



# The Right to do Magic

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# CHAPTER ONE

Yurik flipped the sign on his door to "Closed". It was important to keep up pretenses. The tiny shop was almost invisible on this block, tucked in between a wig and cell phone store and boisterous import shop that played hip-hop music on the sidewalk. "Yurik's Trinkets" was the quiet and understated respite between the neon of the cell phone shop and the loud T-shirt shop. It was easy to ignore and easier to forget. Yurik liked it that way. If people didn't notice the shop at all, it was less likely to be noticed by the wrong people.

The shop was a legitimate business. Yurik paid his taxes, filled out all the right forms, and had all the necessary permits to operate a magic shop. Every year, he gladly submitted to the required state inspection of his shop and wares, displaying the sticker on his shop's door. He even joined the Better Business Bureau and displayed their sticker of membership. Yurik's Trinkets had enough legitimate business to keep it in the black, at least on paper. If anyone asked about those customers and why no one ever saw them come in, Yurik could claim that the business was mail order. He had all the paperwork to show he had checked their permits before making a sale.

Keeping up on two sets of books took a distressingly long time in Yurik's opinion. Early on, he decided it was too much hassle and let his state-required magical accident insurance lapse. Just another government rule he could ignore, or so he thought. His suppliers in the Petrovin family were not happy about that and let him know in no uncertain terms. He still had the scars to prove it. Accidents will happen, they said, and proper businesses had to be ready for it. If he wanted to sell for them, he had to maintain a legitimate business that would pass any scrutiny.

So Yurik kept his shop and all his permits and books in order. He

went to the shop everyday and learned to like the routine. He made phone calls and watched TV while the people on the sidewalk passed him by.

Sometimes a guy selling sunglasses and mixed CDs would set up a table in front of Yurik's store, but he didn't mind. The guy had asked Yurik's permission once and that was good enough for both of them. They chatted amiably about the weather and sports while shoppers passed them by.

Yurik turned the sign but left the door propped open. The sticky early summer heat was already oppressive. He remembered his grandmother's rants about how much better the summers were in Russia and

frowned. Those were possibly the nicest words she ever said to him. At least when she was yelling about the weather, she wasn't yelling at him about getting a job and staying away from those bad boys down the street. Yurik was glad he hadn't stayed away. This shop had been a lifeline, a way out of the cycle of poverty, hard manual labor, and early graves his family had known for generations. It didn't much matter to Yurik that it was illegal. He had seen enough laws broken by cops and had heard enough stories to know that they law only applied to those who let it apply. If you were smart and daring, it didn't have to apply to you. And as a seller

for the Petrovin family, Yurik only needed a little bit of smarts and daring and the family made up for whatever he lacked.

The phone rang behind the counter and Yurik answered it. The phone was an ancient landline phone, heavy and discolored with age.

"Yurik's Trinkets," he said plainly.

It was one of Yurik's legitimate suppliers, calling about one of his recent orders. He cradled the phone to his head with his shoulder and searched through the paperwork for the purchase orders the supplier was calling about. His wife always swore that his filing system could win awards

for messiest looking while still being mostly functional.

Between his searching and the murmur of the TV, Yurik didn't hear the man enter the shop.

Yurik found the paper and read some numbers into the phone then said goodbye and hung up. He looked up and smiled at the man standing just inside the door. "Welcome," said Yurik. "I'm sorry, but we're closed—"

The man held up a hand to silence Yurik.

"I know," he said. "This won't take long."

Yurik furrowed his brow. Was this a new runner for one of the

Petrovin boys? He didn't look like one, but that was usually the point.

While Yurik contemplated, the man drew a gun and aimed it at Yurik. Yurik took a step backwards and bumped into the wall behind him. His heart raced like a frightened rabbit and his eyes darted unbidden to the shop's escape routes. He was pretty sure his magical defenses, his wards, would not be up to the task of defeating the M-gun this stranger had drawn on him. Yurik was pretty pedestrian as traffickers in magic go, so he never worried too much about wielders of serious magic coming after him. Some of the Petrovin family were heavy hitters with magic, but it was much

easier to beat someone up when they got out of line than it was to use magic to hurt them.

"Look, man," said Yurik desperately, his hands up, "I have a wife and three kids. Please don't hurt me."

"More's the pity," said the man. His voice was singed with venom.

Yurik started to protest again but the gun fired and his world was filled with white light and pain. He was dead before he hit the floor.



## CHAPTER TWO

The bright work lights gave the tiny shop a surreal feeling, like it was a stage being set for a movie. Detective Bernadine Cart had never like this part of the investigation and she suspected that she never would. It was the most raw, the most unyielding and undeniable. Every time she was on the scene of a murder, she thought of all the scenes just like this her father and brothers had caused. No matter how many times it happened or how many times she scolded herself for thinking about it, the thought was a cold, dense marble rolling through her

mind, knocking away useful insights with self-doubt and shame.

She ground her teeth and forced herself to focus on the here and now. Her partner, Lawson Demars, was getting the victim's name and information from the first officer on the scene.

"Yurik Zubov, 35, lived in one of the apartments upstairs with his wife and three children," Mike said.

Lawson nodded as he wrote in his notebook. "Has someone talked to the wife yet?"

The officer sighed. "Yes. She went into hysterics, first accusing us of lying and then jabbering in Russian. The EMTs took her to St. Mary's to try

and get her calmed down."

"Who's with the kids now?" asked Bernie.

"The kids' grandmother also lives with them," said Mike. "She was not as rattled by the news and stayed behind with the kids."

Bernie nodded. "Did they hear anything?"

"No one heard anything," said Mike. "A couple of guys are checking with the surrounding shops to see if they noticed anything, but the grandmother claims they didn't hear or see anything."

Lawson looked up from his notebook and over to the body. "That's

not unusual for an M-gun," he said. "The flash of light might have been visible outside the shop, but there are a lot of stickers and signs blocking the view."

Bernie grunted her agreement. The wall behind the counter listed all Yurik Zubov's credentials and permits for the shop along with prices for some of the common magical items the shop sold. The other walls were covered with posters advertising one brand of magic item over another, touting their amazing properties with exciting text and photogenic models. Where the windows weren't covered with permit and inspection stickers, they were displaying advertisements.

"Are there any security cameras in the shop?" Bernie asked.

"No," said Mike, "we haven't found any yet." He lowered his voice and said, "and in this neighborhood in a Russian shop, I don't think we're going to find any, if you know what I mean."

Bernie cleared her throat and Lawson said, "let's not start assuming anything just yet, okay Mike?"

"Sure thing," said Mike. Bernie thought Mike was right, but knew Lawson would object to the stereotyping. In her experience, if it looked like something illegal was going on, it probably was. This shop was no exception. The handful of

magical items listed and advertised would barely be enough to keep the shop afloat without a steady stream of buyers. It seemed far more likely to Bernie that the real money was made elsewhere and the shop was a front. For the time being, she had to assume that the shop was legit. After all, it didn't yet matter to the investigation. Criminal or not, Yurik Zubov was dead, most likely murdered, and it was Bernie's job to find his killer.

"Who found the body?" asked Bernie.

"Guy from the cell phone shop next door said he came by after closing up. He looked inside, saw Zubov lying on the ground, and called 911," said

Mike.

"Thanks," said Lawson.

Mike left to join the officers interviewing the neighbors while Lawson and Cart looked at the body. There was no blood, just a misshapen bunch of flesh where Yurik's chest and heart had been. The ME was checking for any other wounds.

"Anything to suggest Yurik Zubov was killed by something other than the damage the M-gun did to his heart?" asked Bernie.

"Nope," said Jerry. "No defensive wounds, no signs of asphyxiation or poison. Just your run of the mill shooting."

Lawson shifted his weight uncomfortably. When he finished law school and went to work for the DA's office, he would need to treat every new case as a tragedy to speak convincingly to both the press and a jury, even if he didn't feel it. He vowed never to use language that might seem to make light of murder.

"Time of death?" asked Bernie.  
"Four to six hours ago," said Jerry.

"What caliber of M-gun are we looking for?" asked Lawson. The damage to Zubov's chest looked pretty big to Lawson.

Bernie pushed down her

annoyance at the question. Caliber wasn't a straight-forward question when dealing with M-guns, in fact, the word "caliber" was wrong in a lot of ways, but there wasn't a good way of expressing the power of a magical weapon. Like normal guns, M-guns varied by power and type of damage caused. There were magical weapons that caused a spray pattern of damage, like a shotgun, and those that caused concentrated damage, more like a handgun or rifle. The power behind the weapon was determined by a combination of the killer's magical power, the weapon, and whether the killer ever had close contact with the victim before. Deaths where the killer

had both the skill and knowledge of their victim were usually far more subtle, enough so that Bernie had ruled it out on sight. This killer didn't know the victim well and didn't need to. The weapon was powerful enough to kill almost instantly.

"Big," said Jerry. "Zubov had some wards, but nothing to protect against something like this." He gestured at the large wound on Zubov's chest. "The magic techs might be able to give you more once we get him back to the morgue."

Lawson nodded and made some more notes. The CSI techs were gathering fingerprints, stray fibers, and any lingering magical traces from the

scene.

"The front door was open when the first officers arrived," said Lawson, "so we probably won't get any useful prints from it. And, well, it's a public door. There are probably hundreds of prints there."

Bernie didn't voice her suspicion that the shop was a front. If it was, there weren't as many users of that door as Lawson thought and they might be more interesting than usual. "It might be worth getting anything from the door, just in case," she said. "From where the body is, the killer probably came in through that door, shot Yurik Zubov, and went out the same door."

Lawson nodded and indicated to the CSI techs to get the door.

"No signs of robbery?" Bernie asked the ME.

"Zubov's wallet was still in his pocket when EMTs got here," said Jerry.

Bernie stepped around the body to get behind the counter and look around. "The cash box is here," she said, opening it. "There's still cash inside."

"Not a robbery gone wrong, then," said Lawson.

"Not a robbery for cash anyway," said Bernie.

There were papers piled

seemingly at random on the shelves behind the counter. The boxes of common magical items, the ones listed on the wall behind her, were slightly dusty on top. "The boxes of inventory don't look disturbed either," she said. "If it was a robbery, it wasn't for anything obvious."

Bernie picked up the top paper from the stack and examined it.

"What is it?" asked Lawson.

"Purchase order," said Bernie. "It was on top of the chaos back here." She set the paper down on the counter for Lawson to copy down the buyer's name and address. The buyer was local, but not nearby.

"Anything else?" said Lawson.

"There's no ledger book, just the pile of papers," she said. "There's some dust on the boxes back here."

Lawson nodded. "Yurik's common items not so popular?"

"So it seems," said Bernie.



## CHAPTER THREE

The smell of frying bacon and brewing coffee made Edward Knox smile as he rolled out of his parents' guest bed. He put on a T-shirt and walked down the short hallway to the kitchen. The house was just as Edward remembered it, maybe a little smaller. He paused to look at the photos of him, his parents, and his siblings that lined the hallway. There were pictures from when Edward was in grade school all the way up to a photo of him from one of the many black-tie functions he attended as a lobbyist in Washington, D.C.. The photos of his two older

brothers showed them, their wives, and kids. His parents had never pressured him outright to settle down and have kids, but there on the wall, Edward felt the pressure all the same.

He sighed and took a deep breath. The good breakfast smells lightened his mood and he went into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Edward," sang his mother, Patricia. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you," said Edward sitting down at the little kitchen table. "I'm glad I got in last night so I could be here for breakfast. That smells wonderful, but you didn't have to trouble yourself."

"Now, what kind of mother would I be if I didn't feed my little boy?" she asked, smiling at him over her shoulder. "There's coffee and juice, help yourself. Your father went out front to get the paper."

As if on cue, the front door closed and Edward could hear his father's short stride down the hallway and into the kitchen. When he stood near his mother, Edward marveled at how alike they looked. Maybe it was true that people who were together for many years started to look like each other. They were short and a little heavyset with warm, round faces and graying hair. Though his mother had much more of it and it was more red

with shots of gray while his father was nearly bald, just the short fuzz of white hair around the back of his head.

Edward poured himself a coffee and sat at the table again. His father, Harold, seemed upset as he set the newspaper on the table.

"What's wrong, dad?" asked Edward.

Harold didn't say anything for a moment and Patricia turned around to look at them. "Oh, he's probably gone and read the newspaper again," she said. "I don't know why he still pays for it when all it does is upset him." She turned back to the bacon and Edward sensed a long running debate was on the verge of replaying itself, so

he quickly jumped in.

"Is it the Mets again?" asked Edward. "I keep telling you to give up on those bums and go Yankees instead."

"It's not baseball," said Harold, his normally cheerful voice was dark and serious.

Edward reached over and pulled the newspaper towards him. The story above the fold on the front page was about the mayor doing something with parking that was, apparently, controversial. He flipped the paper over and scanned the rest of the front page. There was a small article about a magic shop keeper being killed by an M-gun. That must have been it. He

quickly read the first few paragraphs.

"Hmm," he said, "it looks like the proprietor of a magic shop was killed last night by an M-gun."

"Oh," breathed Patricia, steadying herself on the counter. "More violence by magic?" She shook her head. "When will it end?"

Harold harumphed. "It will end when we make it end and finally outlaw magic for good," he said firmly.

There had never been any debate about the magic in Edward's house growing up. Magic was dangerous, end of story. You did not use magic, nor did you associate with anyone who did. That made Edward's

choices in playmates rather limited since most people used some kind of magic, even if it was simple self-defense magic. But even that had been unacceptable to Harold and thus Edward was forbidden from playing with kids who had wards.

So Edward didn't understand the fascination the rest of the nation seemed to have with buying and using magical trinkets. They were alien to him and completely superfluous to living a full life in his estimation. Growing up as he did, it was almost unavoidable that he become some kind of anti-magic activist like his father. Harold hadn't started as an activist, but he had committed himself to it fully

when Edward was a baby, so it was all he ever knew his father to be.

"We're working on it, dad," said Edward soothingly. "Someday, we'll make it happen."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, only the popping and sizzling of the bacon making a sound.

Harold tried not to think about that day at his school, the day that everything changed. The screaming and panic, his students lying dead in the classroom he loved so much. He closed his eyes and pushed it back. After all this time, it was easy to distract himself from that horrible memory, but it was never pleasant to remember. He took a deep breath and

stood up to get the plates and silverware for the table.

They busied themselves with the coordination of serving breakfast in a small kitchen, remembering again amusing things Edward and his brothers had done as children. The sun shone in the tiny window over the sink and lit the kitchen. Edward remembered why he loved coming home to visit and also why he didn't do it more often. His life was different from his parents', even though they shared a common goal. He felt like a welcomed guest, but he no longer belonged here. That was as it should be, he thought, but still made him feel a little sad. Something between them

had passed away, never to return.

After breakfast, Edward gathered up his notes and laptop and they headed to the headquarters of Citizens for a Sensible Reality, the non-profit anti-magic activist group that Harold led. He had worked his way up from just a volunteer to a staff position, finally being elected to various board positions and then to its presidency. Harold was fully devoted to the cause, so anything he lacked in physical stamina needed for long days and, sometimes, nights, he made up for in charisma and the energy of his devotion.

The CSR office was already open and a few volunteers were

stuffing envelopes. They greeted Harold cheerfully and waved hello to Edward. Some of the older volunteers Edward remembered from when he was much younger. They would slip him lollipops when they thought Harold wasn't looking.

Edward and Harold made their way back to the office and closed the door. The day was already warm and promised to be a scorcher, so they wanted to get any delicate discussions out of the way quickly while it was still cool in the office. Harold seated himself behind the desk and pulled out a long yellow legal pad from his desk. The desk was a functional mess. There were stacks of papers going in and out,

but nothing lingered too long or got so buried that it got lost. Edward pulled out his laptop and balanced it on his knees.

They started by comparing notes on what calls and letters CSR members had written to their representatives and what effect, if any, Edward had noticed when talking with those representatives. Edward's lobbying efforts were not just about broadcasting the anti-magic message to anyone that happened by. He needed to tune the message to the audience and make sure the right people heard their message at the right time. If done well, Edward could have as big or bigger impact on anti-magic

legislation than all the letter writing. Edward never told Harold about that disparity. Harold would be happy when magic was outlawed and Edward wanted to give that to him.

"Finally," said Edward, after they had been comparing notes for a while, "what do you have for Representative Liz Jacobs?"

"Jacobs, Jacobs," said Harold as he searched his notes. "Ah, yes, here she is. For Liz Jacobs, we had seventeen members write her independently and almost five hundred of her constituents signed a petition."

"She's relatively new in congress, so her voice is not being heard," said Edward, "but it looks like

anti-magic was a big part of her platform. I didn't write anything down about the letters or petition, so she must not have mentioned them." He typed some notes into his laptop. "I'll follow up with her and see if she's in danger of leaving the anti-magic cause. If not, we may want to direct those letters and petitions to the other representatives."

Harold agreed and made some notes of his own.

"Jacobs' husband Samuel and I are on fairly good terms," said Edward, "so it won't be a problem." He was bragging a little and he knew it, but he also didn't want his father to worry and waste time convincing someone who

was already in the anti-magic fold of the value of their cause. "I have also convinced Representative Jacobs to speak at the CSR rally in a couple of days."

"Excellent," said Harold. "I say, you certainly have taken to your role in Washington, haven't you?"

Edward smiled and said, "I'm choosing to take that as a the compliment I'm sure it was intended as."

"It was," confirmed Harold. "I'm just glad to see you fitting in and making the connections I couldn't make from here."

"We're all part of the same team," said Edward and meant it.

Edward was happy to interrupt that line of discussion with a break for some fresh air. He spent much more of his time making connections and talking with politicians behind closed doors and off the books than Harold knew. Edward understood that it was a necessary part of being a lobbyist, but he was sure that Harold would not like some of the tactics he employed to get the attention of politicians to win them to their cause. It was better for both of them if he left out some of the details of his job.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Bernie looked at her office desk and was reminded of the chaos behind Yurik Zubov's counter. She promised herself that, after this case, she would clean off her desk. Of course, cleaning off the desk wasn't the hard part, it was keeping it that way. And what was the benefit of a clean desk anyway? There was no point in fighting the inevitable. Still, she didn't want to be known as a sloppy detective, so it was probably time. For now, she pushed aside the pile to make room for her notes on Yurik Zubov and Yurik's Trinkets.

Lawson hung up the phone.

"That was the buyer on the purchase order you found," he said. "He said he called Zubov around 5pm yesterday to check on whether his order had been shipped yet. He said that Zubov sounded fine when they talked."

Bernie nodded. "I did some digging last night on our victim," she said. "No criminal record and his taxes and business filings are all in perfect order."

"You don't sound convinced," said Lawson.

"They're too perfect," said Bernie. "After seeing Zubov's filing system yesterday, I expected a few late payments or a few errors somewhere.

Nothing."

"Maybe he kept it all in his head," said Lawson. "If he was into something shady on the side, he wouldn't want a written record of it."

Bernie shook her head, started to say something, then stopped. She trusted Lawson to listen to her and reserve judgment, but she wasn't comfortable airing some of the things she knew with the whole office listening. She leaned forward and said, "do you want to go get some coffee?"

They left the police station and walked half a block to the nearest coffee shop. The day threatened to be hotter than yesterday and was already thick with humidity. Bernie refused to

be drawn in by the sweetened iced coffee drinks and got a hot black coffee. Lawson was not steadfast and got a giant iced glass of cream and sugar with a splash of coffee. Bernie was silently amazed that he could drink all those calories and still be so skinny. Armed with coffee, they sat at a quiet table in the back near the air conditioner.

"Now," said Lawson, "want to tell me why we're having four dollar coffees instead of drinking the free stuff in the office? Other than the obvious that this is much better tasting."

"I don't think Zubov kept all his off-book dealings in his head," said

Bernie.

Lawson sipped his beverage and waited for her to continue. He had guessed that this treaded close to her comfort level where talking about criminal behavior was concerned. Her family was one of the largest crime families in New York. While she was never directly involved in anything illegal that Lawson knew of, she had all kinds of second-hand knowledge about how criminal organizations were run and who some of the players were. Lawson respected Bernie for leaving that life and becoming a police officer, but he also knew that others in the department didn't fully trust her. She was careful about how much she

revealed, even to him, and he had learned not to push her into talking.

Bernie glanced around and leaned forward. "There's just too much information to keep in your head," she said finally. "It makes for great TV, the bookies who can keep everyone straight, and that works for a while, but once you get to a certain size, it's just not worth it."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, there is always debate about who paid what to whom and for what," said Bernie. "Especially if Zubov was working for someone else, he would need to account for the sales or the merchandise to his suppliers." She started to add something else and

stopped.

Lawson sipped and waited.

Bernie dropped her eyes to her coffee and took a sip. She hated this part. Lawson was a good guy and she hated keeping things from him. Some of the people who had signed off on Zubov's taxes were familiar to her. She was pretty sure she knew who Zubov was working for on the side and they would have demanded that he keep good books, but there was no hard evidence. Without it, they could still talk to people and risk spooking them into destroying evidence or risk harassment lawsuits. The department was still fighting some profiling cases in court so they were very sensitive

and Bernie didn't want to be in the middle of anything like that. She decided instead to just talk about facts and avoid speculation.

"The non-magic way to keep secret books usually involves a code, sometimes for just people, sometimes for people and money or merchandise. Magic users can be more elaborate, but it basically comes down to the same thing. If you have the key, you can read the encoded books, otherwise it's just gibberish," she said.

