightened, I can’t tell from here.

“Don’t make me come down there!” I add.

He steps back toward the garbage tentatively and picks up his bottle. He places it in the trash properly and glances at me for approval. Then he runs.

It’s a small victory, but it’s only the beginning.



## CHAPTER 1

2009

Ted Walker stared at a crudely-drawn, crayon-colored image of himself in his costume and wondered if he really looked that silly. He flipped through creased pages he hadn't pulled out in years. Each contained a six-panel comic strip illustrated by his nephew Everett long ago when the kid was still young enough for such things to be cute and Ted wasn't quite as embarrassed about his past as he had become. The characters' bodies were disproportioned, his own musculature ridiculously exaggerated, the word balloons barely legible, but the Night Watchman battled all kinds of supervillains, mad scientists and monsters and, of course, he always won. At the top of every strip in big block letters: "The Adventures of the Night Watchman by Everett Voigt."

Ted never could decide if he should have felt humbled or ashamed by the extraordinary acts of heroism he allowed the boy to think he was capable of. Most of the strips were adapted from stories he had told his nephew himself back when Everett probably could have been convinced to believe anything he said.

This morning, though, they just made him angry.

*Stupid kid*, he thought. *What the hell did you get yourself into?*

Ted had arrived at Portland International Airport just after 5 am, almost an hour before the day's first non-stop flight to New York, two hours after his sister's frantic phone call. Before dawn on a Tuesday morning, the security lines were short and the terminal halls nearly silent except for the scratching of his suitcase wheels as he rolled it unsteadily toward his concourse. Now he was sitting at a small table outside a coffee shop near his gate, restless in his stiff metal chair.

He sipped hot cider, grumbling to himself about the whipped cream and caramel that he had specifically asked not be put on his drink but now coated his lips and his thinning mustache. Rather than standing to get a napkin, he wiped his mouth with a dry, callused hand. He gathered Everett's comic strips, folded them and slipped them in the outside pocket of his suitcase. He watched the ground crews out on the tarmac prepare planes for take-off, load and unload luggage, and guide the few redeyes landing at this hour to their gates. His age was beginning to weigh heavily on his senses, but he was pleased that his vision remained mostly clear, even if it wasn't what it once was. When he leaned back in his chair, Ted felt his spine tingle with pain from one of the many injuries he sustained during his years of running and fighting through long sleepless nights. Since his retirement, Ted had been to doctors, chiropractors, acupuncturists, hypnotists, even an old Chinese lady who insisted he eat willow bark and suck on some kind of root, but the pain always returned, often at inconvenient times—like when he was about to spend six hours flying across the country squeezed into a coach seat with no distractions aside from other people's whining kids and whatever awful romantic comedy or animated musical the airline forced in front of him.



He had pain pills. Good ones, strong ones. But in the rush to pack he forgot to put any in his pill case with his other medication. The mistake was understandable; he wasn't thinking straight. After the call from his sister, the image of his nephew lying bruised and broken in a pool of blood in some dark alley crowded out most other thoughts in his head.

When the ringing phone roused him from his sleep earlier, he had glanced at the clock on his nightstand and he knew it was Jasmine without even looking at the caller ID.

"Do I need to explain time zones to you again, Jasmine?" Ted asked, his mouth dry and his voice raspy. He yawned theatrically.

"It's 9:00." She sounded out of breath. The connection was punctuated with bursts of static, her words drowning in the steady stream of voices and activity around her, wherever she was. "You should be awake anyway, Ted."

"It's 3 am," he said. He checked the clock again, double-checked the time on his watch. "I've been here for close to ten years and you still haven't figured this out?"

"3:00? Are you sure?" Her voice drifted. "That doesn't sound right."

"Yes. I live here. I'm sure." Too many of their conversations seemed to begin this way. "I have several clocks. What the hell is going on?"

"I'm at the hospital. In the emergency room."

Ted sat up in bed, recognizing that the middle-of-the-night call was about more than his ditzy sister forgetting what time it was. "What? Why?"

"It's Everett." The static spiked. Ted hadn't seen his nephew in over a year. "He's been—I don't know how to—He's been—"

“Is he okay?” He and the boy—a teenager now—had been close in the years before he moved across the country. Everett always respected him, even in the darkest days of the Night Watchman's career when few others even acknowledged his existence.

“No, of course not,” she said, an anchor of stress and frustration dragging down her words. “We’re in the emergency room, Ted. It’s an emergency. They found him unconscious downtown. He had a broken arm, internal bleeding, the doctors might have said he ruptured his spleen. I don’t know. They were talking so fast.”

“How did this happen?”

“That’s not important right now.” He could hear her choking back tears.

“Jasmine, this is my nephew. Talk to me.”

“It’s not important.”

“Now I know it is important because you keep saying that.”

“We can talk about it later.”

“We can talk about it now and later if we have to. Just say it.”

“Okay, fine,” she said, pausing to compose herself, “but I just don’t want you to feel like this is all your fault. I wasn’t going to tell you because I don’t want you to be burdened by guilt right now. It is your fault, but this isn’t the time for pointing fingers.”

“What is my fault?” Ted felt an uneasiness in his stomach as he began to piece together what most likely happened on his own, and he hoped he was wrong.

But Jasmine’s answer confirmed his fears. “He was wearing your costume,” she said. “He went out and nearly got beaten to death.”

Ted was silent for a moment, unsure whether to argue or accept the blame. After all, he had spent years feeding the kid lies about the glamour and excitement of superhero life. He chose to agree with his sister, though, that now wasn't the best time for that conversation, so he momentarily tabled the issue. "How are you holding up?" he asked. "Are you alone out there?"

"Greg's here." Ted recoiled at the mention of the brother of Jasmine's deceased husband. He remembered several unpleasant encounters with the man over his influence on Everett—particularly what Greg felt, and it now seemed he may have been right, was misguided and dangerous inspiration that the boy drew from his superhero uncle—before he moved out west. "Everett's in surgery now. We're just waiting in the...uh..."

"The waiting room." Ted balanced the phone between his neck and shoulder as he frantically scoured his bedroom trying to recall where his luggage was. "Okay, Jas. Try to calm down. Talk to Greg for a while. Sleep if you can. This is what's happening: I'm going to get dressed, I'll drive to the airport, I'll get on a plane and I'll be there tonight."

"You don't have to do that, Ted."

"Yes," he said, yanking a suitcase out of his closet and tossing it onto his bed. It felt heavy, never fully unpacked from his last trip to New York. "I do."

Sitting in the airport, the initial shock of Jasmine's words had worn off slightly. Ted was still greatly concerned, but he knew from experience that broken bones heal and organ damage usually sounded a lot worse than it was. But "Oh, don't worry, it's only a ruptured spleen" didn't seem like the appropriate thing to say to her at the time, and it wasn't a terribly comforting way to frame the situation for himself either. For the

moment, he chose to focus on his glass-a-little-bit-full assumptions rather than give in to doubt. There was nothing he could do about the situation for the next seven hours anyway. He had forgotten to call Greg and tell him when he'd be landing—his sister insisted Greg would pick him up, even if that was something neither man wanted. Ted considered not calling at all, getting on the plane and taking a cab from the airport, but he knew Jasmine and he knew how she'd panic if she didn't hear from him, how she'd assume something horrible happened to him, and he saw no reason to add to her stress.

Still, holding the phone in his hand, he was tempted to turn it off and start thinking of excuses to give his sister when he got to the hospital. Greg's number glowed on the cell phone's screen. Ted braced himself and pressed "call."

"How is he?" Ted asked as soon as Greg picked up.

"He's sunshine and puppies, Walker. How do you think?"

Ted ignored the belligerent mockery. "Is he out of surgery?" he asked.

"The doctor's talking to Jas now."

"Be honest with me, Greg," he pleaded. "How bad is it?"

Greg sighed and answered, "We don't know how bad it is yet." And, he added, "This is your fault, you know."

"Yes, Jasmine already told me and—"

"You had to give him that stupid costume, didn't you? You had to be a *hero*." He said the word with pointed disgust, like it was a dead rat he was tossing in a dumpster.

Greg clearly didn't share Jasmine's view that this wasn't the time to point fingers—though something in Greg's voice made Ted want to fight back this time—but

he knew this was a battle he couldn't, and possibly shouldn't, win, so he surrendered.

"You're right," he said meekly.

"You—say what?"

"This is on me," Ted said, more assured.

Greg was silent. Ted got the impression he had a much longer rant prepared that he was disappointed to hear Ted undercut by taking the blame off the bat. "As long as we're clear on that. When do you land?"

Ted scanned the boarding pass on his table. "Around 4:30."

"JFK? I'll be there."

"That's really not necessary, Greg."

"Yes, it is. Jasmine's orders. Besides, you and I need to talk."

"Okay." Ted knew he wouldn't let him off that easily. "Well, I'm certainly looking forward to that. Tell Jas I—" but Greg was already gone.

As he slid his phone back in his pocket, Ted heard a loud quack. At the counter inside the coffee shop, a young man was wearing what appeared to be a white feathered duck suit and a stretched green sailor's blouse. His hair was also green, sculpted into a thick Mohawk, and his mouth was covered by an orange rubber bill. A green domino mask surrounded his eyes. It was hard to tell under the costume, but Ted guessed the kid was around 18 or 20 years old. He took a large frozen coffee drink from the girl behind the counter, thanked her, then squeezed his bill, releasing another quack. The kid waddled in Ted's direction, dragging his suitcase behind him. Ted twisted his neck

toward the window, aware—and a bit annoyed—that with about a dozen empty tables inside and outside the shop, the duck was taking a seat at the one next to his.

Using skills honed in his many years of riding New York subways and pretending not to notice panhandlers, street musicians, breakdancers and people trying to sell him batteries, Ted made an effort to ignore the costume. Eventually, though, the constant slurping of the straw in the duck's drink invited his angry glare. The guy stopped sipping when he noticed Ted was looking his way.

“Sup?” he said with a nod. He had removed the bill to drink, and, apparently, to carry on unwelcome conversations with complete strangers.

Ted smiled, then turned back to the window.

“Headed to New York?” the duck asked. He slurped his drink again. Ted was confused and unsettled that the guy knew his destination, but he explained, “Saw the boarding pass on your table. That's where I'm headed too. Name's Mike.”

Ted gulped most of his remaining cider, disappointed it had cooled to the point where it no longer burned his tongue. When he realized Mike was waiting for him to introduce himself, he sat up and gave the fake name he had been living under since moving to Portland. “William Ross.”

William and Christina Ross were identities Ted fabricated for himself and his wife Andrea after he permanently retired the Night Watchman, when too many people knew who Ted Walker really was and very few of them wanted anything to do with him, professionally or personally. William Ross, on the other hand, was a popular high school English teacher with a lengthy resume and impressive references. Ted used his remaining

law enforcement contacts, called in his last favors to give William and Christina a legit paper trail—social security numbers, birth certificates, college degrees, even a fake minor criminal record for Christina from her rebellious teen years. Sometimes, after Andrea died, Ted would look back at the entire lives he created from nothing, and Bill and Tina Ross almost seemed more real than Ted and Andrea Walker ever were.

“First time in NYC for me,” Mike said, reaching out to shake Ted's hand. “You ever been, Willy?”

“I lived there,” Ted hesitated. He had grown uncommonly self-conscious about a simple handshake over the years, having lost his right pinkie in the line of duty two decades earlier and believing the missing finger was impossible to ignore.

“No way, dude.” Mike leaned forward as much as his suit would allow. “I'd never fucking move out here if I was there. Why'd you do it?”

Ted struggled for an uninteresting lie. “Made sense at the time,” was all he said.

After allowing a silence for Ted to elaborate that went unused, Mike asked, “So are you going back for business or like a vacation kind of thing or what?”

“Family,” Ted said.

“I'm going to a conference,” Mike said with palpable excitement.

“Have fun with that.” Ted checked his watch. Boarding time was mercifully near.

“I guess it's more of a convention. It's the New York Comic-Con, so yeah, it's a convention. That's why,” he pointed at himself, “you know, the costume and all.”

Mike stood triumphantly, kicking his chair away to make room to show off the duck costume.

He waited for some sign of recognition. Ted stared vacantly.

“Nothing?” Mike sighed, dragged his chair back and sat down. “It’s cool. I’m pretty new at this. And I know what you’re thinking, right? *Oh, it’s February, isn’t college football season over? Why’s he dressed like a duck?* Well, I’m not a mascot.” He leaned in close to Ted and whispered. “I’m a superhero.”

Ted looked at his watch again.

“Yeah, sure,” Mike continued. “I did get this duck costume from a dumpster when the University of Oregon was throwing it out, but that’s not the point. I am...” he paused for dramatic effect, “The Daring Duck, Portland’s Protector from Peril.”

Ted remained unresponsive. Mike took a big sip from his coffee. He winced. “Brain freeze. Anyway, I’m going to be the Pacific Northwest’s mightiest superhero.”

“There are no superheroes,” Ted responded.

“Look around, grandpa. There’s tons of us.” Mike gestured outward to the rest of the terminal. Ted looked up. A janitor passed slowly, pushing a garbage bin and whistling out of tune. Mike shrugged. “Well, not here in the airport, but you know what I mean. Like out there in the...uh...everywhere.”

“Putting on a mask doesn’t make an idiot a hero, kid,” Ted snapped, taken aback by his own vitriol. “It makes him an idiot in a mask.”

Mike’s eyes betrayed a quivering discomfort. “Jeez, don’t have a coronary, dude. I know you’re, like, greatest generation and World War II and all, and hey, good job on that, but we’re not facing an intergalactic crisis here.” He put his bill back on. “This is just for fun, man.”



“Fun?” Ted thought of his nephew and briefly considered revealing his true identity so he could explain just how little fun life under the mask could be, but he had worked too long and hard to cultivate William Ross to give him up so easily. He also wanted to point out that World War II ended long before he was born, but there seemed little point in dwelling on the fact that he looked old enough for someone, however stupid they may be, to make that mistake.

Instead, he recalled a ride on a commuter train into Manhattan to take on big-city crime for the first time a few months after adopting his vigilante identity. He wore his Night Watchman costume on the train, drawing uncomfortable looks from businessmen in their own suits and cloaks. When the train came to a stop in Grand Central, one man paused in the doorway, looked Ted over and asked the question he posed to Mike now: “Why didn't you just change into the costume when you got to New York?”

Mike shook his head. “That did occur to me during the cab ride, but I figured, fuck it, right? It was a bitch to get through security in this, but whatever.”

They were interrupted by the PA system calling their flight for boarding. As they both stood, Mike kicked the side of his suitcase, “Besides, I wanted to just do carry-on and the suit wouldn't fit in my roller.”

When Ted began to walk away, Mike squeezed his bill and it quacked. Ted turned in response. Mike pointed at his costume, “But I look pretty bad-ass, right?”

“You look like you're going to live in your parents' basement until you're 40,” Ted said, trying to keep his luggage wheels straight as he headed toward their gate.

1985

How did I get here?

The long answer is, you are the accumulation of everything that's ever happened to you. My sister usually slaps me when I start talking like this, but it's true. You stop and look around and try to figure out where you are and how you got there and that's what it comes down to. You are the inevitable effect of yourself.

Me, for example, how I ended up in this costume chasing some bozo through the Galleria mall parking lot at 9:30 at night is a question with many answers.

We are all the product of the world that we live in. The movies, the comic books, TV shows, friends, family. Somewhere in there is a way this all makes sense.

After Batman caught the guy who killed his parents, why did he keep fighting?

The answer is simple: because crime is still crime and victims are still victims even if they're not your family, and they're no less deserving of justice.

Plus, honestly, it's kind of fun.

Case in point: 9:30, parking lot, dumbass crook trying to outrun me.

We race down the ramp between the second and third sublevels of the garage. He's not far ahead of me, but he's widening the gap. I need to work out more. Been doing too much monitor duty, not enough hands-on action, and it shows. I started this whole new regimen a while back—running, weight-lifting, sit-ups and push-ups, all that jazz—but I keep pulling the early shift at the coffee shop and the time's just not there.

The biggest lie comic books tell you is that you can do all of this while holding down a real full-time job.

First, you got to figure in the fact that crime has something of an unpredictable and uncontrollable schedule. You can't plan a meeting around a bank robbery or cancel an appointment with a client every time you hear a cry for help. You can get away with it a couple of times, but eventually people get extremely suspicious. Factor in the lack of sleep the whole patrolling thing entails and pretty quickly your co-workers will start to think you're either a drug addict, an enormous slacker or a narcoleptic, and businesses tend to be hesitant to keep any of those around for very long. At least Superman and the Flash had super speed. The rest of us, I don't know what we're supposed to do when we have to be in two places at once. The rest of us just get fired a lot.

So wave goodbye to Ted Walker, paralegal; Ted Walker, bank teller; Ted Walker, hotel security guard; Ted Walker, dog trainer; and Ted Walker, insurance salesman. Wave goodbye to any career you ever dreamed of. That's the price you pay.

Five jobs in two years and I can't help but look at my check on payday—when I actually get one—and wonder if it's all worth it. Then I get a night like this, a chance to really help somebody, and all my doubts run off my forehead in beads of sweat.

Oh, yeah. It's worth it.

I want to stop for a second and catch my breath, but I can't lose this guy. He's got a purse tucked under his arm that I promised a young mother two levels up I'd get back.

I need to stop making promises.

Ahead of us, a car comes speeding up the ramp from the next level down. The thug manages to dive aside, but in the moments it takes to regain his footing, I have a chance to catch up with him. That driver probably could use a firm talking-to about speed limits in underground parking lots, but I've got to prioritize. As the guy scrambles to pick up the loose change and credit cards that scattered from the purse when he landed, I jump on his back. His forehead smacks the pavement and I tumble off him.

There's an opportunity to say something witty, but I draw a blank. Another comic book lie: the notion that you can spontaneously come up with those clever one-liners in the middle of a fight. More often than not, a good, solid right hook to the face is all the wit a superhero needs anyway.

I mean, really, what am I going to do? Write my jokes in advance and carry a little quip-filled notebook with me? Just the sheer amount of scenarios I could potentially encounter that I would have to prepare lines for would practically require hiring a part-time staff of comedy writers, and that's simply not in my budget.

I punch the purse-snatcher a few times to discourage him from standing. It still hurts my fists when I do that sometimes, and after two years of this it shouldn't. Then again, this kind of action is unfortunately rare. It's been weeks since my last real slugfest. I savor the rush of adrenaline pumping through my veins.

With my boot on his back, I grab the rest of the purse's spilled contents and stuff them back inside. I tie his hands and wait for mall security to arrive and take him away. Then I'll return the purse to a grateful citizen and disappear into the night.

So, question: How did I get here?

Answer: Where else would I be?

## CHAPTER 2

Ted lumbered off the plane in a fog of half-sleep. He had landed at JFK almost an hour late. He tried to rest through much of the flight, but he only managed the kind of listless dozing he usually settled into while traveling, easily jolted awake by fellow passengers trying to scoot past him and stewardesses handing out cocktails or those little bags of nothing the airlines call snacks these days. He stumbled through the terminal, taking advantage of every moving walkway he came to, even if they only carried him a couple hundred feet closer to the exit. Somewhere along the way, he stopped to pick up a double shot of espresso.

Cup in one hand, the handle of his wobbling suitcase in the other, he made his way toward baggage claim, where he was sure Greg would be waiting, most likely fuming with impatience and irritation, his never-particularly-sunny disposition made worse by the flight's delay. Ted swam through the crowds, savoring the bitterness of his espresso and trying his best not to spill any, until he reached the escalator leading to the baggage and ground transportation area. As soon as he stepped off, he heard Greg shouting his name—his real name—repeatedly. When he turned to follow the voice, his brother-in-law stampeded past the other passengers being warmly greeted by their loved ones, his face a red flare of anger even more intense than Ted predicted. He appeared ready to charge straight through Ted, gore him and carry him out to the car on the

momentum of his fury. Ted braced for impact, tightening his grip on the suitcase and the espresso, but Greg stopped himself, his face inches away from Ted's. Ted imagined steam whistling from his nostrils and ears, a mad cartoon animal.

"You stupid son of a bitch," Greg hissed through gritted teeth. "This is exactly why I tried to stop you from sinking your hooks into him."

"I cannot tell you how much I've missed that bright, shiny face of yours, Greg," Ted said, an admittedly futile attempt to defuse the situation. "The flight was wonderful, thanks for asking."

"Not here," Greg said, nodding toward two guards at a TSA security checkpoint whose attention had already been piqued by their aura of open hostility.

Greg jerked Ted's suitcase from his hand and led him to the exit. As Ted's luggage bounced violently off its axis behind him, he kept talking.

"They found Everett in an alley near the mall. He was covered in blood, some of it his, some not, barely breathing. If some old drunk hadn't almost tripped over him and called 911 when he did, we'd be making funeral arrangements right now."

"Doctors tell you anything more today?" Ted had a queasy feeling that no answer to that question would make him feel better, but he needed to know.

Greg stopped and looked him in the eyes. "Nothing good," was all he said. Then he walked through the revolving doors.

They both quivered against the grip of the icy winter air outside. Ted paused when he heard a voice calling from the line of passengers waiting for cabs, "Bill!" He looked back to see Mike in his white feathered costume waving from the taxi line.

Ted waved back, but he didn't bother trying to speak over the cacophony of choking bus engines, honking horns and shouting tourists that surrounded them. Greg grabbed his arm and yanked him toward the parking lot.

"Who the hell was that?" Greg asked as they crossed the path between the terminal and the lot.

"That was the Daring Duck," Ted said.

Greg shook his head. "There is something very wrong with all of you people."

He continued walking. Ted jogged to catch up.

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What happened next, Ted figured, was pretty much inevitable. It was probably best for everyone to just get it over with. When they reached the car and Greg set the suitcase down, then turned and swung his fist at Ted's jaw, he didn't even bother to dodge. He felt the full force of a punch from a man 10 years younger and in much better shape than him. He reeled back, regrettably letting his cup slip from his fingers, helpless to watch as the last of his espresso splashed out onto the asphalt. Shameful as that loss was, he was more concerned with maintaining his balance to avoid falling into a puddle of melted ice or one of the plowed-up black slush piles of snow, dirt and motor oil that bordered the rows of the lot.

"You happy to see what you've done?" Greg said, nearly shouting. He threw another punch, a left hook Ted could have easily blocked despite his dusty reflexes, but he took it. There was less force behind this one anyway, like the first punch had made his point and the second was only punctuation.



"Can we just go to the hospital now?" Ted asked. He straightened his back and rubbed his jaw. "I'd like to see my sister. You can hit me again there if you need to."

"Don't tempt me," Greg said, his hands still balled into tight fists. "My nephew has spent most of the last 24 hours in surgery and I think we all know why."

Ted had mailed the original Night Watchman costume to Everett years earlier after he swore never to put it on again himself. At the time, he assumed the boy would save it with all the other memorabilia he passed on during his career, like the prototype action figure from the Nocturnal Night Watchman online animated series that still sat on Everett's bookshelf in its original packaging the last time Ted visited. He told himself he never intended for his nephew to wear the thing.

Ted knew there was no point in making this argument with Greg, though. He may not even have believed it himself. So instead he said, "How is Jasmine holding up?"

Greg studied him for a moment, then finally relaxed his fists. "How do you think, Walker? Her son was nearly beaten to death. She's walking on air."

"Has your constant parade of sarcasm been helping?" Ted replied. He noticed a handful of travelers had paused in the lot to watch the two of them fight. He was uncomfortable with that attention on him. "Because I've been here for about five minutes and I'm already sick of it."

"Hey, I'm coping how I cope," Greg said. He pressed a button on his keychain to unlock the doors. "Get in the fucking car."

Greg spent much of the drive to the hospital lecturing Ted about his chronic irresponsibility and stupidity, and Ted nodded along robotically, but he wasn't listening.

The truth was, Ted always did fear Everett would do something like this. It was the trajectory he had been on for nearly his entire life. The classic superhero origin story that Ted himself never had, though he wasn't particularly jealous in that regard.

Jasmine's husband Jack died before their son was old enough to walk. It happened during a random, late-night mugging that was too typical in White Plains in the early 90s. The cops said Jack probably fought back and the mugger panicked, but whatever the reason, Jack got three bullets in the chest and the shooter got away with \$17 and some subway tokens. This all occurred during a period when, for a number of personal and legal reasons, Ted was rarely going out in his costume.

Because of that, in the years that followed, Ted would second-guess the hell out of it. Sure, maybe if he was down there patrolling like he used to he could have stopped the shooting, but maybe his sister would have just ended up burying two bodies instead of one. After all, in all his time working the streets, he could probably count the number of times he actually faced down an armed man on one hand.

A few years later, when young Everett, growing up with no father figure and an overdeveloped sense of curiosity, started asking difficult questions, Ted and Jasmine found themselves searching for answers that might be more palatable than the truth.

This was the reasoning that led them to tell the 5-year-old boy that the Night Watchman hunted down the man who killed his father and brought him to justice.

It was a bad decision. Ted knew that, but he took solace in the fact that it was a mutual one between himself and his sister. Lying to a child about something so significant seemed slightly less outrageous if he had the mother's permission to do it. And

the way Everett revered him as a result gave Ted a much-needed self-esteem boost, even though the lie wouldn't hold up under much scrutiny in the years to come.

In his defense, it was not a complete fabrication. It was perfectly fair to say Ted hunted Jack's killer. But he didn't catch him. Nobody ever did. And Ted's rage-fueled crusade for street justice didn't help the situation. Somewhere in Westchester County Court archives, there were records of convictions for assault and obstruction of justice that illustrated exactly how unhelpful Ted was to the authorities at the time. But he was grieving, he was thirsty for vengeance, he knew his way around the city's underbelly, and he found great catharsis in beating down anyone within reach of his fists.

Everett didn't hear that part of the story until much later. Instead, he was regaled with tales of Ted defeating villains, saving busloads of nuns and once fighting off an alien invasion. Eventually, Ted realized he was often merely inserting himself into old Superman and Batman comics he half-remembered from childhood, but Everett seemed to enjoy them—even the ones he must have known Ted was making up.

When he did learn the truth, there wasn't the kind of backlash Ted anticipated. There was anger and disappointment, but Everett was a surprisingly reasonable 10-year-old at the time. He wasn't bothered by the deceit and betrayal; it was the fact that his father's killer was still out there somewhere that he would never fully get over. But his interest in Ted's stories did soon drop off, slowly at first and then faster. Ted chalked that up to him getting old enough and smart enough to doubt the plausibility of his heroics. That may have been part of it, but Everett's sudden disinterest was more a result of

discovering his own speed and athletic skills—and his subsequent discovery that kids who played football were a lot more popular than kids who drew their own comic books.

Still, all those years of bedtime stories and letters left some imprint, so the news today that Everett had donned the Night Watchman's bandana and sweatshirt wasn't a complete shock. In a way, Ted was more surprised that the kid didn't try it sooner. There were times in his life when he might have encouraged it, but after all the tragedies and indignities he endured, he'd have flown across the country and locked Everett in a closet to stop him if he had the chance.

But even now, riding to the hospital and tuning out the litany of complaints spewing from the other major male influence in Everett's life, Ted couldn't deny that part of him was a little bit proud of the boy.

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Jasmine sat alone in the intensive care waiting room drinking watery vending machine coffee and wishing she was tall enough to reach the television suspended from the wall in the corner so she could turn down the volume on the Spanish-dubbed rerun of *ER* that had been blasting from the screen since she woke from a nap that didn't feel nearly long enough sprawled out across the cushions of three chairs. She considered pushing the table in front of her across the room and under the TV to stand on it and shut the thing off, but she didn't have the energy for that. She looked at the clock above the door, squinting to see where the hands were. Her groggy brain struggled with the basic math. Less than two hours since she fell asleep. More than three since Greg left for the airport. Even with heavy traffic, that seemed like a lot.

She was relieved when the two men walked in a few minutes later, more so when the first thing Ted did upon entering the room was reach up and slap the TV's power button. She stood to hug him, whispering a "thank you" in his ear, unsure if he realized that was all she was thanking him for.

They were all quiet after that, unsaid words lost somewhere in the haze of anxiety that filled the air between them. Greg sat next to Jasmine and put his arm around her. She leaned into his chest and sniffled soft tears. Her long hair, artificially blond and usually expertly styled, was now a tousled mess that hung over her face. Ted looked out the window, his eyes attempting to follow individual snowflakes as they gently flurried to the street below. When the snowfall grew too heavy, he gave up and turned away.

"How was the flight?" Jasmine said, straining to sound casual.

"Does it matter?"

"Please, Ted, can we just act like a family for five minutes?"

"Sorry," Ted said. He sat on the edge of the table. "The flight was fine."

"Good." He waited for her to say more, but she just nodded.

Desperate to fill the void in the room, Ted kept talking, "Work's been going well. My students are reading *The Odyssey* and I'm amazed how much they're enjoying it. When I was their age, I—" He could tell Jasmine wasn't listening. She was just staring at the carpet. "Jas, are we done acting like a family already?"

"I'm sorry, Ted," she said, looking up. She reached for her purse on the table and began rummaging through it. "I'm...distracted."

"I understand."

She pulled a tissue from the purse and wiped her nose. Gently, she said, “I still haven’t figured out how mad at you I am yet.”

“Take your time,” Ted said, and he instantly regretted sounding even slightly flippant about a situation that he understood was so difficult.

“You failed him, Ted,” Jasmine said, taking his hand. “Both of us did.”

He wasn't sure what to make of her cold and calm tone. He expected anger. He expected white-hot burning rage; he was prepared for white-hot burning rage. Not this.

“We both should have known better, seen this coming, I don’t know,” she continued. “I should have been watching him closer or talking to him more. I could have put him in therapy or something. There were warning signs and I didn’t see them.”

“Don’t go blaming yourself. This is my fault. You said it yourself. And I am beyond sorry for that,” Ted said, though he felt it necessary to add, “But look, even though I’m the first to admit I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life—a lot, I know—I’m not going to apologize for putting on that mask and helping people, Jas.”

“Oh, please,” Greg said, his eyes closed and his head down. Ted had hoped he’d fallen asleep. “You didn’t even have a real mask. It was just a stupid bandana.”

“Not now, Greg,” Jasmine swatted his words aside. Her fingers gripped Ted’s tighter. “You know he wouldn’t be lying in that hospital bed right now if you weren’t out there playing Superman for 15 years.”

“Probably not.” Ted paused. “I don’t know what you want me to say to that.”

“Nothing.”

Ted stood and paced in front of the table for a moment. He cautiously took the seat next to Jasmine's, still wary that she might slap or yell at him at any moment.

"I'm glad you're here," she said instead, with a faint hint of a smile. "Everything else aside, I'm glad you're here, Ted."

"Of course. But I told you I could have taken a cab." He nodded at Greg, who seemed to be resting again. "Cab driver probably wouldn't have punched me."

"Greg!" Jasmine slapped him in the back of the head. "You hit my brother?"

Greg shot up, suddenly alert. He said defensively, "Only twice."

"It's okay," Ted said, trying to remember if he had always been this sore after a fight. "I needed something to wake me up after that flight."

Jasmine chuckled, a very specific, almost theatrical laugh that, after surviving a lifetime of family crises and long nights in hospitals together, Ted recognized as her way of showing that she appreciated him trying to make her laugh but she either didn't get his joke or, more often, that it just wasn't very funny.

To crack the uncomfortable silence that followed, Ted finally asked the question he hadn't wanted to ask since entering the room. "How is he?"

Her eyes drifted downward. "Stable," she said. She spoke so quietly he had to lean in to hear her. "He's not out of the woods yet, but he's a little bit better. He's still in a drug-induced coma, but the doctors are more optimistic than last night. Right, Greg?"

Eyes closed again, Greg grunted in what Ted assumed was agreement.

She continued, “He lost a lot of blood, but there’s no permanent internal damage, and they don’t think it’s going to affect his brain or muscle function long term. I doubt it’s the kind of thing that college recruiters are looking for in a football prospect.”

“Hey,” Ted reached out and gently brushed her chin up so he could see her exhausted eyes. “We worry about tomorrow tomorrow, right? Can I get you anything?”

“No, thanks.” She tapped her empty paper cup on the table with the tip of her boot, knocking it over. “I have toxic levels of that swill they call coffee floating around inside me as it is.”

Greg spoke up, “You want to grab me a Coke, buddy?”

Ted didn’t even look at him. About a minute later, Greg stood. “Fine,” he said, heading for the door. “I’ll get it myself.”

After he stomped down the hall and out of sight, Jasmine turned to Ted. “You shouldn’t antagonize him,” she said.

“I shouldn’t—? He punched me! Twice!”

“You have to admit you deserved it. Think of it as one for me and one for Jack.”

Ted considered that for a moment, then said, “When you put it that way, it does seem pretty reasonable, huh? It doesn’t matter. He hits like a girl anyway.”

Jasmine smiled. She tried to gather the disheveled strands of her hair into some semblance of a ponytail. As she did, she asked, “Everett’s going to be okay, right?”

“I always was. Most of the time, I mean.”



“That’s not reassuring.” Her voice hardened, “You're going to have to talk to him. When he wakes up. You're going to have to talk to him and stop him from ever doing this again.”

“When he wakes up, I will. Trust me.”

The words carried false bravado, as if he actually knew what he would say.

“Visiting hours are starting up again,” Jasmine said, checking the clock again. She waved her hand at the hallway. “You should go in. If he wasn't so comatose, I'm sure he'd be thrilled to see you.”

2002

My relationship with my nephew is built on a lie.

Many lies, actually. But aside from all the harmless little ones, the amped-up adventures and exaggerated tales of superheroism, there's the one big lie that I've always felt hanging like a sword over our heads. So when I fly back home from Portland to New York for Thanksgiving and Jasmine picks me up at the airport, when the first thing she says, before I even get in the car, is, "He knows," I know exactly what she's talking about, and it scares the hell out of me.

As we pull out of the parking lot, I acknowledge that we both knew this was unavoidable, "I guess he had to find out eventually. Did you tell him?"

"The internet. He looked it up himself."

"Damn modern technology," I say with a smack of the dashboard. "Why can't he just use it to look for porn like a normal kid?"

"He's only 10 years old."

"You don't want to know how young I was when I started ogling dad's Playboys in the basement."

"I really, really don't want to," she says. "So what are we going to do?"

"The easiest thing would be to keep lying," I offer, an answer that seems patently obvious to me. "Just deny whatever he thinks happened."

She pulls over on the shoulder of the highway and slaps me upside the head. “Keep lying? How is that the easy thing? This is what's wrong with you, Ted. Your default response to every situation is to lie. Who the hell thinks that way?”

“Superheroes! It's a well-established tradition.”

“In comic books, maybe. This is our very real family.”

“The same basic principles apply, no?”

“No, Ted!” She raises her hand. I shy away to get out of her reach, but she lowers the hand and shifts the car into drive. “Damn it.”

As she merges back onto the road, I start to connect the dots of the bigger picture in my head, “So if he knows about Jack...”

“He probably knows the truth about everything else too.”

“Oh, boy.” I give my solution one more go, “And we're definitely taking lying to him off the table as an option here?”

“We're never going to lie to him again.”

“Now you're just talking crazy talk.”

“Like you said, he has to find out the truth eventually.”

The rest of the drive back to Jasmine's house is quiet and tense, both of us silently blaming each other and strategizing the best way to handle the situation with minimal collateral damage. I had to leave Andrea home in Portland with her sister because, even on her best days, she doesn't have the strength to run the gauntlet of airport security anymore. Times like this, I miss her even more than usual, when my family's dysfunctional Walker-ness runs rampant and she's not here to keep us in check.

When Everett comes home from school that afternoon, Jasmine and I sit him down in their dining room for what promises to be a lengthy and awkward conversation. He looks absurdly small in the antique chair at the head of the table, but Jasmine decided long ago that he's the "man of the house" now, so that's where he sits.

"Look, kid," I say, trying to find the best possible light to put the truth in. "I'll be honest with you. Anything you may have read about me that seemed embarrassing or incompetent, it's probably true. This whole Night Watchman thing, it didn't really work out quite as well as I might have possibly at times given you the impression it did."

His eyes are glazed with confusion as I fumble for words.

"I mean, don't get me wrong. I helped a lot of people. I'm not ashamed of a lot of what I've done in the last 15 years. And some of it could reasonably be described as crime fighting. There was more community activism and public service, but I didn't think you'd find those stories quite as exciting, so yes, I made some stuff up. Most of the stuff I've told you, actually." I throw out one of the more fantastic stories I might have borrowed liberally from an issue of *Green Lantern*. "I didn't really fight off an invasion by the weaponers of Qward, for example."

"I know," he sighs. "Uncle Ted, I figured out there was no Santa Claus all on my own when I was seven. I'm not stupid."

"Of course not." I take a deep breath and push on, "And I gather you know now what really happened with your father?"

"Yes."

“And the killer nobody ever found.” I hasten to clarify that point, “Not just me, I mean. The entire White Plains Police Department, the Sheriff’s Office—”

“Ted!” Jasmine jumps in.

“What? I’m just trying to put the failure—the collective failure,” I emphasize, “of many, many people—in proper context.”

“Why did you lie to me?” Everett asks.

“Because we—not just me; me and your mother—”

“Ted!” Jasmine interrupts again.

I give Everett the honest answer, “I didn’t see any good that could come from you believing you lived in a world where such a horrific crime could go unpunished.”

“But don’t I?”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t I live in that world?”

“Well, yes.” I have to say, I’m beginning to question this wisdom of this honesty approach. “But I hoped you wouldn’t have to face the harsh realities of life until some mean girl breaks your heart in high school or college like most boys.”

Jasmine smiles, but I think the humor flies over Everett’s head.

“So what does this mean?” he asks.

“That I am a man who has made many, many bad decisions in my life—”

Jasmine seemingly can’t resist reinforcing the part of the sentence I planned to gloss over, interjecting, “But that he’s made them with the best of intentions.”

“You know, I was going somewhere else with that. But forget it.” I sit back and let her go, “You take it from here.”

“Uncle Ted is a hero, Everett. He may not have done all of the stuff he’s told you about, but he’s done other things. Great things. Let’s see...He’s planted trees, promoted recycling in the community, raised money for hospitals and charities, taught kids to read, fed the homeless, cleaned up graffiti and litter downtown,” (Gee, thanks, Jasmine. Want to tell him about the time I gave those lost tourists directions to Playland?) “he fought all kinds of political corruption, he thoroughly and publicly embarrassed a rich old man, and yes, he has even saved some lives and put a few very bad men in jail.”

I figure this is a good place for me to step back in. “So here’s what we’re going to do,” I say, hoping to bring the conversation back in the direction I intended it to go. “Your mother’s going to make us all some hot chocolate and I’m going to tell you all about your father, and how what happened to people like him is why I did what I’ve done with my life.”

“Okay,” Everett says, sufficiently excited by the prospect of chocolate and marshmallows. He runs off into the kitchen.

“Come on, sis,” I say once he’s gone. “You have to admit, that was a pretty nice save there.”

“You did have a bit of help,” Jasmine shrugs, then heads to the kitchen herself.

“Yeah,” I call out from behind her, “and speaking of, did you really have to lead off with planting trees and recycling?”

She doesn’t answer.

## CHAPTER 3

In the hospital room, monitors and machines beeped, bubbled and breathed all around Everett. After hours in surgery, he remained unconscious, a tube stuck down his throat and numerous others running in and out of his body. Ted hadn't seen his nephew in over a year, and he marveled at how much he'd grown, not just his height but also his body, bulked up by an intense season as his high school's starting running back.

Ted approached the bed tentatively, hindered by raw memories of his wife and his mother in similar beds soon before their deaths and, more immediately, of his own first experience waking up on a ventilator. The terrifying feeling of coming to, still disoriented and weak from the drugs and not knowing where he was, how he got there and why he was gagging on a tube that prevented him from saying a single word. He struggled, tried to pull himself up, tried to yank the breathing tube out, tried to scream for help. They had to put him back into the coma, which of course only meant that when he awoke again, he would be disoriented, weak and wondering why there was a tube down his throat. It took a few days before they got him up and calm enough to understand what was happening.

So he wanted to be there when Everett woke up, to be the voice of reason in that moment of chaos, confusion and terror. He wanted to be the one who was there for him.

Everett's body remained motionless, granite. If not for the machine pumping air through his lungs, he'd hardly even have seemed alive.

Ted reached for a pitcher of water on the table next to the bed. After splashing some water into a small paper cup and taking a sip, he pulled up a chair and reached out to put his hands on Everett's cold arm. When he did, he felt a powerful, uncomfortable echo of his wife Andrea, the chilly resonance of mourning.

He leaned forward in his seat and studied Everett, his right arm in a cast, the left a maze of cuts and scratches, the bandages and pulpy bruises on his face. The broken nose and swollen cheeks. Black hair all matted and gnarled. He assumed the hospital gown and the sheets on the bed hid more cuts and bruises on Everett's body. The football star, usually strong and vibrant, gone stale and limp. Legs that ran record-setting yards, he didn't know when they would run again. He tried telling himself it could be a whole lot worse, but he didn't want to imagine what "a whole lot worse" would look like.

"Your mother's furious, you know," he said, grazing his hand across Everett's forehead. "At me, not at you. Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming you for getting me in trouble, though yes, you did, but we're all going to have a lot of rebuilding to do when this is over. She just wants to see you awake and healthy again and I keep telling her she will. Don't make me more of a liar than I already am. And listen, kid, I don't know what possessed you to do this, but I can guess. We'll save that conversation for when you can actually hear me, though. What I wanted to say now is, I love you, son. And now that Andrea's gone and I'm almost certain your mother shacking up with Meathead McGee out there, I don't have a lot of things left to love. So fight. With every ounce of strength you still have, just fight."



Ted remained by his nephew's bedside then, mouthing the words to the few prayers he still knew.

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After spending nearly an hour with Everett, Ted bypassed the waiting room, not ready to face his sister again. Even in the hospital's bright, wide hallways, he was feeling claustrophobic, and going into that little room with its sickly green walls and stained carpet wasn't going to help. He didn't care if it was snowing; he needed to get outside into the open air.

Ted pressed the down button next to the elevator doors several times, but one was out of service and the other remained in the lobby 14 floors below. Just as the red number above the working elevator showed it was starting to move up, a young woman slipped in front of him, a thin girl in a short floral skirt and a long-sleeved pink shirt. Her face was freckled and her hair was tied in a ponytail, her lips and fingernails apparently colored to match the shirt. Ted guessed she couldn't be older than 22 or 23. She held a small spiral notepad with a kitten on the cover and a sharpened pencil. She smiled at him.

"Mr. Ross?" Her voice was blindingly bright. "Bill Ross?"

"Who are you?" he asked, somewhat unnerved.

"Cassidy Fulbright," she said, extending a hand. "*New York Express*."

He didn't reach his hand out to greet hers, so after a moment she retracted it. Ted had generally shunned press interviews in even the best of times, and this moment was far from that. A verve of anger mounted. "And I'm talking to you because?"

"Because I have important questions to ask about your nephew."

Ted looked at the rising floor numbers. He shook his head and sighed impatiently.

“Because I'm standing in front of the only working elevator?”

The doors dinged open, but when Ted tried to step forward, Cassidy shuffled in front of him. He tried a few more times, but she continued to block his way. “It does appear that you are,” he said, watching the doors close.

“I'm not moving until I get some answers, Ted,” Cassidy said, watching his face carefully for any sign of recognition. She thought she saw his lips briefly settle into a smile. “That is your real name, right? Ted Walker?”

“Who did you say you worked for again?”

“The *New York Express*,” she said, adding, “It's a newspaper.”

“Why have I never heard of it?”

“For one thing,” she glanced at her notepad, “you've been hiding out in a cramped shack in Oregon for most of the last decade. Also, the paper's only been around for about a year and it's online only.”

After considering this for a moment, Ted replied, “So it's not a newspaper.”

“It is. It's just online.”

“There's no paper!” he shouted at a volume that called too much attention to himself, then hastily lowered his voice. “It can't be a newspaper.”

“What century have you been living in?”

“I've been in Oregon.” Ted's eyes drifted toward the door to the stairwell as he spoke, debating whether he could get there without having to physically remove her from his path. “Look, I appreciate that you have a job to do and I am sympathetic to that—not

very, but still, a little—but you’re what? About a year out of journalism school? Let me guess: you tried to get into Northwestern but you were rejected—you’ve got this overdrive about you that suggests the sort of inferiority complex that comes from settling for far less than your first choice. Still, you got your degree from some respectable school you don’t like to talk about in public. Now you’ve got yourself a job writing for a newspaper that’s not a newspaper, you still look like you’re in middle school, and judging by the hour and the fact that you have nothing better to do right now than pester me, you’ve got to be working overtime on the suburban crime desk desperate for the story that will give you your first front-page byline. Stop me when I’m supposed to be impressed. Now, if only there were some kind of descending series of steps I could walk down to get to the lobby instead of waiting for the elevator.”

“14 floors with the way your back has been acting up lately? Not likely, sir.”

“What do you know about my back?” Ted asked, attempting to straighten into a stiff, regal posture without betraying the pain building up in his spine.

“Impressed yet?” she smiled. “I know a lot about Ted Walker.”

“Ted Walker’s not here,” he said, stepping past her toward the stairs.

“I know about the Night Watchman,” she called from behind him. “I know about Portland. And I know about April 23, 2003.”

Ted froze. His mind flashed on violent memories and images of his own fists scraped and bloody. “That was just one night.”

“One night where a mysterious masked man tore through Beaverton, Oregon knocking out every criminal on the streets —and even a few innocent bystanders by some accounts—and he was never seen or heard from again.”

“A lot of people know about that.” Ted continued toward the stairs. “I heard it made national news.”

“Maybe. But they don’t all know who he was, Ted.” He turned to face her again. “And they certainly don’t have proof like I do.”

“Assuming you’re right about any of this,” he said, moving in close to her and whispering, “am I really somebody you want to be messing with? Assuming you’re right, I mean. And you’re not.”

“From what I’ve heard,” she said, “you used to be funnier.”

“Leave.” He summoned what was left of the gruff, commanding voice he once used to intimidate White Plains' vagrants and loiterers. “Now.”

Cassidy remained motionless before him.

“Fuck my back,” Ted said, mostly to himself. “The stairs it is.”

“The police aren’t telling anyone he was wearing the costume, you know,” Cassidy said, not wanting to press the confrontation but not wanting to go home without a story either. “Everett, I mean. The responding officers, the EMTs, everyone’s keeping that part quiet for now. But they won’t be able to hide it for much longer.”

“Why?” Ted didn't bother to look back. “Because you’re going to report it?”

“No. Not yet. But someone else sure as hell will as soon as they find out.”

Ted paused. “Well...” he turned and nodded to her, “thanks for that.”

She watched the door to the stairwell swing shut behind him, the sound of his feet clacking down the steps growing fainter until it disappeared.

\*\*\*\*

When Ted reached the lobby, out of breath and aching from the 14-flight sprint, Cassidy was there, leaning against the wall, waiting for him.

“Elevator’s faster, you know,” she said with a catty grin that irritated him more than any of her words had so far.

He didn't respond. The lobby was open enough that he could easily maneuver around her to get to the exit.

“Where are you going?”

“To my car.”

“You flew here.”

“To my rental car, then.”

“You didn’t rent a car. Your brother-in-law picked you up.”

“Okay,” he said, scowling at her, “now this shit is just getting creepy, girl.”

“If you need to go somewhere, I can totally give you a ride.”

He didn't want to give her the satisfaction of showing that she was starting to get to him. “I’ll manage,” he said, walking away.

Frustrated that the reporter had ruined his potentially dramatic exit, he sulked out the hospital doors. Outside, Ted fished through his coat pockets for his phone, having decided that he should at least call his sister and tell her he wouldn’t be coming back up

and he'd meet her at her house later. In one pocket, he found Cassidy Fulbright's business card. He had no idea when she slipped it in there.

1987

I really should find an issue worth rallying about in the summer. And preferably in a somewhat tropical location. Because Albany in January is not worth the drive.

Still, there are some things you can't delegate. Testifying in front of the State Senate is one, and thankfully their hearing rooms are heated. If I can make it through this small but dense crowd of loyal supporters, professional protesters and disaffected college students with nothing better to do, I can get out of this arctic chill for a little while.

Of course, chopping through the thickets of people would be a lot easier if my entourage consisted of more than one 17-year-old kid with a megaphone.

"Please step aside!" Josh shouts, my intern trying to modulate the squeakiness out of his voice so he sounds almost tough. Behind him, I fight the shivers that would make me look weak in front of all these people I've worked so hard to convince I'm strong.

Wearing the costume in single-digit weather is something you would think I'd have learned to stop doing by now, but the senators invited the Night Watchman to testify today, not Ted Walker. And the crowd rallying outside the capitol building is only here because of the costume. I have to respect that.

"Move out of the way!" Josh yells. "Night Watchman coming through!"

Momentum drives him to shove a large man aside. The man turns, angry, grunting like a bull. I step between them. “Stand down,” I tell him. He mutters a string of profanity and raises his fist. I dodge his punch easily, grab his arm and twist it.

“Stand down,” I repeat. “Now.”

So yes, my next crusade for justice should be someplace warm where the locals are a bit less irritable.

Saving the rain forests? Sounds way too ambitious. Maybe dolphins? I don't know, people do get outraged about them. Is there anything sinister going on in Hawaii? Cruise ship corruption? Volcano maintenance?

Beach pollution? Beach pollution might work. It is a serious problem and it could at least get me down to the Jersey shore for a few days in the spring.

As we approach the capitol steps, someone grabs my hood and yanks me off balance. When I turn, I'm afraid it's going to be that same angry bull again, but it's just a young guy wearing a sweatshirt and goggles just like mine. A super-fan. There's always at least one at these things.

I tune out his rant about selling out and forgetting what my mission is supposed to be about, everyone I've let down by devoting so much time to lame political activism.

He's not exactly wrong. My methods have shifted, as has my focus. People take me seriously now, though. I spent years shouting at the rain in the middle of the night and it turns out I can do it in the bright of day instead and someone will even give me a microphone. The thing is, that's not an easy argument to make to irrational crazy people.



And anytime you get together a crowd that cares passionately about anything, you're going to get some crazy people.

I'm used to these confrontations by now. Josh tries to interject but I wave him off.

"I'm not a sell-out," I insist. "I just found a way to help people without getting punched in the face."

As if on cue, he punches me in the face.

My first thought is, I hope the goggles and bandana can cover up any bruising. There are, after all, going to be cameras inside.

"Sell-out!" he shouts, and then he disappears into the crowd.

"Okay," I tell Josh, "that's enough of this."

I've disappointed many people in many ways in my life, but this one seems to sting some folks the deepest. This betrayal of the image of me that they've created in their own minds. And maybe that's my fault for building up the superhero myth, but I'm running late and these incidents have long since lost their charm.

Standing on the steps, I take Josh's megaphone.

"People," I say, my voice amplified and echoed, "please listen to me. I hear a lot of grumbling about the way I operate these days. That there's not enough superheroing and too much camera-hogging. And I get it. I do. But if I ever inspired you, if you ever believed in me, then know this: I know what I'm doing. I'm asking you to trust me.

"No, I don't fight crime in dark alleys anymore. I certainly could, but why? That's not where the real bad guys are. These days, the villain isn't the bank robber; it's the

bank. It's the politicians and profiteers who prey on the weak and powerless. The system itself is sick with corruption and someone has to treat the disease.

"There's more than one kind of crime out there, and even more ways to fight it. Each hero must walk his own road. This is mine today.

"This is modern heroism. And I thank you all for being a part of it."

There are a few stray claps, but I rush inside without gauging the reaction.

I savor the artificial warmth of the lobby, bathe myself in it.

Josh walks with me toward the hearing room, and in truth, I was talking to him out there as much as to anyone else. He signed up to work for a superhero, so he wasn't thrilled when I decided the new enemy was the pervasive use of sub-standard meats and dairy products in Westchester public school lunches, but it brought us here and even he can't argue with results.

After taking my seat, I pour myself a glass of water very carefully, steadying my nervous hand to avoid spilling any in front of the local news cameras.

The chairman bangs his gavel and calls the hearing to order. I straighten up my posture. Once all the hubbub in the room simmers down, I clear my throat to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let me begin by stating what an honor and a privilege it is to be here before you this morning. I would like to read from a prepared statement..." I dig into my sweatshirt pockets and come up empty, check the pouches on my belt, give a quizzical look at Josh, who throws up his hands and shrugs his shoulders in surrender.

"...but I can't seem to find it."

The room is silent. One camera bulb flashes in my eye. “Now, then...I would be happy to take any questions you have at this time.”

## CHAPTER 4

The action figure looked nothing like him. Exaggerated musculature, cartoonish bright colors, 20-something points of articulation—Ted wasn't even sure what that meant, but the designers were quite proud of it at the time. All for an online animated series that practically nobody even watched. For a while, Ted had tried to convince himself that the show was just put out before its time, that the internet audience wasn't ready for such original content in the mid-90s. Years after the series was cancelled, though, Ted finally sat down to watch an episode himself, having not been among what the producers called a “statistically insignificant” viewership, because his computer was nearly a decade old and he didn't understand what a modem was. He recognized within a few minutes that the show simply wasn't very good. Awful, in fact. He was also surprised to learn that his animated counterpart had gained his powers from an Amish Night God and spent his time fighting villains like the Eclipse and Dusk the Sundown Man. He didn't remember any of that discussed in the pitch meetings he attended.

When that whole ordeal was over, he gave the action figure, in its preliminary mock-up packaging, to Everett. It still rested on the bookshelf now as Ted sat on the edge of his nephew's bed, studying the relics of his prior life preserved around the room.

His original yellow-tinted goggles. Newspaper pages pinned to the wall, displaying stories of his first adventures and rough artists' sketches based on witness

accounts. One of the baseballs he used to carry in his meager arsenal, now signed by Ted and protected by a glass case. The bow and arrow set he used briefly in the late 80s. He felt almost overwhelmed by the rush of memory.

After a few moments of trying not to look at all of those things, he leaned back, his head sinking into the dark blue comforter. Behind him, he heard his sister's voice.

"Are you going to sleep in here tonight?" Jasmine asked, standing in the doorway. Ted struggled to sit upright, but before he could answer, she shook her head and said, "Nevermind. That's a bad idea."

Ted looked at the Night Watchman action figure, the photos and newspaper clippings pinned to a board on the wall over Everett's desk, an abstract biography of himself blurring to life. "It really is."

Jasmine sighed and pointed down the hallway to the stairs. "The couch in the living room is pretty comfortable."

"Where's Greg sleeping?" Ted asked.

"At home," Jasmine said hurriedly, cheeks blushing just enough to hint at her embarrassment. "At his house, I mean. In his bed."

"Look, Jasmine—" Ted began, standing on numb, wobbly legs that had apparently taken it upon themselves to fall to sleep without the rest of his body.

"Can we just not go there tonight?"

Ted shrugged. He nodded toward the bookshelf. "I can't believe he kept all of this stuff."

"He kept everything. You knew he would. Why else would you give it to him?"

"I didn't really think about that."

"Yes, not thinking seems to be a recurring problem in this family."

"We all do stupid things sometimes, don't we?"

"We?' I was only talking about you and dad."

"Because our mother was a great big ball of rationality."

Jasmine laughed. "Oh," she said, "you're just still bitter that she tried to have you thrown in an insane asylum."

Ted rolled his eyes at the memory, "I am weird that way."

He tapped the box with the action figure inside.

"I'm not going to take it out of the case, but did you know this thing talks?" he said. "There's a button on the back. You press it and he growls, 'Watch out! It's night time!' That was supposed to be his catchphrase."

"'It's night time?' What does that mean?"

"I never really got it either, but they promised me it would look great on t-shirts."

"They' gave you a lot of really bad advice, didn't they?"

"You have no idea."

Ted stepped away from the bookshelf and leaned against the window sill, looking out into the darkness.

"Look, Ted, I know you feel responsible for this. And you should, but—"

"You are a hell of a motivational speaker."

"What I'm getting at is," her voice trembled with sincerity, "you really weren't as bad of an uncle as you think you were."

Ted smiled and shook his head. "They should make greeting cards that say that."

He watched Jasmine's reflection in the window, standing silently and awkwardly in the middle of the room. As she turned to leave, she said, "There are pillows and blankets in the hall closet. Take whatever you need."

Before she got through the doorway, Ted's voice stopped her. "Hey, do they have any suspects? In the attack, I mean. If you know."

She came back into the room. She studied Ted's toughened eyes contrasted by his slightly suppressed smile, and she sighed. "Ted, the police are handling it."

"What? What was the sigh for?"

"You have that look," she said, absently wagging a finger. "I know that look. You want to solve a mystery."

"Someone has to."

"Someone is." She put her hands on his shoulder. "Several someones at the White Plains Police Department."

"When has that ever been enough?"

Jasmine leaned forward, resting her forehead against his, and whispered, "Please, Ted, just leave it alone."

Ted pulled away from her. Then he made his way toward the hall, pausing to kiss her cheek as he passed. All he said in response to her pleading was, "So I'll take the couch then."

\*\*\*\*

From the living room, Ted could see the shadow of a man with a thin trail of smoke rising from his lips on the back porch. He dumped the pillows and blanket on the couch, then walked through the kitchen to the back door. Outside, Greg was leaning against the railing, tapping ash from his cigarette into the wind. Ted knocked on the door, then waved when Greg looked his way.

He stepped outside and let the glass door swing shut behind him. "You still smoke?" he asked.

"People don't change," Greg said, studying his cigarette in the pale moonlight. "We just think we do. You going to stand there and judge me all night?"

"I was actually going to ask," Ted held out his hand, "can I bum one of those off you?"

Greg eyed him suspiciously at first, but then reached for the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. "Sorry," he said, his voice suddenly softening. "It's been a long day. Here. You can keep what's left in the pack."

Ted responded with a similar glare of suspicion before taking the cigarettes and placing one in his mouth. "Well...thank you."

Greg took out a lighter and flicked it on. He struggled against the cold to keep the flame going long enough for Ted to use it. "I didn't realize you smoked."

Ted took a long drag. Exhaling a cloud of smoke, he said, "I stood on rooftops for about five hours a night back in the day. What else was I going to do up there?"

"Could have gone home and slept like a normal person."

"Where were you 25 years ago when I needed advice like that?"



Greg chuckled and, for the moment, it seemed like the acrimony between the two men had drifted away on the night breeze. Even if it only lasted these few seconds, Ted counted it as a great victory for family unity.

"You shouldn't do it," Greg said as he grinded his cigarette butt against the wood railing.

"What?"

"Whatever it is you're planning."

Ted backed away, despite realizing he was perhaps being overly defensive. "Why does everyone just assume I'm planning something?"

Greg shrugged, "Aren't you?"

"Yes," Ted acknowledged. "But I thought I could be more stealthy about it."

"Dude, you're pushing 60. I can hear your joints creak when you walk. Stealth ain't your strong suit."

Ted looked out over the lawn and flicked his cigarette into the dirt. "Getting old is an unpleasant experience, Gregory," he said.

He extended his hand.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do," Greg said as he shook Ted's hand. "For your sister and your nephew and all. You know it hurts me to admit that kind of thing. So...there you go."

"But you still don't think I should do anything?"

Shaking his head, Greg responded, "I just know Jasmine would want me to talk you out of it. And she tends to be right more often than not, so I'm going with it."

Before he went back inside, Ted felt compelled to clarify what his plan was. "It's not like I'm going to put on a costume and go bash heads in. I want to, but I'm not that stupid. I'm talking about doing some shoe leather detective work. Asking some questions, running down some leads. It'll be completely harmless."

Greg nodded and considered that for a moment, then replied, "See, now, the thing about that, haven't you found that the things that people expect to do the least harm are the ones that end up causing the most?"

"I liked you better when you were just trying to punch me." Ted opened the door to go into the kitchen. "Thanks for the cigarettes."

Alone on the porch, Greg lit another cigarette for himself and smoked in silence.

\*\*\*\*

Too often, Ted dreamed of the fire.

The heat of the flames. The sound of the scream. Sweat down the side of his face.

*I am the fire.*

The body falling. The cackling.

*Fear my flames.*

The fire.

He shot upright when he woke. As always, he needed a moment to compose himself and to convince himself he wasn't still on the roof of that burning building. Once he cleared that hurdle, he took a few deep breaths and lay back down.

Ted realized now that his sister may have substantially oversold the comfort of the couch, with its thin pillows, rock-hard cushions and rough upholstery, and it was difficult to find a position that would let him get back to sleep.

After several minutes of twisting and turning as much as his stiff bones and joints allowed, he gave up, stood and stumbled toward the kitchen, leaning on the wall for balance. He rummaged through drawers for any kind of decaffeinated tea that wasn't somehow fruit flavored. He settled on an ambiguously-named "Irish Breakfast" tea, filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove, momentarily balking to figure out how to turn on one of the burners using the digital controls of the new appliance.

While the water boiled, he sat in a wooden chair, resting his head on the table and closing his eyes. He wasn't sure how to break the news to his sister that even this was much more comfortable than her couch was. He had started to drift back to sleep when the kettle's whistle screamed for him.

Before he could finish pouring the water into a mug, he was interrupted by the sound of shattering glass. His head whipped around to look toward the front of the house, allowing hot water to splash out and burn his hand, but the pain barely registered.

Ted ran to the living room, where shards were scattered across the carpet beneath a broken window. A brick sat on the floor next to the glass, a wrinkled sheet of paper wrapped around it with a gray rubber band. He snapped the band and held the paper up under the beam of streetlight that flooded in where the window used to be. The big red letters splattered on the page:

“U’RE NEXT”

1989

You get this picture in your head of how the scene's going to play out.

In reality, though, there's a lot more screaming.

We've been dating for almost a year, so it seemed like the right time.

I thought it'd be cute and funny, like that bit in the Superman movie where Lois interviews him and he tells her all about himself and his powers, then he takes her flying—"You've got me? Who's got you?"—that whole thing.

With Andrea? Not so much.

When she turned on her bedroom light and saw me standing there in costume, before I even had a chance to explain myself, she panicked and started swinging her purse at me. As I ducked and dodged around her bed and furniture, I took off the hood and bandana and tried to explain, but even after I was done, she was still frantic.

It's not as if her reaction is unreasonable, of course. There are some things that sound completely ludicrous when you say them out loud, no matter how you phrase them. Telling your girlfriend you're secretly a costumed urban vigilante/political activist is apparently one of those things. Certainly, in retrospect, there must have been a better way to approach the problem than creeping through her window in the middle of the night.