"So you think Zubov was dealing on the side and kept that written down somewhere?"

Bernie nodded. "I think the people in those books are our most

likely suspects."

"Even if we find the books," said Lawson, "you said they're probably encoded. How can we read them without the key?"

She looked over her shoulder at the cafe. The baristas were busy making espresso drinks and the office workers in line were absently playing on their cell phones. She turned back to Lawson. "Zubov wouldn't have the only key," Bernie said. "His bosses would want to have access to the books. They'll also have a key."

Lawson sipped his coffee. They were on fairly shaky ground here. They suspected Zubov of dealing in illegal magic, but to prove it they would need

to produce both encoded ledgers and a key capable of reading the ledgers. To get the key, they had to know who his suppliers were.

Without looking up from his coffee, Lawson said, "you know who Zubov's supplier is, don't you?"

Bernie sat back in her chair then cursed herself for doing it. She had seen a hundred suspects do exactly that when they knew they were caught and she knew it made her look guilty. Thank God it was only Lawson doing the asking.

He raised an eyebrow, but waited silently. It wasn't a leap to suspect the Petrovin family as Zubov's suppliers. They were Russian and

active in Zubov's neighborhood. Even the patrolman Mike from last night had suspected a connection. Lawson was willing to give Bernie's opinion more weight, but they wouldn't have much room to maneuver until they had something more concrete to go on.

"Maybe," said Bernie. "But let's start with Zubov's family and friends."



## CHAPTER FIVE

Liz Jacobs didn't like her orange juice and sent it back three times until the staff got it right. Sometimes you had to insist that things were done right. It wasn't just about too much or too little pulp in the orange juice, it was about taking pride in your work and overall work ethic. If you let substandard work slip for too long, it would spread and others would start to think that substandard work was acceptable. Let it go long enough and the work ethic and moral fabric of the entire country would start to sag and unravel. Once they had brought the

orange juice up to Liz's standards, the croissant had gotten cold, so she told them bring her a freshly toasted one.

Her husband sat across the table from her and watched the annoyance sharpen her features. Surrounded by her almost blond curls, the sharpness seemed out of place. She was a beautiful woman, full of charm and grace, when she was happy. When she was unhappy, only her charm left her and only her cold, self-serving core remained. Samuel loved all of her, her campaign winning smiles, her grace, her conniving and backstabbing. He took the bad with the good. She would never be a warm person, but she was loyal, strong, and gaining political

power by the day. He sometimes dared to dream that she would be the first female president. His masculinity would not be threatened by being the nation's "first gentleman". He preferred to be the power behind the throne, making the deals and connections that would keep her political life on track.

Samuel cleared his throat and said, "Maria is with the nanny this morning so that we can go have those campaign photos taken. So don't work yourself into a tizzy over the breakfast, Liz."

She put down her phone and looked at him, deciding whether to say something more.

"The world will not come to an end if your food isn't perfect," he said, taking a bite of her cold croissant. "And you are more photogenic when you're in a good mood."

Liz decided that she had ranted to Samuel enough times about work ethic and substandard work that he didn't need to hear it again. She sat back in her chair on the rooftop patio and changed the subject.

"I got an email from one of the groups we work with asking if I would come down and give a talk at their headquarters while I'm in New York," she said. If she was in the mood to scowl, she might as well share.

Samuel grumbled and said,

"send it to me." He put down his croissant. Samuel considered himself a patient man. The spouse of an ambitious politician has to be just to stay sane. But some of the anti-magic groups they worked with were so clueless about technology, it was as if anti-magic meant anti-computers, too. He swore that some of them simply could not read a webpage with the contact information listed so plainly. It would go to a central address so that Samuel and the other campaign workers could field the requests in parallel. If it was sent to Liz, she had to forward it or relinquish her phone to Samuel long enough to let him do it. Woe betide the man who tried to take

her phone from her when she wasn't ready to let it go. "Better yet," he said, picking up his breakfast again, "I'll just deal with it while you're in for your photo shoot."

Liz hesitated. She had some things on her phone from yesterday that she really didn't want Samuel to see. Her reaction was covered by the arrival of a new croissant and an extremely cautious server. Liz took a bite of the croissant, declared it satisfactory and ordered more coffee. She could delete the messages right now while they ate breakfast. Using her phone during a meal was not unusual for them, so she went to it.

Samuel's phone rang and he

answered it.

"Daddy?" said a young girl's voice, "when are you coming home? Lidia won't let me play X-box before breakfast."

"Maria," said Samuel, in a slightly reprimanding tone, "listen to Lidia. You know she's in charge when your mother and I aren't home."

"But daddy-"

"No buts, Maria," said Samuel firmly. "Eat your breakfast first, and then you can play X-box, but only until it's time for school. Understand?"

"Okay," said Maria. She sounded wounded and excessively sad, but Samuel would not let her play with

his heart.

"Let me talk to Lidia," he said. There were muffled sounds as the phone was handed off.

"I'm sorry about that, Mr. Jacobs, but she insisted that she talk to you about it," said Lidia.

"It's okay Lidia," said Samuel, "she's still testing the limits of her control. And, she gets anxious when we move between D.C. and New York. I told her breakfast, then X-box, then school."

"Got it," said Lidia. "Thanks."

Liz finished deleting the email and text messages between her and Griffin and put her phone on the table

while she finished her breakfast. Samuel put his phone down as well. Liz said, "how is Maria doing?"

"She's anxious," said Samuel, "but she'll be fine." They had adopted Maria five years ago after trying and failing to have a child of their own. She had been three at the time and hadn't spoken a word of English. Samuel and Liz, mostly Samuel, had hired tutors and spent a lot of time and money bringing her language skills into English and catching her up on basic skills. Her birth mother had been college educated, but she was a single mother who worked long hours to pay for day care and to give Maria a good life. After Maria's mother was killed in

a hit and run, Maria had been taken to a foster home while the next of kin were located. Unfortunately, her next of kin were in Mexico and were either unwilling or unable to take another child. A social services worker got all the paperwork done to put Maria up for adoption. Samuel was sure that Maria still remembered her birth mother and would always have separation anxiety and an aversion to change. He made a mental note to see if a child psychologist could be found to work with her on it.



## CHAPTER SIX

Sonya Zubov always knew her son had married a weak woman, but the skinny tramp still amazed her with her frailty. She was sleeping now, in midday, too afraid of the world to do anything useful. Sonya had sent the children to stay with her cousin for a few days. Their mother was useless to them and Sonya knew the police would be back. The police would never leave them alone. It was just like back in Russia, once they paid attention to you, they would never stop. It was one of the reasons she and her family had left.

She sighed and lit another cigarette. She had gotten through worse than this and she would get through this. She was sad her son was dead, of course. He was her first, her strong little man, but life in America made him weak over the years. He could have done so much more with his life. He could have risen further in the family. But he had no ambition. Even his wife was a pale shadow of a real woman, just someone to have sex with and watch his kids. A real woman would have made her man into something greater, someone strong, someone to be proud of. Instead she complained and argued with him like a mistress, behavior not befitting a wife.

Sonya would mourn for her son in private, with her God, not out in the open and certainly not in front of her son's wife Nadia. It would only set the little bitch crying again.

The tiny apartment was quiet without the kids there. The clock in the living room tick-tocked reassuringly. The windows were open and music and street noise drifted up to them. Sonya stubbed out her cigarette and looked out the window. Perhaps this was better. With her son gone, she could take the children to her cousin's permanently. They had succeeded where Sonya had failed in keeping the Russian spirit alive in the family. There was no time to waste on regrets

or thinking of what might have been. She had failed her children, but she would not make that mistake with her grandchildren.

There was a knock at the door. Sonya shut the door to the bedroom where Nadia was sleeping then went to the front door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Detectives Cart and Demars, ma'am," said Bernie. "We need to ask you a few questions about Yurik."

Sonya opened the door with the chain still attached.

"Let me see your badges," Sonya demanded.

Cart and Demars produced

them and held them up for Sonya's inspection. She studied them for a long moment then said, "one moment." She closed the door, slid the chain lock off and opened the door for the detectives. "Come in."

The living room was small but tidy and everything in it looked well cared for. Bernie raised an eyebrow at the shockingly hideous wallpaper, but recovered quickly. Even Lawson had a hard time not boggling at it.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?"

Lawson started to decline but Bernie cut him off. "Tea would be lovely, thank you," she said.

Sonya nodded. "Please make

yourselves comfortable," she said and headed to the kitchen to prepare the tea tray.

Bernie sat on one the dark yellow sofa nearest the door. Lawson sat beside her and pulled out his notepad and pen. Bernie shook her head. "Not yet," she whispered. "You'll offend her if you get straight to business."

Lawson frowned but put his notepad away. "What? I thought Russians always got straight to the point."

"It's not a Russian thing," said Bernie smiling, "it's a grandmother thing."

The studied the room for a few

minutes while the water boiled and Sonya worked in the kitchen. The curtains were old, but clean, white lace that competed with the wallpaper for the busiest design. The throw pillows on the sofa were hand embroidered with birds and flowers. Prominently displayed on one wall was a photograph of the Zubovs and their extended family. Yurik and Nadia looked ten or fifteen years younger in the photo and Nadia was obviously pregnant.

Lawson was having a hard time reconciling Yurik's chaotic shop with the pristine order of the apartment. Rebellion was one thing, but this apartment seemed like he didn't even

live there. If the mother was this controlling, she might have known what her son was into. He had seen plenty of mothers of victims, even some who were glad their sons were dead, but they fit better with what Lawson expected in those cases. This apartment hurt his brain with how much it didn't match his expectations.

Sonya returned to the living room with a tray and started setting out the cups. As she was doing so, Nadia emerged from the bedroom looking sleepy with her eyes still puffy and red from crying. Sonya mentally cursed. She had hoped Nadia would sleep through the entire interview. She did not know how to handle the police

and would undoubtedly say something stupid.

The tea was poured and Sonya sat down. Nadia sat beside her and reached for a cookie. Sonya slapped her hand and scolded her in Russian. Nadia withdrew her hand without a word and waited. Sonya smiled and gestured at the tea and cookies.

Bernie leaned forward, took her tea and a cookie, then sat up straight, holding the tea on her lap. Lawson did the same and they sipped the tea. Sonya nodded and took up her own cup.

"Now," said Sonya, "how can I help the police?"

Bernie smiled slightly and

asked, "Mrs. Zubov, we are trying to find your son's killer. Was he doing anything different lately?"

"No," she said, "my son was a good boy. He was always working hard, but he never missed a dinner with his family."

"What about after work," said Lawson. "Did he go out with friends or have business meetings?"

Nadia started to answer but Sonya said, "no, he was a good father. He stayed home and helped them with homework."

"How about in the summer?" asked Bernie gently.

"Yurik took the children to the

park," said Sonya. Nadia's eyes were glassy and filled with tears as she stared without seeing at the teacup in front of her. She couldn't believe he was gone. Life with Yurik hadn't been perfect, but he was gentle with her and he loved their kids. It wasn't true that Yurik never went out with friends and he certainly had business meetings late at night, but he did take the kids to the park and they loved it. They loved him and now they would never see him again. Except at the funeral. Nadia couldn't stop herself and started to sob.

Sonya stiffened and put down her tea. She took Nadia's hand and squeezed it hard.

"I'm sorry if we've upset you,

Mrs. Zubov," said Bernie to Nadia. Nadia nodded and mopped at her eyes with a tissue. "We have to ask if we're going to bring Yurik's killer to justice." Nadia sobbed once more then made an effort to get herself under control.

"Can you give us the names of anyone Yurik might have spoken to about his work in the last week?" said Lawson.

Sonya shook her head. "Work was not allowed in the house," she said firmly. "Work was for downstairs in the shop."

Nadia nodded in agreement. "Any work contacts would be in his phone book downstairs."

Lawson didn't remember seeing any phone book in the shop, but there was so much clutter it would have been easy to miss. He made a mental note to look for it on their way out.

"Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Yurik?" asked Bernie. "Did he have any problems with the neighbors? Anything like that?"

Sonya and Nadia shook their heads. "No," said Sonya, "everyone liked Yurik."

Bernie mentally noted that at least one person didn't like Yurik enough to kill him. This was getting them nowhere. They were obviously lying which confirmed her suspicions

about the true nature of Yurik's shop but not in any way that she and Lawson could use to find the killer. Frustrated, she sipped at her tea.

Lawson pulled a card out of his pocket and handed it to Sonya. "If you think of anything," he said, "please call us."

"Thank you," said Nadia with a weak smile. Sonya sat stony-faced and said nothing.

Bernie opened the back door to the shop and found the light switch. She and Lawson went inside and closed the door behind them. It was quiet and stiflingly hot in the shop.

"Let's make this quick," said Lawson, "before I further contaminate

the scene with all my sweat."

They searched behind the counter for anything that looked like a phone book. The stack of invoices was gone. The techs had put it in a box for them back at the precinct. The back side of the counter looked strangely bare without it. They rifled through the remaining boxes and stacks of catalogs, magazines, and notebooks looking for something with business contacts or phone numbers in it.

"What did you think of Sonya Zubov's performance?" asked Lawson.

Bernie chuckled.

"Yeah," said Lawson, "me too."

She had seen that drama from

the other side only once. She was fourteen and her cousin Vernon had been staying with them. Vernon had been killed on business with her eldest brother, Guy. Bernie hadn't really liked Vernon. He was mean and talked too much, but her brother and father loved having him around saying he really knew how to get things done. It made her a little sick to her stomach now, knowing that they meant he was really good at beating up and killing people.

After Vernon was killed, the house knew about it hours before the police. Bernie remembered her mother giving them strict instructions to not say anything to anyone and to stay away from the police while they were

at the house. Those instructions were then echoed by her father, lending extra weight to the seriousness of the command.

When the police came, she and her younger siblings hid in the stairs near the living room. They were very quiet and stayed well out of sight, just listening. Their mother cried a bit when the officers told her that Vernon was dead, but she didn't wail or go to pieces. Of course, she already knew that Vernon was dead, but even when she first heard the news, Bernie had never seen her mother go to pieces.

Bernie remembered the sounds of the officers' radios, their heavy boots on the floor, and the difference

in her father's voice when he talked to the police. He was controlled, but congenial, the passion in his normal voice was absent. It sounded strange to Bernie to hear him like that, so without emotion. She wondered what Sonya Zubov was like when not talking to the police.

"I think I found something," said Lawson. He set a thin notebook on the counter. "It was wedged in between these two boards," he said, gesturing to the supports for the counter.

They looked over the pages. The names and numbers were just about as well-organized as the rest of Yurik's filing system. They names were seemingly random in the book,

some underlined, some circled, some crossed out. There were even stick figure doodles and other random markings on the pages.

"It doesn't look encoded to me," said Lawson.

Bernie grunted. "Me either," she said. "Maybe this isn't the interesting phone book."

"Well, it's a start," said Lawson.

"Now all we have to do is make about a million phone calls," said Bernie sourly. Second only to actually dealing with dead bodies, this was the part of police work she hated most.





## CHAPTER SEVEN

The photo studio was small, but furnished in good taste. All of Liz's previous campaign photos had been done by another company. They had done a fine job, but someone had tipped off Samuel that the previous photographer was a magic user. That simply would not stand for Samuel. They had built Liz's platform on opposition to magic and Samuel had a personal reasons to reject magic users outright. His brother Matthew had been killed by some deranged magic user that had gone on shooting spree with an M-gun in Arizona. Matthew

had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but Samuel would never forget. He started working with anti-magic groups and Liz took up his cause with vigor. It launched her from city council to state senate to US Congress in a few short years.

Once Samuel learned of the photographer's use of magic, he had to find a new one that had strict "no magic" policies and who could make Liz look professional, likable, and trustworthy. This photographer had come highly recommended by some of the local politicians in the anti-magic camp, so Samuel was hopeful.

After making sure they knew what kind of image he and Liz wanted

to capture, Samuel turned his attention to Liz's phone. Her email was a mess, as usual, with things flagged for follow-up from two weeks ago or more. Samuel sighed and started working his way through it, making notes on his own phone, forwarding messages to the contact address with special instructions, deleting messages, and so on. Thirty minutes into his purge of Liz's phone, some new messages had arrived, so he scrolled back to check them. There were a few misdirected requests for Liz to speak at their event, a few carefully constructed spam messages that made it past the filters, and some routine messages from her colleagues.

in D.C.

There was a message from Liz's preferred airline that Samuel nearly deleted on sight, but he decided to read it, in case they had given her some reward miles or something that required action on her part. It was a thank you for her recent flight and it listed the date and time of yesterday's flight from D.C. to New York.

Samuel's eyes snapped back to the arrival time and his stomach turned to ice.

Liz had arrived in New York six hours earlier than she should have.

In their twenty years of marriage, Samuel had never doubted her faithfulness. She had always been

honest and straight-forward with him. Yes, she could be a little devious in her work, but it had never invaded their personal lives before. That was the business of politics and both Samuel and Liz knew she needed to play the game to get ahead. But, to bring that mindset, that behavior to their relationship, it left Samuel stunned and hollow.

He sat in the conservatively trendy chair and stared at the wall of portraits, too shocked to think straight. He took a shaky breath and tried to consider other possibilities. Maybe there was a meeting she had forgotten about and moved her flight up. Samuel and Maria had moved back to New

York a week earlier. He was in charge of setting up speaking engagements and campaign meetings for her and he didn't remember any meetings. He checked her calendar and there was a four hour block of time marked off, but there was no description.

Samuel didn't know what to think. His gut told him that this was not an innocent change to her schedule, but his mind and emotions protested. Liz simply wouldn't do that to him after all this time together. He checked her text messages and deleted email messages and there was nothing there to indicate she had strayed. There were no call records either.

His mind declared victory and

tried to convince the rest of Samuel that it was simply a misunderstanding, but his gut wouldn't let it rest. He had almost a half an hour before the photographer would be finished. He used his phone to call Edward Knox. Knox was fairly well-connected, here and in D.C., for certain kinds of people and services.

"Hi Edward, this is Samuel Jacobs," he said.

"Samuel! Good to hear from you," said Edward. "Are we still on for later this afternoon to setup details of Liz's talk to our members?"

"Yes, we're still on," said Samuel. "Listen, I need a contact here in New York and I think this will be

right up your alley." He didn't want to say anything about his suspicions concerning Liz in case he was wrong, so he concocted a story for Edward. "One of our campaign staff is, well, we think he's stealing money from the campaign."

Samuel could almost hear Edward's attention snap back to the phone.

"Like embezzlement?" asked Edward.

"No, no," said Samuel, "nothing like that." He imagined Edward deflating at that news. "Just small amounts, probably from the cash box, but we keep quite a bit on hand, so losing a few hundred starts to add up.

We'd like to put a private investigator on his trail to see if he's meeting anyone to give the money to. Do you know of anyone in New York who can do that? Someone discreet is crucial. We don't want a breath of this getting out, you understand, of course."

"Of course," said Edward. He gave Samuel the name and number of his preferred PI in New York, assuring Samuel that he was discreet and thorough, but warned him that he wasn't cheap.

Samuel thanked him and ended the call. Possibly for the first time, Samuel was glad that Edward was a spying little sneak and that Samuel was currently on Edward's good side.

He knew that by asking Edward he was giving Edward something in return. He was getting the name of a PI in exchange for information that their campaign possibly had a thief. That alone wasn't enough for Edward to turn against them someday, but it was something. And information was the only currency that Edward really responded to.

Samuel called the number Edward had given him and setup a time to talk to the PI that afternoon. Liz wasn't the only one who could hide clandestine meetings under the cover of real ones.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Alex Petrovin didn't often take out bad news on the messenger, but he was willing to make an exception in this case. Boris was an irritating lout even when he wasn't delivering bad news. He had interrupted Alex's lunch at his club to tell him one of his dealers was dead and that the police were all over it. And not just any police, but Bernadine Cart. It really put him off his quiche. He set down the silverware gently against the expensive china dishes and wiped his mouth on the ivory napkin before looking up at Boris. The temptation to

strangle Boris on the spot was very tempting. Alex's bodyguards picked up on his tension and braced for the worst.

Alex took a deep breath and said quietly, "you're just telling me this now?"

"The killing was on the morning news," said Boris defensively.

Alex gripped the arm of his chair tightly. "No, you idiot," he said through clenched teeth, "that Cart was working this case." The sunlight streamed into the indoor garden and the gentle splashing of the fountain neatly hid the conversation of the club's patrons from each other, a feature they all appreciated. The tall

and elaborate fronds of ferns, palms, and other greenery added to the privacy for each table.

Boris shifted uncomfortably, licking his thick lips.

"I- We-" he stammered.

"Quiet," ordered Alex with a wave of his hand. He tapped the chair arm absently as he thought. Bernie would make better progress than most detectives in proving who Zubov had been working for and what he had been working on. That was a concern, certainly, but at the moment, who had killed Zubov was the more pressing question. If it was a rival, they had not yet come forward to claim the kill or to challenge Alex openly. And,

frankly, if it was a rival, it was damn sloppy to kill Zubov in his shop. A rival would want to make sure the connection was made back to Alex and that wasn't certain to happen now. Cementing that connection by killing him at a drop site or payoff would have been the smarter move.