She puts down her purse and picks up a lamp, at which point this is clearly becoming counterproductive. When she raises the lamp to swing it, I dive at her, wrestle it away and cover her mouth. “Calm down,” I whisper, gently guiding her to a chair.

I should have learned my lesson last year when I told my mother the truth and she responded by trying to have me committed. In my defense, that was my mother and she’s more than a little crazy herself, so I don’t generally use her behavior as a barometer for how others will react in a given situation.

Bottom line: I’m not going to lie to the woman I love anymore. This right here is a romantic gesture, a dramatic display of unwavering trust that I’d hoped she would appreciate. Recognize the gravity of letting her in to that side of myself and my world. The deep symbolism of the unmasking.

Once she’s taken a moment to catch her breath and look me in the eyes, Andrea grows docile but confused. “Ted,” she says, “what the hell is going on?”

Standing in front of her chair, I state plainly, “I’m the Night Watchman.”

Her face is a white sheet. “I don’t know what that means,” she says eventually.

“I—” Rewind. “Wait, really?”

“Really.” Her eyes skim over the details of my costume and she asks, “What the hell are you wearing?”

I’m stung by my apparent anonymity. “Does nobody read the local newspaper anymore?” I say, counting off just a few of my accomplishments, “I’ve been fighting crime for more than five years. I’ve organized some pretty high profile rallies for

numerous arguably significant causes. I even testified before the state senate once. There were a lot of cameras there. The name's really not ringing a bell at all?"

She gestures toward my outfit again, "You fight crime in that?"

"Some nights, yeah."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a superhero." I hate using the word, but it's more relatable than the alternatives. Personally, I think it sounds pretty silly, and apparently she does too, as evidenced by her snickering. "Stop laughing."

"I'm sorry," she says between giggles. "It's just—that's—are you serious?"

"Yes! I'm standing here wearing the damn costume. What do you think I'm—Of course I'm serious. Look at me."

"I'm having a hard time doing that."

"Babe, I'm not kidding." I speak solemnly but not angrily, and my tone immediately hushes her laughter. I say again, "Please, look at me."

"Can you at least take the goggles off?" she asks.

"Sure." I pull the goggles from my eyes, the suction of the lenses leaving behind dull rings of pain. "Sorry."

The silence in the room quickly grows uncomfortable, like we're strangers on a bad first date.

"What are you thinking?" I ask.

"Isn't that—I'm sorry," she says. "This is a stupid question, but isn't that dangerous?"

“Very.” I try not to sound too proud or too brave. “That’s not a stupid question.”

“Why would you—?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” I say, unwaveringly sincere.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I’m sick of the lies, Andrea. Of knowing that half the things I tell you are complete bullshit. I’m sick of disappearing in the middle of the night and not being able to tell you why. Of showing up for dates exhausted, beaten or bruised and making ridiculous excuses for myself. Of having to pretend to be a complete loser when I’ve got this whole incredible life that you know nothing about.”

“I never thought you were a loser,” she says. She’s a terrible liar.

“I love you,” I say. It’s not the first time, but it feels that way as the words stumble from my lips.

“You’re completely insane,” she says. Her voice is sugary with unambiguous sweetness and affection.

## CHAPTER 5

The White Plains Police headquarters had undergone extensive renovations since Ted was last there. It seemed much larger now but, more importantly, the doorway in the back alley he once used for clandestine meetings with officers was gone. He knew the computerized locks and keypads that now secured the building's entrances would dwarf his primitive lock-picking abilities, so a more straight-forward approach would be necessary.

Unable to think of alternative, Ted moped around to the front entrance of the building. He walked into the bright lobby, stopping briefly to enjoy an inviting gust of heat after standing outside in the cold, and approached the nearest desk.

"I'm looking for a Detective Oliver Winslow," he said to the officer stationed there.

The officer, at least 20 years younger than him, took a gulp of root beer from a can before responding. "He ain't here," he said.

"I see," Ted remembered the lobby being smaller. "When will he be back?"

"Considering he retired and moved to Florida a couple years back," the officer paused for another sip of soda, "I'd bet probably not anytime soon."

Ted stretched to recall the names of any other offices he worked with over the years. "Is Al King still around?" he asked.



“Dead.”

“Hmm. Sorry to hear that.”

“Look,” the officer said, leaning forward on his desk, “no offense, buddy, but there’s actual police work going on here, so you want to tell me why you’re here? Or are you just going to hop back in your time machine?”

“I’m sorry. It’s been a long time since I—” Ted stopped himself, debating how much information he needed to share with a stranger. “Would you be able to tell me who’s handling the Everett Voigt investigation?”

“The who?”

“Everett Voigt. Teenager, got beat up a couple of nights ago.” Keeping in mind what Cassidy had told him about the police not revealing that Everett was wearing his costume, Ted whispered, “He was dressed as the Night Watchman.”

The officer scratched his head, “Who are we talking about now?”

Ted snapped back, “He was a very well-known local superhero. He was quite popular. You know,” he gestured emphatically toward his chest and eyes, “with the sweatshirt and the goggles.”

“Must have been before my time.” The officer picked up the phone on his desk. “Hang on. Let me check who you need to speak to. What did you say your name was?”

“Ross. Bill Ross. The boy is my nephew.”

While the cop dialed and spoke to someone on the other end, Ted's eyes fixated on the glare shining through an ornate sky light above him. That was definitely new.

He was interrupted by a sudden burst of laughter from the officer. "That guy?" he said into the phone. "I totally forgot about him. No, no, I've seen the video. The kid's uncle is out here."

After he hung up the phone, the officer motioned toward a set of double doors behind the desk. "You're going to have to talk to the chief on this one."

"What was so funny?" Ted asked.

"What? Oh, nothing. No, I just—why didn't you tell me the Night Watchman was that superhero wannabe who got nailed on *COPS* back in the day? That was hilarious."

Ted remembered one bad night 17 years earlier when he was caught driving drunk in the Watch Wagon. It was just another example of his stunningly bad luck that it happened to be the same night a Fox television crew was shadowing the White Plains police for an early episode of *COPS*. "He did other things too," he offered in a half-hearted defense.

"If you say so, dude," the officer said.

Ted remained in front of the desk, unsure where anything was in this building anymore. "Where do I—?"

The officer sighed. Pointing toward the doors again, he said, "Go through there and you keep walking until you get to the office with 'CHIEF' on the door in big ass letters. That's his."

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The chief's office was empty and there was nobody at his assistant's desk when Ted approached. With other officers walking past constantly, Ted felt he was in the way

standing out in the hall, so he went inside the office and sat in a soft chair by the door. The desk was a mess of unfinished paperwork and open case files. A tarnished gold nameplate: Chief Norbert Jameson.

A few minutes later, Chief Jameson stormed in and slammed the door. He was a short, thin man with a wrinkled face and a web of thin gray hair on his head. He breathed heavily and deliberately, trying to calm his mad, thumping heartbeat. Not noticing Ted's presence, he sat at the desk and sipped from a mug he had brought in with him.

"Excuse me," Ted said, startling the chief, who flinched and knocked over his cup, spilling coffee across the files on his desk.

"Shit!" He stood and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, which he tried to use to soak up the coffee. While he did, he asked Ted, "Who are you, why are you here and why haven't I kicked you out of my office yet?"

"Do you need some paper towels?"

"What I need is for you to leave unless you have something important to say."

"You guys might want to consider working on your attitude toward citizens."

"This ain't exactly the customer service department at Wal-Mart." Jameson held up a wet folder and watched coffee drip off it onto his carpet. "But I promise we'll get right on that after we take care of all these pesky murders and whatnot. I'm going to ask one more time, and then I'm going to start shooting things: why are you here?"

"My name is William Ross."

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"My nephew is Everett Voigt."

Jameson thought for a few seconds, whispering the name to himself to recall why it sounded so familiar. Then he reached into the middle of a pile of folders and pulled out a file. He flipped through the pages, mumbling as he read along. He tossed the file onto his desk and leaned back in his chair. “Aw, crap. The mask.”

“Well, it's technically not a mask.” Ted attempted to mimic the way it would hang over his nose and mouth with his hand. “It’s more like a bandana.”

“This is not what I need right now.”

Jameson got up and walked out of the room. Ted was momentarily confused, but he tried to wait patiently for the chief to return. After close to five minutes, he peered out into the hallway and didn’t see him anywhere. Then he looked over at Everett’s file that Jameson had thrown across the desk. He crept toward it, constantly glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone was coming.

The file rather thin, consisting mainly of a police incident report and a few witness statements. After a quick scan of the pages, Ted eyed a copy machine across the hall. The chief’s assistant, a middle-aged woman with very thick glasses, had come back to her desk, but now she stood and walked away again.

Ted looked at his watch, then at the copier and then back at the file in his hand.

He walked briskly across the hallway, cradling the file under his sweater, nervous and not wanting to arouse suspicion from any officers who might see him. In the copy room, he tried to make sense of the dozens of buttons on the top of the machine. He placed the pages, face-down, in the feeder and hit the big green button. The machine beeped at him, the small display screen flashing that it was warming up. After what

seemed like far more than the thirty seconds it actually was, the pages began feeding. While copied pages printed, Ted took another anxious look down the hall. When he came back to the machine, he picked up the copies and saw that they were all blank. He slammed them furiously into a blue recycle bin and kicked the side of the machine, which proceeded to make a series of unhealthy grinding and revving sounds before going silent. He placed the original copy in the feeder again, face-up this time. He pressed the green button, restlessly watching the tray where the copies should come out.

Nothing.

He looked at the display, an "Error: Paper Jam" message accompanied by a diagram of the machine indicating three places where it was jammed.

Ted grabbed the file and drifted as casually as possible back into the chief's office, avoiding eye contact with anyone he passed.

When he heard footsteps approach, Ted spun around to face the door. Chief Jameson walked in and groaned, "Christ, you're still here, aren't you?"

Behind his back, Ted pushed the file further onto the desk, trying to get it to approximately where he had found it. "It's a family thing, sir."

Jameson walked around Ted and tore a strip of paper off the bottom of one of the documents scattered across his desk.

"Here's the deal," he said as he scribbled a name and number. "Since I don't particularly want to see you ever again, I'm going to put you in touch with the lead detective on the case. Bother him all you like."

He handed the paper—a phone number for a Detective Adrian Morris—to Ted, who stared at it for a moment, then pointed at one of the numbers, "Is this a 4 or a 9?"

The chief's eyes blazed at him. He didn't say anything.

"I'll—you know what, I'll just try both," Ted said, backing off.

When he turned around to leave, though, he heard Jameson's voice behind him. "I don't want these people invading my town."

Ted stopped and looked back at him.

"I mean it," the chief said. "Put the word out."

"To who?"

"Everyone in your little club."

"I have no idea what—"

"Mr. Walker—"

"Ross," Ted spat the word out almost instinctively.

"Look, Walker," Jameson emphasized the name, "I'm not going to play games here. We both know who you really are."

Ted tried to draw a shocked look on his face, but he quickly decided maintaining the lie at this point would prove pointless and most likely embarrassing.

"What? You don't need to wear a mask to be a detective." Jameson looked down at his desk and started filling out a coffee-stained form. "You provided an admirable service to this city for quite a long time. That's the only reason I'm still talking to you. But this isn't your show anymore. Stay out of our way, tell the other masks to stay out of our way and we'll do everything we can."

There was little point in explaining that he didn't have some massive phone chain or email list to contact all of the other "masks" out there. He had only even met one himself, and that was just the day before. Instead, Ted made one more effort to get the police chief to listen to him.

"I'd love to stay out of it, but they're threatening my family now," he said, slamming the note that had been tied to the brick down on the desk.

"What is this?"

"Somebody hurled it through my sister's window last night."

Jameson read it over a few times, mumbling to himself. "Who's next for what?"

"It doesn't say."

"I can see that it doesn't say," he said, pointing at the seven red letters on the page, "but I'm asking, what the hell does it mean?"

"Obviously whoever attacked my nephew is threatening the rest of our family."

"Obviously, huh?" Jameson handed the note back to Ted. "Can you prove that?"

"Well, no."

"Not much I can do about it, then."

"Isn't it your job to find proof and arrest people?"

Jameson rolled his eyes. "I've heard it described as such."

"So?"

"So I'll pass it on to Detective Morris, but I'm warning you, unless it's got somebody's bloody fingerprints or a return address on it, it's a thin lead that's going to be

tough to trace back to anybody." He resumed writing on the form, signed it and violently grabbed another. "Unlike you people, we have rules and procedures we have to follow."

"Thank you."

"You can go now," Jameson said, looking up one last time with suddenly sympathetic eyes. "We know what we're doing."

Before leaving the police station, Ted paused in the hallway to search his coat pocket for Cassidy Fulbright's business card. He stopped at the chief's assistant's desk and handed it to the woman sitting there.

"Excuse me, miss," he said. "The chief needs this woman's home address right away."

While he waited for her to look up the information and write it down, he ignored the officers gathered around the copy machine, tinkering with several open compartments and trying to un-jam it.



1992

"Fifty bucks," I say, slamming a fistful of bills on the bar.

The woman on the stool next to me stares at the crumpled pile of money. "No," she says.

I don't grieve well. That's the best excuse I can offer for this behavior. The why doesn't really matter right now anyway. All I want right now is for someone to punch me.

"Come on. I'll give you fifty bucks to hit me in the face. Actually, you know what? Wait. Hit me in the shoulder first. If I can take that, then hit me in the face."

"I'm not going to hit you at all. Why do you want me to punch you?"

"Because no one has in a couple of years and I need to see if I've still got it."

"Got what?"

"My A-game."

"I don't even know what that is."

"\$100, then. \$100 to do something you probably wanted to do already."

When I slap another bill down on the bar, she stares at my hand, continuing to watch it even after I pull it away. "You're missing a finger," she says.

"I noticed," I reply.

Her face twists into revulsion, but it passes quickly. Shaking it off, she says, "I'm not saying you don't deserve a punch in the face. I'm just saying I'm not going to do it."

"Is it the costume? Is the costume intimidating you? Is that the problem?"

"Yes. I mean, no, I'm not intimidated. It's—who are you supposed to be?"

"I'm the Night Watchman. Have you really not heard of me?"

"Afraid not."

"Well, if it'll make you more comfortable, I can take the costume off."

"Are you wearing anything underneath it?"

"...No."

"Then that's definitely not going to make me more comfortable."

"So it's a solid 'no' on the punching, then?"

"It is."

"How about sex? The \$100 is negotiable. Very negotiable."

I figure at this point, worst case scenario is she slaps me in the face, which would be pretty close to giving me what I wanted to begin with. Check and mate, my lady.

But then I feel the sudden impact of a fist against my right cheek. I tumble off the stool. From the floor, rubbing the side of my face, I look up at the bartender, who shrugs.

"What?" he asks. "I thought the offer was open to anybody."

The woman helps me to my feet and I hear her struggling to hide a giggle. As I brush dust and peanut shells off my costume, she asks, "So, do you still have it?"

"No," I say, hobbling toward the door. "Apparently not."

I step outside into the withering cold. The last thing I hear before the door swings shut behind me is the bartender shouting, "I can keep the money, right?"

I try to remember where I parked.

After wandering the municipal lot for close to twenty minutes, I find the Watch Wagon and slide into the sweet comfort of its cushioned seats. I could just sleep here until the buzz wears off or the sun comes up. Andrea would worry about me, though. The promise I made when I first revealed my identity to her, before we even got married, was that I'd always come home by 3 am.

*But honey, crime doesn't have a curfew*, I argued.

She wouldn't listen. If I was going to keep doing this, I had to swear that I'd keep myself alive and that I'd make it back to her every night.

The things we do for love...

I shift the car into reverse and carefully pull out of my parking space.

I can hear my mother's voice, long ago, in the passenger seat of her Buick teaching me how to drive. It's been happening all day, these vivid memories drowning me. But they all just bring me back to this morning, in the cemetery, watching her coffin sink into her grave.

Of course, we weren't close toward the end. These last few years, her trying to convince me, my wife and anyone in Westchester County who would listen that I was crazy, that I needed to be committed for my own protection because of my "delusional superhero complex." She always failed, but like the coyote chasing the road runner, she never gave up.

And now she's gone.

I wouldn't say I'm sad, exactly. I'm angry. And here I am wallowing in my rage because that's what feels good tonight.

I'm yanked out of my haze of self-pity by the squealing horn of an oncoming truck. It takes a few seconds too long to figure out what lane I'm in. As I swerve back to the right side of the road, narrowly dodging a crash, my car clips the side-view mirror off a parked police cruiser.

In my rearview, I see two cops and what looks like a cameraman scramble to get inside, fire up their siren and pursue me.

Times like this, having the most identifiable vehicle in town is a bit of a drawback. Still, I consider running. But my mother's memory starts lecturing me about civic responsibility, the dangers of driving drunk and the idiocy of endangering other drivers and pedestrians with a high-speed chase.

So I pull over. The police car stops behind me and both officers and a man with a large video camera on his shoulder approach carefully, the cops yelling something about not making any sudden moves. But they're both shouting at once and I feel a pounding headache coming on as the alcohol soaks through my system, so it's hard to understand.

As the cameraman gets closer, I see the Fox logo on his jacket and the word "COPS" emblazoned on his baseball cap and I just know this is all going to get a lot worse before it gets better.

## CHAPTER 6

When Ted returned to his sister's house, Greg was outside standing on a short ladder, struggling to lift a large sheet of glass. He had already removed what remained of the broken window, and several power tools were laid out on the porch next to him. When Greg said he'd "take care of the window" the night before, Ted just assumed he meant he'd call a carpenter or window repair man or something, but instead his brother-in-law was hell-bent on replacing the window himself.

The men exchanged silent nods acknowledging each other's presence.

Ted noticed that Greg was beginning to lose his footing on the ladder. Ted rushed over to save him from falling, but he quickly regained his balance on his own. This left Ted standing awkwardly close with no apparent purpose.

"I've got the bottom," he said, putting his hands under the glass.

"Thanks," Greg said. "It's heavier than I thought."

With Ted's help, he maneuvered the window into place. Ted was impressed by how well it fit the frame and by how focused Greg was on this one task.

"I'm trying to get this done by dark," Greg said as he carefully let go of the glass and climbed down the ladder. "I still need to seal it and finish up a few other things."

They stepped back to admire Greg's work.

"I can help with the rest of this," Ted said.

Greg eyed him skeptically, no doubt imagining various bloody accidents that were likely to result from Ted handling his tools. He shook his head, "No offense, bro, but you really can't."

"How hard can it be?"

"Well, do you know what to do with this?" he asked, holding up a caulking gun.

"You put the one thing there into," Ted made ambiguous hand gestures, "you know, the...other thing."

"Yeah, I appreciate the offer, but I've got this one."

Greg patted Ted on the back, then knelt down to make sure he had all of the equipment he needed to seal the window into the frame.

Suddenly, the sound of an ancient engine roared up the street. Ted watched a black station wagon barrel forward through the neighborhood, swerving and accelerating. When it got close, he could see that the driver's window was open. But because of its heavily-tinted windshield, he didn't know the driver was holding something and preparing to throw it until it was almost too late.

"Get down!" he shouted, ducking and reaching out to protect Greg with his body, but Greg stood up instead, helpless to watch as a brick sailed through the new window.

"Oh, come on!" Greg shouted as the car sped off. "Really?"

Ted got up, quickly scanning both his and Greg's bodies for any injuries. By the time he looked at the street, the car was already out of sight.

"Did you catch the plate number?" he asked.

Greg shrugged, "It didn't have plates."

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely none on the rear end." He pointed to the new hole in the window,

"What was that?"

Ted stepped carefully around pieces of glass on the lawn and climbed up the ladder. Looking into the house, he saw the brick on the carpet. Rather than stepping down and walking to the front door, Ted jumped from the top of the ladder to the window frame. He almost fell forward, onto the broken glass inside, but he caught himself and hopped down instead.

Greg, meanwhile, had used the door and stood in the hallway watching as Ted crouched over the brick and studied it. Like the one the night before, it had a note rubber-banded to it. Ted pulled it off and read it, sighing and looking back out the window for a moment before handing the note to Greg.

"YOU R GOING 2 DI"

"I don't get it," Greg said, offering the paper back to Ted. "Who's going to die?"

"Nobody," Ted said. He snatched the note and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To do something I really wish I didn't have to."

Ted slammed the door behind him and stomped out to his sister's car.

\*\*\*\*\*

Cassidy sat at her desk in the bedroom of her small third-story apartment. She had spent hours poring over archived news stories and old fan web sites devoted to the Night

Watchman. Her vision was beginning to blur, tiny letters on her laptop screen bleeding into each other. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the desk.

She perked up to a rapping on her window.

Ted crouched on her fire escape, a long raincoat hanging off his body in a way that she couldn't help noticing looked almost like a cape. He waved.

"I think I need your help," he shouted through the glass.

She looked around before letting him in. The alley below was empty and still. She unlocked a rusty latch and opened the window.

"You said the cops are keeping the bit about the costume quiet," Ted said. "Why? Why are they doing that?"

"How did you get up here?"

Ted pointed down at the trash bin that sat beneath the fire escape. "I pushed that dumpster over from across the alley, climbed on top and pulled down the ladder."

"I have a door, you know."

"That's not my style."

"Really," she said, gesturing toward her cramped, ambiguous living room/dining room/kitchen area. "Big old front door, right out there. There's even an elevator from the lobby. I use it all the time."

"No offense, but it wouldn't hurt you to take the stairs a bit more."

Cassidy analyzed her body in the mirror hanging from her closet door. "How am I supposed to not be offended by that?"

"I was just making an observation."



“You could have called me. You have my business card with my phone number.”

Ignoring the suggestion, Ted stepped into the apartment and stretched tired limbs that were less prepared for physical activity than he had hoped. Cassidy fought to get the rarely-used window closed. Ted reached over from behind her to push it down.

“Why aren’t they releasing the information?” he asked again after he shut it.

“Officially? Because they never release details of an ongoing investigation.” She returned to the seat at her desk. “The truth? They don’t want this town flooded with Reals out for vengeance.”

Ted stared wordlessly. She groaned in frustration.

“Reals,” she repeated. “Real-Life Superheroes. People like you. Or like you used to be. With the code names and the costumes and the borderline mental deficiencies.”

“There’s a word for it now?” Ted’s face maintained vacant confusion.

“There’s even a database,” she said, sitting down and typing. Watching her work on the 13-inch laptop screen, Ted felt almost prehistoric. “Here. It’s on the internet. See, what we do is we go ‘online’ and there are these things called ‘web sites’ where we—”

“I know what the internet is,” Ted sniped back.

“But you don’t know how to use it, do you?”

He contemplated his options, afraid that if he lied she might dare him to prove it, so he went with the truth, “Computers are not one of my areas of expertise.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I’m really not that old, you know,” Ted protested, more to himself than to her. Cassidy kept typing. He added, “I still have to pay full price for my bus pass back home.”

She paused, turned her chair to face him and crossed her arms.

"So, let's say I help you," she said. "Hypothetically, I mean. What do I get in return?"

"There's the satisfaction of knowing you've done the right thing and aided and kindly old man in a time of need."

"Sort of looking for more than that, Ted."

"Fine." He massaged his forehead as he thought. "You want an interview?"

"A series of interviews," she said sternly. "For a comprehensive multi-part feature on your career."

Ted measured his options. His own attempts at researching the case online had consisted entirely of typing his nephew's name into a search engine and being overwhelmed by the sheer number of results, all of which seemed to involve other people named Everett who had nothing to do with his family. And far too many of them were naked. Cassidy was a local reporter. She probably had connections, sources who weren't either dead or retired like his. She knew the area, whereas he kept getting lost navigating streets he hadn't driven in almost a decade.

As little as he wanted to admit it, he might actually need her.

"If you think anyone would want to read that, fine. Go nuts. What do you want to know?"

"Not right now. I need to prepare. I'm a real journalist, you know."

"If you say so," Ted said under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. How do you even use a computer this small?" he asked. "When I was in school, I had a calculator bigger than that."

"You really miss the good old days, don't you?" she said, smiling at him.

"The good old days I was running around in tight pants, jumping off rooftops and occasionally getting my ass kicked. The good old days weren't always all that good, Cassy."

"'Cassy?' Really? That's going to be a thing now?" She pointed at the screen, a page filled with images of men and women in costumes listing their codenames and bases of operations. "Okay, see, here it is. 300 heroes all over the world."

"All of these people are out there fighting crime?"

"Some of them just shovel snow for old people or pick up trash on the side of the highway and stuff, but sure, they've got the names and the costumes."

Ted scoffed, "There's more to being a hero than a name and a costume."

"Like what? An exaggerated sense of self-importance?"

"See, now," Ted looked around her cramped bedroom, "it's a mouth like that that's why you're still single and living alone in this rathouse."

"Okay, yeah," she closed her laptop and turned to face him. "This isn't going to work. If we're going to do this, we need to establish a few rules. First, and this is—you know what, this is the only rule: I'm not your granddaughter. I'm not looking for your approval, I'm not looking for your advice. I want your story. Nothing else. So keep the judgy-judgy comments to yourself."

"Yes, yes. You are woman, hear you roar, etcetera. Are you in?"

“Whatever. But I’m not wearing a costume.”

“Deal,” Ted said, opening the window.

“You do have a plan, right?”

“I have the beginnings of one,” he said as he began to climb back out.

“Ted! Door!”

He paused, one foot on the fire escape, the other on her radiator. “I’m already halfway out. Next time.”

“Next time? How often are you going to show up like this?”

But he was gone.

Cassidy walked to the window, expecting Ted to have mysteriously disappeared from view. Instead she heard a crash and looked down to see him roll off the top of the dumpster, struggle to his feet and limp off toward the street.

The Night Watchman climbs in through the bedroom window as the young woman steps out of the shower. She wraps herself in a towel and walks through the open bathroom door. In the bedroom, she finds him hunched over her armoire, sifting through her underwear drawer. She screams and, startled, he drops a pair of her panties. He rushes across the room to grab her, to cover her mouth and silence her. One hand over her lips and the other firmly gripping her waist, he whispers to her.

"My deepest apologies, citizen," he says, overacting like he's in a 40s radio serial. "I'm searching for a bra with the power to destroy the world as we know it. I received a tip that it may be hidden in this very apartment."

Wriggling her mouth free, she asks, "Why didn't you knock on my front door?"

With a gleaming white smile, he winks at the camera and says, "I prefer to come from behind."

"Well, then, why don't you strip search me?" she says, allowing the towel to slip off and fall to the carpet as she kisses him passionately. Then she leads him to the bed.

Watching the scene play out, off-stage with the director and about a dozen crew members, I think, *This is all Michael Keaton's fault.*

It's been less than a year since the *Batman* film starring the otherwise-likeable actor landed in theaters and raked in millions. It also set off a wave of new superhero

projects that are now in various stages of development. The Night Watchman, unfortunately, was not one of the properties wrapped up in this little whirlwind of activity. Andrea and I sent out pitches to a few studios, but none of them even replied with a polite rejection letter.

At the same time, the porn industry was apparently having the opposite problem. As the producers explained to me, neither of the major comic book publishers wanted any of their characters associated with even the most tasteful of skin flicks. So having struck out with their offers for the license to use a fictional superhero in their Batman-parody porn project, they eventually turned to me, the real world hero suffering from image problems and financial shortfalls.

A few contracts and tens of thousands of dollars later, I'm standing on the set of *The Nymphomaniacal Night Watchman*, the first film in a planned trilogy.

I don't even want to know what they're going to call the other two.

Looking at the actor, if you can call him that, in their version of my costume—which somehow manages to look even cheaper than the real thing—I'm relieved that I refused their initial offer to star in the films myself. Their argument was that it'd make the whole thing feel more authentic. My argument was that I didn't want a million complete strangers staring at my naked body—let alone my naked body having sex with another naked body. Also, the whole thing struck me as creepy as all fuck-out and I wanted to stay as uninvolved as possible while still collecting as much money as they were willing to give me. And so, after a lengthy casting process I wish I could bleach from my memory, we hired Hugh G. Sexton and Kandy, who insists she has no last name.

With Hugh worming his way out of his skintight pants and Kandy's long legs spread on top of the satin sheets, I decide this would be a good time to step outside for a moment. Get some fresh air. Absorb the beautiful view of the warehouse parking lot and the other massive empty buildings along the grimy Brooklyn waterfront.

Maybe this was all a mistake, but there's no point in dwelling on that now.

It's not that we absolutely needed the money to get by—it certainly helped, but Andrea's been very successful in her own career—but I do have an ego and it's underfed by the occasional crime fighting success or headline-grabbing rally for some bullshit cause. I needed more, and I guess this is what I get for my greed. I'm a smut-peddling superhero. Living the dream right here.

When I return to the building, the other Night Watchman is standing outside leaning against the wall with a cigarette in his mouth, wearing nothing but a bathrobe, flip-flops and sunglasses. The robe isn't tied very tight around his waist and the wind is blowing hard off the river. I try not to look down.

"It's cold out here, bro," he says.

"It might be a bit warmer if you were wearing clothes."

"I'll try that sometime." He exhales smoke, and he seems to be mulling over the idea. When he snaps out of it, he asks, "So you're the guy, right? I mean, the actual guy."

"I am," I say, aiming for an equilibrium point between pride and shame.

"Radical." He holds up his hand, waiting. "High five?"

I'm not wild about the idea, knowing where that hand may have been, but I offer a meek pat to avoid seeming impolite.

“Did you have any questions for me? Like method acting research type stuff?”

“Research?” He laughs and shakes his head. “Dude, I just fuck chicks on camera.”

He smokes silently, allowing burnt ash to flutter away.

I turn skyward as a strong gust leaves his robe almost fully open. “I’ve been meaning to ask, is Hugh Sexton your real name?”

“Yep. If I made one up, I’d have gone with something dirtier. Like Dirk Longpenis or Awesome J. Fucksalot.”

The door swings open and a crew member passes between us. While the door slowly creaks shut, I watch Kandy inside sitting away from the cameras in her robe sipping coffee from a plastic cup.

“So what's it like?” I ask Hugh.

“What?”

“You know...with her?”

“Honestly,” he says, stomping his cigarette butt into the concrete, “you think about how many other dudes have stuck it in there, it gets to be like renting bowling shoes.”

“Romantic.”

“Hey, it's just a paycheck, right? You do what you do. Speaking of which,” he looks down, as if noticing for the first time that his balls have been flapping free in the breeze, and hastily ties the robe, “I got to get back in there. Peace.”

I wait a few minutes before following him back inside.



## CHAPTER 7

The silence of the alley was occasionally shattered by the rumbling tires of trucks on the highway as they made their midnight voyage through Westchester County, evading the commuters and mall shoppers who clogged the roads all day and well into the evening. Ted didn't know what he was looking for, and equipped with little more than a flashlight and a cell phone, he didn't know how he was going to find it either.

Uncertain of what he was up against, who might be watching him or why, he thought it best to ensure that he wasn't immediately recognizable as either Ted Walker or the Night Watchman. He wore Greg's long gray trenchcoat, which ran down past his knees, and he covered most of his face with a snugly-wrapped plaid scarf. An old Yankees cap he found in Everett's closet hid his eyes in the shadow of its brim. While he didn't consider this getup a costume, it was closer than anything he'd worn in almost a decade, close enough that it felt almost like returning to a childhood home—or at least a former childhood home that had been torn down and replaced by a sleek modern condo.

Also, it was rather cold outside, and, after so many years of patrolling in winter, he believed there was something to be said for practicality in wardrobe choices.

Ted never was much of a detective. He held no illusions about that fact. In the early days, he made a clear distinction between being a *crime-fighter* and a *crime-solver*. And as the Night Watchman's role shifted over the years from brawler to activist, he only

moved further away from the “solver” side of that superhero equation. So here he was, searching for clues, three nights after the crime and well after police evidence technicians swept the scene with their far more advanced equipment.

Maybe this effort was wasted, but he had to do something. He couldn't just sit in that hospital room listening as machines breathed his nephew's air, or in the waiting room watching other families grieve for their almost-dead, or even at his sister's house with its empty beds, broken windows and a current of blame running thicker in the halls than oxygen. So he crouched in the spot where he believed Everett's body was found and tried to recreate the fight in his mind.

Everett must have heard a victim, maybe a woman, scream in here, darted from whatever shadows he was perched in, probably found himself outnumbered. Five or six guys, some of them armed. He'd have the 30 seconds or so advantage of all of them staring at him, trying to figure out what he's doing there, how crazy he must be, and he'd take that opportunity for a first strike. The alley was full of potential weapons, offensive and defensive: rocks of various sizes, wood planks leaning against the dumpster, a few stray metal fragments, trash can lids, bags of trash themselves if he got desperate. Everett was athletic and smart, a great strategic football player. He would know how to use his environment, be aware of hazards like ice, anything he could trip over.

But he was never a real fighter or a brawler. And in Ted's experience, fighting was always faster, uglier, tighter, closer and more brutal than he anticipated. Everett probably took a few blows to the head and chest before he regained control. The alley walls—he'd use them to push off for momentum or to slam some guy's head into. Same

with the dumpsters. Based on the injuries, there had to be knives involved. Everett got slashed in the arm and stomach at some point. Crime scene photos showed trash spilled from bags on the ground. Maybe he used one as a shield. Backed into a corner, he'd lash out. If he was going down, he'd take as many as he could down with him.

Even if he won, if he scared away or beat all of the bad guys, he'd be drained, out of breath. As the adrenaline wore off, he would start to feel the pain of his internal injuries and broken arm. The unfamiliar dagger stabbing in his chest that was a broken rib. His limbs weak, hurting. His vision blurred.

He fell face-first into a garbage pile. That's how the paramedics found him.

Ted hoped it played out like that, some insane act of bravery, the kid drunk on his own heroic ambitions not knowing any better. Ted's own first fight as a superhero hadn't gone much better, and he still had scars to prove it.

He turned on the flashlight, letting it shine on the brick wall in front of him, stained and chipped, covered with graffiti and god only knew what else. The alley around him was littered with crushed cans, broken bottles and cigarette butts. He walked out to the street and looked up and down the block for any clue that might jump out at him and magically crack the case. All he found was more trash.

Ted froze when he heard a loud metallic clang behind him. He turned to see a freshly fallen garbage can, its contents dumped across the ground, and a shadow.

Cursing the need to run on his weary legs, Ted chased the shadow. It bled into the darkness of the alley instantly, though. Now, Ted knew for sure that he wasn't alone. He shined the flashlight across his field of view. Then he looked up, and he was sure he saw

someone moving on the fire escape. He swung the light at a man in a ski mask and black coat three stories up who was frozen and silent, almost blending in to the darkness. Once the light hit him, he scurried up the stairs. Ted tried to devise a way to reach the ladder or bring it down to himself while the man above him climbed toward the roof.

He was caught in a flash that burst from the other end of the alley. Whoever was there bolted for the street as soon as Ted looked in his direction. He glanced back at the roof one more time, but the fire escape climber was long gone, so he ran after the flash.

He was surprised when he turned the corner and was only a couple hundred feet behind, but the distance grew fast. From what he could tell in the brief glimpses he snared of the guy as he passed streetlights and lit-up storefronts, he was young and relatively thin, long brown hair flapping in the wind. Ted wished he was wearing his glasses so he might be able to see more details, or that he still had the 20/20 vision he once boasted. Then he slipped, tumbling to the concrete and feeling the sharp pain of his ankle twisting the wrong way.

As he pulled himself back up, Ted saw something under a streetlight between him and the fleeing, and now nearly out of sight, man. He stepped toward it cautiously, curiously. There was a wool glove sitting there on the sidewalk. He lifted it gingerly with the tips of his fingers, holding it up to the light and studying it from different angles.

Ted smiled.

Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it had nothing to do with the men watching him at all. Maybe it was just some random glove in the street, a coincidence. But maybe it was exactly what he was looking for tonight.

\*\*\*\*

When he got back to his sister's house, Ted picked up the phone right away to call Cassidy. He didn't realize until after he dialed that it was nearly 2:30 am.

When Cassidy picked up on the fifth ring, Ted spoke quickly. "I went back to the crime scene tonight and I need you to check this glove I found for DNA."

"Yeah," there was a silence and then an overly-dramatic yawn, "I'll run that right down to the crime lab."

"Great."

"No, Ted," she moaned, "We don't have a crime lab. It's an online newspaper."

"Which by the way—"

"I know, I know. It's not really a newspaper. Whatever." He heard her shuffling around on the other end. Probably getting out of bed and grabbing a notepad and a pen, he figured. "Please don't tell me you woke me up at 2 in the morning to ask me to run DNA tests on something you found in an alley."

"No, it wasn't in the alley. The guy dropped it when he ran out of the alley."

"Good night, Ted."

"Wait. It's a glove, right?" He started making gestures with his free hand until he considered that she couldn't actually see anything he was doing. "Can't you test the inside for fingerprints?"

"Again, where do you think I work, Ted?"

"Is that a no?"

"Good night, Ted," she said, and then she was gone.

Still, all in all, while Ted sat there icing his sore ankle, when he looked at the glove sitting in a Ziploc bag on his sister's kitchen table, he felt pretty damn proud of himself.

1990

“So,” Jack asks, “which one’s the mask?”

“What?”

He bends over the pool table to line up his shot. “The eternal, inevitable question about the secret identity.” He sends the cue ball ricocheting off the walls of the table.

“Which is the man and which is the mask?”

“I’m the man.”

“But who are you?”

We’re playing pool and drinking Canadian beer, because that’s what you do when your sister insists you spend more time with her Quebecois husband.

I sip my beer and survey the table. I’ve got five balls left, he has three and he won the last two games. “I’m the Night Watchman,” I say.

“See, that’s exactly what I’m asking. Are you really?”

“How many of those have you had?” I point my cue stick at the bottle in his hand.

“You know,” he says, exasperated that I’m making him explain again, “is Clark Kent Superman or is Superman Clark Kent? Is the Batman a costume that Bruce Wayne puts on or is Bruce Wayne the costume that Batman wears to hide himself?”

I shake my head and take my shot. As I watch none of the balls roll into pockets, I say with a gentle hint of mockery, “I honestly don’t know what my sister sees in you.”

It's not that I don't understand the question, but I don't enjoy psychoanalyzing myself, and I don't have terribly much patience for others doing it either.

When I first started out, I used to try hard to protect my secret identity, because that's just the way these things are done, but the simple reality is, all that comic book melodrama, disappearing without explanation, covering your ass, trying to live two separate lives—who needs the aggravation?

It's too easy to get lost in your own lies sometimes.

Besides, the closest thing I have an arch-nemesis is old Morton Merriweather and he's not that kind of evil, and even if he was, he wouldn't risk his gold-plated reputation on a direct strike against my family. There's nobody out there who has sworn vengeance on me and my loved ones. The only person I'm ever putting in danger is myself, and I can handle it. And I'm not saying I walk around all day with a big "I am the Night Watchman" sign on my chest. I have simply made the decision to tell family members and friends the truth before the lies get out of control. Everyone takes it differently. My sister was pretty pissed when I first let her in on the secret a few years back, even though I made a point of telling her that I was the one responsible for recovering all of that shit that got swiped from her apartment that one time. Her new husband Jack...maybe the best way to describe his reaction is that at his bachelor party, he was far more interested in talking to me than in looking at the strippers. And understand, these were some top of the line exotic dancers. So moments like this, the Huguenot Inquisition over here, have become pretty typical since the wedding.

"What's this really about, Jack?"



He knocks the six-ball into a corner pocket. “Do you ever worry that you’re disappearing in there?” he says.

“I really don’t.”

He takes a moment to figure out his next shot, then responds, “And isn’t that alone proof that it’s something you do need to worry about?”

“I swear, I don’t even know what language you’re speaking right now.”

“You’re one man under this constant pressure to be two men.” His three-ball misses the pocket he was aiming for. “That’s got to dig into you.”

“I don’t look at it like that,” I say, approaching the table.

“Why not?”

“Because it would drive me crazy.” I chalk up the cue with my eye on the ten-ball and the corner it’s only inches away from. “Look, it’s just a thing that I do. It’s like a second job. Like if I worked nights driving a delivery truck.”

“Yeah, but a lot cooler.”

“Well, I can’t deny that. It’s pretty fucking cool, man.”

“Okay, that guy over there,” Jack points to a six-foot mountain of muscle who’s got to weigh at least 250 pounds, “he pulls a gun right now, points it at the bartender, what do you do?”

Analyzing the situation, I strike the cue ball almost as an afterthought.

“Nothing at first,” I say as he prepares his shot. “You’ve got to take the measure of the man. Is he nervous? Is he cold as steel? Is he not planning on walking out of this bar alive? You figure that out, you know if you’re dealing with a professional or a

desperate man. Because sometimes the only thing you can do is let the perp take what he wants and hope there's no body count. But if there's an opening, even a few seconds, that's all you need to take him down. We're surrounded by weapons here—the stick, obviously, the balls, these bottles. And you've got the crowd, dozens of potential victims on one hand, but on the other, a big cloud of distraction to hide in until you get in position to strike.”

“That’s it right there. We’re two guys playing pool and just like that, boom,” he snaps his fingers, “in a second you turn into this whole other thing.”

“You asked the question. I answered.”

“Have you ever had to do anything like that?”

“Hell no,” I admit, somewhat deflated. “That’s really not the kind of superheroing I usually do. Seems like it’d work, though.”

“It’s your turn.”

It’s only now that I realize Jack knocked in his two remaining balls while I was talking. The middle of the table at this point is essentially a sea of striped balls with the black eight-ball floating somewhere between them. I work out the angles, but I don’t see any shot I can make.

“This was all an elaborate distraction to throw me off my game, wasn’t it?”

“Please, Ted,” he says as I miss, “I don’t need to throw you off your game.”

He gulps down the last of his bottle and sets it on the edge of the table.

“Anyway, ask yourself sometime,” he says, sinking the eight-ball. “Are you the Night Watchman or are you Ted Walker?”

## CHAPTER 8

*Who's next for what?*

The police chief's question still haunted Ted as he sat in the hospital waiting room the next afternoon. He studied the wrinkled pages spread out in his lap. The spelling of the notes bothered him more than it should have. The high school teacher in him rearing its ugly head, he figured.

*U'RE NEXT.*

It wasn't so much the bastardized, ADD, text-message generation abbreviation of "you"—though that was also quite annoying. It was the indecisiveness of it, the way the gentleman scholar who wrote it apparently couldn't choose between "You're" and "U R," so they just mashed them together.

*And YOU R GOING 2 DI?*

He had no idea what tangled grammatical arithmetic produced that.

Pathetic spelling aside, he didn't like being threatened either.

*U'RE NEXT.*

But who was "U" anyway? He wished the perp had at least taken a moment to properly address the note to someone. If it was directed at him, how did anyone even know he was there, only hours after his arrival. But he couldn't think of a reason to

threaten his sister, and, personal misgivings aside, he doubted Greg would have engendered this level of animosity from anybody else.

In retrospect, he decided the appropriate reaction to the brick coming through the window in the first place would have been to flip the paper over, write a polite note explaining that a vague threat like this was far less effective than a specific one and then throw it back out to wherever it came from.

Jasmine sat in the chair across a small table from him, filling out paperwork.

When she glanced up from her clipboard, he held the two notes up with a slick grin. “I’ll tell you, Jas,” he said, “if these guys fight as bad as they spell, we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

She stared at him for a moment, shook her head and looked back down.

“Come on, not even a pity laugh?”

“I’m not in the mood, Ted,” she said, finishing one form and slapping it on top of a small pile on the seat next to her. She began reading over the next page that needed to be filled out.

“I know. I’m trying to get you in the mood with the comedy stylings of Mr. Theodore Walker, esquire.”

“Esquire?”

“I sometimes tack that on at the end. Makes me sound sophisticated.”

She looked up again, putting her pen on the table and setting the clipboard aside.

“What on earth is wrong with you?” she asked.

Ted was taken aback by her confrontational tone, though on reflection, her skepticism about his newly frothy demeanor seemed reasonable. “I’m just tired,” he said. “I didn’t sleep last night. Something about death threats makes me a touch uneasy.”

“Well, at least you’re in a better mood today, I suppose.”

“Hey, I’m a superhero,” he said with a shrug. “I hide my pain behind witty banter. It’s what we do.”

“You’re a high school English teacher.” She picked up the clipboard again, then added sharply, “Try to remember that.”

“Well, until scientists prove conjugating verbs can revive coma patients, I’m going to rely on my more relevant skills here.”

Jasmine tossed the clipboard onto the table and crossed her arms. “Oh my God.” She said the words slowly, like three short, jagged sentences.

Ted tried to gauge whether she was truly angry with him. “What?”

“This is fun for you, isn’t it?”

“This is not fun,” he shot back, though he struggled for evidence to back up that declaration. “Come on. Have you listened to how much I’ve complained over the last 48 hours? Even I’m sick of hearing me.”

“Maybe,” she said, hedging as she recalled his belligerence when he first arrived and contrasted that with today’s chipperness, “but it’s all got this ‘Please don’t throw me in the briar patch’ vibe.”

“That is utterly ridiculous.”

“Then why did you spend half the night traipsing around the crime scene?”

“Jasmine,” Ted aimed for a slightly incredulous laugh but knew right away that he overplayed it. “I do not want to be doing this.”

“Nobody's asking you to. In fact, I specifically asked you not to get involved.”

“For the record, I'm not enjoying this.” He paused to search for an appropriate euphemism. “I'm merely engaged in the investigative process.”

“God, you believe that, don't you?” Jasmine said after studying his face for a moment. She stood and stepped away from the table, heading toward the hallway.

“Why would any of this be fun for me?”

“Because you're an addict, Ted.” She turned to face him again. “You get a high from seeing other people in danger because it means you get to try to help them.”

“You don't have to sound so dubious about the concept that maybe I can help people.” He rose from his seat. “Did you prefer me when I was depressed and paralyzed by self-doubt?”

“I didn't like it, but I can't help thinking we were all a lot safer then.”

“And how safe was Everett?” he said.

She responded with a silent, burning stare.

“I'm sorry,” he said meekly as he sat back down. “That's not fair.”

“No, it's not.” Jasmine returned to her seat. “Jesus, Ted, this isn't a game.”

Ted looked away, then asked, “Do you really think I'm someone who needs to be told that?”

“I absolutely would not have, until you came prancing in here giddy as a school girl today.”

“I have a lead,” Ted said, taking her hand. “This is a good thing.” He felt the need to add, “And I don't prance.”

“You prance a little sometimes,” she smiled. “Look at you. You’ve been here for three days and you already went out and got yourself a new sidekick.”

Ted pulled back, “What the hell does that—I never had an old sidekick.”

“Josh?” she said, referring to the overachieving high school student who worked with the Night Watchman for a couple of years in the late 1980s.

“For the thousandth time, he was an unpaid intern.”

“He wore a mask.”

“Only sometimes. And I never asked him to do that.”

“And does that make it more normal?”

“I know, he was a strange kid, but he was amazing at clerical work.” He laughed to himself when he considered how Cassidy Fulbright might react to his sister’s characterization of her role in the case. “Besides, seriously, you don’t want Cassidy to hear you calling her a ‘sidekick.’ She’ll ‘sidekick’ you right in the jaw.”

Jasmine groaned, “I’m really not in the mood, Ted.”

Ted nodded. “I regretted that joke before I even finished saying it,” he said.

“I told you to let the police handle this.”

“And I am.”

“You're breaking into their offices and harassing them.”

“Okay,” Ted realized that she already knew too much for there to be any point in trying to deny his behavior, but it still seemed worthwhile to make a few arguments in his

own defense, “that is an unfair characterization. The chief's door was wide open. And how do you even know about that?”

“They're investigating an attack on my son. They do speak to me on occasion.” She added with an accusatory frown, “Particularly when my relatives show up and steal their files.”

“I did not steal—“ He wanted to find an innocuous but accurate way to describe it, “I tried to make a copy of a police report, but I put it back. That’s all.”

“Just let it go, Ted,” she pleaded. “This is my son we’re talking about.”

“That’s why I can’t.”

“Look, it’s good to see you smile on some weird level. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve seen you this excited since—”

“Don’t,” he said, his voice taking on an abruptly serious edge.

“Right.” She retreated. “That’s my point. This never ends well. You know that.”

“That's what I thought. But look around, sis. It never ends at all.”

When Jasmine actually did look around the waiting room—the sort of camp the family had established at their table with pillows and blankets, the spread of snacks and candy bars, the sugar substitute packets Greg used for his coffee, the wand she brought with her to reach the TV control panel—it dawned on her just how much of the previous three days she had spent sitting there.

Jasmine stood again. She said, “I’m going to head home and check on Greg.”

“He still trying to fix that window?”



“Again, yes.” She reached out her hand to Ted. “You want to come? You should get some real sleep.”

“I’ll wait here,” he said, waving her away and leaning back in his chair. “Visiting hours are starting up again eventually.”

“You need to take better care of yourself.”

“I really don’t. Not right now, at least.”

“Do you want me to stay with you?” she asked, returning to her seat.

“No, no. Go do...whatever.”

Jasmine reluctantly stepped back. She turned to leave, pausing a couple of times to start to say something, but she silenced herself and kept walking.

When she got close to the doorway, she heard Ted’s voice behind her, “Hey, so you and Greg are...you know?”

“We’re—” she scurried back toward Ted and whispered, “Kind of. But only in a shallow, two cold bodies keeping each other warm in the night sort of way.”

“He’s your brother,” Ted said as he cringed.

“He’s my brother-in-law,” she corrected.

He shook his head, “You have the same last name. That’s creepy, Jas.”

She crossed her arms and looked away. “In the old days,” she said, avoiding eye contact, “it was customary for a single man to marry his brother’s widow.”

“Please, please don’t tell me that was the pick-up line he used.”

She released an aggravated sigh and said, “I’m going home now.”

Jasmine stamped out of the waiting room. Ted settled into his chair, shifting his body until he found an acceptable position. He closed his eyes. As he heard the elevator doors ding closed in the hall, Ted drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

Ted opened his eyes to see death watching over him. He wasn't sure how long he had slept or, judging by the figure in the hooded black robe sitting across the table from him with a scythe in its hand, if he was even awake at all. Ted slumped over and rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was disappointed to see the man was still there.

The man in the robe leaned forward, the white skull under his hood coming into view against the glow of the buzzing fluorescent light overhead.

"How can I help you today, sir?" he asked, the lips of the skull not moving.

Ted realized any opportunity to simply pretend he was still sleeping had already passed. He nodded toward a row of empty chairs on the other side of the room, "Sitting over there would not be unappreciated."

The robed man leaned the scythe against the seat next to him, sat back and crossed his legs. "I recognize this is a stressful time for you. That's why I'm here."

Ted looked to a man reading a golf magazine a few chairs down from him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, then he nodded toward the guy across from him. "Is there a man in a black hooded cloak with a scythe sitting over here?"

The man looked at them both silently. Death waved.

"Yes," the man said. "Yes, there is."

“Thank you.” Ted leaned toward him and added in a loud whisper, “This is the second time in two days something like this has happened and I just want to make sure I’m not imagining this crap.”

The man nodded slowly with a confused, uncomfortable grimace. “Uh-huh,” he said before returning to his magazine.

“If you were imagining me, you might also be imagining him,” the guy dressed as death offered. “I’m just saying.”

“You’re not helping.”

“I apologize,” he said, wrestling the tight-fitting skull mask off his head. After he finally got it off, he ran his hands through his long dark hair and pulled a pair of eyeglasses from a pocket inside his robe. He looked at least 30 years old. “I am the Reaper. ‘Please allow me to introduce myself,’” he warbled, an embarrassingly off-key Mick Jagger impersonation. “Right? Get it? Like the song.”

“That’s ‘Sympathy for the Devil,’ not the grim reaper.”

“Whatevs,” the Reaper shrugged. “Anyway, I’m just in town for a few days. You could say I’ve been keeping the streets of New Orleans clean for...God, nearly a decade now. Well, cleaner than they were. The place is a bit of a shithole, quite frankly. Especially after the storm and all, there’s only so much I can do.”

Recalling his encounter with the Duck at the airport in Portland, Ted asked, “Here for the convention?”

“But of course. It is a lonely road I walk most nights.” He hastily added, “I mean, it’s Bourbon Street, so you know, figuratively lonely. Not so much literally. What with

the beads and the drinking and the exposed breasts of the nubile young women. Are you here for the show as well?"

Ted wished he had heat vision.

"Ah, right. Hospital. Sick loved one." The Reaper looked up at the clock on the wall and pulled back a black glove to check his own watch. "Still, if you have time, you should check it out. It's going to be pretty badass."

Ted rubbed his parched eyes. "This isn't exactly a good time."

"It rarely is in a place like this." He picked a duffle bag up off the floor and placed it on the seat next to him. After unzipping it, he pulled out a small snack package and offered it to Ted. "Sun Chips?"

Ted waved it away, but he noticed several more packages of corn chips in the bag. "Why do you have a duffle bag filled with Sun Chips?"

"It's not filled with them," the Reaper scoffed. "There's other stuff in there too. But, you know, the truth?" He looked around before leaning in to whisper conspiratorially, "I'm working on getting an endorsement deal from them."

"You think people are going to buy junk food because someone dressed like the grim reaper tells them to?"

"See, I imagined a pitch somewhere along the lines of," he cleared his throat and adopted a gruff yet nasally voice that called to mind a professional wrestler with a sinus infection, "If you don't buy these chips, I'ma find you and kill you, sucker."

"Good luck with that."

The Reaper transitioned back to his normal voice and explained, “I’m branching out, you know. Can’t just beat up vandals for the rest of my life, right? Like here,” he gestured toward the hospital around them, “I’m trying out this therapy hero thing.”

Ted didn’t want to ask, but he was sure a clarification was coming anyway.

As expected, the Reaper continued, “Like, you know, how they do with therapy dogs cheering up sick people. Except with a hero. Me, in this case.”

Ted took a few seconds to formulate what seemed to him to be an obvious question about this plan. “You look like Death,” he said.

“Indeed I do.”

“People in hospital beds aren’t going to find that comforting.”

“You’d be surprised.” He offered excitedly, “Do you think the patient you’re here for would appreciate a visit from a real superhero?”

Ted tried to hold back laughter in response to the question but failed.

“O...kay. I’ll take that as a ‘no.’” He reached into his duffle bag again, Sun Chip bags crunching and crackling as he shoved them aside, searching for something else.

“Can I at least leave you with a Reaper comic book?”

Ted shrugged, “I don’t expect I could stop you.”

The Reaper handed him a bagged-and-boarded comic with an illegible signature scrawled across the cover in black marker. “Issue 7. ‘Welcome to Zombie Gras’ part 1. Signed copy, limited edition New York Comic-Con exclusive holo-foil variant cover. Hang on to it. It’s going to be worth something someday.”

Ted pulled it out of the bag. He studied the cover for a moment, a hologram of a man in a stylized version of the Reaper's black cloak and skull mask, wielding his scythe menacingly, surrounded by walking, decaying corpses. At the top was a logo in bleeding red letters: "The Reaper: Defender of the Dead." A text box on the bottom promised "Mardi Gras Mayhem." Flipping through the book, he paused on an early splash page featuring a decomposing man shouting "Welcome to Zombie Gras!" as a horde of the undead attacked a parade float. The remaining pages appeared to involve the Reaper killing the zombies in increasingly violent and graphic ways.

The art was good—clean and detailed, though gory; the anatomy not overly distorted—much better than Ted recalled in the samples he saw when he was trying to get a Night Watchman comic published in the 1990s.

"This looks professional," he said, genuinely impressed.

"It is, man," the Reaper said, pointing at a DC Comics logo in the upper right corner of the cover. "Cool, right?"

Ted was surprised to feel pangs of envy, his own efforts to snag one of the big comic book publishers to license his character at a time when the industry was booming having been entirely unsuccessful. "This is published by DC?"

"I know. It's like an actor making it onto Broadway and shit." He reached out to give Ted a supportive pat on the shoulder. "Looks like my work here is done. I'm off to find others in need of my assistance."

The Reaper zipped his duffle bag back up and stood, taking a moment to flatten out the wrinkles in his robe.

“‘Don’t Fear the Reaper,’” Ted said.

The Reaper paused, tilting his head quizzically. “What?”

“Nothing.” Ted debated whether it was worth elaborating on the thought that had spontaneously shot out of his mouth. “No, I was just thinking, if you’re intent on using a song as a point of reference for the whole... ‘Don’t Fear the Reaper.’ Blue Oyster Cult.”

“A little on the nose, don’t you think?” He hummed the rhythm for a moment and then test-drove the lyrics, “‘Seasons don’t fear the Reaper. Nor do the wind, the sun or the rain. We can be like they are.’ Meh. I guess that would work.”

He picked up the duffle bag and slung it over his shoulder.

“And with that,” he said, his words garbled as he squeezed his mask back on, “before security throws me out again, I shall away!”

The Reaper sprinted out of the waiting room and disappeared. He had left his scythe behind, but Ted lacked the energy or motivation to run after him and let him know. Instead, he just checked his watch, noted that visiting hours were about to begin and shambled down the long hallway toward Everett’s room.

1994

I always feel like I need a shower after I visit this place. And I say that as someone who has comfortably spent a fair amount of time on a porn set. I hired Lauryn Depp to serve as my publicist when I decided to make a serious run at a comeback last year. I had been told by people who were supposed to know about these things that she was the best there is at what she does.

I didn't want to go back to wandering around hitting people in the middle of the night. I'm thinking bigger now. I'm thinking national-icon big.

Unfortunately, my efforts to develop the Night Watchman brand respectably have been largely fruitless. As a result, these meetings with Lauryn have become little more than biweekly exercises in futility. Every time, she presents me with opportunities for increasingly desperate and debasing media stunts, I turn them down, we graze each other with thinly-veiled insults and I get a free cup of gourmet coffee.

I'm talking about some serious high-quality brew here.

So when I walk in and ask for a status update on our comic book pitch, I can probably already guess the answer. "Any word from Marvel?"

"They're not on board, I'm afraid. They say you're not," her fingers make air quotes, "toyetic enough."

"Now you're just making words up."



“It means—”

“I honestly don’t care, Lauryn.” I pour myself a cup of coffee and pick up a fresh, warm pumpkin-raisin scone off her always-impressive pastry tray. “Just tell me if we’ve got anything new.”

“Not as such.” Then she says words I have grown to fear over the last few months. “But I had an amazing idea. Take a look.”

She tosses a booklet across her desk. I worry it’s another catalog like the time she tried to get me to work as a door-to-door knife salesman. Which, since it entailed a man in a mask knocking on people’s doors with a large extra-sharp knife in hand that he promised could cut clear through bone, went rather predictably poorly.

Mace stings, and more housewives carry it than you might expect.

“What is this?” I ask, picking up the booklet and staring at a drawing of a man in spandex swinging over a city with a gold armor-plated chest, a cape that spans across the entire page and ridiculously large claws.

“*Batman #500*. Top-selling comic book last October.”

“Who the hell is that?”

“It’s Batman.”

I fling the book back onto the desk with a dismissive snort. “With the claws and the armor? That’s just stupid.”

She leans back and rests her black stiletto heels on her desk. “Ted, have you ever heard of Image Comics?”

“I’m 40 years old.”

“And you put on a wet suit and chase drunks and shoplifters for kicks.”

“Fair enough.”

“It’s a new company, primarily artist-driven. The characters are violent, they’re edgy and they tend to carry guns larger than their arms—and they have very large arms. And often shoulder pads for some reason.”

“And you think they might be interested?”

“I think it’s worth pitching.” She sits up again and adds, gravely, “But you have to keep in mind, the nature of the American hero has changed, Ted. He’s darker.”

“Darker than the ‘Dark Knight?’”

“Darker,” she taps the Batman cover with her pen, “and with claws and armor.”

I take another look at the new Batman costume, which raises even more questions upon closer inspection. “How does he even move in something like that? It doesn’t make any sense. I mean, it’s got to weigh about a hundred pounds, and you’re swinging from rooftops in it?”

“He’s not real, Ted. Calm down. He’s helping me illustrate a point.”

“Right,” I groan. “A point. There’s always one of those with you.”

“My point is, Superman’s dead,” she says. She waits for the shock of that pronouncement to sink in. “Think about that for a minute.”

“What do you mean, ‘Superman’s dead?’”

“Dead. He died fighting an alien monster.” Obviously. Because, really, how else would he die? “Superman’s dead, and he’s been replaced by a teenage clone, a cyborg, an inner-city father in a suit of armor and an ultra-violent vigilante.”

“No visual aids for this one?”

“The comic store was sold out.”

After taking this all in for a moment, I can’t help asking, “Comic books really are very silly, aren’t they?”

“Pot, meet kettle.”

“Hey, my costume was entirely functional.” Mostly, I think.

“At least consider it.” She hands me a legal pad, opened to a page with an elaborate pencil drawing. “Here, I took the liberty of having this sketch of an upgraded costume drawn up.”

It’s a variation on my outfit, with a long tattered cape, bulky shoulder pads, two giant guns held by claw-like gloves and what I’m almost certain is a cybernetic eye.

“You think I’m going to wear this?”

“That’s the other issue I wanted to discuss. I was thinking maybe we go with someone younger,” she says, completely nonchalantly, like this is the most reasonable suggestion in the world. “With more spunk. And the claws, obviously.”

“Wait a minute. You want someone to replace me?”

“No, no, of course not,” she grins. “I want you to replace you.”

It takes me a few seconds too long to process that concept. “Lauryn, tell me, in your head, before you said that, did it make any sense?”

“Look, it’s always going to be you in the costume. We’re not taking this that far yet. But they don’t need to know that.” Her harmless grin shifted to an almost sinister

smile. “The rubes out there, for all they know, it's your cool new teenage successor. Because that's what we're going to sell them.”

I sigh. “This is still about the claws and armor, isn't it?”

“At least try them on,” she says, reaching under her desk. She strains to lift two large gloves with metal claws from the floor and dumps them in front of me. “Come on, get with the times, Ted. You can always re-assume the title later yourself if it doesn't work out.”

“Re-assume it from myself, you mean?” My head hurts. More than usual for one of these meetings.

“So we're on the same page now. Great. I'll call the tailor.”

While she picks up the phone, I pour myself another overflowing cup of hot coffee. Should it really be this hard to be a hero?

## CHAPTER 9

Cassidy hated the *New York Express* office. Not only because its cramped space with only about a dozen desks reinforced her insecurities about working for New York's least-read daily news publication, but also because being there meant she wasn't out hitting the streets and doing real reporting. And she was there far too often.

She was even more anxious to get out than usual, though, because there was a staff meeting in a half hour and she still didn't have a reportable story. At least, not one that she was comfortable writing without more information, and she knew her editor would gladly hand the Everett Voigt story over to an older, more experienced reporter if she gave him even the slightest reason to doubt her.