It was possible that he was seeing a new player or someone too young to really know what they were doing, trying to make their bones and impress their boss. He dismissed this as unlikely. It was also possible that it was a random killing, some nutjob in a robbery gone wrong, or someone Zubov had personally insulted. He dismissed this as nearly impossible.

Zubov was an ass-kisser, through and through, and never pissed off anyone in his life except by kissing someone else's ass more.

He needed to know more about the circumstances of Zubov's death than he was likely to get from a stolen police report. No, he needed his own people on this, and he had to do it fast before Cart could prove a connection to him and start harassing him and his people with questions and search warrants.

Alex looked up at Boris and said, "get out of here." Boris bowed his head and all but ran out of the dining room. Alex looked at his guard, Gregori, and said, "get Eric Strickland

here now. I don't care what he's doing, just get him here."

Computers had nothing on magic in Eric's opinion. He had learned some of their magic while on parole and trying to go straight. There was some power there, knowing the all the secret words and how to use them together to make things happen in the machine. But the sense of power and the thrill of making the world match your imagination one got from computers paled in comparison to making it happen in the physical world. In hindsight, it was naive of him to think that computers would ever be able to sate his desire to create something real. Here, working for

Alex Petrovin, he was finally back to doing what he loved. And this time, he had some powerful allies to keep him out of trouble. Not that he completely trusted Alex or the family to be there for him, but loyalty was earned in both directions and so far they had been making good on their part of the deal. His parole officer had stopped asking him for updates and seemed content with whatever story Alex's minions were feeding him. That alone was worth its weight in gold to Eric, but he also got to work with some very talented mages on interesting magic.

They were working on anti-ward magic to scare people into thinking they had been compromised.

It made them more suggestive and pliable to the right kinds of pressure. It was fun because Eric got to reverse engineer wards to see what made them work and find ways to subvert or circumvent that. It was down in the nuts and bolts of magic and it was glorious.

Eric's team's workroom was a large loft space in an old industrial building. The large windows were mostly blocked by whiteboards and the painted concrete pillars were covered with diagrams explaining some aspect of the magic they were building. There was a large table where they all sat, building their attack spell, trying it against each other, reading the traces

to see what went wrong, and trying something different. Since magic was largely a mental creation, it was sometimes difficult to convey those ideas to another person. If a spell was simple enough, you could write it down and they could read and understand what it would do. But, for very complex spells, you had to convey not only what was happening, but why it was happening, and when, and in what context. That was what separated mages from superstitious hacks in Eric's mind. If you really understood magic and why something worked, you wielded more control than someone who just took someone else's work and changed it a little bit. The

people Eric worked with were true mages and it was a joy.

All Eric's happy thoughts came screeching to a halt when he saw one of Alex Petrovin's personal guards, Gergori, talking to the guard at the door to the loft. Their guard was there to make sure no one came in who wasn't supposed to and Eric considered him part of the team. Gregori being sent here was a sign that not all was well in Alex Petrovin's life which usually meant that someone else was also about to have a bad day. Eric's stomach turned liquid and he noticed he wasn't the only one. They might all be good at what they did, but mages did not hold the power in the Petrovin

family.

Gregori approached the large work table, his demeanor business-like and urgent, but not angry. That was a good sign. He walked directly to Eric's chair and put his hand on Eric's shoulder. Eric's insides turned to ice. Gregori leaned down and whispered, "boss needs to see you. You're not in trouble, but we need to go now. Bring your stuff." Eric nodded stiffly and quickly collected all his magical tools into his bag, avoiding eye contact with the other members of his team. He stood up shakily and slung the bag over his shoulder. Gregori led the way out of the workroom and down to a waiting car.

Alex was drinking scotch when Gregori returned with Eric in tow. The mage looked just as unimpressive as the day they met, but Alex knew just how deceiving that t-shirt and faded jeans could be. He didn't stand, but smiled and offered Eric a chair which he took.

"Scotch?" asked Alex by way of an offer.

Eric nodded after a brief hesitation.

Alex poured the drink and set the glass in front of Eric. "You look like you could use it," said Alex. Eric took the glass and downed the liquid in one toss. Alex raised his eyebrows but said nothing and poured another round.

"I assume Gregori told you that you're not in trouble." Eric nodded again. "Good. I have need of your special expertise. Have you heard of Yurik Zubov?"

Eric cleared his throat. "Isn't that the magic dealer they found dead last night?"

"That's the one," said Alex. "I need you to find out who killed him."

Eric choked on the scotch he was in the middle of sipping and Alex smiled. Normally, Alex enjoyed his scary reputation. It was well-deserved, but now that it was established, it took far less effort to maintain. But right now, it was not helping and he needed this done.

He leaned forward and looked at Eric. "Listen, I know this is not the kind of thing you normally do, but I've seen your work and you're good. I need this done quickly and quietly before the police come sniffing around."

"No offense," said Eric, "but why do it at all? Won't the police find the killer for you?" Gregori and Alex's guards stiffened. They were not used to anyone questioning Alex's word, but he saw it as Eric intended it: problem solving.

"True, but I'd like to get to him first," said Alex. "If someone was sending me a message, they failed. I want to know what's going on before they try again."

Eric nodded.

"Good. Gregori will give you Zubov's address. Call me as soon as you have something."

Eric finished the scotch and took a card from Gregori and left the club. His head was spinning and not just from the liquor. What the hell did he know about finding a killer? He had spent most of his life trying to avoid people like that or at least to stay on their good side. Now he had a chance to fail at both of those goals. And the day had been going so well.

The address for Zubov's shop was a little over a mile away. The day was sunny and mercilessly hot and humid. Eric started sweating as soon

as he got out of the air conditioning. He decided to walk to Zubov's despite the heat. It would give him a chance to clear his head and figure out what he was going to do when he got there. The news had just said that Zubov was killed by magic, but gave no more details. To Eric, that was like saying someone was killed by a projectile when they were shot with a gun: it was technically correct, but fairly useless.

An M-gun was a magical focus, a device designed to direct and control the magical intent of the user. Focuses as a general concept varied in specialization and purpose, everything from tiny charms to look at magical traces or move a coin as a cheap party

trick, all the way up to military-grade wards. The appearance of a focus varied wildly and was mostly under the control of the owner, but the size was necessarily linked to the capabilities and complexity of the focus itself. Eric had dozens of focuses in his bag but the largest was about the size of a baseball. Back at the loft where his group was working on magic for Alex, they had focuses the size of filing cabinets that were extremely powerful. Eric chuckled. Access to that kind of hardware was one of the perks of his new job.

Because an M-gun had a limited purpose, they could be very small, about the size of a pencil was

Eric's guess. But with something like that, you had to have a clear shot at your target and they couldn't have any wards or the magic would fail, dissipating as it collided with the ward. Overcoming someone's anti-magic magic, took power and skill. The person wielding the M-gun supplied the power and intent, but the skill was built into the focus. The more different kinds of wards the maker of the M-gun had considered when making it, the larger the M-gun and the more effective it would be at actually killing someone.

Eric didn't have any personal experience with M-guns, but he had read about them and the basic concepts

were the same for all magic. Knowing that Zubov had been killed by and M-gun also didn't really help narrow things down unless he could tell what kind of M-gun it was and then track its creator. He knew the cops had magic techs for doing exactly that kind of thing and Eric was pretty confident that he could find the information faster, but they did have almost a full day head start on him. He picked up the pace of his walk, determined not to give Alex a reason to kill him.

His shirt was soaked with sweat by the time he arrived at the address Alex had given him. There didn't seem to be anyone watching the front door, but it was blocked off with police tape.

He decided to check around back for a delivery entrance or access to the apartments above the shop. In the alley was a back door to the shop, also blocked with police tape. He looked up and down the alley and up to the fire escapes and open windows, searching for cops or other witnesses. Seeing none, he focused his will on releasing the adhesive of the police tape from the wall behind it. The tape slid away and Eric covered his hand with a clean and not sweat-soaked handkerchief from his bag before opening the door. He felt super-paranoid about doing it, but he didn't want to leave any more of his DNA behind than was necessary to get a look at the crime scene.

He went inside and closed the door behind him. The shop was so hot that Eric found it difficult to breathe. He moved quickly, hoping to get what he needed and be out of this oven as quickly as possible. Standing near the outline of the body the police had left, he pulled out a charm necklace and looped it over his head. He tucked the necklace under his shirt so that all the charms were in contact with his skin then he turned to face the front door of the shop where the killer presumably stood.

He pushed his will through the charms, slowly at first, getting an overview of the kinds of traces present in the room. Pale yellow and white

light emerged in patterns on the floor and counter around where Zubov's body had been. Examining the patterns, Eric mentally adjusted the charms, letting information flow between the shop and the charms. The lights changed and moved as Eric manipulated them, filtering out residual magic that was unimportant from the traces of Zubov's killer.

After fifteen minutes of work, Eric was pretty sure that the M-gun had been fairly large caliber, designed specifically for killing someone reasonably paranoid about magic. But the traces near where the killer had stood were weird. He had gone over them three times to be sure what he

was seeing was right. The killer didn't have any wards of his own. It was almost inconceivable that someone with the resources and balls to get an illegal M-gun of that size would not be protecting said balls with wards.

Convinced that what he was seeing was correct, Eric turned back to the rear shop door to leave. He started and took a step backwards when he saw a young girl standing in the doorway staring at him. She looked to be less than ten, older than a toddler. Eric was bad with ages. He swallowed and said, "hey kid, you scared the crap out of me."

"I saw the lights," she said.  
"Can you make them again?"

Eric really wanted to leave, not entertain a bored kid, but what the heck, it would only take a few minutes.

"Sure," he said. He pushed his will through some of his charms and let it interact with the traces in the shop, performing pretty, but useless, transformations on the patterns. Belatedly, he thought to move his arms in time with the changes in patterns to make it more impressive.

The little girl's eyes widened and she grinned. "Wow," she said in awe, "that is so cool."

Eric grinned back and finished with a pop of light and let it fade back to the hot darkness of the shop. The little girl clapped her hands and

squealed with delight. "Again!" she cried.

"Sorry, kid," said Eric, "but I have to go."

She whined a little in protest and then said, "are you with the police?"

His stomach caught in his throat. "Why?" he asked.

"Babushka says they were here earlier asking questions," she said. "Can you teach me how to make the lights?"

Eric's stomach relaxed down to its normal position in his gut. If the police had just been here today, he might be able to get ahead of them.

There were only a few families that regularly dealt in the caliber of M-gun that had been used. There were traces indicating it was a Kwon family gun, and not one of the Cart family's guns. He didn't think the cops would be recognize those traces since they were pretty subtle. Maybe he could do this after all.

"Maybe some other time, kid," he said.

"My name is Olga," she said, "not 'kid'."

"Hello, Olga," said Eric, "it's nice to meet you. My name is Eric."

"Did you work with my dad?"

Eric's stomach turned with pity.

He didn't remember his father, but growing up just him and his mom wasn't always easy. "No," he said, "I didn't."

"You're much nicer than them anyway," she said. "Sven was always mean to me when I came down to see papa."

"Sven? Was that one of your father's friends?"

Olga nodded. "I remember because I didn't want to come down when he was here."

"Do you know Sven's last name?"

Olga shook her head. "No, but papa keeps a secret book," she darted

from the door to behind the counter. Eric followed her and she pointed at the supports for the counter. There was no book there. "Oh," she said with disappointment, "the police must have taken it away."

"Well," said Eric, "thanks for trying."

"Ooo," said Olga, "but they forgot the key." She pointed at a short, much-used pencil laying on a shelf near the phone. Eric pushed his will through some charms and looked at the traces on the pencil. It was a magical focus alright, but he couldn't tell if it really was a key. Still, it was worth taking just in case. If nothing else, it would help prevent the cops from

reading any of Zubov's secrets.

"Can I have this?" asked Eric.

"Well," said Olga, "what will you trade me for it?"

Eric smiled. He knew just the thing. He picked up a normal ball point pen and got the baseball-sized focus out of his bag. He concentrated and murmured a few words. After a few seconds, the cap of the pen began to change shape, sliding into a small five-pointed star on the end of the pen. When it was done, Eric put his larger focus away and handed the pen to Olga.

"Okay," he said, "now focus on the magic wand and say 'abracadabra'"

Olga somberly took the pen and focused. She said, "abracadabra" and gold sparkles of light erupted from the star in all directions. She squeaked in surprise and almost dropped the pen. Her eyes lit up with glee and she clutched the new treasure tightly. Eric smiled at her then had to step out of her way as she raced passed him, eager to show off her new toy. He picked up the pencil/key and carefully put it deep in his bag.



## CHAPTER NINE

After interviewing Yurik Zubov's family, Bernie and Lawson went back to the station to start calling Zubov's customers. It was extremely tedious work and it made Bernie antsy. She was anxious to get started calling the more interesting numbers in the book they had found wedged in the counter at Zubov's shop. If they just started cold calling all those people, they were likely to get spooked and anyone who did know anything would clam up immediately. Instead, they had put in requests to track the phone numbers to owners and, more

importantly, their locations. They needed warrants to get the location and a judge was unlikely to give them one based solely on their hunch that the numbers could be related to the case.

Bernie hung up after leaving yet another message on voicemail. "I'm starting to think that Zubov didn't have any legitimate clients."

Lawson didn't look up from his notebook. "What? You don't think they're all just unavailable right now?"

"I'm pretty sure that's the same voicemail system for half a dozen of these numbers."

Lawson smiled, finished writing, and looked up at Bernie. "We still haven't heard back on full names

for the numbers in Zubov's secret book?"

"Nope, not yet." She was so tempted to call just one of the numbers in the secret book and take her chances. Of course, she wouldn't call from the office, she'd go back to Zubov's shop and call from there so the caller ID would match. The techs told her they could fake a caller ID, but she didn't trust it. But, she should just bide her time until the names came through the proper channels, no matter how much it irritated her.

"Okay," said Lawson, leaning back in his chair and dropping his pen on the desk. "Let's talk it through again. Maybe we'll jar something else

loose. Or maybe we'll just kill enough time for the report to come back."

Bernie scowled at him and he grinned.

"Fine," said Bernie. "Most murders are committed by someone the victim knows. An angry customer, a jilted lover, something. But as far as we can tell, there is no lover and the neighbors seemed to like Zubov okay. Or at least didn't dislike him enough to kill him."

"We haven't scratched the surface on Zubov's customers, but presumably the legitimate ones would have filed complaints with the Better Business Bureau or sued him if they were unhappy, not kill him."

"He doesn't have a criminal record."

"What about siblings or his wife's family."

Bernie shuffled some papers, looking for her notes. "He has two brothers, both living out of state. His wife is an only child. No criminal records for any of them."

Lawson frowned. They sat in silence for a moment. Bernie built Zubov's family tree in her head.

"What about his mother's family?" she wondered aloud. "We've been assuming that Zubov's wife and mother knew about his off-the-books deals but weren't involved directly. What if they were indirectly

involved?" She lowered her voice and looked around before continuing, "they don't call them crime families for nothing."

Having a new thread to pull on, she and Lawson turned to their computers and began looking at Sonya Zubov's siblings and their offspring. It was a goldmine of prior arrests and juvenile records. Lawson said, "well, it looks like Sonya did something right. She's got the good kids."

Bernie grunted. "I might have something here," she said. "Yelana Lobacheva, one of Yurik Zubov's distant cousins, was arrested last year for trafficking in magic, in particular, large caliber M-guns. The DA dropped

the case due to mishandling of evidence."

"Do you have a current address for Ms. Lobacheva?"

"Yes, right here," she wrote it down and they headed for the car.

Yelana Lobacheva was at home when Bernie and Lawson knocked on her door thirty minutes later. She opened the door wearing a pink bathrobe and a bluetooth headset. She held up a finger to silence Bernie and Lawson. Talking into her mic she said, "I hate to do this to you, Mrs. Smith, but I have to let you go. I have some other customers at the door. Uh-huh, you too. Okay, b-bye." She touched the headset then looked back and forth

between Bernie and Lawson. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yelana Lobacheva?" asked Lawson.

"Yes," she said, "who's asking?"

"I'm Detective Lawson and this is Detective Cart. We have some questions about your cousin, Yurik Zubov."

She blinked. "Yurik? Look, I don't have time for this. I have six Disney cruises to book or I don't get paid for them."

Bernie felt her temper flare, but said more calmly than she felt, "you can talk to us here or back at the

station. It's up to you."

Yelana checked her watch and sighed. "Fine, make it quick." She did not invite them in and continued to stand in the open doorway.

"When was the last time you saw Yurik?" asked Lawson.

"I don't know, maybe six months ago," she said. "His son had some church thing, communion maybe."

"Where were you last night between four and six?" asked Bernie. She tried and failed to keep the challenge out of her voice. She hated when people didn't give her job the respect it deserved.

"Home, making dinner," she said, her eyes narrowed. "Before you ask, my boyfriend was here and he'll vouch for me."

"Your boyfriend's name?" asked Lawson.

"Sven Baronova."

"Do you know anyone who would want to hurt Yurik?" asked Lawson.

Yelana barked a laugh. "No, not Yurik. He was a sniveling weasel, not the kind of guy who went around pissing people off."

"What about people he spent time with or had business with?" asked Lawson.

"Look, I don't know," said Yelana, shifting her weight. "We hardly ever saw each other, okay?"

Lawson nodded to Bernie. She said, "one more thing. The M-gun that killed your cousin was a similar caliber to the ones you were arrested for trafficking in last year." She studied Yelana, waiting for a reaction. Yelana stopped fidgeting and her eyes went hard. "You don't have any of those in your apartment now, do you?"

Yelana's tone was icy. "Come back with a warrant."

Bernie smiled. "We will."

They waited in the car outside Yelana's apartment. They left the

windows down and sweat into the vinyl of the seats. Bernie had tried to argue for air conditioning, but Lawson said it used too much gas and the department was trying to save money. They had also made a friendly bet on whether Yelana would try to get rid of any illegal weapons she had in her apartment before they came back with a search warrant. Bernie was betting that she both had weapons to dispose of and that she would try to sell or move them. Lawson was betting that she did not have any weapons, but that their visit would spook her into making contact with someone who did.

Bernie finished her phone call and stuffed it back in her pocket. "The

magic techs finished going over the traces from the scene," she said. "They confirmed the caliber of the M-gun, but they don't know who made it."

"They can tell that kind of thing from traces?"

"Sometimes," said Bernie. "It's difficult, but sometimes it's possible." She tapped her lip with her finger and gazed absently at Yelana's building. "We should get the techs in organized crime to take a look. They have a better feel for that kind of thing."

Lawson chuckled. "Right, because their time is free, right?"

"What is it with you and the budget fixation?" asked Bernie, turning to face him. "Did you have a

finance class to go along with your law classes?"

"No, but it's something we have to weigh," said Lawson. "There are only so many resources and we have to use them wisely."

Bernie bristled at this. She knew that Lawson wasn't suggesting that some crimes go unpunished, but he was close to implying that some cases were more important than others, some criminals more worth pursuing. "So we should just let things fall through the cracks?" It was confrontational and she knew it.

"That's not what I meant," said Lawson.

"Then what did you mean?"

Lawson sighed. It seemed that Bernie's temper, while still under strict control most of the time, had a shorter fuse lately. She had been ordered to see the police shrink for a few months after the hostage situation last year with Curtis Krish. Lawson wondered if those sessions had the wrong effect on her. "Let's look at this from another angle," he said. "Who usually makes or deals in the kind of M-gun that killed Zubov?"

Bernie blinked and sat back in the roasting car seat. She thought for a moment and said, "we'd have to check with organized crime to be sure it hasn't changed..."

She trailed off and Lawson

could guess why. "One of the families is Cart, isn't it?" he asked gently.

Bernie cleared her throat. "Yes, Cart and Kwon were the two big families for offensive weapons back several years ago."

Lawson nodded. He pulled out his notebook and made a reminder.

They stared into the street, waiting for someone to make contact with Yelana Lobacheva. After twenty minutes, Bernie was starting to wish she had brought some of the papers from Zubov's shop with customers she needed to call. If she had to sit there, she could at least be doing something useful. After forty-five minutes, Bernie was ready to crack.

"That's it," she said, "I can't take this heat. Either turn on the AC or I'm going to find someone selling big blocks of ice and put one on the seat between us."

Lawson chuckled. He started to say something else, but instead just pointed at Yelana's building. A man in his early thirties carrying a messenger bag disappeared into the front door.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Buyer or courier?"

"Let's go ask him," said Bernie. They got out of the car and crossed the street. Bernie briefly considered going around back to watch the fire escape, in case he came out that way, but decided it would take

him long enough to squeeze out the tiny apartment windows that she'd be able to make it down the apartment steps in time to catch him, if necessary. They quietly worked their way up the stairs, paused on the landing below Yelana's floor and listened. Whoever this guy was, he was already inside Yelana's apartment and they were arguing.

Lawson's heart was racing and his stomach was tight. This was the part of police work he hated. He knew it was necessary and he was confident in his ability to do it, but he didn't like it. There wasn't enough time to think things through, you just had to operate on instinct and training. It felt too

seat-of-the-pants for Lawson's liking.

They waited until the arguing subsided a little, maybe a deal had been struck. They made eye contact and nodded then ran up the stairs to the door. Lawson banged on the door and Bernie yelled, "police, open up!"

They waited a few seconds and heard frantic movement inside the apartment. Her heart leapt. They were finally getting somewhere in this case. Maybe she wouldn't have to call Zubov's other customers after all. And best of all, she got to bust a bad guy.