In her downtime since being assigned the story, which was proving to be unfortunately frequent, she had begun searching real-life superhero blogs and message boards, hoping to find even the tiniest bit of relevant information or, at the very least, to keep herself entertained. She bookmarked dozens of web pages in her browser and she would work her way through them slowly over the course of the day. They consisted mostly of dry after-action reports on the previous evening's heroics, reviews of low-cost crime fighting equipment, training schedules, rants about the moral and social decay of society and the occasional tragicomic attempt at self-affirmation, but right now, checking after being away from her desk for a couple of hours, she saw something shocking.

*Legendary Hero Found Dead*, screamed the headline on one message board thread. The post kicking off the discussion was a swamp of rumors, half-truths and some information that appeared to be completely made up, the sad story of how one of the world's first and greatest superheroes was beaten to death in an alley earlier in the week and how the police were now scurrying to cover it up. Few of the initial responding posters seemed to believe the story, but the one Cassidy found most interesting was a post insisting the story was false because its author had seen Ted Walker in a fist fight at JFK Airport the day after his alleged death. The conversation, like most she tried to follow on the board, then spiraled into a duel between conflicting conspiracy theories, threats and insults of mothers.

She wanted to dismiss the thread as an anomaly, but a few links further down her list, in a post titled *New Night Watchman Near Death*, a blogger begged for prayers for the second-generation Night Watchman, who was being treated at an undisclosed hospital for severe injuries suffered during a fight the night before. Other than the date of the incident, the writer seemed to have most of his facts straight. She was more than a little embarrassed that they were reporting more accurate information than she would be able to if she published her story at that moment.

She felt a fire tear through the pit of her stomach when she saw two more sites were reporting elements and variations of the truth. She clicked on a link on one page and landed on a huge picture of the Night Watchman in action. A blurb underneath the photo guaranteed that it was "100% authentic! Taken only three nights ago!"

She grabbed her cell phone and called Ted. While she waited for him to answer, she typed, trying to send the photo to his device.

“Look at the picture,” she said when he picked up. “I’m sending it to your phone.”

There was silence on the other end for a moment before Ted replied, “I don’t know what that means.”

“I’m sending you a picture message.”

“Can my phone do that?”

“Yes.”

Cassidy had seen Ted’s high-tech smartphone in his hand while she watched him in the hospital waiting room before introducing herself, and it stood out in her mind because he came across as the type of curmudgeonly old-timer who was incapable of handling technology more complicated than a light switch.

“Just look at your screen,” she said, her mind a buzzing cloud of information she needed to share, filling up more and more as she scrolled through the pages.

“Okay, I’ll hang up.”

“No, you don’t have to—”

“I’ll call you back.”

“No, Ted. Just—”

Cassidy tossed her phone onto her desk when she realized he had hung up. Certain Ted would call back as soon as he figured out how to, she continued devouring the material on the website. The Daily Bugle was essentially a fan gossip site, like so many celebrity tabloid pages she’d trolled as an intern for *People Magazine* in college,

except devoted to sightings and rumors about real life superheroes. Although, based on the low hit count on the bottom of the page and the fact that she'd never heard of it, it clearly wasn't anywhere near as popular as the celebrity sites had been.

Just over a minute later, her phone began to beep and vibrate, jittering toward the edge of the desk. She caught it as it fell over, and then, irritated and wanting nothing in the world more than to kick something, she put her earpiece in place and answered.

"I think I deleted it," Ted said, defeated.

"I don't know why I even try."

"I assumed it was because you were desperate for any story that even slightly validates your tenuous claim to title of professional journalist."

"Just look at the damn photo, Ted." She typed, "I'm sending it again."

"Okay...I think I got it."

She waited for his reaction, and she grew suspicious when he didn't seem to have one. "Ted? You don't have the photo, do you?"

"No."

"Nevermind." She found it unexpectedly difficult to gather the precise words to describe it, like a game show contestant whose time was running out. "It's, like, a picture of Everett in his costume, or your costume I guess, running across a street, kind of blurry, I don't know, probably taken with, like, a cell phone or something."

"You said the cops weren't releasing this."

"They didn't. This isn't police evidence. Someone else has it."

"How does that happen?"



“This is the modern world, Ted.” She typed *Night Watchman* in the website’s search bar. “Information gets out there. You run around in public like—no offense—a crazy person, somebody’s going to take a picture of you.”

“So what happens next?”

“Damage control, spinning, ass-covering.” She glazed over dozens of search results. “Whatever you want to call it.”

“Police aren’t going to deny it?”

“It’s on the internet, Ted. It’s the truth now.”

“I’m meeting with some detective later. I’ll find out what they know.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re going to want to talk to you about that.”

“I know what I’m doing, kid,” he chuckled. “This ain’t my first rodeo.”

“There’s also this,” she said, looking at a different picture of the Night Watchman, this one from an older post.

“I don’t know what you’re looking at.”

“It’s another photo of him in the costume.”

“So?”

“So it’s timestamped six months ago.” She smirked, taking a small measure of satisfaction from being able to say, “Looks like this wasn’t his first rodeo either.”

“That’s not possible.”

“I’m looking at it.”

“Maybe the date’s wrong. That can happen, right?” He sounded utterly baffled.

“My VCR has said it’s 1967 since I bought it and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Your VCR. That’s adorable,” she laughed. “I don’t know what’s going on, Ted. I’m just starting to look through this stuff, but there are a lot of photos and videos of your nephew out there. And details about the case, stuff that’s got to be coming from the cops, it’s starting to leak all over. I’m telling you, this thing’s going to blow up, it’s going to blow up big and it’s going to blow up soon.”

“Shit.” Ted was quiet for a few seconds. He steeled himself and said, “Okay, I need to go. I was supposed to be at the hospital an hour ago. Keep me posted.”

As she put the phone down, she mumbled to herself, ““This ain’t my first rodeo?” Who talks like that?”

Her eyes locked on the ticking second hand of her desk clock, she typed furiously, pulling up the registration information on the domain name of the website where she found the photos. She scribbled the name and address of the site’s owner on a post-it note and shoved it in her coat pocket.

Cassidy typed a quick email to her editor telling him she was following up on an important lead and she’d miss the noon meeting. With notebook in hand and digital audio recorder in pocket, she bolted out of the office.

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Ted was positive the frozen yogurt machine in the hospital cafeteria was exactly the same one that sat on the counter nearly a decade earlier when his wife was being treated there. The machine offered eight flavors, and the option to select two swirled together; Andrea’s favorite combination was green apple and butterscotch. The sweetness of that was always too much for him.

He sat at a small table against a pale yellow-hued wall sipping a bowl of an unidentifiable salty soup that had smelled much better when he poured it than it tasted. He wasn't that hungry, though, and he didn't feel like a sandwich, pizza or anything else the cafeteria chefs were cooking that day, particularly given that it all often tasted more or less like well-seasoned cardboard. Between spoonfuls, he studied the photos Cassidy had sent him, still trying to figure out exactly what they meant. How long had Everett been wearing his costume? Was he good at it? Did Jasmine know? How could she not? What went wrong that one night that put him in the hospital?

And who the hell was taking pictures of him?

Ted hadn't visited Everett's room yet that day. He hadn't even made it to the ICU waiting room. Going up there would mean talking to Jasmine and that would mean either lying to her or withholding the truth, habits he thought he had broken by this point in his life. Yet he knew that when she asked if he had any new information, it would be so easy for him to simply say, "No." He watched the clock, wondering how long he could hide out down there before Jasmine called him or sent out Greg with a search party. Downing the last of a plastic cup of warm flat soda, he resolved to march upstairs sit by his nephew's side and, for a few hours at least, forget all this bullshit and be an uncle.

Then he decided to wait just a little longer.

2000

I carry a heavy box from the bedroom to the living room, where Jasmine kneels wrapping Andrea's porcelain figurine collection in newspaper. She tosses a black marker. I catch it between the box and my chest.

While I'm writing "Walker—Bedroom" on the side so the movers know where to put it, she turns and asks, "You're sure it's too late to talk you out of this?"

"Jasmine, we already bought the house. Yeah, it's a little late."

Her tongue makes a disapproving clicking sound. "I still think this is a bad idea."

"And it's still not your decision."

"You can't run across the country to get away from your problems."

I hesitate before responding. "They're not my problems, and I'm not running away from anything."

She stands with a stern frown, "Is this because of the fire?"

Almost two years later, people still assume everything I do is because of one damn fire. "It has nothing to do with the fire. It has nothing to do with me."

"Then why? Why Portland?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," I say, groping for a conversational exit strategy.

"You haven't wanted to talk about it for weeks."

"I'm nothing if not consistent." I try to make eye contact, use some sort of sibling telepathy to convince her I'm serious. "Jas, drop it."

"I'm not kidding, Ted. Talk to me," she says, raising one of the porcelain children over her head, "or I'm going to start throwing villagers out the window. Why Portland? Why are you moving all the way across the country?"

I fight the words as they push through my lips, but the truth slips out. "Because it's where Andrea wants to die."

"What are you—oh."

The shock and regret on her face offers me a glint of vindication.

"Yes," I say. No point in holding back now. "The cancer's back. This time, the doctor says the tumor's inoperable. They can treat it, slow it down, but she's got a year, maybe 18 months left if we're lucky." I take the fragile child from her hand and hold it up to the light. "And come on, let's be realistic, how often am I lucky?"

"I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"She didn't want me to." I wipe a black smudge off the child's small face with my shirt sleeve as I speak. "Nobody was supposed to know until we were already gone. She doesn't like pity."

"I'm your sister."

"She's my wife," I volley back, sharp with frustration. "Sister beats rock, wife beats sister, you know the rules."

"And you were just going to up and move across the country and not tell anyone? Then what? Send out 'save the date' cards for her funeral?"

My head bobs mournfully. “I won’t fight her right now,” I say. “No reason to make this harder for her than it is.”

She thinks for a minute and I know she sees my point, but she finally says, “I’m not wild about this.”

“You think I am?” I laugh as little as I feel is appropriate, given the subject.

There’s a cabin in the woods west of Portland that Andrea saw a long time ago. It’s got this deck with an amazing view of the forest and the mountains at sunset and she decided that if she has any say in the matter, that’s where she’s going to die.

When I agreed, I didn’t think it was a contingency plan we’d ever put into action. I mean, really what were the odds it would even be for sale at the exact moment we need it, let alone that we could afford it? But it turns out being a failed cartoon star can be surprisingly profitable. And ever since I stopped...doing what I did at night...I’ve been able to hold down a real job for more than six months for the first time since I was 30. Couple that with Andrea’s ample savings and retirement funds and away we go.

“So that’s it?” Jasmine asks. “You go? Then what?”

“I don’t know. Like mom used to say, we’ll worry about tomorrow tomorrow.” I gesture toward the open boxes and overstocked bookshelves around us. “Today’s problem is packing, so let’s just pack, okay?”

While I start loading a box with old books neither of us ever had time to read, Jasmine says in a solemn voice, “She’s not dead yet.”

“Believe me,” I respond, “I’ve tried telling her that.”

“And?”

“And we’re moving to Portland.” I take a deep breath and head toward the bar in the dining room. “Did you box up the whiskey yet? I need a drink.”

## CHAPTER 10

Cassidy dialed the registered phone number for the Daily Bugle website for the ninth time. She could hear it ring over and over on her Bluetooth headset as she drove across Westchester on I-287. And for the ninth time, her call went to voicemail. The outgoing message was an anonymous robotic monotone, so she hung up and slammed the headset down on the passenger seat, whispering "fuckity, fuck, fuck" in tune with the music playing softly on the radio. She swerved across two lanes to pass a long truck that seemed to speed up just before she could get ahead of it, some 18-wheel asshole toying with her. She was now in the far left lane with her exit approaching on the right. Facing a choice between slowing down and letting the truck pass or pushing 85 mph to outrun it, her red high-heeled shoe pressed down on the gas pedal. The frame of her Corolla rattled unnervingly as the speed increased.

She had no idea what to expect when she got to the address where this website was registered. In her experience, stereotypes existed for a reason; comic geeks and computer nerds were more often than not exactly what you think they'll be, but there were always exceptions. Plus, the person who owned the website wasn't necessarily responsible for its content. They may not even know about it. There was a distinct possibility that the person may not exist at all. The address could be an abandoned building or a strip club. Had she taken the time, given it even a moment's thought before



rushing out of the office, she would have looked at property records, aerial maps, satellite photos, figured out exactly what she was walking into.

So, sure, speeding north from her Manhattan newsroom to Port Chester was impulsive and potentially a colossal waste of time, she was well aware of all that, but she needed to advance the story in some direction, any direction at all, and these photos and videos gave her an angle on reals not yet reported into irrelevance by the other tabloids. That she might be able to do it without burning her most important source, Ted Walker, made it even more mouth-watering. Just thinking of possible headlines for her front-page story on the superhero underworld sparked a bone-jittering thrill.

After swinging off the exit ramp, Cassidy followed the directions squawked by her car's GPS device, twisting through a maze of residential streets completely foreign to her until she arrived at her destination. When she stopped, she looked at the narrow two-story house and checked the registered address again. It was correct. The outside walls were an elaborate map of chips and cracks, the lawn tangled in weeds and overgrown bushes. Cassidy checked herself in the rearview mirror before exiting the car, assessing her hair and make-up. Nerds, stereotypes, etcetera; whoever's door she was about to knock on, it couldn't hurt to look her most Lois Lane-esque. She dug lipstick out of her purse and applied a fresh, bright coat of coral red. While rising from her seat, she discretely adjusted her bra to highlight her cleavage and ensure that one of its pink shoulder straps was exposed.

She took a few seconds to compose herself before approaching the house. In her head, she prioritized the questions she wanted answered—who was in charge; where did

they get the photos of Everett Voigt; did they have more; did they have any reportable information about his hospitalization. There were plenty of other questions, but she was going to ease into it, feel this guy out before probing deeper. Halfway up the brick path to the front door, she realized she left her notebook in the car. She walked briskly back to the vehicle, stumbling and nearly falling into the wet, overgrown grass when her heel got caught in the space between two concrete slabs. Once she regained her balance, she walked carefully back to the car, snatched the notebook off the front passenger seat and slammed the door. On the serene suburban street, the sound of the shutting door amplified. Cassidy slinked back toward the house.

When she pressed the doorbell, it jingled to the tune of theme music she recognized from some superhero movie but couldn't quite pin down. After that, she heard the click and slide of a deadbolt being unlatched and the creaking of rusty hinges as the doorknob turned.

A round-bodied teenager opened the door, a smoking bag of microwave popcorn in his hand. The air smelled of burnt kernels, artificial butter and way too much of somebody's father's aftershave.

"Yeah," he said before his hand dove into the bag. "What you want?"

"Cassidy Fulbright," she said, offering a business card. "*New York Express*."

He stuffed a handful of popcorn in his mouth and took the card in his moist, greasy fingers. He looked at it, then back at her and then waited silently. Cassidy glanced down at the printed-out registration information peeking out of her pocket.

"I'm looking for Josh Kord." Her lips curled into a fiery red smile.

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Ted arrived at the police station early for his meeting with the detective handling his nephew's case. The hour he had spent in Everett's hospital room that afternoon seemed interminable, sitting next to the bed and waiting—as if that ever got anybody better—occasionally busying himself with minor tasks like watering the flowers by the window or putting moisturizer on his nephew's dry lips. And there was only so much praying a man could do before he remembered that he was talking to himself. After feeling utterly useless in that small sterile room, Ted was overcome by a desperate urge to get out and be somewhere, do anything that might be considered productive.

He may not have been having much luck working on the case himself, but he saw this as an opportunity to at least get a thorough update on the progress of the real investigation to bring back to his sister. That plan, of course, depended on how forthcoming the detective was willing to be, and after his unpleasant experience with the abrasive police chief, he wasn't overly optimistic. Still, both men were agents of justice—though in Ted's case, unofficial and retired—so he hoped to build some camaraderie. First, he sat outside in his sister's car for 15 minutes scanning frequencies and remembering why he didn't listen to the radio anymore.

Once he felt he wouldn't be considered impolitely early, he got out of the car and walked inside. Detective Adrian Morris rose from his desk to greet Ted when he entered the squad room. He was taller and significantly heavier than Ted; his presence was instantaneously intimidating. He loomed over everything around him.

While he shook Ted's hand firmly, he said with an inviting grin, "So you're the former superhero who's going to be a pain in my ass until this damn thing is over?"

"You can just call me Ted."

"Well, Ted, let's go have a seat."

Ted had already begun to sit in an empty chair next to the detective's desk when he realized Morris was walking away. Morris turned and motioned for Ted to follow him down a long hallway. Large bulletin boards hung from the walls with wanted posters, crime alerts and various other papers pinned all over.

"By the way, I appreciate you not wearing the costume today."

"I haven't worn a costume in years, detective."

Morris turned, "But admit it, you were kind of tempted, right?"

Ted didn't answer. The detective stopped to unlock the door to one of the rooms toward the end of the hall, his girth blocking Ted's view of the small sign on the wall next to it. Morris pushed the door open, ushering Ted through into a cramped white room with no decoration or distinction, only a gunmetal gray table and two matching chairs. Ted had never been inside a police interview room before, and a fleeting pulse of excitement surged through him before the dreariness of the room itself took over.

Pausing after he entered the room, Ted remembered he had something important in his coat pocket. He held up the sandwich bag containing the glove he had found on the street two nights before. Morris glowered impatiently.

"I found this glove," Ted said, placing it delicately on the large table that took up most of the room. "I think the person it belongs to may know something."

Morris poked at it with his pen. “Where did you get this?”

“At the crime scene. Some guy was taking pictures of me and he dropped it.”

“Do you know who this person was?”

“No. But you have his glove now.” To ensure that the information he provided was specific and accurate, he clarified, “I think it was his. I mean, I didn’t see him drop it but it was there after he ran away.”

“Yes, well,” Morris held up the bag, “I’m sure this’ll crack the case wide open.”

He put the bag with the glove back on the table, pushed it aside and directed Ted to the chair across from him. Though he hesitated, reconciling pangs of discomfort with the aura of the room, the absorbed criminality of a chair likely used by hundreds of suspects and victims before him, Ted took a seat.

“Where are you guys at?” he asked. “Any promising leads I should know about?”

Morris laughed. “You’re in my interrogation room, Superman. When we’re in yours, you get to ask the questions, but that ain’t today. You feel me?”

“I don’t—sure. Yes.”

“Good.” Morris pulled a digital recorder the size of a pen from the inner pocket of his blazer. After placing it on the table between himself and Ted, he pressed a button and a red light flashed on. He looked at his watch. “Let’s see...it’s 2:15 pm. This is Detective Adrian Morris interviewing Theodore Walker, aka William Ross.”

“How does that thing work?” Ted asked, pointing at the recorder.

“Elves. Little magic elves. How the fuck should I know?” He made a rolling-forward gesture with his right hand and said, “Can we...?”

“Sure.” Ted sat up straight in his chair. “What do you—”

“Now,” Morris said, speaking loudly over Ted’s words, “Mr. Walker, for the record, you are Everett Voigt’s uncle, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Are you aware of anything that would have set the kid off?”

“Set him off?”

Morris tilted his head toward the ceiling, pondering another way to phrase it. He looked back to Ted and explained, “Drive him to do something so, and I say this with all due respect, recklessly moronic as to put on a costume and try to fight crime.”

“You mean something recent?”

“Yeah.” What Ted had initially read as indifference in Morris’ demeanor was quickly coming into focus as suspicion. “Like something along the lines of you calling him up and saying, *hey kid, you ought to go do that crazy, illegal thing I used to do.*”

“I never pressed him to do this,” Ted said, shaking his head.

“But you sent him your costume.”

“As a souvenir.” Ted underlined the word, “Just as a souvenir. He was a fan.”

“He used to be.” Morris leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “As I understand it from the boy’s mother, that wasn’t as much the case anymore.”

“We had a complicated relationship.” Ted tried to turn the conversation sharply. “Can we talk about the criminal investigation now?”

Morris sighed. “I’m really not at liberty to discuss any evidence we may or may not have at this time.”

“So this whole meeting is kind of a waste of time then.”

“Not for me.” He smiled, something uncomfortably sinister in his teeth. “I’m just getting started.”

“With what?”

“I think you misunderstand me, Mr. Walker.” He tapped the recorder. “This isn’t an information session. It’s an investigative interview. So, let’s talk about your nephew.”

For the next twenty minutes, the detective battered Ted with questions that ranged from frustratingly incisive to numbingly trivial, and his answers were at times unintentionally enigmatic, as if some old evasive instinct kicked in without him noticing. The detective grew irritated, stabbing his pen into his pad with increasing intensity when he took notes, but in Ted’s mind, the fact that he was across the country and asleep at the time of the incident, and that his relationship with his nephew in recent years was strained at best, made the whole interview rather pointless. Finally, Morris went silent for close to a minute before turning the recorder off. He didn’t let Ted get up yet.

He said, “I’m sure I don’t have to emphasize to you the sensitivity of this investigation. Nor do I need to tell you how vital it is to keep certain details to quiet vis a vis the costumed nature of the...you know, the whole fricassee.”

“It’s too late, detective. That’s out there. It’s all over the web.”

The detective’s face went blank. “You serious?”

“How do I know about this before you do?” Ted asked, astonished. His technological know-how was limited primarily to operating small kitchen appliances; he had six-month-old voicemail messages on his phone he couldn’t figure out how to erase.

Then again, he recalled noticing as he was led through the squad room that some desks had box-like computer monitors with black and pea-green display screens like the ones his wife used for work in the early 1990s and others had manual typewriters harvesting dust next to phones with intricately tangled cords, so perhaps he wasn't the only one the 21<sup>st</sup> century left behind. Under other circumstances, that might be comforting.

"Crap." Morris let out a deep sigh. "We are about to get severely fucked."

"What does that mean?"

"The circus is coming to town."

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The teen led Cassidy into the house and up the stairs to a door with a metal "Keep Out!" sign nailed to it. Loud dance music thumped into the hall from the other side. He knocked three times, waited a few seconds and the music stopped.

"Come in," a voice shouted.

The teen opened the door and led Cassidy through to a darkened bedroom. The blinds were shut, the only light glowed from a small desk lamp, the walls were plastered with posters for monster movies she'd never heard of and replicas of medieval weapons, and she suddenly heard foreboding organ music. There was an oversized office chair in front of the desk, turned toward a computer monitor. All she could see in the shadows was a hand moving a mouse on a pad, clicking occasionally. She tried not to admit to herself that she was growing nervous about this situation, and she tried to forget that nobody else knew she was there. She was a journalist. Guys she went to school with were now dodging their way through warzones every day, witnessing death and destruction,



interviewing terrorists and dictators. This, meeting with a website developer in a suburban two-family house, however creepy that house may be, she could handle. She had to. She was a professional. Still, she regretted her rushed decision not to tell her editor, or even Ted Walker, where she was going.

“Ms. Fulbright,” a deep voice boomed from the chair, “I’ve been expecting you.”

She didn’t say anything. The chair swiveled around, revealing a short young man in a black suit. He held a cell phone, navigating its touch screen. He pressed it once and the recessed lights in the ceiling momentarily blinded Cassidy with their sudden brightness. He scrolled through menus on the screen, pressed it again and the music stopped. He nodded toward Cassidy and pointed at the phone with his free hand.

“I swear, there’s nothing this phone can’t do,” he said proudly, as though he had designed the thing himself. “Except receive calls in the southwestern quadrant of the house. Satellite interference. Or something.”

“Are you Josh Kord?”

“I could be,” he said, his lips slippery, the deep voice he initially used replaced by a tone that seemed modest yet obnoxious, “I see you’ve met Corey.”

“Little brother?”

“Personal assistant.” He waved Corey away, so the teen obediently stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him. Josh looked back to Cassidy, “He’s older than he looks. And more competent, I swear.”

“He fooled me.”

"Yep. People tend to—what's the word?—misunderestimate him." Josh chuckled, guttural and swine-like.

The word choice grated on her. *Misunderestimate*. It was the kind of lazy, outdated cliché that made her want to claw out her own ear drums. But she suppressed the urge and instead smiled and nodded.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"The Daily Bugle website."

"Yeah, we're not hiring." He paused, assessing her with his eyes, then said, "Not even, you know, hot chicks."

"I already have a job, thank you." She spoke firmly, the professional courage that led her out there returning. "And I'm here to do it. Cassidy Fulbright, *New York Express*."

"I don't do interviews."

"It's about these photos I saw on the Daily Bugle."

Josh scratched his head, looked up at the ceiling for a moment, his gestures exaggerated. He snorted a laugh through his nose, "I don't even know what that is."

Cassidy rolled her eyes. "30 seconds ago you were rejecting me for a job there that I didn't even apply for."

His grin at this point was constant and wide, feeding on her frustration. "I can't say I have any recollection of that."

"Really? This is how we're going to play it? The site's registered in your name."

"That doesn't prove—What?" He shouted, "Corey!"

Seconds later, Corey opened the door just enough to pop his head through. He was apparently waiting right outside the bedroom, which unsettled Cassidy when she considered that it meant she was essentially trapped between him and Josh.

“Yeah, boss,” he said.

“You used my real name on the website registration?”

“Well...it's your name. What else would—”

“There's a reason we have like eight aliases in our paperwork.” He paused, then asked, mostly to himself, “Aliases? Is that—? Aliai?” He whistled and pointed at Cassidy, who at that point was studying the swords and shields on the wall. “You, intrepid reporter, what's the plural of alias?”

“I don't know.”

“And that's exactly why I can't hire you.”

“Why you can't hire me to work for the website you don't own, you mean?”

“I'm glad we're both on the same wavelength here,” he flashed his white teeth.

“You can go, Corey.”

When Josh's assistant again left the room and closed the door, Cassidy, who had decided she didn't want to spend a second more in this house than was necessary, asked, “As much as I'm enjoying this, can we talk about Everett Voigt?”

“We might be able to if I knew who that was.”

“The Night Watchman.” She pointed at his computer. “There's like a ginormous picture of him in costume on your website and the top story is all about how he's in the hospital after nearly being beaten to death in a fight.”

Josh glanced over his shoulder at the computer, where the Daily Bugle website was open on the screen. “That certainly sounds like something I’d print.”

“How did you know about it?”

“If I did know,” he gave the *if* a playful, unpleasantly flirtatious emphasis, “my sources would have to be confidential. You understand that, right?”

“I understand so very little of what I’ve been dealing with for the last 48 hours.”

“It can be that way for outsiders.”

“And you’re an insider?”

He tilted his head with an incredulous sneer. “Seriously? You don’t know?” He leaned back, his chair squeaking under his weight. “You do understand a reporter’s job involves finding out information about the people you’re writing about?”

Cassidy couldn’t help feeling a tinge of embarrassment, even though the insult came from a stranger whose opinion held little value to her. Flustered, she said, “I never even heard your name before, Jeff.”

“Josh,” he corrected. “I’m starting to see why you work for a newspaper that can’t afford to print itself. I was Ted Walker’s sidekick.”

She thought her research on the Night Watchman had been relatively extensive, and she had already learned much from Ted himself, but she never heard this before. “He didn’t have a sidekick.”

“I’m sure that’s what he tells people now. Ask him about me. 1986 to...” he paused to recall the correct year, “...1989. It’s on my resume.

“So the Night Watchman.” His hands tapped his knees rhythmically. “I assume you’re here because you need something from me. What’s the sitch?”

“I’m writing a story about him. The original and the nephew, I mean. I’m looking for details about what the younger one has been up to, and nobody else seems to be following him more closely than you guys.”

“An article about them? Ted must love that,” Josh laughed. “Why didn’t you just tell me you were doing something that was going to piss him off? Of course I’ll help.”

His chair spun back to the computer screen and he typed rapidly, “Give me a few minutes. I’ll pull up the archives and print you out everything we’ve posted about the kid since he first popped up.”

“Thank you much.”

“No, no. Thank you. This is a nice change of pace.” The printer whirled into action spitting out pages quickly but loudly. “Some days it’s just me and Corey in here. I can’t even tell you the last time we had an attractive woman in this office.”

*Hard to believe with such a female-friendly workplace*, she thought, her eyes again returning to the medieval weaponry. Her attention shifted back to Josh when the printer stopped. He stood, taking a moment to stretch his arms before he picked up a short stack of paper from the printer tray.

“Here you go,” he said.

“Thanks.” Cassidy flipped through the pages, disappointment building as she saw a pattern in the contents that was unlikely to be as useful as she had hoped. “Um...these are just a bunch of blurry snapshots with snarky captions beneath them.”

“What else were you expecting? That’s basically all we do here.”

“So you don’t know anything about the attack?”

“On Night Watchman Jr.? Or is ‘Night Watch-boy’ better? I posted everything I’ve heard, and it’s not much.” He placed his hand on her shoulder, ignorant to the way she bristled at his touch. “I’ve seen that kid in action. We’re not talking Justice League material here. And I mean not even Detroit-era Justice League, know what I’m saying?”

“I have no earthly idea what you’re talking about right now.”

Josh stepped back. He returned to his seat and faced the computer. “Alright,” he said abruptly. “We’re done here.”

“You didn’t tell me anything.”

“Yeah. Not exactly Barbara Walters, are you?”

Cassidy stood in the middle of Josh’s office, figuring it was worth taking one more shot at riling him up into telling her more than he intended. “The original Night Watchman is back in town, you know,” she said.

“Of course I know. We have pictures of him at the airport.” He rotated the chair about 90 degrees and looked at her over his shoulder. “If you see him, tell him I said he can go suck my hairy nuts. Clean that up a bit if you have to—you’re the writer here, right?—as long as you convey the general mise-en-scene to him.”

He kept staring at her, to the point where she wondered if he was waiting for her to write his message down. His gaze made her increasingly uncomfortable, so she ultimately turned away and opened the door.

“Do you need Corey to walk you out?” Josh said as she left the room.

“I'd really prefer if he didn't,” she said.

The teen was still standing in the narrow hallway. Cassidy squeezed past him.

1985

So I say to the car dealer, *What's the cheapest thing you got?*

Car dealer says to me, *We've got this station wagon over here. Costs 500 bucks.*

*How does it drive?* I ask.

*Like it costs 500 bucks,* he says.

It seemed funny at the time. It doesn't anymore.

My watch ticks into the second hour of waiting for a tow truck to bring the Watch Wagon to the mechanic to fix whatever's wrong with it this time. I can name maybe about a half dozen automobile parts, and I've already had to replace all of those, plus several others that I'm reasonably sure the guy at the gas station made up. The serpentine belt? Really, what is that?

I drink cold coffee and try to look like I'm supposed to be here. Just a tough, cool superhero on patrol. Watching all of you like a hawk. Not that there's anyone else out here at the moment—it's almost 3 am and I haven't seen another car pass by in about a half hour—but if they come along, I've got an image to maintain.

Coffee splashes on my glove when I'm jolted by a thunderous bang behind me. I whip around, expecting to see a gunman or a wounded victim staggering down the road, maybe some bullet holes in a wall or street sign, anything. Instead, a red Dodge Charger limps along the curb across the street. A young man stumbles out, his pinstriped business



suit wrinkled, light blue shirt untucked and stained red, his tie hung loose around his neck. I rest my coffee mug—the *Greatest American Hero* mug with the logo from the TV show that my sister got me for my birthday after I told her my secret because she likes to think she’s funny—on top of my car. The driver tries to stand up straight.