Lawson kicked open the door and Bernie yelled, "police, stay where you are!"

They moved past the shattered

door frame and into the apartment. Yelana was standing by the open front window. She raised her hands but otherwise didn't move. On the other side of the apartment, the courier was scrambling out the kitchen window onto the fire escape.

Lawson repeated, "stay where you are!" Bernie was already out the door, racing down the stairs. She cursed herself for not trusting her instincts in the first place, but couldn't deny the thrill she felt with a good chase. She threw open the fire door at the back of the stairwell and quickly scanned the fire escape from Yelana's apartment. The courier had just dropped down the ground and was

sprinting up the alley.

"Police!" yelled Bernie and took off after him.

She might have been a faster runner, but he had longer legs and a ton of motivation. He raced to the end of the alley and careened into the sparse sidewalk traffic. Bernie followed, continuing to yell instructions to stop.

Eric really could not afford to be caught. He was carrying enough unregistered magical focuses to land him back in prison for many years. And, if he ended up in jail even temporarily he wouldn't be able to find Zubov's killer before the police. That would make Alex Petrovin very

unhappy with him. That fear alone put a spring in his step. He pelted down the sidewalk, dodging the few people who were outside in this heat.

At the intersection, he took his chances and ran against the light. A delivery van screeched its tires and the driver blared his horn. From the other direction, Eric saw his chance to escape. A bicycle messenger and a car were speeding towards him. Eric shoved the nearest pedestrian into the path of the cyclist then he kept running.

The pedestrian protested and stumbled off the sidewalk. The cyclist braked and swerved, side swiping the car before colliding painfully with the

pedestrian. They tumbled to the ground in a heap. The car braked and blared its horn, sliding to a stop between Eric and the police officer that was chasing him.

Eric kept running, not looking back. After another block, he darted around the corner. He made several turns and ran several more blocks before his lungs decided he could either stop or die on the spot. He stopped running and slipped down into a subway stop. He paused on the landing to look behind him and didn't see anyone chasing him. He went down into the dark and relative cool of the subway station and boarded the first train leaving.

He settled into the hard plastic seat as much as possible and tried to look bored like every other subway passenger but his mind was racing. What the hell did the cops want with Yelana? Eric had gotten her address from Alex's man Gregori when he called to report what he'd found. He told Gregori that he needed a contact that knew about Kwon M-guns so he could track Zubov's killer and he had given him Yelana's name. Were the police already ahead of him?

Eric swore and sat forward in the seat, his head in his hands, and rubbed his face. He stared at the floor, seeing nothing. After a long minute, he broke into a grin. The cops didn't have

jack. If they knew it was a Kwon family M-gun, why would they be after Yelana? Who knew? Who cared? The point was, they were on the wrong track and it was just bad luck that they were at Yelana's place the same time as him. Eric's muscles turned to jelly from relief and the exertion of the chase they had given him. Whoever that cop chick was, Eric hoped he'd never see her again. She was fast.

Now that his head was clearer, Eric realized that he still needed a contact in the Kwon family to try and find the killer's source for weapons and thus the killer himself. Yelana had given him a location where he could find contacts, but not a name. Eric

wondered if any of his old friends from before prison were still around that could help him out. There was only one way to find out and it would take more out of his liver than he cared to admit.



## CHAPTER TEN

It was still early for the usual bar crowd, but the people Eric wanted to talk to didn't keep normal hours anyway. He strolled into The Black Eye Tavern and ordered a beer at the bar. No sense in drinking anything stronger until he needed to loosen lips. The TV was on, showing the news with the sound down low.

After Eric ordered his second beer, he asked the bartender if Carsten had been around lately. The bartender set down the beer and said, "who's asking?"

"Eric," he said. "Carsten was a

buddy of mine, long time back."

"Sorry," said the bartender, "I don't know who you're talking about."

Eric shrugged and took a sip of his beer. With luck, that inquiry would reach Carsten's ears. If he was unlucky, Eric would have to try two or three more bars. If he was really unlucky, Eric would have to try his other contacts, too. Carsten was one of the saner guys he knew that was into heavy-duty magic and was pretty careful around it. He had met a bunch of guys while working for the Sloan family that were real thrill seekers and daredevils with magic. Eric understood the thrill of doing magic, but he also valued his life and freedom. Those

guys were all about pushing the limits of what they could get away with.

Eric was about to settle up and head to the next bar when a strong hand slapped him on the back. "Eric Strickland!" a voice said. The man settled down on the barstool next to Eric, his hand still on Eric's shoulder.

The man had a broad face and a crooked nose from one too many bar fights, but he was smiling.

"Carsten!" said Eric happily and relaxed. They shook hands and Carsten ordered another round for them.

"Hey, man," said Carsten smiling, "when did you get out?" He seemed genuinely glad to see Eric,

which Eric was glad to see. They had been friends since high school, but they hadn't parted on the best of terms.

"Last year," said Eric.

"Yeah? What have you been up to?"

Eric didn't want to admit he was working for Alex Petrovin now, so he was intentionally vague. "I did some computer tech work for a while," Eric said, "then, you know, a little of this, a little of that."

"Yeah," said Carsten, "okay. Well, if you ever need a job, I can probably hook you up, okay?"

Eric was a little surprised by the offer. After all, it had been

Carsten's goods that Eric had been moving when he was busted. The magical focuses had been confiscated and Eric was pretty sure Carsten took more than a financial hit on it. Of course, it was possible that Carsten felt guilty for getting his buddy locked up for five years. But Eric knew Carsten and it wasn't in his nature to feel guilty.

"Yeah," said Eric, "sounds great. I'll let you know."

"Okay," said Carsten. "So, what brings you out my way?"

Eric knew he had to be careful here: go for the prize and he'd spook Carsten, dance around too much and he'd spook Carsten. He decided to use

a little of the truth and try for a middle ground.

"I'm doing a job for someone and I need a contact, but hey, man, why jump right to business? Did you lose your taste for alcohol while I was away?"

"Okay, man," said Carsten, relaxing, "yeah, let's have some fun first and catch up." He flagged the bartender and ordered a round of shots.

A few hours later, the bar had filled up and some of Carsten's friends had come around. They were throwing darts and drinking. Eric was starting to feel sick and knew that if he didn't get any information soon, he was screwed. He couldn't afford to pass out around

these guys and let anything slip about what he was up to.

Eric sat down at the bar near the darts and started nursing his beer. Carsten came over and sat with him.

"Hey, man, good times," said Carsten. "I knew you'd get along with my guys." They were all much bigger than Eric, but Eric had been keeping up with them on shots to prove himself worthy. He had even told a self-effacing story about him and Carsten from when they were in high school. They had laughed and Carsten grinned, so Eric felt like he was making progress.

"Yeah," said Eric, smiling and weaving a little on his barstool.

"You want to talk about that thing now?" asked Carsten, his voice lowered.

"Yeah," said Eric. He swallowed, "there's just no good way to say this. I need something to protect myself with."

"Shit, man," said Carsten, "why didn't you say so? I have some stuff-"

"Unless things have really changed," said Eric, "I need something bigger."

Carsten hesitated and watched Eric's face for deceit. Eric knew it was now or never. He put all the fear he truly felt when Alex threatened him into his face and voice and told his lie.

"You don't understand," said Eric, "this guy, he's, well, he's powerful." His hand trembled as he picked up his beer and took a sip. "I don't want to end up face down in the East river. Man, you're my last hope. I don't know what he'll do the next time I see him and I want to be ready."

Eric took another trembling sip.

"Okay, man, take it easy," said Carsten. He reached behind the bar and picked up the order pad. He wrote a name and address on the pad, tore off the top sheet and handed the paper to Eric.

"Here's a guy I know that might be able to help," said Carsten. "No

promises, though, he's kind of a flake."

Eric took a deep, unsteady breath. "Thanks man, I owe you one."

Carsten nodded. "And if he can't help you out, come back and we'll work it out. Okay?" He clapped Eric on the back again. "Now, get out of here," he said, "you look green and I don't want you to embarrass me, lightweight." Carsten grinned and Eric smiled weakly at him.

Eric got unsteadily to his feet and headed for the door, waving goodbye to Carsten and his friends. The cooler air of the evening felt good on Eric's face, but it wasn't enough. He went around the corner of the bar and vomited prodigiously into a trash bin.

After recovering himself a bit, Eric looked at the address Carsten had given him for someone named Ho Ying. It was all the way across town, so Eric hoped he could sober up some on his way. And this time, he hoped the cops wouldn't show up at all, but if they did, he hoped it was before he got there.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

After his meeting with private investigator, Samuel took a cab to the headquarters of Citizens for a Sensible Reality. He paid in cash, just in case anyone had a reason to go looking for his whereabouts for the last few hours. The storefront was unimpressive, but he appreciated when activist groups spent less on their offices and more on the message. When less of their money went into overhead, more was available for campaigns like the one he and Liz were running.

He went inside and asked the nearest staff member for Edward

Knox. She disappeared into the tiny back office and emerged with Edward. He smiled broadly and understood the game well enough to play it. They must show the others that they were on good, even enthusiastic, terms. Word of that interaction would spread and it would encourage people to donate and work harder, knowing they had a chance to make a difference via Liz.

Samuel smiled back, feeling none of it.

"Samuel Jacobs," said Edward, beaming, "good to see you, sir." They grasped hands and pumped a few vigorous times.

"Edward," said Samuel, "good to see you, too."

"You're hear to discuss Representative Jacobs' talk to our members later this week?" he asked for the benefit of the volunteers and staff members listening.

"Of course," said Samuel, "she's looking forward to spending some time with the tireless workers in your group."

Edward nodded almost imperceptibly and said, "excellent! Let's step into the president's office and I'll introduce you." They walked back to the office continuing the pro forma discussions of Liz and their daughter Maria.

Edward closed the door and introduced Samuel to his father. They

shook hands and sat down.

In how they approached change, Samuel and Harold were about as dissimilar as you could get. Samuel wanted to bring down magic from within the upper-echelons of political power while Harold was convinced that grassroots efforts were the only lasting way to affect change. Edward knew this and tried to smooth over those differences. He felt it was part of his job and he wanted Samuel and Harold to see that they had the same goals.

"Samuel," said Edward, "why don't you tell Harold a little bit about how you came to the anti-magic cause?"

Samuel knew what Edward was doing and played along. No matter how many times he had to tell the story, it still stung. In some ways, Samuel hoped the sting never went away.

"Of course," said Samuel. "Five years ago, my brother in Arizona was out shopping at a local mall for his daughter's birthday present. A magic user went on a shooting spree with an M-gun, killing twelve people, including my brother, before taking his own life."

Harold nodded solemnly. "The Westlake Mall shooting," he said, "I remember."

"He was completely innocent

and did not deserve to die that day. It shook me to my core. I vowed to make magic illegal and my wife, Liz, joined me in that cause. I am grateful to her for bringing this important cause to the national level," said Samuel.

Edward nodded. "We're grateful, too," he said. "Without the support of champions in Washington, our efforts on the ground through Harold and the CSR would be much slower."

"But without your support, Liz would not be able to make as much progress as she has in Congress. The letters and support from constituents and the populous in general is extremely important." Samuel smiled

at Harold, hoping he seemed genuine. He was still upset about Liz's deception and to talk about her in glowing terms was difficult. Fortunately, he had practiced that kind of discussion of Liz's work often enough that it was nearly rote.

Harold smiled warmly. "That's wonderful to hear," he said. "Two heads are better than one, I always say."

Edward nodded, glad that they were at least pretending to understand each other and see value in the other's approach to change. "We work better when we work together," he said. "That's why I asked Liz to speak to our group, so that folks here on the ground

will know they have support in Congress and likewise that Liz sees the support from the people."

Samuel nodded. They hashed out the exact time for Liz's speech in two days. They had originally planned to have a smaller event at CSR headquarters, but in light of the recent M-gun murder, they decided that a rally at city hall or at the police precinct where the investigation was taking place would be a better choice.

By the logistics were taken care of, it was well past 6pm.

"Oh, my, look at the time," said Harold. "I hate to do this to you Mr. Jacobs, but Patricia, my wife, will be wondering where I am. Edward, can

you handle anything remaining?"

"Of course, dad," said Edward.

Harold and Samuel shook hands and Harold left the office for home. Edward waited until he heard the front door close then turned back to Samuel.

"What kind of crowd do we want at this rally?" asked Edward.

"Large," said Samuel, "and vocal, but not crazy."

"I'm not sure I can guarantee a complete lack of crazies," said Edward. "They kind of come with the territory of grassroots movements."

Samuel nodded. "I understand, but try to keep them to a minimum.

We don't want Liz to be a crusader, just a strong, reasonable champion."

"Understood," said Edward.

"Do you have any insight into local pro-magic groups to know if they'll have protesters at the rally?"

Edward shrugged, trying to keep his true connections a secret, "some counter-protests are inevitable."

"Hmm," mused Samuel. So Edward wanted to play the secrets game. That was fine with him. "Well, it would be nice if the pro-magic protesters were on the crazy side. It sets a good example."

"Understood," said Edward. He did have some moles in the pro-magic

groups, but none that could influence what kind of protesters showed up. Still, it was worth a try.

"On the other side of things," said Samuel, "do you have any new information Liz can use in her discussions with other representatives?"

"Nothing actionable," said Edward. In truth, he had learned some damning things about two other representatives from New York, but he wanted to keep that to himself until the time was right.

Samuel nodded. Let the sneak keep his secrets. Edward was dependent on Liz's position and they both knew it. The information would

come out eventually. "Alright," said Samuel, "then I think we're done for the night." He stood up to leave. "Call if anything changes for the rally."

"Will do," said Edward. "And thank you again. Thank Liz for me as well."

"Of course," said Samuel.

They shook hands and Edward showed Samuel to the door. After seeing Samuel safely into a cab, Edward returned to the office to make some of the after-hours calls that were his real business.

He called his moles in the pro-magic groups to see if they could rile a few of the crazier members to protest Liz's speech in two days. They

promised nothing, but said they'd work on it.

He also called his connections in or near magic using groups that weren't activists for any new information. He got updates on a few people and the rumor that someone besides the cops was looking for Yurik Zubov's killer. While interesting, it wasn't particularly useful to Edward or his cause. The longer it took the cops to find the killer, the more hay they could make out of the killing. If they never found the killer, Liz could argue for better registration of M-guns at a minimum and more restrictions on magic users in general, citing the Zubov killing as an example of why

law enforcement needed more control. Either way, and like it or not, the killing had given the anti-magic cause a boost.

After a few hours of making calls, his phone rang and he answered with, "Edward Knox."

The man on the phone spoke hurriedly and softly. "Mr. Knox, I may know of someone who has strayed," he said. That was the code Edward had given to his informants to use when they had something to report. Edward couldn't be seen as tracking magic users, but he wanted to know who they were in case they ever tried to infiltrate the CSR. He wanted to know who they talked to in case he could tie

it back to a politician he needed to pressure. Knowledge was power and Edward was determined to bring all his power to bear on the problem of magic still being legal.

"Go on," said Edward.

"The lost one is called Ho Ying," said the voice and gave Edward an address for Ying.

"Thank you," said Edward. "I'll see to it you're compensated for your time in bringing this to my attention."

They hung up. Edward made a note about Ho Ying in his notebook. Tomorrow, he could see what kind of man Ho Ying was and whether he would be useful to the anti-magic cause as an example of someone who

was a danger to society.

Edward headed back to his parents' house. It had been a long day and he was ready for a late dinner and an early bed.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Bernie slipped onto a barstool and waved for the bartender's attention. The place was starting to thin out, being too late for dinner, but too early for a night on the town. The TV over the bar was showing highlights from the day's sporting events. The crowd was a mix of laborers and professionals, joined in their love of alcohol and the spontaneous camaraderie of bars. Bernie loved this place for exactly that reason. She could be herself, not someone others expected her to be. Here in the dark confidential folds of

the bar, she was finally just Bernadine, not Detective Cart, not Bernadine Cart the black sheep of the Cart crime family, just Bernadine. She sighed inwardly and reveled in the energy of the place. People with their lives and their ups and downs and they brought it all here to subconsciously share that with the rest of the patrons.

The bartender nodded at her. "Scotch, straight," she said. Her mind started to drift towards work but she jerked it ruthlessly back to the present. It was one thing to let her subconscious mind work on a problem, but her conscious mind needed a break and a fresh perspective.

A man with close cropped

brown hair and a strong jaw worked his way into the barstool next to Bernie. He looked at her and said, "hey, pretty lady, want to buy a hardworking nurse a drink?"

"Sure," she said, "why not?" She flagged the bartender and leaned in to kiss the man. They kissed a long, comfortable kiss.

"Mmm," he said. "Hey, babe. It's good to see you."

"You too, Shawn" said Bernie. The bartender dropped off the scotch and took Shawn's order for a kind of beer that Bernie had never heard of.

"How was your day?" asked

Shawn.

Bernie let out a soft laugh.

"Well, I talked to some very unhelpful family members, searched a crime scene, and failed to catch a person of interest in a very exciting foot chase," she said. "Not my best day ever, but far from the worst. How about you?"

"Oh, you know," said Shawn, "helped save three lives, failed to save another. Two car wrecks, a fire, and a stabbing." The bartender brought Shawn's beer. "Here's to the city that never sleeps. May it keep us busy the rest of our natural lives."

Bernie laughed and clinked her scotch with Shawn's tall beer glass. Shawn told her about patients in the

emergency room that he had worked on and Bernie told him about the afternoon's foot chase of a suspect that ended in two injuries and hours of paperwork for her.

They finished their drinks and got a second round to take to a booth and ordered dinner. They talked about work, Shawn describing the amusing position two of the other nurses had to get into to help a patient, and Bernie relaying the unceremonious crash of the cyclist and pedestrian.

Bernie loved Shawn in ways she couldn't easily describe. He was kind, interesting, and completely understanding. He didn't ask about her past or her family, but listened without

judging whenever she talked about it. He understood her crazy hours, the midnight phone calls, and the work as her priority. He never asked about settling down. They enjoyed each others' company but took no offense if the other was out with someone else. Bernie loved all of that and realized just how lucky she was to have it.

As she was reveling in her time with Shawn, her phone rang. She fished it out of her pocket and checked the number. It was Lawson so she answered.

"Bernie," he said, "we've got another one."

"Same guy?" she asked.

"Looks like," said Lawson.

"The press is going to be all over this, two murders in as many days. We need to get on this ASAP. I'm on my way there now." He gave Bernie the address.

"Got it," she said and hung up. She looked up at Shawn and smiled weakly.

"That Lawson?" he asked.

She nodded. "Sorry, I have to go."

He leaned forward over the table and she leaned in to kiss him. It was long and passionate this time. "Okay," he said, "I'm taking a rain check on this evening."

She smiled at him and was glad

the darkness of the bar covered the coloring of her cheeks. "You got it," she said. She left some money for her part of the bill and headed out to the address Lawson had given her. If he was right and it was the same killer, the press would be more than all over it.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The red and blue lights from police cruisers were already competing with lights from a dozen news cameras when Bernie got to the scene. She cursed inwardly and quietly made her way up to the victim's apartment. The building had seen better days. The walls of the stairwell were covered in graffiti and smelled of urine. The interior of the victim's apartment wasn't much better. The broken down couch sat across from a small TV. Pizza boxes littered the floor, freely intermingling with boxes of illicit magical focuses. The victim was

sprawled on the couch with the same large bloodless mess of wound in his chest as Zubov.

Bernie hated that she was getting used to seeing death. The first time she had seen a dead body was back when she was a patrolman. It hadn't even been a murder, but it gave her nightmares for months afterwards. She was six months into her job, walking her beat, and enjoying the feeling that she was creating order and safety in the world, unlike her father and brothers. All they could do was create chaos and destruction, but she could make things better in a way they never would. Her self-satisfaction faded when she saw legs protruding

from a pile of dirty blankets and newspapers. She went to make sure homeless man was okay and realized he was dead. She tried and failed to keep herself from vomiting. She did have the presence of mind not to do it near the body. Embarrassed and shaking, she radioed in and did the job she had been trained for, but it wasn't easy. It was the first time she questioned whether she had made the right choice in leaving her father's family. She viciously squashed that thought. Now, she was so practiced at suppressing it that it happened automatically.

Here, facing another murder, she marshaled her feelings about

death, her job, and her family and carefully put them away. She had almost succeeded when she saw a pink pacifier on the coffee table and a toddler's toy underneath the table. The pacifier and toy looked used and Bernie's emotions trickled back from the box she had put them in, filling her stomach with cold sadness. She took a deep breath and let them stay. No matter what her feelings were on their victim and his lifestyle, he might have been someone's father, he might have been someone's brother, and he certainly was someone's son. She held onto that feeling to remind her why she was there, doing that job. Whoever else was in the victim's life, they

deserved justice and closure, and Bernie was going to give it to them.

Lawson was standing with the first officer on the scene getting the details. He filled Bernie in quickly. "They were responding to reports of disturbing the peace," said Lawson. "Apparently there was some kind of shouting before our victim was killed."

"Did you get a name?" asked Bernie.

Lawson checked his notes. "Ho Ying," he said. "Lives alone, but the neighbors say he had people coming and going at all hours."

"Any of those neighbors hear anything beyond the shouting?" asked Bernie.

The first officer on the scene said, "nothing. They said they heard two male voices arguing, called the cops, and then nothing."

"Thank you," said Bernie. The officer nodded and headed outside for crowd control.

"So our killer was probably male," said Lawson, making a note.

"The wound certainly looks like the same caliber as Zubov," said Bernie. "But other than the size of the weapon and timing, do we have anything to link these two murders?"

"Not yet," said Lawson, "but that won't stop the press from making up a connection."

"Ho Ying," said Bernie. "I'm guessing he's affiliated with the Kwon or Sloan family."

"Kwon I get," said Lawson, "but Sloan? What are they like?"

"They're runners," said Bernie. "They move goods and don't really care about the who or why. They have about as much 'family' in them as a dog pound does."

Lawson chuckled. Bernie moved to examine the body and the boxes of focuses more closely. Using magic to shoot someone wasn't as simple as it might sound. Sure, magic was manipulation of matter at a molecular level, but it only worked on line of sight. Well, only worked on

line of sight. The incident last year proved to Bernie that it was possible to do it differently, but that was now a tightly guarded secret of the ATFM and US military.

In order to use magic to kill someone, you have to be able to see the thing you're affecting. There were ways around it in the literal sense, like doing magic in the dark, but they were effectively the same as being able to see what you were operating on. The result was that magical weapons needed to make someone's internal organs visible before you could damage them with magic. It was gruesome, but usually bloodless. As magic rearranged someone's flesh to

expose the heart, it scrambled the skin and muscle and bone molecules into a generic fleshy lump. That action usually sealed off any blood vessels in the area, making the wound bloodless, but no less deadly.

Ying had been standing when he was killed and fell backwards onto the couch. There was a cell phone by the couch. Bernie pulled on a latex glove and picked up the phone.

"Got something?" asked Lawson.

"Cell phone," said Bernie. She pulled up the most recent call list and held the phone for Lawson to copy into his notebook. They repeated the exercise with the outgoing call list.

None of the numbers looked familiar to Bernie, but it was late and she had never been that good with numbers.

Bernie bent down to take a look at the magical focuses and Lawson examined the room more closely, hoping something would seem out of place to him. Lawson would never admit it aloud, but he always felt more comfortable with murders in places like this, where he expected violent criminals to live. Murders in nicer homes or even Yurik Zubov's murder made him uncomfortable because he could empathize with the victim's family. This guy had almost no redeeming value in Lawson's mind. It didn't make the murder any less of a

crime so he willed himself to care.

"These focuses are illegal," said Bernie, "but they're nothing exotic. They're the magical equivalents of bolt cutters and fake IDs."

Lawson nodded. One of the officers searching the bedroom stuck his head out into the living room and said, "detectives? You're going to want to see this."

They went into the bedroom and the officer gestured to the closet. Behind a badly made false back, there was a cabinet-sized space filled with M-guns of every shape and size. Lawson whistled in appreciation and Bernie raised both her eyebrows in surprise.

She turned to the officer and said, "check the kitchen, too. Under the sink and over the fridge are also common places to hide this kind of thing, but check everywhere."

"Bathroom, too," called Lawson as the officer hurried to comply. "There are enough guns here to start a small war."

"So," said Bernie, pacing as she talked, "we have a dead quasi-legitimate magic dealer and a dead illicit magic dealer. Normally, I could believe that Ying was supplying Zubov or Zubov was providing cover for Ying, but that doesn't track. They're different families and, last I heard, rivals, at least in some things."

Lawson stood up and crossed his arms. "We still don't know that Zubov was working for the Petrovin family."

Bernie stopped pacing and looked at him dubiously. He held his hands up in a placating gesture.

"I'm not saying he isn't," said Lawson, "I'm just saying we can't prove it."

"If Zubov was ostensibly working for the Petrovin family, but selling weapons from Ying on the side," said Bernie, "that would be enough for the Petrovin family to want to kill him."

Lawson nodded. "We should

talk to organized crime in the morning and see if they can shed any light on the current family politicking. And damn the extra cost to the department for their time."

Bernie's temper flared when she thought this might be internal Petrovin family business spilling out into her life. If they had to be violent criminals, they should at least try to keep it off the police's radar.

"Come on," said Lawson, "let's go see if anything's cooking in the kitchen. It's late and I want to wrap this up and go home."

Bernie said nothing but followed him out of the bedroom.

Eric saw the flashing red and

blue lights from a block away. He sidled up to the crowd and listened, hoping to hear what had happened. He didn't believe in coincidence. If it was Ho Ying at the center of this cop show, Eric was going to lose more than the rest of the evening's alcohol. He cursed himself for not taking Carsten up on his offer of a smaller M-gun. Of course, it was Ying he actually needed, but part of him would feel better with some kind of offensive potential. He doubted he could fake up that kind of attack on the fly, even when he was at his best, and tonight he certainly was not at his best.

The ambulances left and the van from the medical examiner's

office showed up instead. Eric's head started swimming. He was so fucked. He was now out two leads on finding Zubov's killer, Yelana had been arrested and Ying was dead. Eric was in so far over his head he couldn't even see daylight any more. He steadied himself on the nearest building and willed himself not to puke again. His body had other plans and he lost it all over the sidewalk.

Sniffling and terrified, Eric debated just trying to get out of town before Alex found him. He walked away from the crime scene and talked himself down off that ledge. He should just tell Alex when he had found out and let Alex decide what to do. Eric

hadn't completely failed yet and maybe this information would mean more to Alex than it did to him.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alex's nightclub had grown in popularity after word got out that someone had tried to kill him outside its front door. The manager had convinced Alex to not repair the pockmarks in the stone facing from that ordeal as proof of the attack. The marks were starting to be worn smooth by the hundreds of people who had touched the gouges. Gregori said it made people realize their mortality. After being shocked that Gregori thought in such big words, Alex had to agree with him. People were obsessed with their lives and their deaths. After

all, what could be more personally important to someone.

So Alex left them. The interior of the nightclub could not have been a more polar opposite to the club where he ate his lunch and had serious meetings. That was entirely intentional on Alex's part. He wanted his environment to reflect the kind of work he was discussing. That wasn't always possible, but Alex arranged it that way whenever possible.

But tonight was not a business night for Alex. He was just going to have some drinks and dance with some pretty girls. The line of people at the door waiting to get in craned their necks to see who was getting out the

limo that pulled up in front of the club. Gregori opened the door for Alex and they walked to the club. The crowd of people erupted in whispers. It was kind of like being a rock star, thought Alex not for the first time.

They opened the door and a blast of air conditioning hit them. Once inside, it wasn't much cooler than outside with all the body heat. They made their way through the crowd, Alex nodding and smiling at everyone, winking at especially hot girls. The girls withdrew, giggling, to the protection of their flocks of friends but continued to stare at him.

He had heard from Eric by way of Gregori. Eric was hitting up his

other contacts for who might have sold a large M-gun to Zubov's killer. Alex felt a little bad for the guy. He knew he had thrown Eric into the deep end by tasking him to find Zubov's killer before the police. He really didn't want to have to kill Eric if he failed, but things were not looking good. Eric's only lead, Yelana, had been arrested earlier in the day for suspected trafficking in magic. By his account, he had just barely gotten away. Still, Alex had some amount of faith in the guy. He was a survivor and he'd figure out how to make it work.

Alex was only on his second drink when he noticed a familiar brunette facing off with Gregori. He

might have been a good foot taller than her, but she was no less fierce. The light on her wavy hair and long regal face made Alex sad that it could never have been. Even if she hadn't become a cop, Petrovin and Cart were bitter rivals. Sighing inwardly, he motioned to Gregori to let her through. She glared at Gregori and came over to stand at the low table. Alex stood up to welcome her.

"Bernadine Cart," he said, "what a pleasant surprise."

"Alex," she said, nodding.

"Please, have a seat."

"I'll stand," she said, her voice tight. "This won't take long."

Alex raised and eyebrow, shrugged and sat down. "Suit yourself. What brings you here?"

"How well did you know Yurik Zubov?"

Alex's guard immediately went up. Bernadine was not one to trifl with, even on her best days, but if she was on the warpath about Zubov, she wouldn't believe anything he said, but she might follow up on it. "I knew of him," said Alex. "He was one of many small business owners in the area."

Bernie's temper flared again. He was playing with her and she was really not in the mood for his games. "Cut the crap, Alex," she said, "I know he worked for you. What was he

selling and to whom?"

"You have all his shop's paperwork I understand," said Alex levelly, "so you should know that already."

"This is bullshit!" raged Bernie. Gergori turned his head to them, but Alex waved him off. "Zubov worked for you, did something you didn't like, and you killed him." Bernie's stomach was all fire and liquid acid now. If this was an internal family matter or an escalating turf war between Petrovin and Kwon, she had to nip it in the bud now before more people died.

Alex blinked. It wasn't like Bernadine to lose control like that. Yes, she had a temper, but to openly

accuse someone of murder without evidence was sloppy. He didn't know what about this case had gotten under her skin, but it clearly had.

Alex cleared his throat.  
"Where's your partner, Bernadine?" he asked.

She glared down at him with rage and hatred in her eyes. On some level she knew she was being irrational and irresponsible, but more of her just didn't care. Zubov's three kids deserved justice and they weren't going to get it if Alex Petrovin had killed him. More than that, innocent people died during magic deals gone wrong, not just guilty people, and it wasn't fair to them and their families.

This had to stop now before anyone else got hurt.

"You keep your family politics and turf wars out of the morgue," she said coldly. "I don't want any more of your messes to clean up."

Alex sat upright and stared at her with hard eyes. "This is edging close to slander and harassment, Detective Cart," he said. "Want to threaten me and go for a trifecta?"

"Fuck you, Alex," said Bernie. She turned on her heel and stalked out of the club.

Bernie couldn't go home after her confrontation with Alex. She was too wound up and far too pissed off. She walked angrily back to the car and

sat staring at the dashboard for a few long minutes. She must have been blind not to see the threat to Yurik before now. Dealing with criminals like Alex was bound to bite him sooner or later. He must have bought from Ying, sold to the vague names and numbers in his phonebook, and didn't cut his Petrovin masters in on the deal. That was motive for murder all right.

She felt good that she had figured it out, but now she had to prove it. She had to prove that someone working for Alex had killed Zubov. She should have arrested Alex on the spot and searched his place for the murder weapon. She banged on the steering wheel in frustration. Search

warrants took so much time to get. If only he had threatened her, or said or done something to give her probably cause. Due process was such a pain in the ass when she knew she was right. How many more illegal magic dealers needed to die before she could put his ass behind bars?

Bernie stared out the window of the car, not seeing. She felt as though the clouds of confusion had been seared apart by a lightning bolt. As she sat, the clouds drifted apart. Illegal magic dealers? Was the connection between Zubov and Ying that simple? If so, then any other dealers were also at risk. Bernie felt despair tug at her, but she pushed it

away. There were probably hundreds of illegal magic dealers in New York City. If they were all at risk, she was looking at a massacre. Was there anything that both Ying and Zubov both dealt in? Some focus they both could get that connected them? How did Yelana Lobacheva fit into all this? She dealt in illegal M-guns as well. Or at least, that's what they thought when they arrested her earlier. Search of her place didn't turn up any guns, but that doesn't mean they weren't there.

So that was it. Yurik could have been running M-guns for his cousin Yelana. Ying was definitely running M-guns. That's what the victims had in common. If she was

right, anyone running M-guns was at risk until they found something else to connect Ying and Zubov. Bernie felt calmer now. It might still be Alex that had killed Zubov and she was no less pissed about that, but finding a connection, however tenuous, between her victims made her feel better. She started the car. She wanted to have another look at the crime scene.

She went in the back door to Zubov's shop, pushing aside the police tape. The shop was hotter than the alley, still holding onto the heat of the day. She flipped on the light and surveyed the chaotic shop. Dust motes drifted in the overhead light as Bernie considered the locations of victim and

shooter. She walked to what she thought would be the midpoint of the confrontation. She wanted to see the magical traces left behind. They would be very dim now, time having eroded their passage, but M-guns were powerful and there had been nothing to disturb them.

Bernie pulled a charm bracelet from her pocket. She hadn't worn it in many years, but she still carried it as both a reminder of her past and validation of her choices in the present. Each of the charms was a small magical focus, completely legal, specialized to fit how Bernie liked to interact with the magical world. None of them were necessary to do magic,

but they made routine magic simpler and more efficient.

She concentrated on the charms and lit up the magical traces. The strength of the lights surprised her and she took a step back. Many of the traces lit up almost on top of her. Someone had been doing magic here after the killing and fairly recently. The red and orange lights of the M-gun were now the faintest traces in the room. They formed a fairly straight line between the killer and the victim. Next brightest were the traces of the CSI techs, white lines of inquiry and observation. The bright traces were pale yellow, a mix of inquiry, observation, and manipulation.

A smile tugged at Bernie's lips. Whoever had been here after the CSI techs was good. The techs would collect magical traces, producing only white traces themselves, and take the results back to the office for analysis and manipulation. Whoever had been here since then was doing manipulation and analysis on the fly. That took skill and Bernie respected that, even if they had contaminated the crime scene by doing so.

She looked at the original traces and contaminated the crime scene with her own analysis and manipulation. She just hoped she could figure out what the person here before her had learned. The lights from the

traces moved about her and she worked her way through them. After a few minutes, she realized the other analyzer had been after two things: the type of M-gun used and who made it, and who the killer was. She followed the traces to the shooter and was surprised to find it completely devoid of green traces. Green was most often associated with wards and anti-magic magic and most people who wielded M-guns of the caliber used here would have been using some. There was nothing. Not even the most basic protection against malicious magic.

Bernie blinked in surprise and horror. It was downright dangerous to be walking around without any wards,

but to use an M-gun of the caliber used to kill Zubov without any protection? That was downright suicidal. A chill went down her spine. She didn't know who the killer was, but he was a zealot, a radical, and he would not go down easily.

Completely unsettled by her findings, Bernie left the shop in a daze. Once in her car, she knew she needed confirmation so she drove to Ho Ying's apartment. Her mysterious visitor to the first crime scene had not been here. The traces were much brighter, but there were only the M-gun and the white CSI tech traces; the yellow manipulation traces were missing. So she was one step ahead of whoever was

interested in Zubov's murder. It wasn't much, but it was something. When she turned to look for green ward traces from near the killer's position, she braced herself to be wrong, but she wasn't. The area was completely empty. She smiled a little. In this case, absence of evidence was its own kind of evidence. The two murders were connected and she had a pretty good idea of where to start looking for the killer.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eric called the number Alex had given him and talked to Gregori. He told Eric to meet them at Alex's nightclub and warned him that Alex was not in a good mood. Eric had the subway ride and several block walk to think about how screwed he was and to reconsider running for his life. Fortunately, the adrenaline was fighting it out with the alcohol in Eric's system and so far was winning the fight.

Eric arrived at the club and Gregori was waiting for him outside. "Alex will meet you out here in a

minute," said Gregori. "He wants to talk in private." Gregori looked Eric up and down. "And, you don't meet the club's dress code."

Alex emerged a few minutes later with a lovely lady on his arm. He kissed her goodbye and smiled warmly. He turned to Eric and the smile evaporated. Eric swallowed the lump in his throat and tried not to think of the East river.

A limo pulled up and Gregori motioned to Eric that he should go with them to the car. Alex got in first and Eric followed. Gregori shut the door and got into the front seat.

"Please tell me you have good news," said Alex.

Eric shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I don't."

Alex swore in Russian and said, "what is it, then? What did Yelana tell you?"

"Not much," said Eric. "We were interrupted by the police. They arrested Yelana."

Alex's nostrils flared and Eric tried to make himself smaller. The car had pulled away from the club and was making its way slowly through a seemingly random path through the city.

"Who arrested her and for what?"

Eric swallowed again. He had

been too busy running to get names and badge numbers. "Uh, it was two detectives, I think, at least they were plain clothes."

"Man and a woman?" asked Alex.

"Yes," said Eric, his stomach filling with dread. If Alex already knew this, then Eric wasn't proving his worth by bringing new information. Eric wasn't sure it was biologically possible for his heart to explode of his chest, but it was beating hard enough to make Eric wonder if it would.

Alex swore again in Russian and punched the seat next to him. He breathed a few times and said, "what did they arrest her for?"

"I don't know for sure," said Eric and Alex glared at him. He really hated qualifying statements like that from his subordinates. He always assumed his people could be wrong, whether they admitted to that possibility or not, so to have them state it was just duplicate effort. "But," said Eric, "my guess is suspicion of trafficking in M-guns or some other controlled focus. I was only there about a minute before they showed up, so they must have been waiting."

Alex nodded. Bernadine had been convinced that Alex killed Zubov over some kind of turf war or because Zubov had gone behind Alex's back. Alex wasn't engaged in a turf war, at

least not yet, and he didn't think Zubov was the kind to cheat him. So, what was the connection to Yelana? And what had put Bernadine on the warpath for him? Alex considered the possibility that Yelana had given up Alex in exchange for leniency, but Yelana didn't keep the contraband in her apartment. The cops likely had nothing on her. Something else must have convinced Bernadine there was a turf war.

"What else?" said Alex.

Eric blinked and said, "I found a guy that I thought could help me find whoever sold the M-gun to Zubov's killer. His name is, or was, Ho Ying."

"Was?" asked Alex sharply.

Eric nodded, the sick feeling returning to his stomach. He feared throwing up in Alex Petrovin's car about as much as death itself, so he swallowed it down. "I went to Ying's apartment and it was already swarmed with cops. I saw the morgue van pull up."

Alex nodded again. Well, that explained Bernadine's theory that it was a turf war. He was going to have to talk to the Kwons before anything escalated and it really did turn into a battle. He needed to catch this killer in the act, before he caused any more damage. Not to mention that killing magic dealers was hardly good for business in general.

But how could he draw the killer out? "How did you get Ying's name?"

"I asked some buddies of mine for a contact," said Eric. Fearing that he had made Alex angry by going outside the family, he quickly added, "with Yelana in jail I didn't have any other line on M-gun dealers."

Alex waved him to silence. "Were you in a public place when you got Ying's name?"

Eric swallowed. It was starting to dawn on him that it might not have been the smartest move ever. The bar had been loud, but not so loud that overhearing conversations was impossible. "Yes," said Eric meekly.

"I take your tone to mean that you realize how stupid that was," said Alex.

Eric nodded and Alex grunted.  
"Take care not to let it happen again."  
Eric nodded again.

Alex looked out the window of the car and thought. Perhaps he could turn this information leak to his advantage. He could use the bar Eric mentioned and some others he knew that were more talkative than they should be. He could feed them information and use them to spread the word about another M-gun dealer. Hopefully, word would reach the killer and he would jump at the chance to off another of Alex's minions. He just

needed bait.

"Here's what you're going to do," said Alex. "You're going to go home and get some sleep. Tomorrow evening, go back to the bar you were at tonight. Say you couldn't get to Ying and you're desperate. One of my guys will be there to give you Yelana's name and address."

Eric shifted in his seat. This felt an awful lot like reproducing a problem with a magic spell, just recreating the conditions of the first problem to make it happen again. You usually only did that when you wanted to examine the problem more closely. It wasn't a fix and it wasn't going to prevent the problem from happening.

Yelana was being set-up to be bait for the killer.

Alex continued. "You're going to leave the bar and go to Yelana's so it doesn't look like you're just name dropping."

"What?" said Eric in alarm.  
"You want me to be the bait?"

Alex smiled coldly. "You're the one who failed to find Zubov's killer before he offed your best lead," said Alex. "I'm giving you a chance to salvage the mess you've made."

Eric's heart sped up again. He was wrong, Alex wasn't going to kill him here, he was going to let some whack-job with a large M-gun and no wards do it for him. A sliver of hope

slid down Eric's mind. Zubov's killer hadn't been using wards. If the same guy showed up at Yelana's, Eric wouldn't be completely defenseless. He would at least be able to counter-attack and have a good chance of doing some damage. He was still terrified, but his heart was no longer beating like a frightened rabbit's.

"Okay," said Eric. "What time?"

Alex shrugged. "Same time as today, roughly. We know that the killer was listening tonight, so let's hope he's listening tomorrow, too."

Alex motioned to the driver and the car pulled over to the curb. Gregori got out to open the back door.

"This is your stop," said Alex.

Eric scrambled to get out of the car. They were nowhere near his apartment. Or the East river. So it felt like a minor victory to Eric. Gregori shut the door, got in the front, and the car rolled away. Eric spent several minutes breathing and trying not to throw up before heading home.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Liz Jacobs had her car service drop her off several blocks from Griffin's apartment. The night was cooling off, but the pavement was still warm and radiated up on her. She walked briskly down the street. The neighborhood was safe enough, but Liz had never felt so alive as when she was with Griffin and she was anxious to see him again. She arrived at the apartment and looked up and down the street, making sure that no one was following her. There were no other pedestrians, just a cyclist and rows of cars that had been parked and dark

since Liz had started walking.

She took a deep breath and pressed the buzzer for Griffin's apartment. The door buzzed open and Liz slipped inside, taking one final look around. She walked up three flights of stairs and down the bland, but clean, hallway to Griffin's apartment. Her loins were on fire with anticipation and the adrenaline of their clandestine affair. She knocked on the door.

The night Liz had seen Griffin performing in the ballet, she knew they had to meet. She had charmed her way back stage after the show and found him signing autographs for what looked like ballet groupies. They were

children without any connections while she was a powerful woman with experience and a patron of the arts, if only Griffin could prove himself and the ballet company worthy of it.