"Blow out," he says, nodding toward his flat front tire.

"Small engine fire." I tap my hood.

His body begins to teeter, so I rush over to catch him before he falls to the ground. The reek of cheap alcohol singes my sinuses.

"What's with the costume?" he says.

He pokes my lenses softly. Apparently, it’s going to be that kind of night.

"You don't recognize me?"

"Should I?"

I remind myself I’m in this for justice, not glory. While I may be building a reputation in some circles, I’m still not exactly a household name in this town. "I suppose not. I’m the Night Watchman."

"You look kind of stupid."

"I get that a lot." I stare at the seeping red stain on his shirt. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, totally." His eyes go wide in a flicker of panic, as if he’s noticing it for the first time, but he tests it with his finger. "It’s just red wine. I think."

"How much have you had to drink?"

He squints and his forehead wrinkles, machinery inside his head moving slowly and clumsily. Eventually he gives up and asks, "You’re, what, a superhero?"

“That’s the general idea.”

He points at the Watch Wagon. "So, can't you, like, fix your car with your mind?"

"I couldn't fix my car with detailed instructions and every tool ever made."

“Gotcha. As long as you’re not doing nothing,” his leather shoe taps the flattened rubber of his tire, “think you could help me out with this?”

I shrug. While he opens the trunk to dig out his spare tire, a quick look in both directions confirms there’s no tow truck on the horizon. "Where's your jack?"

He pauses, spare in hand. "I don't have one. Can you just hold the car up?"

"I don't have super powers."

"I don't understand." He puts the tire down, like he needs his hands free to do his thinking on this one. “You're a superhero.”

“Yes, but I don't have superhuman abilities.”

“That’s lame.”

"I'm just going to wait over by my car," I say.

“No, dude.” He grabs my arm, pleading, “Dude. Help me out.”

“Here.” I flip a quarter to him. He raises his hand in an effort to catch it but whiffs and it smacks his left eye. “There’s a pay phone on the corner. Call a tow truck.”

The quarter falls and rolls under the car. He rubs his eye, blinks a few times and shakes his head. For a moment, it looks like he’s going to vomit. His face goes pale, his body heaves, but he swallows hard and recomposes himself.

“Even if you get that tire fixed,” I say, “you’re too drunk to drive anyway, pal.”

“Come on, man. It’s just a flat tire.”

My tow truck pulls up across the street. I take another look at the wasted putz in front of me, leaning his entire body against the side of his car to keep from falling over. In my head, I see someone else with more compassion and less common sense coming on down and actually helping him change the tire, letting him get back on the road. If I leave him that option, what happens from there could be my fault. Short of beating him unconscious or tossing his keys into the sewer, what can I really do? It occurs to me that he only had one spare in his trunk. I unsheathe one of the steak knives strapped to my boot and plunge it into his rear tire.

“Now it’s two.”

## CHAPTER 11

Everett's laptop sat untouched on his desk. The police had never conducted a search of the house and Jasmine considered nearly everything in her son's room sacrosanct until he came back, so that it would look exactly as he left it. Ted was less concerned with preserving every inch of the place like a shrine, but he did want to respect the boy's privacy to the extent that he could. He also figured the odds were more than even that if he tried to turn the thing on he would break it. Maybe accidentally download a virus, spill a glass of water on the keyboard, set off an explosion; a smorgasbord of elaborately disastrous scenarios played out in his mind. Despite those reservations, after talking to Cassidy and Detective Morris earlier in the day, Ted decided that when he returned from his afternoon hospital visit he needed to see whatever information was out there for himself. He approached Everett's desk cautiously, though, like it held a booby trapped treasure in some ancient temple. When he opened the top of the computer, the screen lit up, flashing "Resuming Windows" for a few seconds before the desktop appeared. He clicked on the Internet Explorer icon.

Ted typed the web address Cassidy had texted to him into the browser. When he clicked *Enter*, the Daily Bugle masthead appeared on the screen. Beneath it was a photograph of a man in a gray fur-covered jumpsuit with a black mask over his eyes and a tail, perched on the roof of a rest stop hot dog kiosk, illuminated by headlights from the

parking lot, baring long metal claws. This image was accompanied by the headline, “The Rabid Raccoon Takes a Bite Out of Jersey Turnpike Crime—Literally.” He skimmed the article, a profile of an emerging hero who had devoted himself to protecting the rest areas along I-95 in New Jersey, leaping into action at the sight of car thieves, vagrants and other suspicious individuals and, when necessary, biting them. Ted scrolled down the page to earlier stories about other heroes with bizarre, and in some cases obscene, costumes and “powers.” He wondered briefly if he appeared as strange or mentally unhinged to outside observers in his day, but he buried that thought in the deepest trenches of his mind.

Ted’s browsing was interrupted when a message popped up inviting him to a private chat. He was intrigued but trepidatious. While he could think of countless reasons to ignore the request, it provided a valuable opportunity to talk to at least one of Everett’s friends, so he clicked on the box to accept it. The screen split into four quarters, with Ted himself reflected through a webcam in the bottom right box. He didn’t recognize the other three faces, but they were in costumes. One wore a shining gold helmet, another a welding mask and the third had a hairpiece that looked like a bird’s nest on top of his head. Ted didn’t want to know what that was.

“Power Force roll call!” the one in the gold helmet cried out.

“The Neanderthal,” said the guy with weedy hair, who Ted could now see was wearing a sort of brown fur toga.

The other voice was muffled by the welding mask like a scream through a pillow.

“Hold on, hold on,” the helmet head said. “We go through this every week. Sammy, you got to take the mask off when you talk.”

He lifted the mask and cleared his throat. “Sorry. The Justicesmith.”

“Goldheart,” the first said. All three waited for Ted.

“Who the hell are you?” the Neanderthal said, his face inches from his screen as he tried to get a closer look.

“I’m the Night Watchman’s uncle. Who are you people?”

The others repeated their names, then shouted in unison, “Power Force!”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I’m telling you,” the Neanderthal said, “this guy totally looks like a narc. Why should we trust you?”

“I really couldn’t care less if you do or not.”

“We are a tri-state superhero collective,” Goldheart explained.

“A team?”

“A collective,” he repeated. “We don’t often get together as, you know, a team, per se. Realistically, it’s just a no go. I’m in Hoboken. Adam’s in Brooklyn—

“Represent!” the Neanderthal shouted.

Goldheart sighed, hanging his head in embarrassment. “He does that every single time. Anyway, Sammy’s in, I don’t know, somewhere in Connecticut.”

The Justicesmith spoke, but his mask had fallen in front of his face again.

“Sammy, God damn it,” the Neanderthal said, “take the fucking mask off.”

“New Haven,” the Justicesmith said. “How do you guys keep forgetting this?”

“This is a nightmare,” Ted said under his breath, thoroughly doubting that any of these kids had the attention span to provide any useful information. “Please at least tell me you're all wearing pants.”

“I'm not,” the Neanderthal said, looking down at his toga. “But I swear that's part of my costume.”

“And what's with the colonial welding motif over here?” Ted asked.

“I'm the Justicesmith,” he said. “I'm like a blacksmith, except I forge justice.”

Ted debated offering a follow-up question, but instead he moved on, “I understand my nephew was operating as the Night Watchman here in Westchester.”

“Was?” Goldheart interrupted. “I'm sorry. You said, 'was?' As in, ‘no longer is?’”

“He's in the hospital. I thought word would have gotten around by now.”

“Everett's in the hospital,” Goldheart said. “Christ. How is he?”

“What happened?” the Neanderthal asked.

“How is he? He's not conscious but he's recovering about as well as can be expected. What happened? That's what I want to know.”

“I saw something about that online,” the Justicesmith said.

“Why didn't you mention it?” Goldheart said.

“It's not time for new business yet.” He held up a sheet of paper. “If you're going to insist on sending out an agenda for these meetings, we should follow it.”

“Well, if there is a crime here,” Goldheart's voice was stuffed with confidence, the team leader trying to sound brave, “we shall seek justice.”

“How can we help?” the Neanderthal asked. “I can be there in about two hours.”

“You can start by not doing that,” Ted said, beginning to fear that this whole conversation was a mistake. “Leave it to the professionals.”

“And what?” he scoffed. “You're a professional what, exactly?”

“Today, I'm an English teacher.” Ted paused. “I didn't used to be.”

“We're his teammates,” Goldheart said. “We're honor-bound to avenge him.”

“No, you're not. Just tell me what you know and I'll handle it.”

“Dude,” the Neanderthal said, “you're like 90.”

“I'm 57.” Ted was surprised by his own defensiveness. “Do any of you have any information that can help me here?”

“I don't know,” Goldheart said. “He's been getting a lot of buzz online lately. I mean, he's almost getting too big for us.”

“How did that happen?”

“Right place, right time, I guess. But it all seemed a bit hinky to me.”

“Hinky?” the Neanderthal snickered. “You sound so stupid sometimes, Mark.”

“Call me Goldheart.” He explained to Ted, “I'm just saying, I think he had some connections he wasn't telling us about.”

“Oh boy,” the Neanderthal jumped in again. “Put on your tin foil hats. It's conspiracy theory time.”

“He got his picture taken a lot more than I'd comfortably call coincidental.”

“In other words, Mark's a jealous little bitch.”

“Do you have any ideas you'd like to share, Neanderthal?” Goldheart sniped.



“Kids,” Ted said, his mind already working up theories, possible connections that could explain what happened to Everett. “I have important things to do. Is that the best anyone's got?” He waited and when none of them spoke, he said, trying to sound sincere, “It’s better than nothing. Thank you. I'm going to...how do I turn this thing off?”

“Hey, wait,” the Justicesmith asked, hurried and nervous. “So does this mean we can't crash at Ev's pad for the convention?”

Ted laughed a little when he imagined going to the hospital and asking Jasmine to let these guys stay at her house. “That is definitely not going to happen.”

“Well, that blows,” the Neanderthal said.

“Yes. That's the real tragedy here, son.” Ted looked around the sides of the laptop, searching for a power button amid rows of inputs and connectors whose purpose was a complete mystery to him. “I'm signing off now.”

He pressed a button above the keyboard, but an icon came up on the screen indicating he had only turned up the volume. He pushed another button. Nothing happened. He stood up and peered over the back of the computer, reached around to pull out various cables that were connected to it. He lightly slapped the side of the screen. When he looked down at it, the chat windows were still open.

“Is this still on?” he said, speaking directly into the lens of the webcam. “Hello?”

“Just close the laptop, dude,” the Neanderthal said.

Ted stepped back, pressed the top of the computer down and waited. After about twenty seconds, the sounds of its internal equipment running, the fans and processors and whatever else, stopped. He sat in Everett’s chair, though he struggled to adjust its height

until he was comfortable. There was a notepad on the desk next to the computer. Ted started to write, racing to catch all of his ideas before they slipped from his brain.

1986

After a few weeks of posting vague “Legitimate business seeks intern for various legitimate business-related tasks” classified ads with no response, I accepted that I needed to crack the veil of secrecy a little. The woman at the newspaper laughed for close to a minute when I told her I wanted to place an ad for a superhero intern. Then I listened as she called her co-workers over and told them and they laughed. The first few days, I didn’t get any calls, but then there was this kid, Josh Kord. He was in high school, looking for a summer job, showed up for the interview wearing a suit two sizes too big. I figured the youthful enthusiasm was a plus.

What it comes down to is, I need a secretary and I can’t afford one. This solution isn’t something I’m particularly proud of—taking advantage of a naïve teenager’s eager sincerity—but Josh doesn’t mind the grunt work. The way the kid answers the phone is chipper, inviting and it took him about two days to completely reorganize my file system into, well, an actual system.

Sometimes he seems better prepared and more engaged in this than I am.

I don’t like that about him.

I’ve tried my best to keep him at arm’s length, tell him only as much as he needs to know, because, really, how much can you trust some kid who wanders in off the street in someone else’s suit? He’s never seen me out of the costume. He doesn’t even know

my real name. One of these days, I imagine I'll have to let him all the way in. That scene seems unavoidable. But he's strictly office support; I'm not taking him in the field with me. Nights like this, though, I could probably use the backup.

I hate warehouses. Nothing good ever happens in them.

I came to this one tonight following a tip about counterfeit handbags coming into these docks. All I needed to do was snap some photos, snag some evidence to bring to the cops to shut this operation down. But as good as I've gotten at evading security guards and surveillance cameras, I have yet to find an effective way around guard dogs.

Two Dobermans chase me toward the fence, roaring through razor-sharp teeth wet with drool over the prospect of tearing me apart. I left a blanket covering the ring of barbed wire atop the fence in case I needed to make a hasty exit, which is a pretty common outcome in these situations. If I can reach it, it's just a short sprint to the Watch Wagon from there. With the dogs gaining on me, that's becoming a big "if."

My toe catches up on a stray rock, dragging me to the ground. Before I make it back onto my feet, one of the dogs is on me. I shield my face against its teeth and claws with my arms. My wrist stings when it scratches through the fabric of the costume and draws blood. It's shredding my sleeves, my feet kicking at it in a vain attempt to push it away. There's a sudden sticky snapping sound and my right hand is drenched with blood before the pain of a lost finger even registers. I continue to try to hold the dog off with the bloody hand while the left reaches out for the knives strapped to my shin. With a firm grip on the handle of one, I stab at the dog with all the strength my left arm can muster. After a few near misses, I manage to plunge one into its neck.

The dog yelps. I'm able to push it off, sending it flailing, bleeding to the ground. I stand, my own hand soaked red and pulsing with pain. The second dog and a security guard watch in horror—as do I—while the Doberman's life spills from its wound.

It's the first time I ever actually stabbed anyone or anything with those knives. Most of the time, I think of them as a primarily decorative accessory.

Recovering from the initial shock of what I've done, I race to the fence and climb quickly, my agony pushed far off my radar. I make it to the car, feeling almost blessed when the engine fires up on the first turn of the key.

I peel out, pushing the car to its limit to put some distance between me and the warehouse before the adrenaline rush cools. A few miles down and I start to think maybe I'll even make it home. That's when the dizziness takes over and runs me off the road. The windshield goes black before my eyes. I don't know what I've hit.

When I wake, pain colors everything I see. I've driven up on the sidewalk and swerved into an alley, apparently straight into the side of a dumpster. I roll out of the car into a puddle that smells like malt liquor and urine. My hand doesn't seem to be bleeding anymore, but it's hard to tell since my glove is already soaked through and crimson. There's a pay phone on the street corner about 50 feet away. I stagger toward it, running through the short list of people I could call for help. My sister's out of town. My friend Pete is working a night shift. My mother is completely out of the question.

I always keep quarters in my sweatshirt pocket for emergency calls. It takes a few seconds to remember Josh's number, but after I dial, I consider how late it must be and hope he picks up before my call wakes his mother or father.

When he answers, I whisper, “Josh, it’s me.”

“Who?” His voice is weak, tentative, like he’s unsure if he’s dreaming.

“Your boss. The Night Watchman.”

“Yes, sir,” he says, somehow immediately awake and professional. “I’m sorry. What do you need?”

“I need you to pick me up somewhere. It’s an emergency.” I look down at my costume, stained and torn, and realize I can’t walk into an ER dressed like this without completely compromising my identity. “And bring pants.”

After giving him the cross streets and describing the general area, I stumble back to the Watch Wagon, where I can stay out of sight for the time being. No idea how much later it is when Josh pulls up in his parents’ car. He makes an effort to help me stand but my weight is too much for him. I drag myself to the passenger side door of his car.

“Before we go to the hospital, I need to get rid of the costume,” I say, trying to wiggle out of the wet suit. “Help me take my clothes off.”

He watches me flop around in pain. “Is that really necessary, sir?”

“We need to protect my identity.” I suddenly feel dizzy. “Now take my pants off.”

Josh leaves the pants alone, but he helps me untangle myself from the sweatshirt.

“You need to go find my finger,” I say, the corners of my vision darkening.

“What I need is to take you to the hospital, sir. You’re really bleeding a lot.”

I don’t know if he ever went back to look for it, but I wake up six hours later in a hospital bed with nine fingers, a broken leg and a fucking huge headache.

## CHAPTER 12

Ted was in the living room gathering his things to return to the hospital and catch the end of evening visiting hours when his phone rang somewhere. He followed the sound down the hall, up the stairs into Everett's room, where he had forgotten to pick it up from the desk after his hectic conference with his nephew's superhero collective. Once he found it, he answered, recognizing Cassidy's number.

"Ted, I have some...less than spectacular news."

He sat on the edge of Everett's bed and ran his hands through his hair. "Is there any other kind these days?"

"Do you remember a Josh Kord?"

"Would that I could forget," Ted grumbled.

"He's a bit of a tool."

"He is an entire tool shed. I did fire him for a reason." He added, with emphasis, "Unpaid intern. Fired him. That's how annoying he was."

"So his new job, kind of relevant right now."

He knew where Cassidy was going before she got there. "Ah, crap."

"Yes. The website."

"That kid is such a nerd. Of course he runs a superhero stalking website."

"I'm sure he's hiding something."

“What?” He had, perhaps unfairly, segregated his memories of Josh to same desolate corner of his mind as he did ex-girlfriends and guys who hit on his sister.

“If I had figured that out, it wouldn’t still be hidden, Ted,” she said. “But I met with him, I talked to him and something is definitely off with that guy.”

“Alright.” Ted glanced at his watch. “Let me deal with to him.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Probably not.” He rose from the bed, grabbed a pen off the desk and prepared to write on his hand. “But give me the address.”

After he hung up, he remembered the notepad sitting next to the computer about a foot away from him. He glanced at the ink scribbled across palm to ensure that it was legible, then went downstairs to get his jacket.

\*\*\*\*

Jasmine’s car screeched to a stop outside Josh’s house less than a half hour after Cassidy’s call. Ted stepped out. Before walking to the house, he took a moment to study the familiar black station wagon in the driveway. He moved on, growing unexpectedly apprehensive about this encounter. The last time he had seen Josh Kord was when he rather abruptly fired him from his internship position 20 years earlier. Josh’s reaction to Ted knocking on his door would be unpredictable, and the possibilities ranged from nostalgic excitement to immediate violence. As he approached the front door, Ted believed he was mentally prepared for any eventuality.

He didn’t anticipate indifference, though, and that’s what he got—Josh lazily opening the door and saying, “Oh. It’s you.”



“It is.” Ted sized him up, a man in his 30s standing before him in plaid flannel pajamas, the pants bunched up around his slippers because they were too long, and a blue bathrobe. “You look good.”

“You look old.”

Josh’s sleepy voice made it hard to determine if that was meant as an insult or simply an observation. Ted chose to ignore it. “So,” he asked, “is this your mother’s place or what?”

“It’s mine, in fact,” Josh said in a flash of defensive vigor. “My mother lives in the other part of the house, but I pay all the rent on this side. I make quite a bit of money these days, you know.”

“I do know, and that’s what I’m here to talk about.”

Josh sighed. “It was only a matter of time, I suppose.” He rubbed his reddening eyes. “What did that reporter tell you?”

“That you’ve put together some superhero stalkerazzi website with way too many pictures of my nephew on it.”

“That’s...actually, that’s mostly true.” He held the door open wider and waved Ted through. “Come on in. Let’s go to my conference room.”

As they walked down the narrow hallway toward the kitchen, Ted asked, “You had people following me the other night, then? In the alley?”

“Yeah,” Josh paused to respond, “we’ve got some awesome photos of all that uploading to the site tonight. Thanks for running after them. The action shots always get more hits.”

"You're putting pictures of me online?"

"Well, of 'the original Night Watchman.' I wasn't going to use your real name, but people already know what they know, right? Love that scarf, by the way. Great look for you. Though, no offense, the trenchcoat's a bit outdated."

Buckling under the intangible weight on his shoulders, Ted slumped and sighed, "I really don't need this."

"Oh, buck up, sport. It'll be great for business. For me, I mean. I can see how it might be a bit of a bitch for you. But really, how long did you expect to be able to sneak around before the fans figured out you were back?"

"I wasn't expecting anyone to care."

"Oh, they do. For reasons unknown, you still have a pretty big fan club out there. I guess some people don't know you as well as the rest of us do. Oh, hey, before I forget, do you still have that glove my guy dropped? They weren't like family heirlooms or anything, but Rick would like it back."

"I gave it to the cops."

Josh groaned, "Now why would you go and do something like that?"

"So they can test it and track him down."

"And even if they were to do that," Josh said, sitting down at the kitchen table, "Ted, you know what would happen? They'd find out that he didn't break any laws. All he did was take some pictures, if they can even prove he did that. You're the one who chased him down the street like a maniac."

Ted silently acknowledged that, in retrospect, this was a good point. He ignored Josh's offer of a seat at the table. "Did I see the Watch Wagon in the driveway?"

"In case you're wondering, it's not the original. It's a replica I had a guy do up."

"Money well spent."

"You obviously weren't going to give me the real one," Josh said, his petulance suggesting a bitter aftertaste that lingered from their years working together.

"It looks a lot like a car that drove by sister's house the other day."

"Odd coincidence, that," Josh smiled. He got up and opened the refrigerator door. "You want anything to drink? I've got about a dozen kinds of beer, some wine down in the cellar, filtered water, purple stuff, Sunny D and," he proudly raised a bottle with a red label, "freshly imported from New Orleans, 20-ounce bottles of Barq's Red Crème Soda."

"No, thanks," Ted said. Josh shrugged and twisted the cap open. As he gulped down the red soda, Ted asked him, "So I'm assuming I have you to thank for the bricks through my windows?"

"Goddamn," Josh said, placing the nearly half-empty bottle on the table, "that stuff is worth the shipping fees. You know, I was going to deny the window thing and make you work for it a bit, but it's getting late. Yeah, I sent a couple of guys to do that."

"Why?"

"I thought they were a nice touch. They added suspense, you know? Raised the stakes a bit." He elevated his hand from his waist to his neck to illustrate the concept.

Ted's eyes flashed red with anger. "My nephew's life wasn't high enough stakes?"

“Apparently not.” Josh shrugged and took another sip from his bottle. “Besides, you knew those injuries weren't life-threatening. I don't mean to downplay your tragedy but...well, yes, I guess I do. The kid's going to be fine eventually.”

“Thank you for your expert medical opinion.”

“Somebody had to light a fire under your ass, Ted. I know how you work. You were going to spend the better part of a week hemming and hawing about whether or not to get involved, then you'd start taking little baby steps and maybe two weeks down the line you'd actually hit the streets. My audience doesn't have that kind of attention span.”

“So you took it upon yourself.”

“I did. You know why? Because I'm a showman. Pure and simple.” He bowed to imaginary applause. “I'm like the PT Barnum of this crap. And I want you putting on the greatest show on earth.”

“And your solution to that was to threaten my family?”

“It worked, didn't it?” Josh said, seeming genuinely confused about why Ted was so upset about all of this. “If it's any consolation, there were never any genuine threats. It was all part of the game.”

“You think that makes it okay?”

“Doesn't it? They weren't in any danger.”

Ted fought to contain his anger at Josh's cavalier attitude, his fists tightening. “I didn't know that, Josh,” he said harshly.

“Obviously,” Josh laughed. “It would have defeated the purpose if you knew the threats were fake, wouldn't it? Though, honestly,” he sipped his soda before continuing,

“I’m a bit disappointed. I thought you were going to really cut loose and bash some skulls. I was expecting another Beaverton.” Ted stepped back nervously at the mention of the incident. “Yeah, more people know about that than you think. Wonderful work for a man your age, from what I’ve heard. I just wish I had a camera there.”

Perhaps realizing how suspicious his apparent nonchalance about the whole situation was, he rushed to add, “And before you ask, no, I didn’t have anything to do with your nephew getting his ass kicked. But the window-breaking, that was all me.”

“And I should just believe you?”

“If I did this, it’d be on the internet right now.” Josh counted off ways he could exploit that material. “Pictures, multi-angle video, exclusive interviews. The works. I’m not wasting drama like that.”

“What the hell happened to you?”

“What do you think?”

“Early onset dementia?”

Josh took another long sip from his bottle. “You used to be funnier,” he said. “It should have been me out there in that costume and you know it.”

Ted held up a fist. “I can put you in the hospital too if it’ll make you feel better.”

“I take it back. You are a funny old, old man,” he chuckled. Then dead serious, he snarled, “You passed over me and gave everything to that kid. I wasn’t thrilled with how that turned out.”

“Give me a break. I hadn’t even spoken to you in ten years at the time.”

“You still owed me.”

“You got school credit.” After he said the words, Ted needed a few seconds to confirm from his memory that he did actually submit the paperwork for the kid’s academic credits. “That’s all you were ever promised.”

“When you work as a hero’s sidekick, it’s implied that you’ll inherit the costume one day.” He said it with absolute confidence, like it was a proven law of physics.

“Eventually, Kid Flash becomes the Flash. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

“You weren’t my sidekick,” Ted corrected. That assumption always bothered him, no matter who made it. His classified ad very clearly stated “intern.” Taking on an honest-to-God sidekick had seemed like a final step in divorcing from reality he didn’t want to take, and that he didn’t want anyone else to think he had taken. “And nobody was ever supposed to take over. I retired for a reason. If you want to be pissed at me, fine. By all means, hold on to your 20-year-old grudge, but I’m not losing any sleep.”

Ted noticed the glow of a monitor in the next room. Ignoring Josh’s urging not to go in, he stepped into a den filled with computer equipment. The big screen that had drawn his attention showed two teenagers in bright, generic spandex costumes hitting each other in what he guessed was the backyard of Josh’s house/office. One dropped to the ground, blood dripping from his mouth and nose. He attempted to stand but the other hit him again.

“What is this?” Ted asked, trying not to watch as the beating continued.

“Phase two,” Josh boasted. “‘Hero Fights.’ The name is preliminary, so if you have any ideas, I’m open to suggestions.”

“This is disgusting.”

“It’s money in my pocket is what it is.” The kid who was winning picked up a large rock. Josh grabbed a remote control and froze the video before he brought it down on the other kid. “Okay, look, the DB—that’s phase one. Photos, quick video clips, just heroes out there doing their thing. People dig it, we rack up some hits. And once we prove there’s an audience, we move on to phase two.”

“Hero Fights?”

“Yes, Hero Fights.” Josh’s energy peaked as he shifted into his salesman mode. “You remember Bum Fights? Those videos of homeless dudes pummeling each other for money and liquor. It’s kind of like that, but with superheroes. When you get right down to it, it’s not that different from professional wrestling. Two guys in costumes on a street corner, an alley, a subway train, an office building lobby, wherever, but we give them a couple hundred bucks and they go at each other. Film it, pop it up on the web, rake in the cash, rinse, repeat. It’s going to be huge.”

“It sounds illegal and dangerous.”

“A, illegal? That’s why we have lawyers. And B, dangerous? Isn’t it already?” He laughed, seemingly expecting Ted to join in but he didn’t. “I mean, isn’t this basically what these chumps set out to do every night anyway? I’m just paying them for it. It’s an immersive media experience. The closest thing imaginable to actually living in a superhero universe. And today’s cultural environment is ripe for exploitation with this kind of crap. I’ll be rich.”

“It’s that easy, huh?”

“I don’t know why nobody’s tried it before.”

“Well, for one thing,” Ted said, wondering if he would have agreed to do something like this to get attention when he was first starting out, “you’re not going to find anyone stupid enough to sign up to fight.”

“I’ve got your nephew’s signature on some contracts that say otherwise,” Josh said, savoring the bug-eyed shock on Ted’s face. He walked back into the kitchen. As he sat down, he said, “Don’t act so surprised. Good press isn’t an autonomous entity.”

“He’s 16.” Ted followed him to the kitchen table but again refused to sit. “He’s not old enough to legally consent to anything.”

“We can let the lawyers decide that. But he’s no use to me conked out in a hospital bed, so the whole issue is moot at the moment anyway.”

Ted sighed and looked down at the marble floor, dusty and tracked with mud. “Are you having fun with your little supervillain shtick? Honestly, it doesn’t suit you.”

“I am not the bad guy here. I’m just a young entrepreneur searching for success.” Josh tilted back in his chair and rested his slippered feet on the table as he drained the last of his soda from the bottle. “Blame capitalism, baby, because every decision I make these days is all about the money.”

“I feel like we should be having this conversation in a secret lair carved out of a volcano.”

“I’m just laying out the facts for you.”

“Right, the facts.” Ted leaned on the table, perhaps with more force than he intended because the whole thing wobbled and Josh almost fell. “This how it’s going to work. You are going to leave my nephew alone.”



“Somehow I don't see that happening, Ted.” Josh sat up once he regained his balance and said soberly, “I do have an offer for you, though.”

“Christ. I can't wait to hear this.”

“I want you to fight.”

“I'm almost 60.”

“Yeah, you'd obviously need to get in better shape first. It's not like this is the kind of game where there's a senior tour.” Josh stopped for a moment, his eyes drifting toward the ceiling while he bounced an idea around in his head. “Not yet, I mean. Long-term, it's certainly an option. I'm not going to rule anything out.”

“Are you insane?” Ted said as he turned to walk out.

“Okay, new idea,” Josh announced. Ted stopped to listen, intrigued despite himself. “Picture it. Title fight. You against your nephew.” Josh held out one hand to represent each and brought them together while making an explosive sound. “Two generations of a superhero legacy clash. Now how much would you pay, huh?”

“I'm not going to fight my own nephew.”

“Come on. One fight and you're both out. It's a great deal.”

Ted's spine stiffened. He adopted his most menacing growl of a voice, “Better deal: we're both out right now and you go fuck yourself.”

“It doesn't work that way, Ted. The kid's on my staff.”

“Then he quits.”

“You can’t decide that for him. If that’s what he wants when he wakes up, maybe we’ll talk about it.” Josh then added, trying to contain a jolt of excitement, “Oh, and here’s the best part. You’re never going to guess who’s funding all of this.”

After waiting awkwardly for Ted to respond, he asked, “Well? Aren’t you going to guess?”

Ted’s eyes darted from side to side. He hunched his shoulders. “You just told me I’m not going to guess right. Why bother?”

“That takes all the fun out of it. Fine.” He insisted on a dramatic pause before revealing the answer. “It’s Morton Merriweather. One of his companies, I mean. A subsidiary of a subsidiary. The guy probably doesn’t even know about it.”

“That would have been my first guess. If I guessed.”

“Of course,” Josh nodded. “Because everything was his fault, right? I didn’t want to say it at the time, but he never was the criminal mastermind you thought he was.”

“I know.” It was a disappointing reality but one Ted had accepted long ago.

“That whole crusade against him was a waste of time, man.”

“A lot of things I’ve done were,” Ted admitted. “I try not to dwell on my past.”

“If mine was like yours, I wouldn’t want to dwell on it either.”

A wide variety of retorts sprung to Ted’s mind, but verbally sparring with an obnoxious former intern quickly lost its appeal. Instead, he just stared Josh down with ice-cold eyes. Ted’s phone rang, interrupting their silent face-off. He looked down at its screen and saw his sister’s name. “I should take this,” he said.

“I don’t care,” Josh shrugged.

Ted listened to Jasmine screeching and rambling on the other end. A look of bewilderment on his face quickly morphed into a broad smile. Then she hung up.

“He’s awake,” Ted said, staring at the phone. “Everett’s awake.”

“Congratulations. Tell him to get well soon. I need him back out on the streets.”

Josh stood and headed for the stairs. He pointed Ted down the hall to the front door.