Griffin sensed the power in Liz and quickly said farewell to the groupies to introduce himself. There was a spark between them from the first night, a game of power and sensuality that they played effortlessly. He took her hand in both of his, she remarked on people she knew at the National Endowment for the Arts. He asked about her husband, she gave him a coy smile and stroked his arm. That first night, they played tentatively at first, but the fit was so easy that ten minutes later they

were all over each other in the dressing room.

That night, six months ago, had been the start of a glorious affair. Liz never considered herself the cheating type and she still loved Samuel, but Griffin made her feel special and alive. She never considered leaving her husband and Griffin didn't want her to. Their connection was so intense that it needed no other commitment from either of them.

Griffin answered the door wearing a tight T-shirt and loose pajama bottoms. He was gorgeous, muscled, and lithe with all the grace he brought to the stage there waiting for her. He offered his hand to Liz and

guided her into the apartment, closing the door behind them. He twirled her around and she laughed, lost in the heady euphoria of being with someone so compatible. He drew her into his arms and lifted her off the ground, still laughing.

He smiled broadly and kissed her along her arms and neck as he lowered slowly to the ground. "I missed you," he said between kisses.

"It was only yesterday," said Liz breathlessly. She was dizzy with delight.

"Too long," said Griffin softly. He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

Below the apartment's

windows, Kevin Marlowe listened and waited. Samuel Jacobs had hired him to figure out if his wife was cheating on him. It was one of the easiest gigs he'd ever had. For a politician, she wasn't very sneaky. He already had photos of her pressing the buzzer for Griffin Smith's apartment and going into the building. He already had phone records and cab receipts from a prepaid credit card in Liz Jacobs' name.

All he needed now was the smoking gun of them together. Once they were done in the bedroom, Kevin would walk up the stairs of the building, pretending to be another resident and make the timing work so

that if they kissed on the way out of Griffin's apartment, Kevin would be there to photograph it. If he got lucky and got all this in one day, it would be the easiest job he'd had in a long while. Thank God for sloppy politicians.

Edward Knox was glad he had gone to bed early. He was awakened at 3am by a phone call. A member of CSR on the police force called to tell him that there had been another murder by magic. Edward was groggy and still waking up when the name of the victim snapped his attention to wide awake. The victim was Ho Ying, the magic dealer his informant had told Edward about just last night. Was there a connection?

He swallowed down his panic. Edward knew he wasn't responsible for Ho Ying's death, so any connection there was circumstantial. Still, it unsettled him. He got out of bed and made his way to the kitchen. If there had been another murder by magic, they could use the extra attention and news coverage to their advantage. He needed to start the call tree and get protesters organized for a demonstration. Edward wished they could have had Liz Jacobs speaking to the CSR today instead of tomorrow. That would have been better timing. Still, you had to "make hay while the sun shines" as his father would say.

Edward woke his parents to

help move people to action. They called other staffers to get the office open and organize their signs. They started the call tree to alert members of CSR that a protest would take place that morning and through the day at both city hall and the police precinct. They sent out email and posted on social media sites, spreading word as far and wide as possible. They couldn't afford to let an opportunity like this pass them by.

After a few frantic hours, the sun was coming up and the Knox house took a break to change clothes and eat breakfast. Edward stepped outside to call Samuel Jacobs. The timing and circumstances of this

murder had been bothering Edward all morning. He needed to talk to someone. And he needed to rule out any involvement from Samuel and his people in Ho Ying's death.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lawson walked into the office early in the morning and ready for work. He had been up late filling out reports from Yelana Lobacheva's arrest and writing up his notes in Ho Ying's murder. With that done, he was ready to dig into the reports from the CSI techs on Zubov's murder. He raised an eyebrow of concern when he saw Bernie with her head on her desk. He checked his watch. It was just before 7am and he fully expected to be the first person in the office.

He got a cup of coffee and settled into his desk. He opened the

report and started reading. A few minutes later, Bernie stirred. She dragged her head up off the desk and wiped the drool off her notebook and then off her face. She blinked blearily at Lawson.

"Good morning," said Lawson, "sleep well?"

Bernie made a face at him and stretched. "Not really," she said, "but I have a lead on our killer."

Lawson raised his eyebrows.  
"You do?"

Bernie nodded and checked her coffee cup. It was empty. "He's a Puritan." She stood up and started towards the coffee machine and Lawson followed her.

"You don't mean a real Puritan, with the pilgrim hat, buckle shoes, that kind of thing," said Lawson. She turned and gave him a sour look.

"No, of course not," she said. "Though some of their attitudes on magic are pretty strict and out there."

"Why haven't I heard of them?" said Lawson.

Bernie filled her cup and said, "what did your parents teach you about magic?"

Lawson thought for a second and said, "that it was powerful and dangerous. They taught me to use basic wards to protect myself and what to do if someone threatened me with

magic."

"Run like hell?"

"Pretty much."

Bernie nodded. "As I understand it, that's the spiel that most parents give their kids." She didn't have to tell Lawson that her exposure to magic as a child was entirely different. She had been doing magic since she could hold a focus and form a coherent thought to use it. To her, magic was a tool, a way to get what you wanted and make your life easier. It could be dangerous, but so was driving a car, walking alone in the city, and living your life. You admitted the danger and moved on. You took steps to protect yourself, tried to stay out of

bad situations, and hoped for the best.

"These people don't call themselves Puritans," said Bernie, "it's a slang term like 'right-wing nutjob' or 'tree-hugging hippie'."

She sipped her coffee. She had so much to tell Lawson, why didn't her brain work?

"What do Puritans do that's so weird?" asked Lawson. "And, is there something inoffensive I should call them instead of Puritans?"

Bernie chuckled. "They would call themselves normal, just normal people uncorrupted by magic's influence. As to what they do that's weird, you've heard of people who don't get their children vaccinated?"

"Yeah," said Lawson, "they think the vaccination is going to do more harm than good."

Bernie nodded. "And now there are epidemics of mumps and the like among these kids. Completely avoidable diseases on the rise again because people are more scared of the antidote than the poison." Bernie shook her head in disbelief. "Well, the same thing is true for Puritans. They are so opposed to magic that they refuse to use even the most basic wards."

Lawson raised his eyebrows. "Wow. I mean, I guess I knew people like that existed, I just..." he trailed off. "What does this have to do with

our killer?"

Bernie raised her coffee mug in a toast and started back to her desk. Lawson followed her and they sat down. "I went back to both murder scenes last night," said Bernie.

Lawson started to protest but she raised her hand to forestall him. "I'll call you next time, I promise." Lawson grumbled but let her continue. "At both scenes, the location of the killer did not show any green traces from wards. None, zero, zip."

She slid a piece of paper over to Lawson. Transcribing magical traces was a tricky business. The arcing fluid motes of light as seen by a human did not translate well into text

or even a drawing you could include in a report. When two magic users wanted to convey magical traces, there were ways to store facsimiles of the originals in a small magical focus. You could give that focus to someone else and they could read it. For this to work, both sides needed to use magic. Back when the laws and nature of magic were being discovered, it was decided that magical traces could be used as evidence, but that you could not require jurors to use magic. With that limitation, it became necessary to transcribe the traces to something a non-magic user could decipher. Since that's what the law required, that became the standard and now, even if

everyone involved in a case used magic, reports had to be non-magic transcriptions.

Lawson looked at the report and frowned. "So you think the killer was Puritan?"

"I'm willing to put money on it," said Bernie.

"If he was so anti-magic, how did he justify using an M-gun?" he asked. "Why not just use a regular gun?"

Bernie's eyes sparkled even through her sleep-deprivation. "Ah, that's what I wondered, and I think I have an answer." She paused for dramatic effect. "Both the victims are M-gun dealers."

Lawson furrowed his brow at her. Maybe the lack of sleep was finally taking its toll. "We don't know that Zubov was running M-guns," he said. "There's no evidence-"

"Trust me," said Bernie, a little manic now, "he was. Yelana Lobacheva was his supplier and she could have been buying from Ying-"

"Bernie, this is great work on seeing the lack of magical traces around the killer, but, you're tired, and you're grasping at straws."

"No," said Bernie, "listen, I-"

Captain Emil Nisbet crashed open the door from the stairwell. The sound filled the otherwise empty

office and made both Bernie and Lawson jump. They turned to look and recoiled under his angry gaze. Captain Nisbet was usually unflappable. He had only raised his voice to Bernie a handful of times in the years they had worked together and she probably deserved it. On any other day, he was the calm, ordered center of the precinct.

He scanned the empty room as he stalked to his office and fixed his eyes on Bernie and Lawson. "Good," he growled, "you're both here. My office. Now."

They exchanged a worried glance, then got up and followed him to his office. They shut the door

behind them. The adrenaline beat back some of Bernie's exhaustion from being up all night. She wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know what had him so upset.

Nisbet was standing behind his desk. He pointed to the two chairs in front of his desk and said, "sit down." Bernie and Lawson obeyed. "I got a call this morning from the mayor and the chief of police."

Bernie and Lawson looked at him blankly.

"Apparently you haven't seen the news this morning," said Nisbet. He started to pace behind his desk. "Two of the more vocal magic and anti-magic activist groups are already

protesting outside city hall. We can expect some of their members to be outside our precinct today." He stopped to look at them coldly. "Someone tipped off the press that our two victims were M-gun dealers."

Bernie felt vindicated that someone else knew Zubov was an arms dealer but simultaneously alarmed that someone had not only beaten her to that conclusion but had told the press about it.

"As a result," continued Nisbet, "the anti-magic groups were planning to protest. In response, some of the pro-magic groups are now planning a counter-protest."

Bernie and Lawson shifted in

their seats.

"These cases just got high-profile fast," he said. "I have to ask: did either of you talk to the press about the investigations?"

"No, sir." Bernie and Lawson's voices overlapped with their speedy replies.

Nisbet nodded. "Okay. It doesn't change anything. We still have to find the killers, now we have to do it quickly and without any off-the-record conversations." He looked at Bernie. "Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Where are we? Anything new?"

Lawson shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. "Yes, sir, analysis of the magical traces at the scene have given us new insight into the killer. Hopefully that will lead us to new suspects."

Nisbet looked dubious but nodded. "Very well," he said. "You can go."

They stood to leave.

"Cart," said Nisbet, "a word, please."

Bernie swallowed hard and Lawson closed the office door behind him. Nisbet looked at her, his face an unreadable mask. Bernie hated that look. She was much more comfortable

with screaming rage than with implacable nothing.

"Yes, sir?" she said.

"Late night?"

"Yes, sir."

"I got a third call this morning," he said. "Alex Petrovin filed a complaint with the police department against you."

Bernie's temper flared anew.

"Sir, I was just—"

"Save it," said Nisbet with a wave of his hand. "I don't want to know. I'm required to give you a verbal and written reprimand. I'm also required to tell you that if you receive two more complaints in the next

calendar year, I'll have to suspend you pending an investigation."

Bernie trembled with anger, outrage, too much coffee, and too little sleep. She was doing her job, making the world safer, protecting people from animals like her father. Somewhere deep inside, she had faith that the justice system had those same goals. But here they were taking the word of a known criminal and using it to cause her harm. It shook her faith in all that she had come to know and love. The nagging fear that she had made the wrong choice in joining the police began to gnaw at her again like it hadn't in many years.

Her face flushed with rage, she

swallowed the lump in her throat and said, "I understand, sir."

He looked at her and his face softened slightly. "Bernie, you're a good cop. Just do your job and don't let it get under your skin, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

He waved at the door. "Go catch the killer."

They brought Yelana Lobacheva up from holding to try and get what they could from her about Zubov's murder. With Bernie's discovery that it was a Puritan that had killed Zubov and Ying, she was convinced that Yelana was involved. They still had a few hours on the 24 they were allowed to hold her for, and

Bernie wanted to take advantage of it.

Lawson was extremely dubious of the connection between their victims and Yelana. They had followed Yelana based on her familial relationship to Zubov and her past history with M-guns. They had been trying to link her to the killer, not to Zubov as his supplier. That Zubov was selling illegal magic on the side was still unproven and it was something that bothered Lawson greatly. He knew how to work on limited information, but he hated making leaps of logic on a hunch that couldn't be proved in court.

Yelana sat in the interrogation room, still in her awful pink bathrobe, her hands cuffed in front of her on the

table. Her dark brown curls were wild and unkempt after spending the night in jail. She sat patiently for a few minutes then began to fidget with the belt on her bathrobe.

Bernie and Lawson watched her from the observation room.

"She looks nervous," said Lawson. "Too bad we didn't find anything illegal in her apartment."

Bernie grunted. They let her stew for a few more minutes before going in together. She stopped fidgeting when they came in and put her hands back on the table, showing them an unconcerned face.

"Is this going to take long?" Yelana asked. "I have things to do, you

know."

"Right," said Bernie, "more Disney cruises to book?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Ms. Lobacheva," said Lawson, "do you recognize this man?" He placed a picture of Ho Ying in front of her on the table.

She made a show of looking closely at the picture then said, "nope, never seen him before."

"His name was Ho Ying," said Lawson. "He was found dead in his apartment late yesterday."

"Sucks to be him," said Yelana. "What does this have to do with me?"

Lawson sighed. "Your cousin,

Yurik Zubov, was killed by a large caliber M-gun. We're trying to find the person or persons who sold the murder weapon."

Yelana coughed a laugh.  
"What? You think I'm involved in something like that?"

"Are you?" asked Lawson.  
"No! I'm a travel agent," said Yelana. "I book cruises for old people and families with kids and too much money."

Lawson looked at Bernie. This wasn't getting them anywhere, maybe because there was nowhere to get to. Despite her abrasive personality and criminal record, she hadn't done anything suspicious. They hadn't found

anything at her apartment, so they really had nothing to go on but Bernie's hunch. Lawson suspected her instincts were a little compromised at this point. To his surprise, Bernie didn't jump down Yelana's throat and demand cooperation or a confession.

"I believe your life is in danger," said Bernie quietly.

"What?" said Yelana, echoing the confusion racing through Lawson's head.

"I think the person who killed Zubov and Ying was strongly anti-magic."

"A Puritan?" said Yelana in disbelief. She sat in stunned silence for a moment, then said, "you said Yurik

was killed by an M-gun, so how could it be a Puritan?"

Bernie sighed wearily. "I believe he's using an M-gun to make a point. So far, he has killed two people, one who definitely trafficked in M-guns and another who probably did."

Yelana leaned back in her chair, defiant but clearly shaken. "I don't do that kind of thing," she said.

"So you say," said Bernie. "If the killer believes you do, he may target you. Are you sure you don't know anything?"

Yelana nodded.

Lawson cleared his throat. "We can keep you in protective custody, if

you fear for your life."

Yelana shook her head. "No," she said. "I'll take my chances."

They cut her loose and started looking for any complaints about Zubov or protests by Puritans near his shop. After a few minutes of looking, Bernie excused herself to go to the restroom. She stopped outside the ladies' room door, made sure no one was around to overhear her, and called a number from memory. It went straight to voicemail with no recorded greeting.

Bernie took a deep breath and said, "hey, Kip, it's BC. Look, be extra careful out there. Not everyone is a fan." She paused, wanting to say more,

but she knew even that much was walking a line. And after the incident with Alex, she needed to stay on the straight and narrow. The thought of more magic users dead, innocent or not, filled her with dread and she had to do something. "Just, be careful," she said finally and hung up. She erased the record of the call from her phone. They could still get it from the phone company, but she wasn't planning to give anyone a reason to check.

She took another deep breath, and headed back to her desk.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The energy outside the police station was palpable. Edward Knox was glad to be here for it, despite the tragic circumstances. Working in Washington was his calling, but he missed the protests. There was an energy to crowds of like-minded people that was undeniable and invigorating. It felt as if everyone there knew they were part of something greater, and that together, they could do big things.

He had gotten there early with the first protesters. He pointed out the best places to stand, and who to target

with thoughtful questions and who to target with shame. Getting their message to others was not as simple as standing around with painted signs and shouting at everyone. They had to be heard to be effective and different people responded to different kinds of arguments. There certainly were people swayed by large crowds chanting or shouting, and they were useful allies, but the real progress towards change was done by individuals and it was these people that Edward wanted to convert to their cause.

Getting his message to the right people was one of the reasons he became a lobbyist. He had noticed that

a few well-placed words could turn the tide and there were lots of ears in Washington for him to speak into. They were making progress and Edward had won over many congressional representatives to the anti-magic cause, but there was still a lot of work to do. While Congress was in recess, he could use this time to do more grass-roots work. Everyone had a right to know how dangerous magic was and why it should be banned outright.

The crowd was large enough now that the press had showed up to cover the protest. Edward was glad to see that and made contact with the reporters to offer interviews and

information about the protest and their cause. One of the reporters agreed to do a short interview with him.

"Mr. Knox, why is the group Citizens for a Sensible Reality protesting here today?" asked the reporter, Julie Chen. The light from the camera was bright and warm and Edward embraced his calling.

"Users of magic would have you believe that it can be safe, that it can be made to do constructive things," said Edward. "They consistently ignore the fact that magic is responsible for thousands of deaths each year, both from accidents and from intentional use like what killed two people in this city in the last two

days." He put on his best hurt and concerned face. "We believe it's time to stop putting people at unnecessary risk. It's time to wake up and see how much better we can be as a society without magic."

Julie nodded and looked sympathetic. The drama and conflict was what she was here to capture, if that meant placating an interviewee, so be it. If that meant picking at him with contentious questions, so be it. She would make a story so she could cover it.

"How do you respond to pro-magic critics who say you and your group are Luddites or out of touch with reality?"

"People who use magic may become dependent upon it and fight to protect it," said Edward. He needed to cast doubt on those people and how trustworthy they could be. He needed to make them seem sympathetic, like lost souls who didn't know better and were victims of what they'd always been taught. Name calling would only polarize people who might be slightly pro-magic more to that side. "It can be hard to see the truth about something when you're addicted to it. There is a way out and we believe that people who give up using magic will lead better lives. It can be habit-forming and that's just one more reason we believe magic is dangerous, too

dangerous, to be used."

"Mr. Knox, currently, magic is covered under the second amendment since it can be classed as a weapon," said Julie. "Do you feel it deserves that protection?"

"Not at all," said Edward. "The second amendment does not cover all kinds of weapons. There are weapons too dangerous for individuals to have, like rocket launchers and grenades. The risk to others is just too great. We believe magic should be equated to these kinds of weapons and should not be covered under the second amendment."

"Thank you, Mr. Knox," said Julie. Dammit. If she wasn't going to

get her conflict from Edward Knox, she'd have to get it somewhere else. She saw the pro-magic camp setting up their own counter-protest and went to talk with them.

A young man in his mid-twenties approached her and smiled. Julie preferred the younger activists since they tended to be a bit more hot headed and prone to good conflict for TV.

"Hi," he said, offering his hand, "I'm John Armstrong with Pervasive Solutions for the Future. As you probably guessed, we're a pro-magic group based here in New York. Let me know if you have any questions."

Julie introduced herself and the

camera man hoisted his camera and aimed it at them.

"I'm here with John Armstrong with the pro-magic group that's counter-protesting outside the police station where the two M-gun related deaths are being investigated," said Julie. "Mr. Armstrong, what is it your group is hoping to accomplish here today?" She tried to make it one part dismissive and one part confrontational.

John was used to reporters and the tactics they sometimes used to inflame emotions, so he was ready for her dismissive tone. "Magic has more uses than weapons and we want to make sure both sides of any debate

over the magic and its uses are heard."

"What kinds of other uses?"

"Magic is a tool and it can be used in industrial applications where extreme precision is required or in things as simple as mending a broken cup," said John. "Magic is similar to technology in a lot of ways. It can do amazing things and make mundane tasks simpler."

"Technology is not without its own dangers," said Julie. "Computer viruses, identity theft, and online harassment are not to be taken lightly."

John nodded. "And like technology, there are precautions magic users take to protect themselves. Almost every activity

from walking down the street to eating a sandwich involves some level of risk. We believe those who ignore magic or seek to prohibit magic are overvaluing the risks and undervaluing the rewards."

Double dammit, thought Julie. She needed to find some shouters. All this reasonable talk wasn't going to make for good TV. She thanked John and plotted with her camera man on how to stir up some more conflict so she could cover it.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Everyone laughed politely at Liz's jokes. Samuel thought he would have to get someone to work with her on her timing if she insisted on continuing to tell them. The banquet hall was filled with lawyers, doctors, and other people who wanted to win influence over Liz's policy making by donating to her campaign.

Not that any of them would ever admit to being that overt. They would say they were merely helping the best candidate win or that the democratic process was working as designed.

Samuel didn't much care if Liz listened to them or not, as long as she kept winning elections and gaining in power. Someday should would have enough power to win over other legislators and get magic outlawed for good. Only then would he be satisfied.

And she wasn't going to keep winning elections if she didn't stop trying, and failing, to tell jokes. She powered through and told many of the people there what they wanted to hear. She gave updates on their pet problems and the progress that she personally had brought to the topics. They applauded and Samuel smiled supportively, ever the loving husband.

After finishing her speech, the

event organizer thanked her and signaled for dessert to be served. Under the noise of the room, Samuel said, "no more jokes, Liz, I mean it."

"It was fine," she said, still smiling and waving at people.

"No, it wasn't fine, it was awful and you're losing credibility every time you do it," said Samuel, also smiling and nodding.

"Later," she said. She greeted a young woman who had come up to introduce herself.

Samuel pressed his eyes closed for a moment and prayed for the strength to get through this election season. As if testing the limits of his patience, his phone buzzed in his

jacket pocket. He excused himself from the long table at the head of the room and ducked behind a large plant to answer the phone.

"Samuel Jacobs," he said over the din of the room.

"Mr. Jacobs, it's Kevin Marlowe. I have some news for you," the voice on the phone said.

"Let me get somewhere a little more private," he said. He walked out of the banquet hall. The corridor was quieter, but also less private. He looked up and down the empty space and saw the coat check. It would be deserted this time of year. He ducked inside and said, "alright, go ahead."

"I'm afraid your suspicions

were correct," said Marlowe. "Your wife did come to New York on the earlier flight. She met with a man, the same many she met with last night. His name is Griffin Smith. He's a ballet dancer."

Samuel almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. On some level he knew his wife was capable of lying and twisting the truth to fit her view, but, in his heart, he believed her to be loyal, at least to him. He felt as if the wind had been knocked from his lungs. He reached out to the wall to steady himself.

"Mr. Jacobs?" said the voice on the phone. "Are you alright, sir?"

"Yes," said Samuel after a

moment, "I- thank you for letting me know."

"I'm sorry I don't have better news," said Marlowe. "All of the documentation I collected will be here at the office. If you have a law firm-"

"No," said Samuel, "I'll come get it myself tomorrow."

"Of course," said Marlowe, "I'll have it ready for you. Is there anything else?"

Samuel's voice caught in his throat. What more could there be after this? All they had worked for together flashed before Samuel's eyes. He thought of Maria and how happy all of them had been together. Now that memory was tainted, every smile was

suspect.

"No," Samuel said. He coughed to clear his throat. "No, that's all, thank you." He hung up the phone and took a deep breath. He couldn't afford to lose it now. He still had another hour of banquet to get through and then a meeting with Edward Knox. No, his emotions would have to wait.

He took a few more deep breaths and steadfastly refused to think about his wife's infidelity. He focused on getting through the day.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

Using Bernie's new information that the killer or killers were strongly anti-magic, they came up with a list of anti-magic groups active in the New York area. They ranked the groups by how many of their listed members or employees had criminal or arrest records. A few hours into their investigation, the noise from the protests was audible up on the third floor through the closed windows.

They decided to leave the precinct by the back door. As they were driving out of the garage, a news crew swarmed the car, aiming lights,

cameras, and microphones in their direction. An Asian looking reporter was shouting questions at the car.

"Detectives! Do you have any suspects? Who is the killer targeting? Do you expect any more murders?"

Lawson scowled and carefully drove through and away from the news crew. Bernie shook her head. Reporters were a species she would never understand.

"What the hell?" said Bernie. "They'll get better information from the press conference. But I guess that doesn't make for good TV."

Lawson grunted. He knew he'd have to get used to the press when he started working for the DA's office,

but right now, they were really not helping.

The first activist group they visited no longer existed. The storefront was papered over from the inside and there was a large "For Lease" sign in the window with the name of a realty company. Lawson made a note to verify the group had disbanded and wasn't simply a dummy group that was a front for something else.

The second group was supposedly headquartered in a building in Queens. They pulled up out front and parked.

"This looks like somebody's apartment," said Bernie, getting out

and shutting the car door, "not the headquarters of an activist group."

"Well, that's the address on the non-profit group's tax papers," said Lawson.

"Hmm," said Bernie. "What's the name of this group?"

"Back to Reality'," said Lawson.

The address was for the basement apartment of a small brownstone. There were curtains pulled across the front window.

"They must have amazing air conditioning to keep it so closed up like that on a day like this," said Bernie.

They descended the short flight of stairs and knocked on the door. They heard movement in the apartment and a voice said, "who is it?"

"NYPD," said Lawson, "we have some questions-" He broke off because the sounds of movement in the house escalated into full-blown panic. There were shouts and the sounds of chairs being knocked over. They drew their guns and Lawson kicked in the door. The room was dark and filled with smoke. There was light from a back window and someone trying to flee up the fire escape ladder.

Bernie turned her weapon on the two men in the living room. She

ordered them to freeze and they did so. The sunlight drew rays of light through the smoke. It was brighter than anything in the apartment. The room was incredibly hot and the two men were clad only in their underwear. They looked around with big, panicked eyes.

Lawson moved quickly to the back of the house. He pulled a third man down and out of the window well.

"Got him," called Lawson.

There were grunts and the clicking of handcuffs from the back. The adrenaline in Bernie's system started to dissipate as she covered the unmoving men in front of her.

Lawson brought the runner into

the living room and directed him to sit in the badly stained recliner. The other two men started pleading their innocence, saying they didn't know anything.

"Shut up," said Bernie. Her head was starting to feel fuzzy and she blinked a few times, trying to concentrate. Lawson felt it too. That wasn't woodsmoke filling the apartment. "Shit," said Bernie, "we've got to get out of this smoke."

"Agreed," said Lawson.

They got the suspects out of the apartment and into the back of their car one at a time. They closed the apartment door and waited by the car for backup to arrive. The car windows

were rolled up and Lawson had the air conditioning turned on.

"You won't let me turn on the AC in the car, but you'll do it for our suspects?" said Bernie, with only half-joking outrage.

"Keeping them in there with the windows up could be considered cruel and unusual punishment," said Lawson. "Plus that thing is loud enough to let us talk out here." He gestured with his head at the apartment. "There's enough pot in there to supply half of Queens."

"Narc and the DEA will be glad to hear it," said Bernie, "but I'm going out on a limb to say they're not our killers."

"That's a bit of a leap," said Lawson. "What makes you so sure? Maybe it wasn't M-guns Zubov and Ying were trafficking in. I've seen people kill for less."

"Call it a hunch," said Bernie. "These guys were using their anti-magic group as a distribution network. It's actually kind of clever."

Lawson furrowed his brow and said, "I don't follow you."

"You think about political protests," said Bernie, "they're chaotic, jumbles of people from all over the city. Nobody notices when one or two people show up and leave because protesters come and go all the time. Police sometimes are there to keep the

peace, but won't interfere lest they violate the right of free assembly."

Lawson nodded. "I get that, but why do you think they're not the killers?"

"Because that was some potent weed," she said.

Lawson raised an eyebrow.

"Uh," said Bernie quickly, "at least, it seemed pretty powerful given how light-headed I felt after breathing it for just a few seconds."

Lawson smiled slightly and said, "okay, how does potent weed equal not our killers?"

Bernie made a dismissive sound. "Pfft! If they were smoking

something that high-test, they were not casual smokers. And, I don't know about you, but in my experience, potheads are some of the most relaxed, non-violent people out there, even when they're not stoned."

"Maybe," said Lawson. "Let's wait and see if we find any weapons in their apartment."

Bernie's impatience flared, but she pushed it down. This was still a win, even if they hadn't made any progress on finding the killer.



# CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

It was early afternoon when Samuel Jacobs arrived at the offices of Citizens for a Sensible Reality. The air conditioner was barely keeping up with the heat in the back office. Edward Knox came out of the office and greeted him more soberly than the day before.

"Come in, Samuel," he said. "Harold is out meeting with one of CSR's lawyers. He should be back in an hour."

Edward nodded and they retreated to the office and closed the door. Samuel settled himself in a guest

chair as Edward sat behind the desk in Harold's chair.

"This is uncomfortable," said Edward, "but I need to ask you something."

"Of course," said Samuel, preparing for the worst. In his mind, the worst would be if Edward already knew about Liz's cheating and was preparing to ask if it would affect her reelection campaign. Samuel wasn't sure he could handle that kind of question.

"Did you have anything to do with Ho Ying?"

Samuel furrowed his brows in honest confusion. "Who?"

Edward leaned forward over the desk, focused intently on Samuel. The fear in his eyes was real and Samuel was taken aback by this sudden form of honesty. He had assumed that Edward Knox had no emotions, or if he did, he always expected the worst of people and was never surprised when they met his expectations.

"The other murder last night," hissed Edward. There was a note of alarm in his voice.

Samuel shifted in his seat. This was not something he had been prepared for. "Look, Edward," he said, "calm down. Take a deep breath and tell me what's going on."

Edward's eyes darted to the door, then he squeezed them shut and took a deep breath. He let it out and sat back in the chair a little bit. When he opened his eyes, he was a little less manic, but no less concerned. He sighed and said, "last night, one of my sources tipped me off about someone who might be dealing in magic."

Samuel frowned and sat back in his chair. "And that person was Ho Ying?"

Edward nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, yes," he said, leaning forward again. "I have to know if you had anything to do with him."

Samuel's frown deepened. He wasn't sure what kind of game Edward

was playing. There was nothing to entrap Samuel into saying or doing because there was nothing to tell. Samuel had nothing at all to do with tracking magic users. He left that kind of thing to Edward and his ilk. It was enough trying to keep track of Liz and her life. His breath caught in his throat again thinking about Liz. Edward looked puzzled at Samuel's reaction and continued speaking.

"Listen, I know it's hard," Edward said, "keeping the forces of magic at bay, but this isn't the way to handle it."

Samuel shook his head vigorously. "No, it's not that," he said, unable to keep the annoyance and

stress from his voice.

"What then?" asked Edward.

Samuel took a deep breath and considered whether to tell Edward about Liz. If Edward was just the information and gossip whore he had been in recent years, then it could come back to bite Liz and Samuel in the ass years down the line. If Edward really was concerned about someone in his office or circle of informants actually killing people, then... A cold plan sidled into Samuel's brain. If Edward was responsible for killing Ho Ying, even inadvertently, there was a chance that dropping the name of Liz' lover would get him killed as well.

Some part of Samuel recoiled

at the thought, but a deeper, more primitive side of Samuel warmed and further considered it. If he dropped the name, the best case was that Edward would investigate the man as if he was a magic user. That might make his life uncomfortable for a while. It was also possible Edward would connect him back to Liz. That would be unfortunate, but hardly the end of the world. It was also possible that whatever sociopathic killer Edward employed, either intentionally or by accident, would get the name of Liz's lover and do to him what had been done to Ho Ying and Yurik Zubov. There were only varying degrees of success with this plan, so Samuel

pushed ahead.

Samuel pursed his lips and then said, "Liz is having an affair."

Edward's eyes bugged in surprise. Here he had been worrying about Samuel killing people and he was all worked up about his wife cheating on him. Edward just assumed that everyone in Washington was both back stabbing and cheating on their spouses all the time, so it came as something of a surprise to Edward that she hadn't been cheating on Samuel until now. Of course, maybe she had been and Samuel just discovered it. Either way, that was not the information he had been expecting.

"What?" Edward said in

surprise.

Samuel leaned forward and steepled his fingers in front of his face, resting his elbows on his knees. The tears pricking behind his eyelids were real and he let them come. "It's true," he said. "I just found out a few hours ago. Some dancer named Griffin Smith." He let his voice catch and said, "I thought Liz hated ballet."

Edward nodded in sympathy and wondered what game Samuel was playing by letting this information out now. He decided that the information was too good to question, so he didn't think too much about it.

"That's terrible," said Edward, trying to sound sincere, "What are you

going to do?"

Samuel sniffed and wiped at his eyes. "I don't know," he said, "I don't know, but it's not important. You asked if I had anything to do with Ho Ying. I didn't. I've been a little preoccupied."

Edward nodded and offered Samuel a tissue. "Of course," said Edward, "I understand. Well, if you hear of anything, please let me know. And, if there's anything I can do to help-

Samuel waved his hand and sat back in the chair, using the tissue. "No," he said. "The fewer people who know, the better." Unless, thought Samuel, the person who knows is

willing to kill Griffin Smith, in which case, sing his name to the mountains.

The air cleared about Ho Ying, they made their goodbyes. Edward showed Samuel to the door. Edward wasn't sure what game was afoot here, but he wrote the name Griffin Smith in his notebook. He would look into it later.



## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Lawson and Bernie spent most of the rest of the day questioning the three members of Back to Reality and checking their story. All three had alibis for the previous two nights; they worked at a small factory packaging cookies for local coffee shops. The owner of the factory confirmed they were there both nights during the times of the murders, explaining that he had to keep a close eye on them because they often ate the cookies if left unattended.

They left the three men for the vice squad and decided to follow-up

with the next anti-magic group on the list. The group's website listed their office hours as nine to five, everyday. If they hurried, they could get there around closing time.

Bernie and Lawson pulled up outside the headquarters of Citizens for a Sensible Reality. The windows of the storefront were plastered with posters warning of the dangers of using magic. One poster depicted a magic user as a heroin addict, desperately reaching for a magical focus. Another had gruesome crime scene photos of victims of magical violence and statistics on the number of magic related deaths. Others simply said "Ban Magic Now".

There were lights on in the office and the door was propped open with a large fan blowing air in. Bernie and Lawson worked their way around the fan and into the quiet hubbub of a political activist office. There were people around a long table, talking on phones, urging the other end of the call to get out to one of their protests, arranging rides to protests, urging them to donate money or time to the cause. Beyond that was a table with volunteers working at laptop computers making the same pleas and doing the same coordinating of protesters online. On the other side of the door was a table filled with premade protest signs, sign-up sheets

for walk-in volunteers, pamphlets and even some T-shirts. Beyond that was a small kitchen area with a coffee maker and a mostly empty box of donuts.

One of the volunteers at the sign-up table noticed them and approached. "Are you looking to make the world safe from magic?"

"Not exactly," said Bernie under her breath.

"Detectives Demars and Cart," said Lawson, producing his badge. "We're here to see Howard Knox."

"Detectives?" said the volunteer in surprise. "Is there some kind of trouble?"

"We just have a few questions,"

said Lawson.

"Wait right here, I'll go get Harold."

They waited and watched as their arrival rippled around the room. Eyes looked up at them, then quickly back down to their work, then to each other. Bernie saw this and recognized the move. They were unhappy about a police presence and doubly unhappy they were here to talk to their leader.

Lawson wasn't sure what he expected the leader of a political activist group to look like, but Harold Knox wasn't it. He was short and balding with a ring of close-cropped white hair around his head and fairly round. He looked like the kind of guy

who put on a fake beard and played Santa for kids at Christmas time.

He walked quickly over to the detectives, smiling, and extended his hand. "I'm Harold Knox," he said. "I was told you have some questions for me."

"I'm Detective Demars," said Lawson, "and this is my partner, Detective Cart."

Harold tilted his head to the side on hearing that name and shook their hands. "Bernadine Cart?" he asked.

"That's right," said Bernie.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," said Harold. "I followed the story of

your induction into the police department with great interest. It takes a lot of courage to stand up to people who use magic, especially when they're your own family."

Bernie hated when people called her out for her family and her past. She wanted either to be known for her own work or a completely anonymous force for good that no one recognized. "Thank you," she said woodenly.

"So," said Harold, "what can I help you with?"

"We're investigating the murders of Yurik Zubov and Ho Ying," said Lawson.

"Yes, I heard about that," said

Harold. He shook his head, "bad business, that. Nothing good comes from using magic, I always say."

A younger man approached the group and stuck out his hand. He was slightly taller than Harold with similar facial features but of medium build. "I'm Edward Knox," he said, smiling. "Diane tells me you're with the police." Bernie and Lawson nodded. "Well, I hate to be rude, but may I see your credentials?"

Bernie and Lawson produced them while Harold objected. "Oh, Edward, do let it rest. They're just asking questions," said Harold.

Edward examined the badges and said, "I know, but I want to be sure

to have their names and badge numbers in case these questions turn into harassment."

Harold looked embarrassed. "Please forgive Edward," he said, "he's been in Washington too long and thinks everyone has a hidden agenda."

"That's quite all right," said Lawson. "We noticed that your group, Citizens for a Sensible Reality, have a few members with criminal and arrest records."

"What of it?" asked Edward.

Bernie shifted. She didn't like Edward and his confrontational style was starting to get under her skin. She tried to calm herself down, reminding herself that she was tired and that she

didn't want another complaint against her.

"Edward," scolded Harold. "Be polite."

"Do you know of anyone in your organization that might take your anti-magic message too far and act against those who deal in magic?"

Edward took a breath, visibly calming himself. "We have members and volunteers from all walks of life," he said. "We don't usually ask about their past. But we do not tolerate someone acting violently in our group's name. We are an activist group, which means we picket and we write letters and organize, but we do not hurt anyone, even if they use

magic."

"Have you had to expel anyone from your group for violent behavior in the last few months?" asked Bernie.

"No," said Edward.

"It only happened once," said Harold.

"Dad, don't," said Edward, but Harold kept talking.

"A few years ago one of our members started a fist fight with the security guards for a company we were protesting against," said Harold.

"There was a fight, the police were called to break it up. We had to tell the young man not to come back."

"Do you remember his name?"

asked Lawson.

"Alan Shields," said Harold. "It was an extremely unpleasant thing, so I remember it well."

"Is there anyone else you can think of that might be prone to radical behavior?" said Bernie.

"No," said Harold, "he's the only one who comes to mind."

Lawson handed business cards to both Harold and Edward. "If you think of anything else," he said, "please give us a call."



## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Lawson volunteered to run down Alan Shields on the condition that Bernie go home and get some rest. She protested, saying she was fine, but privately fearing that the killer would strike again that night. In her experience, killing came in a few varieties, none of them good. The one-time killer, for things like drugs, money, or revenge, were fairly easy to deal with. Then there were habitual killers who did it as part of doing business. While it wasn't common, these were the people Bernie was most familiar with. While she couldn't

prove it, she knew in her gut that her father and brothers were in this category. Finally, there were the spree or terrorist killers, the ones who snapped and went nuts, usually killing at random.

This case was somewhere in between a spree killing and business. They seemed too far apart in time and too selective to be completely random, but too scattershot across families and occupation for it to be internal family business. And it was driving Bernie insane. Understanding the motives of the killer was crucial to how she worked a homicide. These killings didn't fit neatly into her framework. After getting frustrated in this line of

thinking yet again, she decided maybe Lawson was right and went home.

Her apartment was small and a little sparse. After the ATFM had searched it last year, she wondered why she had so much stuff to decorate the place when she was hardly ever there. It also bothered her to see things and know the ATFM had touched them. It was silly and neurotic, but Bernie valued her privacy and the things were constant reminders that it had been violated. She made it a point to take those things to Goodwill and get them out of her apartment.

She turned on the lights and TV while she got some dinner. All of the leftovers in the fridge were green and

fuzzy, so she heated up a frozen dinner. Turkey and gravy was a little weird for May, but it was all she had and she wasn't sure she could stay awake long enough for a pizza to arrive.

The TV news switched to coverage of the protests outside her police station. The images were of people screaming at each other.

"Tensions ran high today outside the twelfth police district today," said the reporter. "Anti-magic groups were there to make it clear how dangerous magic is."

They cut to an video of Edward Knox saying, "people who use magic may become dependent upon it and

fight to protect it." The video went on and Bernie rolled her eyes. Magic was about as addictive as using a dishwasher. You'd use it if you had it, but you didn't go into withdrawal just because it wasn't there any more.

The video went on to talk about whether magic should be equated to weapons and covered under the second amendment. Bernie gave up and went to retrieve her dinner from the microwave. When she got back to the TV, there were video clips from other protesters.

"Magic is a tool of Satan," cried one woman, "it's unnatural and there's a reason we used to burn witches." Bernie chuckled and sat

down in front of the TV. "I like magic," said a young white man in dreadlocks, "I feel better when I use it, like I'm aligning my chakras."

Bernie shook her head at the extremes people could go to on any topic. Calling magic unnatural was like saying that penicillin was unnatural. Learning to use something to your benefit didn't make it unnatural.

The TV cut back to the reporter, a nice looking Asian woman. Bernie recognized her as the one who had tried to ask them questions earlier in the day. "The police aren't commenting on this ongoing investigation, but they assure us that

everything is being done to find the killers. Until then, citizens are advised to be extra cautious and to report any suspicious activity to your local police. For channel three news, this is Julie Chen reporting."

Bernie gave up on the TV, took a shower and went to bed. Hopefully tonight would be uneventful and the morning would be quiet.

Edward was staring at the business card that Detective Demars had given him. He had hidden well today, but Ying being murdered after someone had tipped him off had gnawed at him. Granted, the man was dealing in illegal M-guns, so he had his fair share of enemies, Edward

assumed. Odds were good that it was some other person angry with Ying and it wasn't related to the tip about him at all.

He considered calling the police. If he went to them, they would want to know why he was keeping tabs on magic users, especially those dealing in illegal arms. That was not a conversation he wanted to have with anyone, let alone two homicide detectives.

Harold came into the office where Edward was sitting and Edward quickly pulled a document over the top of the card, hiding them from Harold's view.

"Today went well," said

Harold. "We signed up a lot of new members and the news report was fairly favorable."

Edward nodded distractedly.

"Though," said Harold, "we do need to talk to some of the new people about calling magic unnatural or Satan's work. That kind of blanket statement or name calling simply will not do."

"Dad," said Edward softly, "can I ask you something?"

"Of course," said Harold, pulling up a chair to sit beside his son.

"You know I would do anything for our cause," said Edward.

"I do," said Harold, smiling.

"You are a beacon for us all, a tireless champion."

Edward smiled a little and said, "some of what I do is, well, it's a more Washington, D.C. approach to activism than I think you might be comfortable with."

Harold frowned. "What do you mean?"