“Good to see you, old chum. Shut the door behind you when you leave.”

1998

“I don't know how to tell you this,” Lauryn says, “but they're going to kill you.”

Her office décor hasn't changed much over the years. The only thing that's different is the posters on the walls from her more famous clients' latest films, a mechanism of passive-aggressive ridicule, standing behind her to remind me that I'm not as successful as I could be if I were more attractive, more talented or more willing to listen to her more outlandish recommendations. Every meeting with the woman is like a tap dance on the border between reality and whatever world she thinks I live in. Is it because she's delusional or because she believes I am? I can never tell.

At least the coffee stays the same. I sip from a full, steaming, delicious cup.

“How do I die?” I ask.

She reads something on her computer screen, mouthing words. Then she looks at me and says, “You burn out extinguishing the Dark Sun from the Anti-Galaxy.”

“Of course I do.”

A couple years back, early on in our efforts to negotiate licensing projects for my character—comics, TV, radio, I wasn't picky—we abandoned the notion of me retaining any creative control over what the licensee does with him. Editors and producers laughed us out of the room when we pitched stories to be co-written by me. Given my lack of a college degree or professional writing experience, and Lauryn's insistence that I attend

those meetings in costume, I could see why. This online animated series was the end result, though, a brave voyage into the untested waters of new media that has, through some creative accounting, become a decent moneymaker despite its meager audience. Up until now, the producers' creative decisions weren't a matter of significant concern to me. But now? Now they want me dead.

"There's something we need to talk about, Ted," Lauryn says, about to drop what I'm sure is the real reason for this meeting on my head. She could have told me over the phone if it was just about something happening in the damn cartoon, but clearly there was more to it that required a rare face-to-face. "For promotional reasons, you know, to milk this whole death thing, the producers would like you to lay low for a while."

"Lay low?"

"Take a break from the superhero game." She presented the options cheerfully, her inner PR flak taking over. "Go on vacation, maybe. It'll help maintain the illusion."

The gears of my mind grind slowly. "We're talking about the illusion that my fictional animated self has died fighting an evil star?"

"That would be the one, yes."

"Does it concern you that this whole conversation presumes there are people out there who think an online cartoon is reality?"

"Believe me," she says with a disgusted sigh, "it's not a hypothetical. You're not the one who gets your fan mail."

"I'm still not doing it."

“Honestly, Ted,” she looks down at me and says with the closest thing to genuine concern she’s capable of, “please don’t take this the wrong way, but given your age, I think maybe you should seriously consider retirement anyway.”

“Laurn,” I say, the harshness of my tone rocking her back on her heels, “let me paint for you a picture of what happens when I hang up my costume for purely financial or commercial purposes: people die.”

“That seems a tad overdramatic.”

“Tell that to my brother-in-law,” I hiss. Jack. The wound that scabs over but never quite seems to heal. “Oh, no, you can’t, because he’s dead.”

“People die every day, Ted. You’re not saving all of them now. In fact, when was the last time you even stopped a crime?”

I hate it when she makes sense. “It has been a while,” I admit.

“So what are we even talking about here?”

“Responsibility. Great power, great responsibility, and so on.”

“You don’t have any powers.”

“Fine.” My defiant anger amps up. “But I do have responsibilities. I’m supposed to be there for people in need. And if I’m not, they die.”

“Ted, that’s not what you do anymore.”

What do I do now? Grade school assemblies and soup kitchen food drives? How did I get so far off course? “Maybe it should be again.”

“Well, now is a bad time to come to that conclusion.”

I take another sip from my cup. “This really is very good coffee,” I say.

## CHAPTER 13

Ted rushed straight to Everett's room when he arrived at the hospital, and his spirits plummeted instantly when he saw the boy unconscious. It wasn't the scene he imagined—the family reunited around the bed, Everett sitting up laughing and talking, strong and alert. Instead, he stared at the stiff body, the closed eyes, the machines and monitors until a nurse came in and whispered to him to be quiet and let Everett sleep. He had been awake for hours earlier and needed to rest. She told Ted the rest of the family was in the waiting room and suggested he join them. That prospect overwhelmed him.

Ted decided to stay there until Everett woke up instead. It seemed like a solid, compassionate idea at first, but an hour later the kid was still sleeping and Ted was fading. He didn't know what he was going to do about Josh, what anything he had learned in the last two days truly meant, how much Jasmine and Greg needed to know. The beeping of the machines became almost metronomic, lulling him. This wasn't where any of them were supposed to be—not that what was supposed to happen mattered.

The next thing he felt was Jasmine's hand on his shoulder, yanking him out of a light sleep he didn't recall falling into.

“You're here,” she said.

“I am.” Ted struggled to his feet, the effects of three days of unusually heavy activity sagging down his bones. He looked at the clock on the wall, his vision gradually focusing. “I’ve been here. In here, I mean, for, God, almost two hours.”

“You should have come out.” Jasmine stepped around him and approached the bed. “This British family has been sitting around watching cricket all day. Greg’s pretty sure he has half of the rules figured out. He’s totally wrong, but that’s part of the fun. And the chairs in the waiting room are much more comfortable than these, hard as that may be to believe.”

“Oh, the way my back is feeling,” Ted said as he arched his spine, grimacing from an electric wave of pain he couldn’t hide, “I believe it.”

Jasmine gently brushed her hand across Everett’s forehead and down his cheek, careful not to wake him. Her eyes were deep and damp, weathered by days of horror that Ted knew far eclipsed his own.

“Where have you been all day?” she asked.

“Sorry. I know I commandeered your car for a while there.”

“That’s not what I’m talking—” She halted, smiling down at Everett, and then she motioned for Ted to follow her out into the hallway. Once there, she started over, louder, “That’s not what I’m talking about. What the hell have you been doing?”

“If I tell you, you’re going to be angry.”

“Angry at who?”

Ted wavered over the appropriate response, the proportionate value of a well-crafted lie. Really, what good would it do her to know the kid had been at this for



months? Would she be upset that he used Everett's computer? Would she blame him more than she already did if his former fanboy groupie Josh was even tangentially involved? Most importantly, how much did she already know? What answer could he get away with? He took measure of her face, couldn't read her fresh wrinkles. It was best not to say anything at all. He splashed a broad, false grin across his lips.

"This is a joyous occasion, Jasmine. He's back. Let's just focus on that for now." He seized on a fleeting echo of happiness behind her eyes born of looking past him at her resting son. "There you go. Be joyous."

Ted went back into Everett's room, feeling Jasmine's presence hover behind him in the hall. He tried to ignore her until she went away.

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When Everett opened his eyes, Ted had dozed off again himself.

"Uncle Ted?" he said, raspy, like talking through a mouthful of smoke.

"You're awake. How do you feel?"

He wheezed out his words, "I'm thirsty."

Ted filled a small plastic cup with water and handed it to him. Everett's arm trembled, his muscles weak from days without use.

"Thank you," he said before gulping it down in one sip.

"How's your throat?"

"Sore."

"That's usually the way it goes." Ted refilled the cup. "Do you want me to get you some frozen yogurt? It's pretty good here."

“No, thanks. Not right now.”

Everett drank the second cup slower, taking in his surroundings. His eyes fixed on the numerous vases of flowers on the window sill. He abandoned an effort to sit up.

“Should I be hungry?” he asked.

“Your lips haven’t touched solid food in days. It’s natural.” He added, brightly, “You’re lucky you got the crap kicked out of you in White Plains. The food at Sound Shore Medical in New Rochelle is completely inedible.”

Even weakened, barely conscious, Everett managed to raise an eyebrow in confusion. Ted rethought his words, but he meant what he said. All things considered, there were worse places to be, and some weren’t far away. He figured the kid would come to understand that eventually.

He conceded, “Maybe ‘lucky’ isn’t the right word.”

Everett’s face tightened in pain. He leaned forward, doubling over clumsily. Ted shot up from his chair and reached out to help him. He eased Everett’s head back onto his pillow. The thought of calling for a nurse to aid him did cross his mind, but he knew this conversation would delve into family secrets he didn’t want to air before strangers.

“The first time you end up in the hospital is always a bit rough.” He reflected on his experience for a moment, then added, “So’s the second and third. It really doesn’t get easy, so if you’re serious about this thing, get used to it. And no pressure, if you want to do this, that’s your choice and we’ll deal with it.”

“I do want to,” Everett said, directly, unmistakably, without hesitation.

“You can’t,” Ted replied with equal conviction.

“You just said I had a choice.”

“You would have if you had made the right one.”

Everett turned away, rotating toward the windows as much as his injuries would allow. “You’re going to give me the lecture too? When I woke up, my mom was all like, you can never do that again. I told her she can’t tell me what to do.”

“She’s your mother.” Ted walked around to the other side of the bed into Everett’s line of sight. “Of course she can.”

Everett groaned. “You always told me you never listened to your mother.”

“That was different. That woman was equal parts bat- and ape-shit crazy.”

“So’s my mom.”

“Hey,” Ted said, crouching until his eyes were level with Everett’s, “you don’t say that. I mean it. You have no idea.”

“Whatever.”

“You don’t,” Ted repeated.

“I know,” Everett said. He shifted his body to lie on his back again, gritting his teeth to silence his pain. He squinted against the light from a bulb overhead.

“Everett,” Ted said as he circled around the bed to return to his chair. “I’m not here as your mother’s mouthpiece. Lord knows we don’t agree on much, and she’s certainly not my number one fan at the moment. But if she told you this was a dumb, idiotic, stupid thing to do, she was right.”

Everett laughed, which quickly mutated into a coughing fit. When he stopped panting, he said, “That is so hypocritical coming from you.”

“Huh. Hypocritical. I’ve been accused of being so many worse things, that’s almost a compliment.”

They both got a little laugh out of that. Ted hoped the moment defused the tension that followed him into the room. He figured this was as good a time as any to broach the subject they had expertly avoided so far, “Tell me what happened out there.”

“I don’t know.” Everett tilted his head from side to side, the closest thing to shaking it that he seemed capable of. Whether that was due to pain or exhaustion, Ted could only guess. He added, in a way Ted immediately read as too emphatic to be believed, “Really. It’s like I was out there and everything was fine and next thing I know I’m here.”

“Uh...huh.” Ted’s rested his chin on his hand, an abrasive stubble growing from days without shaving. “Come on, Ev. I’m serious here.”

“I am serious.” He fought to avoid eye contact, closing his eyes every time they were in danger of meeting up with Ted’s. “It’s all a blank.”

“Do you really think I believe that you don’t remember anything?”

“You’ve been hit in the head a lot, Uncle Ted. You know how it is.”

“I’ve also lied about many, many things.” Ted said. He reached out with his four-fingered hand to hold Everett’s arm. “I know how that is. Eventually someone figures it out.”

Everett’s words grew softer and more hoarse, “I know that.”

“Then why are you lying to me right now?”

Everett was suddenly, conveniently overcome by another coughing fit. When he stopped, he closed his eyes, turned his head away and didn't say a word. Ted was prepared to push the question harder, but before he could ask it again, Everett looked up at him, teary-eyed and gesturing toward his neck.

"My throat..." he eked the words out, "I can't talk anymore."

As Ted began to pull away from the bed, he lifted his hand toward him, too weak to make contact. "Thanks for flying all the way out here for me, Uncle Ted," he said.

"There's no place else I'd be," Ted said, beaming genuine happiness. His face hardened, though, "But this conversation isn't over."

"I can't."

Ted doubted whether the physical symptoms Everett was exhibiting were real—the sore throat voice in particular sounded suspiciously like his own bad Al Pacino impression, which he would admit he overused at family gatherings over the years—but he knew for sure that emotionally, the kid couldn't handle this right now. Every labored breath whispered that.

"Yeah, fine. This can wait." He patted Everett's shoulder. Not having children of his own, he always found it challenging to assess the appropriate level of affection to show. On his way out, he said, "Get some rest. I'll see about rustling you up something to eat."

I don't know why I agreed to this. I'm afraid it's simply because I like her smile. Or maybe I have a lot of shit to get off my chest and this is the most direct way imaginable. Whatever my subconscious motivation, I can say without a doubt that wearing a superhero costume in a diner in the town of Larchmont at midday is a staggeringly awkward experience. I untie the bandana to drink my strawberry milkshake. Otherwise, that just gets messy. Besides, I'm not too concerned about protecting my identity in a restaurant full of senior citizens taking advantage of the early bird special. While I wait for her to arrive, I toy with the small jukebox on the table full of songs my parents loved.

The reporter walks in wearing knee-high boots and a skirt too short not to stare at. I try to subtly lick away my milkshake mustache before she gets to the table. Her name is Daisy something and she's working on a feature for *Esquire* about the fall of Cowabunga Films, the porn outfit behind my movies, but she seems to have glommed onto my story in particular. Hence the interview. She insisted I wear the costume. I didn't argue.

When she sits down and pulls out her notebook, Daisy smiles that Lite-Brite smile again. Under the table, my right hand brushes over the ring-less finger on my left. Ted Walker is married. The Night Watchman isn't. I remind myself I'm playing a character

here. I also remind myself I have a beautiful, loving wife at home who will, through some supernatural womanly intuition, know if I do or say anything inappropriate.

“Let’s get started,” she says.

“Let’s, indeed,” I say, and I sound like a complete jackass.

She tests her pen with a spiral doodle in the corner of the page, ready to take copious notes. “So how does it feel to be a superhero and a porn icon?” she asks.

I gulp down a mouthful of shake so I can answer. “First of all, and this is important, I never appeared in any porn myself. I licensed my character for use in adult films. That’s the full extent of it. It feels good, though. But please, don’t call me a ‘superhero.’ It makes this sound so childish. I much prefer the term ‘urban vigilante.’”

“Well, how did you find yourself in this line of work?” She wants to say “superhero” but she stops herself. “The...um...urban vigilante business, I mean.”

“It began before it started, actually, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Yeah, I guess that is a bit obtuse.” I take a deep breath and begin my origin story. “What I’m trying to say is that the seeds of this whole Night Watchman thing were planted weeks before I even put the costume on. It’s a family thing, really, how this became my higher calling in life. See, my sister calls me up one night bawling, somebody broke into her place, took her jewelry, took her TV—and let me tell you, that was no small feat. I carried that thing when I helped her move and it was a heavy fucking television. I didn’t know what else to say, so I promised I’d get her stuff back. She laughed at me, but I was serious.

“It wasn’t the most efficient investigation, I’ll admit. I talked to some neighbors and witnesses, didn’t really get very far. After about a week, I had nothing. Then one night I got lucky. I ran into this chick in the elevator of my sister’s building who was wearing our grandmother’s charm bracelet. Long story somewhat short, I followed her, found out her boyfriend lived on the ninth floor, broke into his place from the fire escape in the middle of the night, scared the hell out of him, threatened him and the next day all my sister’s stuff magically reappeared in her apartment. It felt good, really good. At the time, I was a paralegal at a criminal defense firm. I’d literally never contributed a single thing of value to the world before. And so, after a lot of deliberation, I said, *I have to keep doing this. I have to feel this way again.* And there it is.”

She takes my answer in, then hesitates before the next question, like she’s uncomfortable asking it. “You mention robbery,” she says, and I have pretty good idea of where she’s going. “Now, your identity isn’t exactly a classified state secret, but I don’t feel it’s my place to reveal it here. I do want to talk, though, about your past a bit. Your criminal record, for example. It’s unexpectedly extensive.”

“Ah, yes. My misguided youth. Look, I’ve never pretended to be perfect. I don’t advertise my mistakes, but I know I can’t hide them either. So yes, when I was a teenager, I did a little shoplifting, broke into a few neighbors’ houses and engaged in some minor vandalism. Wrong, obviously, but all misdemeanor crap. I did a lot of community service and court-mandated counseling in my teen years. But it’s not like I had some chronic deep-rooted hatred for authority or society. I was young and stupid and acting out because I didn’t know what else to do.”



“Did those experiences motivate you to turn your life around?”

“I wouldn't put it that way, but I think there's a connection. It's only natural that, after all of that, someone like me seeks out a career where the skills of a criminal could be seen as an advantage. You case your neighbor's house to bust in when they're out of town, for example, you're learning and honing surveillance techniques. If you can pick a lock, work around a security system, disable alarms, that's going to eventually come in handy. A good pick-pocket has quick hands and great coordination. These abilities have countless useful applications on the right side of the law. Of course, if you're just some jackass who shot up a liquor store or smacked an old lady around in an alley, you're pretty much a complete waste of space and oxygen, but I was more than that.”

“Why the name? This one in particular, that is.”

“Coming up with a name is tricky. It really is. If for no other reason than because most of the good ones are already taken by fictional characters. And believe me, a vigilante's got enough troubles without having to fight off copyright lawyers.”

“Just so we're clear, you don't actually believe you have super powers, correct?”

“Well, I've been told I'm an uncommonly good dancer, but other than that, no.”

“Who tells you you're a good dancer?”

“Other white men who can't dance, mostly.”

She giggles just a little. Putting her professional face back on, she asks, “What do you do now that your pornography career is over?”

“I don't know.” I scratch my head with a sigh. “I really don't. It turns out, in the fine print of my contract there was this non-compete clause that bans me from going out

in this costume without their approval for the next two years. Technically, sitting here today, I'm violating that. But that's just how important this interview is to me, Daisy.

“I have no idea where I go from here.”

I tilt my head back and drink up the last of my shake. She smiles again.

## CHAPTER 14

Ted awoke the next morning in Everett's bed, an arrangement he was not at all comfortable with, but it was made necessary by the winter wind constantly lashing through the boards Greg had temporarily nailed in place of the twice-shattered window next to the living room couch he had been using. He heard voices and the hum of large vehicles' engines outside, but looking out the window to investigate would have required walking across the room. He didn't want to see anything else in that bedroom, any of the Night Watchman memorabilia or other reminders that this was not where he should be. He kept his eyes down, watching his own feet step out into the hall and down the stairs.

The day's newspapers were all laid out on the kitchen table when Ted entered the room. Jasmine was standing over them, a lit cigarette shaking between her fingers. The front pages of four papers screamed at Ted, each displaying images of Everett in his Night Watchman costume with mocking headlines like "Night Watch-Out!" and "Super-Zero!" At first, he only glanced at them through unfocused eyes, his brain still asleep.

"Have you seen this?" Jasmine asked.

Ted looked back at the stairs she had seen him lurch down moments earlier. "I just woke up," he said.

"Well," she said, pausing to drag on the cigarette, "look."

"I'm going to pour some coffee first."

“No, Ted,” Jasmine slapped the table. “Look. What are we going to do?”

This time, Ted studied the papers more carefully. He recognized most of the photos from the Daily Bugle website, but there was one unfamiliar image in the *New York Post* that appeared to show Everett unconscious slumped over a pile of trash bags. “The first thing I’m going to do,” he said, “I’m going to kill whoever took this damn photo. After that, I don’t know, you want to maybe meet for brunch somewhere?”

“This isn’t funny, Ted.”

“I’m serious.” He flipped the paper over to show the far less offensive sports section cover on the back page. “Who the fuck takes a picture like that?”

“The pictures are far from our biggest problem right now,” Jasmine said. She nodded toward the front of the house. “They’re already camped out on the sidewalk.”

“I know. Don’t worry. I’ve dealt with the press before. We’ll get through it. We just can’t go doing something that’ll make it worse.

“Like what?”

Ted thought about it. “Pretty much anything Greg might be inclined to do.”

“Peachy,” Jasmine flicked what was left of her burning cigarette into the sink.

Ted surveyed the newspapers once more, momentarily relieved that the *New York Express* wasn’t among them, but he then remembered that Cassidy’s paper didn’t have a print edition at all. He felt a nauseous tremble when he thought of what might be online. Still, if he had an ally in the press, he believed he could use her somehow.

"Have you seen my phone?" he asked, craning his neck to scan the couch and coffee table in the living room. Not seeing his phone, he decided it would best to look at the website before he called Cassidy anyway.

"Where are you going?" Jasmine asked as he turned and headed toward the stairs.

"I need a computer," he said. "Keep the coffee hot. I'll be back."

He rushed up the steps, two or three at a time, which was a significant exertion for him this early in the morning. He briefly worried about Jasmine's potential reaction to him using his nephew's computer, but that seemed like a smaller, easier problem to deal with after the fact. When he got to the bedroom, he saw his cell phone resting in the mess of sheets he left behind when he tumbled out of bed. Once he started up Everett's laptop and made his way to the *New York Express* site, the nauseous feeling returned.

It was the front page story there, of course, with the headline "Washed Up Hero's Kin Washes Out" and Cassidy's name in small, bold letters beneath it. *William Ross isn't who he says he is*, it began, and it painted an even less flattering portrait of his life and his family than the other articles had. Ted read the story quickly, his eyes drawn to the most disconcerting passages. *Ted Walker hid from his past for years...Nephew left in critical condition...Dysfunctional family dynamic...Misguided idealism...Repeating his uncle's embarrassing failure as a hero...Unclear whether he will become another casualty of the Night Watchman's Quixotic three-decade war on crime.*

After giving the article a second read and taking another moment to digest it, Ted sat back in Everett's chair and dialed Cassidy Fulbright's number on his phone. She picked up after just one ring. He could tell she had been expecting his call.

“So you saw the paper then?” she said before he even had a chance to speak.

“What the hell, Cassidy?”

“I had nothing to do with the headline,” she said, trying to sound sympathetic, as if she was still on his side.

“But you wrote the damn article.”

“Yes.” An edge in her voice indicated her patience was already fraying. “I have a job to do, Ted. I’m a reporter. Occasionally I do report things.”

“You couldn’t have warned me?” Ted asked.

She thought for a moment before offering what he felt were empty excuses. “It was pretty late when they decided to run with it. I didn’t want to wake you. I was going to call you this morning.”

“When?” he asked skeptically.

“Well, nowish. It’s not my fault you called me first,” she replied. “What time do you people get up over there?”

“We have a lot going on. Especially with the local news trucks on our lawn.”

“How bad is it?”

“I’m sorry,” he shouted into the phone, “can you speak up? The News 4 chopper is hovering kind of low.”

“Point taken.”

“You burned me.”

“I didn’t burn you,” she explained. “Every other paper in town was going with this story today. And frankly, my editor was going to run it with or without my byline.”

“So obviously you chose 'with.'”

“Yes. Obviously.” Her guard was back up, her tone growing heated. “I have a career to worry about. I met you three days ago. Where do you think my priorities are?”

“We had a deal.”

“As far as I'm concerned, we still do. Nothing we agreed to precluded me from writing that story.”

“What about loyalty?” he asked, running down his mental list of complaints.

“To what?” she laughed. “To you? You haven't stopped mocking and looking down at me since I met you.”

“We were bantering,” he said, surprised by her accusation but aware it may have been true, “like characters in a 40s screwball comedy.”

“Okay, one, I've never seen one of those, and two, calling me fat is calling me fat no matter what movie you think we're in.”

“That's what this is about, isn't it? The fat joke?”

“Yes, Ted.” It was as if he could hear her eyes roll at the suggestion. “I wrote that entire article because you said I needed to exercise more. Because I'm really that insecure. And by the way, you never told me any of this was off the record.”

“I didn't think I had to.”

“That was your mistake, not mine.”

Ted's eyes drifted to the old newspaper articles about the Night Watchman that Everett had pinned to his wall. “You're right. It was my mistake,” he said.

“You're a source. I'm a reporter. What did you expect?”

“Some discretion maybe.”

“Come on.” Cassidy spoke louder and more defensively than before. “I was on this story before anyone else. I had exclusive access to the victim’s family. I had you. I had details I don’t even think the police have yet. You’re insane if you think I’m not going to take credit for that and break the damn news in my paper.”

“I thought you were going to wait until you had more facts.”

“Ted, I couldn’t wait any longer.” She tried again emphatically to get him to see her perspective. “I don’t control the news cycle. The story was going to break. You saw it on the web yourself. Frankly, I’m shocked it didn’t get out there sooner. But when I skip out of my office in the middle of the day to follow up on a lead, when I spend hours conducting interviews in the field, my editors expect me to come back with something interesting enough to justify my paycheck. I couldn’t do nothing.”

“So you just wrote everything you know?”

“Almost everything.” She paused for a moment, suddenly suspicious. “Why? Are you saying there’s something I don’t know?”

“Maybe there is, maybe there isn’t,” he said, reveling in her desperation for a scoop. “I’m sure as hell not going to tell you now.”

“God, I can’t believe you’re pissed at me. You should be thanking me.”

“Is that right? For what?” he asked.

“For one thing,” she said, “you wouldn’t have found Josh Kord without me.”

“I would have eventually,” Ted said in defense of his investigative prowess.

“And all of the computer research I did that was so over your head?”



He knew she had a point there but didn't want to admit it. "I solved plenty of crimes before there even was an internet. I'd have gotten by."

"Believe that all you want. You still owe me an interview."

He laughed and shook his head, "Nothing I want to say to you right now is printable in a family publication."

"Your maturity is simply astounding. I have to get to the office. Goodbye"

"We're not done here, lady," he said, but she had already hung up.

Ted threw his phone onto the bed and walked out of the room. Halfway down the stairs, he heard a crash outside. Jasmine was standing by the open front door staring out with a coffee mug in her hand.

"What was that?" Ted asked.

"That was Greg making it worse," she said, giving the mug to Ted.

"Thanks," Ted said. He tried to spot Greg in the small mob of reporters and cameramen from all of the metro area papers and news stations on the lawn, but strong morning sunlight shining over the roof of a neighbor's house obscured his view. "Who did he hit this time?"

"Does it matter? Just go out there and stop him, Ted."

Ted looked down into his coffee cup; he could feel it cooling in his hands. He wanted nothing more than to return to the kitchen and drink it, but all of those newspapers were still waiting for him in there. He sighed, gave the mug back to Jasmine and opened the screen door. Approaching the media—the reporters with microphones and notepads, the cameramen, the white vans with satellite equipment running up into the

sky—he worried that all this attention would be too much for his sister to handle. Greg was shouting at a reporter who was rubbing his jaw, but Ted couldn't understand and didn't care what he was saying. He grabbed Greg's arm and pulled him away.

"Greg, listen to me," Ted whispered. He was very careful to move out of earshot of any cameras or microphones. "These people feed on conflict. They seek it out. You know what happens when you smack one of them in the face? They all start following you even closer until you smack one again. Then they keep doing it. The media is like a barking dog, okay? It doesn't care about positive or negative reinforcement. The fact that it gets your attention at all gives it what it wants."

"So what?" Greg asked, his anger very slowly subsiding. "We ignore them?"

"We do. And for a while, they're going to chatter about, *oh, they're ignoring us, what does that mean, what are they hiding*, bullshit like that. Let them. Eventually they will get bored unless we do something interesting, so we're not going to. Are we clear?"

"Can't I hit just one more before we go inside?" Greg said. Ted hoped he wasn't serious, but he couldn't rule out the possibility that he was. "I mean, the damage is already done, right?"

"Oh, this is not going to be a good day," Ted said.

They walked back to the house, ignoring the reporters who all shouted questions at once, an unintelligible chorus of babble that continued even after they were inside.

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The hospital parking lot was just as infested with media as Jasmine's front lawn had been, a dozen reporters and their crews camped out waiting. The gathered throng

swept into action the moment Ted, Jasmine and Greg got out of her car, seemingly coming at them from all directions.

“Ignore them,” Ted whispered repeatedly to the other two as they approached.

The swarm moved with them to the entrance, but all three kept their heads down and didn’t speak. Security guards stopped them from following when the family stepped through the doors. Basking in the relative peacefulness of the hospital halls, they patiently waited for the elevator to take them to the ICU.

Greg paused at the nurse’s station in Everett’s unit. He told Ted and Jasmine he’d catch up but first he wanted to talk to someone about maintaining tighter security on the floor. On some level, Ted took offense at the notion that he couldn’t be counted on to keep his nephew safe, but on another level, he knew that was most likely true and appreciated Greg sparing him the indignity of admitting it.

When they got up to Everett’s room, Ted was pleased to see him awake, though his energy was clearly low and his head was slightly tilted toward the windows. From that angle, Ted didn’t think he’d be able to see the reporters below. He wondered if Everett knew his story had made its leap into the news. Nobody else mentioned it, however, so he opted not to bring it up either, assuming either Jasmine and Greg didn’t want to stress the kid out or they were all taking his advice and ignoring the problem.

“How are you today, kid?” he said.

Everett sluggishly turned to face them, an empty stare on his face that could easily have been the result of medication, exhaustion or some combination of the two. “Sore,” he said, visibly trying to muster up some energy for his visitors.

“The pain goes away,” Ted offered. “Most of it, anyway.”

Everett looked down at the cast on his arm and tried with little success to move his legs. “At least I’ve got some time to heal before football season starts up,” he said.

“Man,” Ted said as he slipped into the chair next to the bed, “I don’t know how you kept your game up when you were going out there at night all that time. I couldn’t even hold down a job at a dry cleaners while I…” Everett coughed, the intensity of his heaving awkward and transparently fake. Ted looked at Jasmine. “Nevermind.”

“What do you mean?” she said, stepping closer to them.

“What? Nothing. I just lost a lot of jobs is all.”

“Ted,” she said. She stared daggers at him, “You just said, ‘all that time.’ What did you mean? I thought this was the first time.”

“Yeah, see, about that…” Ted trailed off, hoping Everett would pick up from there and tell the truth.

“Uncle Ted,” Everett said. “No.”

“This was the first time, right?” Jasmine asked.

“That may have been a slight underestimate, it turns out.” Ted turned to Everett and urged him, “Ev, you should really tell her yourself.”

“I don’t know how to—”

“Get used to it,” Ted said, displaying more of his irritation than he’d have liked. He tried to tone down his emotion, “You have to tell everybody everything eventually.”

“Everything about what?” Jasmine said, now looming directly over Ted.

“Okay, hang on,” Ted pushed back. “Jas, really, you haven’t figured out what we’re talking about here? Come on. Do the math.”

“I want to hear him say it.” It was a stern voice he’d never heard from her before.

Ted jumped in again before Everett had a chance to reply or evade. “No, you don’t,” he said. “You want to pretend none of this ever happened and get the fuck on with our lives. We all do.”

“What I want is my son back.”

The three of them traded eloquently silent looks, all of the information any of them needed already made clear.

“Hey, hey,” Greg said, bursting into the room with his arms full of bags of Sun Chips. He dropped them on the corner of Everett’s bed. “Check it, some dude in a black robe was handing these out for free in the waiting room. What’s going on up in here?”

Jasmine spoke first, “I just found out Everett has been running around playing Night Watchman for six months. Can you believe that?”

Greg rested against the wall and breathed a heavy sigh. “Oh, good,” he said. “So you know about that now.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that is a load off.” He grinned broadly for a moment but his eyes went wide as he realized he said something he very much should not have said.

“Wait,” Jasmine said, approaching him. “‘Now?’ You already knew?”

“Christ.” He stood straight and stepped away. “How about I go back out, come back in and we start over like I didn’t say anything?”

“Greg, what are you talking about?”

He surrendered with a shake of his head, “I am so not good with secrets.”

“When did you find out?” Ted asked. He couldn’t quite tell if he had a right to feel betrayed under the circumstances, but he certainly did.

“Longest three months of my life, I tell you.”

“Three months?” Jasmine almost shrieked her words. “You’ve known about this for three freaking months?”

“I told him, mom,” Everett said.

“You told him?” Ted looked at Everett, then Greg, then back at Everett, then back at Greg. “Him? And you didn’t tell me?”

“You were gone, Uncle Ted,” he said weakly. “Greg was here.”

“Damn straight,” Greg said.

“You’re still in trouble, mister,” Jasmine yapped and he shrank against the wall.

The argument could easily have continued for hours, and they all knew it. None of them had the strength for it, though, and they also all knew that. Mercifully, Jasmine stepped away toward the window, a boxer returning to her corner after the round. Greg warily reached out to the bed to pick up a bag of Sun Chips. He popped the bag open and offered it to Ted, who got up, held Everett’s limp hand for a moment, then walked out.

“I hate hospitals,” he grumbled under his breath.

1999

He calls himself the Fire Man. I think. I'm a bit fuzzy on the details.

But he's angry, he hates the Night Watchman and he has this tendency to set things on fire that makes him difficult to ignore. People tell me he's named himself after a villain from my animated series. At first, we all got a good laugh out of that; if nothing else, it was nice to know somebody had been watching. But last week, he torched my best friend Pete's car, which means he either knows who I am or he's getting close. Now, a building a half a block from my apartment is burning and witnesses reported seeing a man on the roof cackling at the sky. That's not a coincidence.

It's an invitation.

This ends tonight. When I arrive on the scene, I can hear some of the firefighters laughing, probably making jokes at my expense. That's fine. I don't need their respect and frankly I haven't done much lately to earn it. They've been working for the better part of an hour clearing the building and containing the fire. They did their jobs. Now I have to do mine, which is to go upstairs and faceoff with a crazy person who wants to kill me.

A couple of cops try to stop me from heading into the inferno—the building is already empty, aside from the nutcase on the roof—but if I'm right, all of this is my fault. I think I can make it up safely on the fire escape, anyway. With their help, I pull myself up the ladder to the first flight. The climb starts out easy, but most of the windows are

either open or broken, waves of thick black smoke pouring out of them directly in my face. Though the bandana thankfully minimizes the amount of smoke I'm inhaling, I suck a little in with each breath. By the fourth floor, every step drains me more than it should. What I get, I suppose, for abandoning my daily training schedule last year so I could get an extra hour of sleep in the morning. Most days, I don't doubt that trade-off is worth it, but every night that I have to put on this costume is a reminder that I'm 15 long years older than I was when all of this seemed like a good idea.

I carry my spent body up the eighth flight of stairs, my costume growing soggy with sweat from the heat of the flames spreading inside. I try to look back the way I came—perhaps being too optimistic in my assumption that I'm going to need a way down eventually. It's all a vertiginous spiral of black and gray. I can't even see the ground.

When I finally heave myself over the top of the roof access ladder from the tenth floor balcony, I'm welcomed by a frosty breeze and a rush of fresh, clean air. Once I get up on my feet, I rip off the bandana, filling my lungs so fast I almost choke. I scan the roof after I regain composure. He's standing there by the far edge, his figure slightly obscured by smoke puffing through vents between us. I have to admit, I'm a tad disappointed when I get a closer look at the guy.

I don't know what I was expecting. I've never faced a costumed villain before. I've never even heard of one popping up in the real world. So congratulations for that, you trailblazing fruitcake. There does need to be a first for everything. In my head, I guess I imagined he would be some kind of dignified evil genius. Instead, he looks...I don't know...homeless.



He wears a dirty, cheap Halloween costume replica of a fireman's uniform, with the big yellow-and-black jacket and the helmet. His jacket is stained by dirt and soot, torn in several places. In his rubber-gloved hands, he holds something that resembles a gasoline pump nozzle with a hose that runs to two large tanks on his back. Where the hell did he get a flamethrower? I want one. It's hard to tell under all of that gear, but he looks small, scrawny, like those tanks weigh about as much as he does and it's taking everything he has to keep from falling.

He stands there, still as ice despite the heat, the heavy jacket unmoved by the raging wind. The helmet masks the expression on his face, but I don't doubt he's laughing.

"I am the fire," he shouts, presumably to me, though God only knows what audience he sees in his head. Is it fair that I'm assuming he's insane? Maybe there's a perfectly good reason for all this I'm not seeing.

Still, I'd bet all my money on insane.

I take a few tentative steps toward him, watching carefully as his trigger finger twitches. "I'm sure you are," I say. It's hard not to sound patronizing.

"Fear my flames," he says. A stream of fire flows from the nozzle into the space between us. I shield my face and stumble backwards. Once I find my balance again, I yell out, "I do. They're quite hot. Good job." I point down emphatically, "Can we talk about your flames downstairs?"

His only response is to shout even louder, "Fear my flames!"

"Okay," I say, again creeping forward to narrow the distance between us, "what we're going to do right now is put down our flamethrowers."

"Burn," he says.

Then it happens.

He raises the nozzle and pulls the trigger, but instead of bursting outward, the fire erupts in his hand. His burning glove drops the nozzle, the hose connecting it to the tanks ruptures, splashing gasoline onto his costume. In an instant, the flames flash over him and his raggedy coat lights up. For an agonizing minute, he remains there, cooking before my eyes. Then he screams this shrill, ear-stabbing cry of pain and rage like I've never heard before. He turns and leaps off the roof, fire trailing behind him. I run to the edge, pointlessly, just in time to watch him smash through the hood of a Chrysler on the street below, still burning. The cops are shouting, desperately trying to get curious bystanders to back away from the body. Firefighters race toward him with hoses. At first, I wonder why. There's no way he survived that fall. Then I remember the full gas tanks on his back. The fire coming off his body intensifies, but there's nothing I can do from here. The tanks explode, taking him and most of the car with them. The firefighters douse the wreckage with water until every last spark of the flames is gone.

Watching all of this from the roof above, I cannot think or speak or move.

## CHAPTER 15

Ted had taken a cab home from the hospital, asking the driver to pick him up at the loading dock on a side street to avoid any media outside the main entrance. The best feeling he had all day was sitting in that cab as it slowly rolled past the TV news crews, completely clueless that he was slipping right through their miserable fingers. He was also relieved when he reached Jasmine's house and the press was, at least for the moment, gone. He strode inside, took off his coat and shoes and dropped onto the couch, allowing the icy air sweeping through the boarded-up window frame to flow over him, and he quickly fell asleep. He didn't know how much later it was when his phone rang.

"We have a situation," Detective Morris barked, words gushing out urgently.

"Your presence is required. I'm coming to get you."

"What are you—"

"Now," he stressed. "I'll be there in five. Bring your mask, Walker."

"I don't have—"

Morris had hung up. The phone fell to the carpet beneath Ted's feet when he tried to turn it off. With minimal information about the situation and why he was needed, he found it difficult to prepare. If the detective had stayed on the line, he'd have heard Ted explain that he didn't have any part of the Night Watchman costume anymore. Whatever wasn't stained or torn beyond repair after Everett's fight was in a police evidence locker

somewhere. His only option was to throw on the trenchcoat and scarf he wore on his reconnaissance mission at the crime scene. Once he had the coat on, Ted swept through Everett's room, digging in dresser drawers and closet shelves, tossing clothes out onto the floor. If the kid was anything like him, there had to be a cache of low-tech weapons or gadgets somewhere. He scoured every potential hiding place he could think of, though, and all he had to show for it was another flashlight and a Swiss Army knife. He stuffed them in his pockets. By the time he was done with that search, Morris was already parked outside, honking the horn of his patrol car.

Ted hurdled down the stairs, stumbling toward the bottom and only narrowly avoiding twisting an ankle or worse. As he ran out the door, he clumsily tried to wrap the scarf around his neck so it would partially cover his face. He gave up out of fear of strangling himself or falling in front of a detective who already had relatively little respect for him. Instead he simply held the scarf in his hand and climbed in the car.

"What is this about?" he asked.

Morris shook his head. "I needed the other you."

"It's not like I flip a switch." Ted wondered how it could matter what he was wearing at this point. "I don't have a costume anymore. This is the best I can do."

"Fine. I'll explain on the way." Before he pulled away from the curb, Morris laid out his ground rules for the night, "But let's be clear: you are not my partner. You are not deputized here. You do not have any authority here. You don't get to arrest anybody. You don't get to hit anybody. You will do what I tell you when I tell you. You will not have a gun. You will wear this vest." He pointed at a Kevlar vest on the floor in front of Ted.

“And don't get the wrong idea—it's not that I care if you get shot. I just don't want to handle the paperwork that you dying would entail. Are we clear?”

Ted bristled at the condescending tone. “You don't have to treat me like a rookie, you know. You were probably in Kindergarten when I started doing this.”

“Oh, right,” Morris laughed. “And how well did that work out for you?”

Steaming, Ted grumbled, “I'll take the damn vest.”

Morris turned on the siren and floored the accelerator.

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There were several other police cars at the scene when they arrived. On the way, Morris had only described the situation vaguely, saying they were investigating a crime that they believed Ted could provide unique insight into. Ted couldn't discern if there was any sarcasm behind his words, but he assumed there probably was. He went along anyway, spurred equally by a desire to prove the detective's worst assumptions wrong and a need to accomplish something at least vaguely heroic. Besides, there didn't seem to be a graceful way to back out once he was in the car; it would appear cowardly, incompetent or selfish, and he didn't want to feel any of those things at that moment.

Ignoring a small gaggle of local reporters who buzzed with questions on the perimeter, they ducked under a barrier of yellow police tape and approached an area where several other officers were gathered. When they got close, the officers parted to make room for them around a body. At first, all Ted could see was a stiff, hairy leg with a black boot sticking out of the shadows. He paused.

“What are we doing?” he asked.

“Surveying the crime scene,” Morris said. “Come on. It’ll be fun. You scared of a little real police work?”

He was a bit scared, but he wasn’t going to admit it. It was one of those times when he deeply regretted allowing himself to stray so far from his crime-fighting roots—not only in recent years as a teacher or in the 90s when he set out to commercialize the Night Watchman brand, but even before that in the late 80s moving so smoothly into advocacy and charity work. One of the many reasons he had fired Josh Kord as an intern was because of the kid’s constant whining that he was taking the easy way out, taking on the ideological fights because they didn’t require him to break a sweat like the physical ones. He wasn’t necessarily wrong, but Ted got sick of hearing it day in and day out. Now, though, he was walking into a crime scene, apparently a homicide, a half dozen cops were watching him, and all he could think about were ways to screw this up.

“Everybody,” Morris announced to the assembled officers, “this is the Night Watchman. You can call him Ted.”

Ted didn’t register their reactions, instead focusing his attention on the body as he got close enough to see the rest of it. The jungle-print toga, the wig—the face may have been an unrecognizable jigsaw of blood and flesh, but he froze upon a dreadful but obvious realization.

“Crap,” he said. “I know this kid.”

“I figured there was a decent chance of that,” Morris said, nodding proudly in front of the other cops like he’d just won a bet, which Ted figured it was entirely possible he had done. “So what's Captain Caveman's deal?”

Ted stepped forward and crouched to get a better look. "He calls himself the Neanderthal," he replied. "His real name's Adam, I think. I don't know what his deal is."

Morris' foot tapped a handgun on the ground next to the body. "What kind of caveman carries a gun?" he asked.

Ted shook his head. "The very, very stupid kind."

"No argument from me there."

Morris stepped away to speak to one of the other investigators. While he was gone, Ted took a closer look at the body, examining wounds and bruises in the upper body visible through the Neanderthal's torn costume. He felt an involuntary urge to touch the body and began to reach for it, but stopped himself when he heard Morris' footsteps behind him.

"What happened here?" Ted asked, rising from his already-sore knees.

"We're working on that." Morris said. He flipped through pages of a small notepad, trying to make out his own handwriting. He pointed at areas of the body and crime scene as he described them. "Forensics guys say he got hit in the face, you know, a lot. Beaten badly. At least two bullet wounds on his chest. A few more shells than that over here, so some shots must have missed. We think he fired a few himself. There's a bit of a blood trail at the other end of the alley. We'll test that, hope for a match. They'll run ballistics too, see if they can tie the bullets that hit him to anything in the system, but it's going to take a while."

Ted backed away from the body unsteadily. "Why am I here?" he asked.

“Because I figured that more likely than not you'd know the guy, and that you'd know what he's doing here.”

Glancing at the body once more before turning to Morris, Ted said, “Well, you were half-right.”

“You really don't know why he's here?” Morris asked. Ted was unnerved by his accusatory tone. He didn't feel he'd done anything to deserve such skepticism and hostility.

“I've only talked to him once in my life,” Ted said, reaching back in his mind to recall details of a conversation he had mostly pushed aside, “and he was ranting about coming out here to do...I don't know. Something. Vaguely something.”

“Why were you talking to him?”

“He and Everett were on some kind of—they don't call themselves a team,” he had no desire to venture into the nuances of the description the members of Power Force gave him, “but a team of superheroes together and he has this revenge kick going.”

“So this is about your nephew,” Morris said.

It didn't sound like a question, but Ted hedged his response, “I don't know that.”

“Yeah, you do,” Morris said dismissively as he walked away.

“I tried to talk him out of this,” Ted said, following.

“I'm sure he appreciated that effort while he was dying in the gutter.”

Ted pushed past Morris and blocked his way out of the alley.



“God,” he said, “what do you expect from me? I can't control what some stupid teenager does. There are no magic words to stop this shit. If I could, don't you think I would have stopped my own goddamn nephew?”

The detective was unable to respond at first, taken aback by the sudden outburst. Eventually, he smiled and said, “Felt good finally getting that off your chest, didn't it?”

“I'm done taking the blame for other people's actions,” Ted said.

Morris shrugged, pulled a packet of gum from his coat pocket and popped a strip in his mouth. He held the pack out to Ted, who just glared back.

“Why did you bring me out here?” Ted asked, pointing at Adam's body, and he grew queasy when his vision tightened on it. “Why did you show me this?”

“Because somebody has to put an end to it before it happens again.”

Ted eyed him suspiciously, “Are you asking me to solve your case?”

“No. God, no. Of course not.” Morris chuckled at the thought. “I'm asking you— Look, every crime has a victim, right? Well, how's about we do this: let's do it the easy way. Let's get rid of the potential victims. If there aren't any live dumbass kids roaming the streets in tights, there won't be any dead ones either.”

After allowing that to sink in, Ted sighed and said, “That's some real airtight logic there, detective.”

“You have a better plan?” Morris asked, and Ted realized the man was completely serious about the idea. He still wasn't clear on how he fit into it, though. “I don't know what we're dealing with here. It could be unrelated to what happened to your nephew, sure. To be honest, I'm surprised this kind of thing doesn't happen more often with these

young, untrained guys getting themselves into fights with hardcore thugs all the time. But I've got two incidents in one week with too many similarities, so I'm not about to dismiss a possible connection. If I've got a spree on my hands, I'm going to do what I can to keep the likely targets out of the crosshairs. Work with me here."

"You just don't want a bunch of heroes getting in your way."

Morris nodded, "I'm considering it a win-win situation."

"I told you—" When he began to speak, Ted's thoughts were derailed by his inability to get Adam's body out of his field of view. "Can we talk about this someplace where I'm not staring into his dead eyes?" he said.

Morris nodded and they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"I told you I tried to stop him," Ted said, watching cars pass slowly as police pulled back some of the roadblocks set up while they were recovering evidence.

"Yeah, but did you really?"

Still attempting to shake off the image of the corpse, Ted got defensive. "I was talking to him through a computer screen. What do you want me to do?"

"Try harder."

He said it as if it was that simple. "Fuck you," Ted replied. Then he walked up the block and sat on the front steps of a nearby apartment building.

At first, he simply stared at the cracks in the sidewalk before him, following them with his eyes, comfortably alone. But Morris' voice interrupted that. "What I'm saying, Walker," he explained, his shadow now eclipsing the streetlight above Ted, "is you can

go out to these people and talk to them. Warn them. Keep them off our streets while the big boys clean this up.”

“How do you think I’m going to do that?” Ted asked, frustrated by the assumption that he had such influence over a community he knew hardly anything about, one he didn’t even know existed until a few days earlier. “Gather everybody around the table at the Hall of Justice? It doesn’t work that way. There are no Avengers to assemble out there. Christ, it’s not like we have secret clubhouses and decoder rings.”

“You do have conventions. A shitload of freaks are down in Manhattan for that, aren’t they? Only a matter of time before they make their way up here. That’s what I’m talking about. You know I’m right.”

It was not a responsibility that he wanted or that he would have asked for, but faced with a choice between potentially protecting others like himself and his nephew or doing nothing, Ted didn’t feel he had a choice at all. But, he said, “So we’re clear, I’m not referring to you as ‘the big boys.’”

“Call us whatever you want, as long as you get the point across.”

Ted rubbed his forehead, uncertain of what he’d just agreed to. “I don’t think I’m as persuasive as you think I am.”

“Let’s hope you’re wrong,” Morris said.

They both remained there, an awkward stillness settling between them, until an officer down the street shouted for Morris.

“Duty calls. Here.” Morris handed Ted his sweat-dampened handkerchief before he walked away. “You’ve got blood on your coat.”

Morris spat his chewed gum at a trash can as he passed, ignorant as it fell short and plopped onto the ground. Ted stared at the wad on the concrete, unable to summon the strength to alert the detective or to do anything about it himself.

Ted brushed his hand over the front of the trenchcoat, feeling a wet, sticky streak of Adam's blood that he must have picked up while he was hunched over the body in the alley. Wiping it with the handkerchief only seemed to spread the stain. That was going to be difficult to explain to Greg when he returned the coat. He considered burying the thing in the back of a closet and hoping Greg wouldn't need it before he left town, but the sight of paramedics rolling a body bag past him reminded him that he had more pressing concerns. He wanted to be anywhere else, but he was too far from his sister's house to walk and he didn't relish the prospect of another car ride with Detective Morris. He checked the pockets of the pants and trenchcoat, but he didn't have his wallet, which seemed to further restrict his options. Pulling himself up from the stairs, he called out for Morris' attention to timidly ask if he could borrow \$20 for a taxi. Morris slapped the money into his hand. Ted pulled out his cell phone to call the cab company, but not to take him home. Not yet.

1986

Morton M. Merriweather III's secretary won't stop staring at me.

This is why I try not to wear the costume during the day. Being seen in the sunlight washes away the mystique of my character. What this city needs is a Day Watchman, somebody I can leave this kind of work to, but that is not the case. And no matter how much you beg or what tricks you try, billionaire philanthropists' offices are reluctant to schedule late night meetings with strangers who refuse to provide their real names, so what else could I do?

When the secretary told me Merriweather was running late for our 2 pm appointment, I didn't complain. I nodded politely, checked my watch and settled into a very comfortable, likely very expensive couch. That was five minutes ago. In front of my seat is a large glass-top table with a wide selection of magazines spread across it. I'm hesitant to pick one. This is, after all, my opening gambit. Every move counts. I have a reputation to uphold, a position of strength I can't afford to abandon. What if he comes in and I'm sitting here flipping through the pages of some cooking magazine? Or *Modern Bride*? He's never going to take me seriously then.

I take a moment to adjust my goggles.

It's hotter in here than I expected.

This meeting has been a long time coming, ever since I saw him on TV at some press conference with his expensive suit, slicked-back hair and fancy sunglasses. I don't care what kind of shelter he was opening. Something's just not right about him.

As a general rule, I don't trust rich people with alliterative names.

Morton M. Merriweather III. Billionaire. Humanitarian. Loved and respected by so many who don't know better. What are you hiding?

I don't know what I'm looking for, but I'm going to find it.

All heroes have their nemesis, and I've been aware for a while that I'm lacking one. A Joker or a Lex Luthor, Red Skull, Doctor Octopus, Professor Zoom, Doctor Doom. You have to respect a villain with a doctorate, I think.

I don't know what Merriweather's post-graduate education is, but there aren't any degrees on the wall out here or anything. Ten minutes late. I begrudgingly read the cover story in a month-old issue of *Time*.

I give him almost twenty more minutes before the heat of the reception area becomes too suffocating under the layers of my costume. Sweat dripping from my forehead, I look at Merriweather's secretary and point at my watch. She shakes her head, then picks up a ringing phone and turns away from me.

Screw it. I'm done playing by his rules.

I grab the latest *Sports Illustrated* from the pile on the table and dash across the office to catch an arriving elevator.

"You haven't seen the last of me," I shout with a raised fist before the elevator doors close, but I don't think the secretary heard me. A bike messenger sharing the

elevator car with me gives me an uncomfortable look. He shuffles as far away as the claustrophobic car allows.

Well played, Merriweather. Well played.

## CHAPTER 16

The shattering of the window echoed in Ted's ear as he reached through the fractured pane and groped blindly for the doorknob to let himself in. His eyes darted around the backyard for signs that anyone heard him kick through the glass. No lights, no sirens, no barking dogs. No neighbors peering down at him through fluttering bedroom curtains. He moved carefully, even though he had already taken down the unarmed guard on the sidewalk and his reconnaissance hadn't identified any others. He ignored the stinging pain and the blood that trickled down his right leg. Trying not to cut his arm on the jagged remnants of the window as his fingers flailed about inside, he finally caught the knob and clicked the lock. He slithered in, avoiding the glass shards that now littered the marble kitchen floor.

Once inside, Ted pulled Everett's miniature flashlight from his trenchcoat pocket. He tapped a button on the handle that created a thin beam of blue light. He swept the light across the room to refresh his memory of the layout—aside from some impressive and expensive-looking new appliances and a deluxe coffee/espresso machine he could only dream of owning, the kitchen hadn't changed much in the 15 years since he last broke into Morton Merriweather's house—then he focused it on the tiles ahead as he shuffled softly toward the living room. Ted froze, one foot on the beige carpet, the other still on the kitchen floor, when he heard a creak on the staircase. He didn't think anyone was



home, but he knew he had gotten rusty, sloppy, relying too much on his aging and out-of-practice senses, his poor night vision and deteriorating hearing.

He quickly, quietly pressed himself into a corner of the living room that wasn't illuminated by moonlight and streetlight cast through the large windows that faced the road. His eyes, having a moment to adjust somewhat to the darkness, caught a shadow creeping down the stairs. Wishing he still had his old stun gun, Ted surveyed the area around him for anything that could be used as a weapon. A fireplace poker or an umbrella would have been ideal.

Instead, he attempted to roll up the November issue of *Architectural Digest* into some sort of blunt instrument. Despite his caution, the crinkling of the pages alerted the man stepping off the stairs, who flipped a switch to turn on the lights in the foyer. The weak bulbs of a dusty chandelier spread enough light into the living room that Ted realized his hiding place was no longer viable. He watched the man in the foyer, taking note of the wiry toupee that rested like a thick brillo pad on top of Morton Merriweather III's scalp. Hoping to utilize the minor advantage of surprise, Ted strode triumphantly out of the shadows before Morton had time to spot him.

"Hello, Mort," he said in a vain attempt to revive the raspy, intimidating growl of the Night Watchman's whisper.

Morton took in the sight of a man he had not seen in over a decade, and who he had rarely ever seen outside of his garish superhero costume. Ted Walker slouched before him wearing a trenchcoat and loosened scarf. His eyes turned to the gash in Ted's leg, the river of blood and rainwater feeding into a puddle on the carpet.

“Jesus, Ted,” he said. “Is that you? What the hell are you doing here?”

“I think we both know the answer to that,” Ted said, abandoning the disguised voice for his own. “By the way, your security guards are pathetic these days.”

Morton responded with a squint, “I don’t have security guards here.”

“Hmm.” Ted scratched his head and looked back through the kitchen. “It’s entirely possible I pummeled your neighbor a few minutes ago.”

“Always fighting the good fight, eh?” Morton sighed. After a moment, he chuckled, “Ah, I never liked that guy much anyway.”

“Works out well then.”

Morton watched Ted stumble closer and lean against the wall. “Are you drunk?”

“Sadly, no.”

“God, man,” Morton said, trying not to sound disgusted at the state of someone who he had always felt, costume aside, once had a quiet dignity about him, “what’s happened to you?”

Ted rested his gloved hands on the back of a tan leather armchair. “You want the long version or the short version?”

“It was more of a rhetorical, honestly.”

“Let’s get down to it then,” Ted said, straightening his back.

“Okay. Let’s,” Morton said, then he paused, “To what?”

“It.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re—”

“You’re a good liar, Mort,” Ted pointed an accusatory finger. “Always have been.”

Morton shook his head and responded, “Ted, that’s because every time you ever thought I was lying I was telling you the truth.”

Morton stepped into the living room as Ted hung his head low, fighting off the onset of a stiff headache. He glanced in Morton’s direction, but he didn’t speak. Decades of strife weighed down the air between them.

“I was sorry to hear about what happened to the boy,” Morton said. “Everett, was it? Well, it was a tragedy. He was a goddamn kid.”

“Is,” Ted said coldly. “He is a goddamn kid.”

“Poor choice of words. My apologies.” Morton found himself increasingly distracted by the red stain that had followed Ted’s leg across the expensive carpet. “Ted, you’re standing in my living room, you’re sopping wet and you’re bleeding. This is ridiculous. Sit down, please—not on the leather, mind you—and I’ll go get you a towel and a bandage.” He gestured toward a bar against the wall near where Ted was standing, “Pour yourself a drink if you like. I’ll be back.”

Before climbing the stairs, Morton looked back to watch Ted clumsily splash bourbon into a crystal glass. Ted’s face had aged beyond his years, weathered and wrinkled under the chandelier’s soft glow. He considered whether it was wise to let an emotional, potentially unbalanced man drink, but it seemed that, given the circumstances, he had a right to engage in whatever behavior might bring him comfort.

Ted gulped down his first glass, savoring the burn in the back of his throat. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his coat and poured another. He sipped this one more slowly, mindful that this would be a very bad place to get drunk and pass out. Still, he finished and poured another before Morton returned. Glass in hand, he sat in a small wooden chair next to the bar and examined the cut in his leg. Just above his boot, the fabric of his pants was torn from when he had kicked through the window. The wound itself didn't look too deep, but it was wide and it hurt like hellfire to touch.

Walking back into the room, Morton whistled to get Ted's attention. He tossed him a towel and some gauze to dress his leg with. Morton rested in the leather chair as Ted struggled with unsteady hands to wrap the bandage.

"A teenager was killed tonight," Ted said. "Dressed up like a caveman. Dead. Somebody beat him and shot him. I never saw a murder victim before, you know that? All this time. Never. But there he was, right in front of me. Dead. In 25 years, I mean, I've never seen anything like this. Some kid in a stupid costume just like me gunned down in the street."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"That is not what you sign up for." Ted cringed as he applied pressure to his wound. "That's not how this works."

"Is that why you're here?"

Finished bandaging his leg, Ted rocked back in his chair and sipped his drink. "I don't know why I'm here, Morton," he said.

“Ted,” Morton said, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees, “whatever quarrel you may have with me—real or otherwise—I must say this: I respect what you did. It was a remarkable thing. You helped people. That’s what I always aspired to in my life, as well, and there you are. You did it in a ridiculous costume, but you did it.”

“Is this the ‘We’re not that different, you and I’ speech?”

“That is to some extent what I was getting at.”

“We’re quite different.” Ted knocked back the rest of his bourbon. “I have real hair and I’m not evil.”

“This is—you see, this is why I wasn’t going to get involved.” Morton stood and began pacing the room. “My assistant said just send some flowers, maybe a nice note. Don’t engage, don’t make eye contact. ‘Don’t feed the gorilla,’ were her exact words. But here you are and so what other choice do I have?”

He stepped in front of a large window and stared out at his darkened driveway. Patches of snow and ice remained on the lawn from the recent storms. He focused on his own and Ted’s images reflected faintly in the glass.

“I am, as we both well know,” Morton said, pivoting to face Ted, “a man of considerable power and influence in many arenas, but in this community in particular. I can make things happen, Ted. A few phone calls and we could have every law enforcement agency in the state down here by morning searching for the punk who did this. Private investigators, bounty hunters, a snap of my finger and they’re on a plane.”

“That’s all very impressive, Mort,” Ted said. He massaged his temples and looked down at the carpet. “But can we get to the...I’ve got a bastard of a headache.”

“I can help you. I can help your boy.”

“I don’t want your help.” Ted didn’t raise his head to face Morton. He spoke softly but he hoped his words sounded like he meant them, even if maybe he didn’t.

“You need it.”

“I’m doing fine on my own.” He waved Morton away, then rubbed his eyes.

“This isn’t a county school board meeting in 1987.” Morton exhaled loudly and deliberately. “This isn’t something you can just blame on me or anyone else and go on your merry way. I don’t need to tell you how serious this is.”

“No, you don’t.” Ted’s head tilted up with a fierce scowl.

“Right, then. We’re not young men anymore, Ted. You can’t do this on your own. Let me make some calls for you.”

“It won’t do any damn good.” He eyed the bourbon bottle on the bar and considered pouring himself another. Would that be rude? It was, after all, far better than any liquor he could afford. But the dizziness that swirled around him when he tried to stand ended that debate.

“Nor will sitting around here waiting for me to confess to something we both know I had nothing to do with.”

“You’re right.” Ted nodded. Then he sat up, gazing down at the ice cubes swirling in his empty glass. “But about that...you do have something to do with it, Morton. What do you know about Stark Industries?”

“I assume you’re asking because there’s something you think I should know.”

“You should. They run, among other things, a superhero news website and you are one of their primary investors.”

“Ted, do you have any comprehension of the complexities of the finances of a multibillionaire? A superhero news website? What does that cost to operate? A couple hundred thousand a year? Less? My financial advisors have financial advisors who handle deals that small before they brush their teeth in the morning. I’m sure somebody thought this was a wise investment, but if it concerns you so much, I’ll look into it and I’ll shut it down. It is of no consequence to me.”

“I guess that's one problem solved then.”

“If only they were all that simple, eh?”

“If only.”

Ted’s eyes fixated on the empty glass he gripped tightly in his hand. Rage that had simmered within him for days boiled over. He thought of his nephew crippled in a hospital bed. He looked at Morton, an old man worn down and wasting his time placating a defeated enemy who never did a thing for him.

“Damn it!” Ted shouted as he threw the glass at the window.

The glass shattered on impact, but the window was left only slightly cracked. Ted stood and backed away.

“I don’t know why I did that,” Ted said. “Felt good, though.”

“It’s my own fault, really,” Morton said, bending down to carefully collect the shards scattered over the carpet. The smaller pieces were hard to find, though, and he

gave up quickly, making a mental note to have one of his maids clear the area in the morning. “I shouldn’t have let you near the expensive glassware.”

Both men studied the damage Ted caused.

“People used to think you worked for me, you know?” Morton said with a laugh, returning to his armchair. He dumped the glass he had gathered on an antique end table next to him. “Back then. That was always the conspiracy theory. That every time you tried to shut me down it was all just a big publicity stunt. And truth be told, the attention certainly never hurt business. Nobody believed the man in that get-up was real.”

“Maybe they were right about that.” After a deliberative pause, he said, “I’m just a teacher now, Morton.” He motioned toward the bar before walking out, “Thanks for the drink.” Then he nodded to the living room window. “I’m sorry about the window.” He pointed into the kitchen where he had broken in. “That one, too.”

“For whatever it’s worth,” Morton said as Ted maneuvered back to the kitchen door, “my prayers are with you and your family.”

Ted buttoned his trenchcoat and wrapped the scarf around his neck. “For whatever it’s worth,” he repeated.

Then he vanished into the night.





## CURRICULUM VITAE

Stephen T. Loiaconi graduated from Regis High School in New York City in 1998. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Georgetown University in 2002. He has worked as a researcher for CNN since 2005. He received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2010.