Edward really didn't want to admit his tracking of magic users to his father, but Harold had always been a steady rock and gave unfailingly good advice on difficult topics. If he admitted to Harold that he had effectively been spying on people, Harold would be disappointed in him. As much as the anti-magic cause

meant everything to Edward, approval from his father competed for a close second.

Instead of explaining the circumstances, Edward decided to stick to facts. "I learned that Ho Ying was trafficking in magic a few hours before he died."

"And?" said Harold.

"That's it," said Edward. "I was wondering if I should tell the police."

"Oh, pish tosh," said Harold dismissively. "If the police want to know about Ho Ying, they will ask. Besides, it's not as though you killed him."

Edward nodded.

"The man certainly had enemies and you are not responsible for those enemies catching up to him," said Harold resolutely. "If you ask me, the man reaped what he sowed. Now, I'm going home for the evening. Your mother has made one of her delicious cherry pies, so don't keep her waiting too long, okay?"

"Yes, sir," said Edward. Harold gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze and headed for the door.

Edward continued to sit, thinking about what his father had said and weighing it against his own views and guilty feelings. A few minutes later, the phone rang. Purely out of habit, Edward answered it.

"Citizens for a Sensible Reality, Edward Knox speaking."

"I may know of someone who has strayed," said the voice. Edward blinked a few times and steadied himself against the desk. His voice was strained when he spoke.

"Go on," he said.

"The lost one is called Yelana Lobacheva," said the voice and gave him an address for Yelana.

"Thank you," said Edward hoarsely. His hand trembled as he hung up the phone and his stomach fell to his feet. Coincidence or not, he had to warn Yelana Lobacheva of the potential danger she was in. If he did

nothing and she ended up dead, he would never forgive himself. People died from using magic, and every death was a tragedy. It was exactly deaths by magic that he had devoted his life to preventing. A tiny part of him said he should just let the magic user die since it would boost the anti-magic cause, but even Edward wasn't that cruel. He would not sit idly by when there was even a chance he could prevent violence.

Edward considered calling the police and reporting it, but he dismissed it almost immediately. He did not want to explain how or why he had come by the information on Yelana Lobacheva. It seemed safer to

just warn her in person. It wouldn't take long and it would soothe his conscience if she did end up dead despite his warning.

Scared, but resolved, Edward pocketed Dective Demars' business card and locked up the office for the night.

Eric was trying to look unconcerned. He and Yelana were sitting in her living room not talking about the disastrous situation they were being forced into. Eric had arrived a few minutes earlier to find Alex's goons already at Yelana's apartment. When Eric arrived, they retreated to places out of sight to wait. Just like cockroaches, thought Eric.

Yelana's taste in furniture was about as good as her taste in bathrobes. Eric would never be a fashionista, but Yelana's God-awful pink bathrobe would never be fashionable in anyone's view. The chairs were a mismatched set of thrift shop rejects, all paisleys, flowers, and brown stripes.

But it was clean and Eric had to give her credit for that. His apartment was far messier and he lived alone. Alex had made sure that Yelana's boyfriend Sven was occupied that evening with some business.

Eric had spent most of the day preparing new wards and some counterattack spells. He couldn't test them, so he hoped he didn't have to use

them. He wanted to blame the extra wards for making him feel so drained of energy, but in truth it was probably just being short on sleep and long on caffeine.

After almost an hour of waiting, there was a tentative knock at Yelana's front door. Alex's instructions were to let the killer get far enough into the apartment to feel comfortable pulling out his M-gun. Fortunately, since he needed line of sight, it wasn't as if the killer could just fire through the door.

Yelana tried to act as naturally as possible. She opened the door slightly and eyed up the man outside. He was in his late twenties or early

thirties and completely unremarkable. He was a little well-dressed for this neighborhood, but not extraordinarily so.

"What do you want?" said Yelana to the man.

His voice trembled and he stammered as he spoke. Even without seeing him, Eric didn't think this guy capable of murder. "Yelana Lobacheva?" the man asked.

"Yeah, what do you want?" repeated Yelana.

"This is going to sound a little strange—"

"You're a little strange," said Yelana, "spit it out." Eric wondered if

she was trying to get herself killed. His heartbeat had sped not quite to frightened rabbit after the first knock at the door.

Edward blurted, "I think your life is in danger."

What the hell, wondered Eric. This guy either wasn't the killer or he had a very strange way of toying with his victims before killing them.

"What makes you say that?" said Yelana, losing some of her abrasive edge. It was the second warning she had received in as many days and if this guy wasn't the killer, she might not have Alex's goons around to take the killer down when he did appear.

"It's not important-

"The hell it isn't," said Yelana.

"Get in here." She opened the door wider to admit Edward, but he protested.

"No, really, I have to go-" The sound of Edward being assaulted by Alex's goons was unmistakable. His startled cries were muffled by large hands as they gagged and blindfolded him. Eric's brain reminded him that he had some ideas for a gag spell that you could force someone else to run like a ward that would counteract the vibrations of speech. It was kind of like noise-canceling headphones, but for people. Cursing his brain for such useless asides, Eric picked up his bag

and stood up, preparing to leave. He had done his job and had been bait. Now that Alex had someone, his job was done.

"Not so fast," said one of the goons inside Yelana's apartment. They had emerged to help the hallway goons deal with the struggling visitor. "We're supposed to bring you with us."

"Me?" said Eric, his heart speeding up again. "Why?"

"Because Mr. Petrovin said so, that's why," said one of the goons. He had a ruddy nose and hair shaved so close, he was almost bald. It was impossible for Eric not to think of Rudolph. Eric started to protest but Rudolph grabbed him by the upper arm

and pulled him towards the hallway.

"Take care, Miss Yelana," said Rudolph.

"You boys have fun," said Yelana.

Eric had the presence of mind to give her the bird as Rudolph pulled him down the stairs.



# CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

It had been a long time since Alex had been in a warehouse late at night waiting to interrogate someone. He didn't exactly miss it, but there was a familiarity that was hard to ignore and almost comforting. The warehouse was owned by a shell company based in the Cayman Islands with no easy links back to Alex. The open space smelled of concrete and iron. There were windows set high in the walls and the sky was fading from dark blue to black in the falling night.

Normally, people waited for Alex, not the other way around, but his

previous meeting had ended early. It turned out that the Kwon family was about as savvy with avoiding turf wars as Alex was at snake charming, which is to say, not at all. Alex explained their mutual concern over the two recent killings and that they were probably the same killer. They thought he was bragging about Ho Ying's death and vowed to make sure Alex choked on his words.

So Alex was there when the van carrying their mystery killer and Eric arrived at the warehouse. The van pulled in and one of his men shut the door behind it. The van doors opened and men emerged, half-carrying the suspected killer. He was making pitiful

whimpering noises and looked like he had peed himself.

Eric looked scared, but no more so than he had last night in Alex's limo. Alex gestured to a chair in the middle of the room for the killer and off to the side of the room for Eric.

Once the killer was securely tied to the chair, Alex addressed Eric, "check him for wards, please."

Eric got his string of charms out of his bag and touched a few while concentrating. He touched a few more, scowled, and said, "he's clean. No wards."

"Thank you," said Alex. He approached the whimpering figure and motioned to his men to remove the

gag. To Alex's surprise, he didn't immediately beg for his life. "Why did you do it?" asked Alex.

The man's voice was raspy and choked with fear. "Do what?" he pleaded.

"Why did you kill Yurik Zubov and Ho Ying?"

The man made a noise that was half wail and half pout. "I didn't kill anyone," he said.

Alex motioned and his goon, Rudolph, handed over the man's wallet. Alex briefly went through it, removing the membership card for the Citizens for a Sensible Reality. It listed Edward Knox as a member in good standing for over fifteen years.

"Mr. Knox," said Alex, "I don't have all night and I'd really prefer not to hurt you." Edward whimpered. "Tell me what I want to know."

"I can't!" cried Edward in desperation. "I didn't—" Alex slapped him hard across the face.

"Why did you kill them?" More spluttering responses and another slap. "Where did you get the M-gun you used to kill them?" More violence.

While Eric was glad the violence wasn't directed at him, he had never had a stomach for it. That was one of the reasons he had started working for the Sloan family. They got along with almost everyone and you proved yourself by getting goods

around the city without being noticed or caught. Eric could blend in, and he would defend himself, but he could never muster the will or sociopathy needed to beat someone up who wasn't fighting back.

After several minutes of this, Edward was on the verge of passing out and Alex was no closer to his answers. He indicated to his guards they should keep Edward awake while he walked over to Eric.

"He is either very tough or he's telling the truth," said Alex. Eric started to protest that it wasn't his fault, but Alex waved him to silence. "Using magic, can you prove he was the killer?"

Eric thought for a moment. "If I collected traces after he fired the same M-gun, I might be able to determine the user, but it would be extremely subtle."

"What about if he fired a different M-gun?"

"That would be borderline impossible," said Eric. "Too much is different. If it can be done, it would take days of analysis."

Alex nodded and turned back to Edward, but Eric said, "for what it's worth, back at Yelana's, he was trying to say that her life was in danger."

"Hmm," said Alex. He handed Edward Knox's CSR membership card

to Eric. "Maybe we bagged the wrong Puritan. Figure out if anyone else at CSR had access to the tip off we gave to Edward."

"Me?" said Eric, making a face at the card.

"Keep up that reaction when I tell you to do things and I'll start to think you can't handle it," said Alex. He turned and walked back to Edward.

Can't handle it, thought Eric sarcastically. He had been in over his head since he could remember, just jumping from pond to pond, but it never got any shallower. This was just a new depth for him. Walking into Puritan-central was not something he was looking forward to. He'd be lucky

if they didn't burn him at the stake or try to drown him or something.

Alex gave his men instructions on where to take Edward and dump him so he'd be found, but not too soon after being ditched. He sent Eric home and washed up. This was a messy business he was in. He briefly thought of Bernadine and how much she would disapprove. A tiny ripple of feeling went through him that he couldn't identify. Guilt? Longing? He sighed and finished washing his hands of Edward Knox.



## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Bernie's phone rang around 4am. Blearily she answered. It was Lawson and there was background noise like over a paging system.

"You need to join me," said Lawson, "I'm at Mercy General with Edward Knox."

"From the anti-magic group?" asked Bernie, rubbing her eyes as she sat up.

"The same," said Lawson. "He says someone kidnapped him, beat him, then dumped him out of a moving van."

"Jesus," said Bernie. She was

up and throwing clothes onto the bed.  
"How did you get notified?"

Lawson chuckled mirthlessly.  
"Apparently he had stuffed the card I  
gave him yesterday into his pocket.  
The kidnappers took his wallet but  
missed the card."

"I'll be there in twenty  
minutes," said Bernie, fully awake.

The drive was quicker than she  
thought. There were a few trucks out,  
but the day was just getting started and  
most of the traffic wouldn't start for  
another hour or more.

Bernie found Lawson waiting  
outside Edward Knox's room, flanked  
by two uniformed officers. She nodded  
to them and said, "how's he doing?"

"Not good," said Lawson, "but the doctors are pretty sure he'll make it. They say he's stable and his parents are in there with him now." He gestured to the room behind him. "The doctors say we can question him, as long as we keep it brief and don't cause him too much stress."

Bernie nodded and they went in. She was never prepared to see the results of violence, even though she saw it in her job and grew up seeing it in her older brothers. Her boyfriend Shawn told her stories about his job as an ER nurse, but somehow it didn't seem as real when it was just an after-work story.

She was never prepared to see

the results of beating because her emotional reaction unsettled her. The part of her that grew up seeing black-eyes and broken noses and the occasional trip to the hospital was unmoved and saw the violence as unavoidable. There was another part of her that silently lost a little faith in humanity every time she saw it. She had seen innocent people killed and it still haunted her. Seeing Edward Knox lying in a hospital bed, his face swollen nearly beyond recognition, brought back that haunted, lost feeling and it was an emotion she didn't know how to deal with.

Harold Knox looked up from the bedside and smiled politely at

Bernie and Lawson. He said, "detectives, this is my wife, Patricia."

The woman smiled politely and said, "hello." She dropped the smile and turned back to looking at her son. Her pain was obvious and Bernie fought to remain detached.

"I'm sorry to have to do this," said Lawson, "but we need to ask you some questions. If this is connected to the murders we're investigating, any information you can give us would be helpful. Did they say anything about M-guns or magic users?"

Edward shook his head and Patricia's lips trembled as she watched him.

"Did they say anything about

the recent murders? Maybe take credit for it?"

He spoke softly, but firmly. "They didn't know the killers," Edward said and tears rolled down his red and purple cheeks.

"How do you know?" asked Lawson.

A small sob escaped his lips then he said, "because that's what they kept asking me." Patricia squeezed his hand and Harold pressed his lips into a hard line and blinked several times.

"Would you recognize your attackers if you saw them again?" asked Bernie.

Through the fog of his ordeal

and the drugs the doctors were giving him, Edward wondered if he should tell them the whole story. Exhaustion won over any kind of information games his rational mind might have been planning.

He breathed out and said, "it was Yelana Lobacheva and someone named Eric."

Bernie and Lawson exchanged a glance. They had long ago given up believing in coincidences when they were tied to a murder.

"Thank you," said Lawson. "We'll let you rest and come back if we have more questions. If you think of anything else, please let us know."

Lawson turned to leave, but

Bernie said, "you said Eric. Any chance you misheard and it was 'Alex'?"

Edward shook his head. "Definitely Eric," he said. "Someone let it slip in the van." He started to sob again, so Bernie withdrew. Harold followed them out of the room and shut the door.

"Someone will be post here at all times," said Lawson to Harold.

He nodded and said, "this will sound like I'm pointing fingers, but Edward is very vocal and very visible in our organization." He took a deep breath and said, "I suspect pro-magic activists."

"Have you received any

threats?" asked Lawson, writing in his notebook.

"Nothing specific and no more than usual," said Harold.

Lawson nodded. "We'll look into it," he said.

"I'll have someone from our office contact you with the groups we receive the most threats from," said Harold. "Thank you. And I know Edward thanks you for your efforts."

Lawson smiled and Harold excused himself back into his son's room. Bernie and Lawson agreed to meet back at the police station since they both had cars at the hospital.

Bernie was unsurprised that

Harold had fingered pro-magic groups as suspects. From what she could tell of Harold and Edward, they were true believers that magic was too dangerous to use. People like that were so fixated on magic being the cause of all the world's ills they often failed to miss obvious ones like greed, hatred, and lust. But they would have to look into it, as a matter of completeness.

More interesting was that he gave Yelana Lobacheva's name as one of his attackers. Bernie's mind raced down possible connections between Yelana and Edward but came up empty.

Annoyed, she would just have to wait until they could bring Yelana in for questioning. The name Eric

nagged at her, as if it should be ringing bells, but couldn't quite reach them. She guessed it would have to wait until she was in front of her computer. The temptation to speed to the office was almost overwhelming, but she bit her lip and drove within the law.

She knew in her gut that Alex was behind the attack on Edward Knox, but she couldn't prove it and she couldn't even explain to Lawson why her gut would say that. He would chalk it up to revenge or profiling or something, but her gut was something Bernie had learned not to ignore.



## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Lawson sent uniformed officers to Yelana's house to bring her in for questioning while he and Bernie went through pro-magic groups and rechecking Yelana's records for anything that might connect her to Edward Knox.

"These two move in completely different circles," said Lawson. "He's a lobbyist in Washington, just in New York on a working vacation to see his parents. She's a travel agent on paper and suspected of trafficking in illegal magic."

"Maybe that's the connection,"

said Bernie, not looking up from her computer. She was trying to find an "Eric" to go with Yelana Lobacheva.

"What?" said Lawson.  
"Magic?"

Bernie looked up. "Yeah. If Edward Knox is so anti-magic, maybe he was doing more than talking to the press at rallies."

Lawson stared at her. She had some crazy ideas sometimes, but this one seemed to come from way out of left field. He worried that she hadn't gotten enough sleep and was still running on coffee and adrenaline from the day before.

"Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Yeah," said Bernie, "why?"

"There is nothing to suggest that Edward Knox has a violent bone in his body," said Lawson. "He doesn't have a criminal record of any kind and only two parking violations in D.C."

"He wouldn't have to be violent to provoke someone into hitting him," said Bernie.

Lawson finally saw what she was saying and wondered if it was him that needed some more sleep. "You think he said something to Yelana that provoked her and this guy Eric to attack him?"

"Maybe," said Bernie. Her gut told her the connection was more

subtle than that. She believed Edward Knox when he said his attackers had been asking about Yurik. If Yurik Zubov had been working for Alex Petrovin or working behind his back, Alex would want to know who the killer was. Bernie had assumed that it was Alex or that Alex already knew who the killer was because it was some internal family affair or a turf war. If Alex didn't know, he sure as hell would want to know.

Lawson checked his notes. "Edward Knox was found pretty far from Yelana's apartment," said Lawson.

"Yelana doesn't have a car," said Bernie. "Maybe this mystery Eric

does."

Lawson nodded. "I'll keep checking for any connection between these Edward and Yelana," he said.

"I'll look for our mystery man," said Bernie. She was convinced that Alex was involved, so she did a search for cases involving Alex Petrovin and the name Eric. That proved to be too many to read through, so she also searched for her name on the cases. For maybe the first time, Bernie was glad all the new cases were tracked on the computer. In less than ten minutes, she had searched hundreds of cases and narrowed it down to six possibly relevant ones.

She started reading the case

files and put faces with the "Eric"s from the different cases. If she couldn't find any that rang a bell, she would just bring them all in. This had gone on long enough.

"No one at Edward Knox's office recognized the name Yelana Lobacheva," said Lawson. "If we don't get anything from her or if we can't find the mystery Eric, I'll go down there with a photo and ask around." He looked up to see Bernie reading her computer screen intently.

He sighed and got up to get some coffee. Just one more year of this and he would be done with law school. Then it was the bar exam and off to the district attorney's office. He was ready

to be using the evidence collected on a case to prove guilt. It was a nuanced problem, conveying facts in a way that showed guilt and admitted any flaws in the evidence but minimized their importance. It seemed more structured than police work. All this grasping at straws and trying to make connections where there might not be any was maddening to Lawson.

He returned to his desk with the coffee and started compiling a list of pro-magic groups with members that had criminal records. He could compare them to the list of any groups that had made threats against the Citizens for a Sensible Reality.

Bernie started reading the

fourth case file on the list and stopped dead, staring at a name. Eric Strickland. It was the case from last year with the magic repeaters that the ATFM had taken over. The way the computer system was setup, you could remove or redact most of the findings, but the people and case number remained in the system. Bernie had heard some of the techs arguing over whether that was a bug or a feature, but she didn't care. Once she had context for the name, she remembered Eric Strickland, what he looked like, how good he was at magic, and that she had heard a rumor that he worked for Alex Petrovin.

"I found our Eric," said Bernie.

"Eric Strickland, from that case last year that the ATFM took over and buried, remember?"

"Yeah," said Lawson, "but I'm not supposed to remember."

Bernie waved her hands. "The case isn't important, but Eric Strickland was there and helped me take down Curtis Krish."

"So how are Eric Strickland and Yelana Lobacheva connected?"

"They don't really have to be if Edward Knox IDed them both, but they may be working for the same guy."

"Wait," said Lawson, annoyed, "let me guess: Alex Petrovin."

Bernie fixed him with a glare.

She knew what was coming next, another Lawson special sermon about how not everyone was a criminal just because they were from a family known for that kind of thing. Just look at her, why did she have to single out Alex Petrovin all the time? The urge to punch Lawson was going to be overwhelming if he actually got started, so she held up her hand and said, "don't. I don't want to hear it." She got up to fill her own coffee cup.

Lawson sighed and followed her. "You don't want to hear it because you know I'm right," he said.

"We know Yelana worked for Alex-"

"Allegedly," said Lawson.

"God dammit, Lawson," said Bernie. She stopped and faced him. "You're not a lawyer yet, so let me finish. Yelana worked for Alex so I went looking for an Eric that also may work for Alex."

Lawson had to admit that, if you took it as given that Yelana worked for Alex, it was a good place to start. "Fine," said Lawson, "we'll bring in this Eric Strickland."

"Good," said Bernie. She turned to continue towards the coffee maker.

Lawson followed her and said, "just give me your word that you won't go after Alex Petrovin without probable cause."

It was Bernie's turn to sigh. She

set her coffee mug down on the counter hard. She turned to glare at Lawson. "You don't trust me now," she said, "is that it?"

"Not where he's concerned," said Lawson. He was not backing down from this. She had it in for Alex Petrovin and it was going to get her fired someday. Lawson was going to do his best to make sure he wasn't around when it happened. He sure as hell didn't want to be part of that shitstorm.

"Well you can't have it," said Bernie. "I follow where the evidence leads me and if it leads to Alex Petrovin, so be it." She turned her back on Lawson to fill her cup.

"Bullshit," hissed Lawson, trying to keep his voice down. "You follow where your gut leads you and if the evidence comes along for the ride, so much the better."

Bernie whirled on Lawson and started to say something when Sargent Cumberland said, "detectives! Yelana Lobacheva is in interrogation room two for you." He looked back and forth between them. "Why don't you go take it out on her?"

Bernie stalked off towards the interrogation room. Lawson sighed and went back to his desk to get his notebook.

Yelana Lobacheva lounged in the uncomfortable metal chair. Bernie

noted with gratitude that the pink bathrobe was gone and it was just shorts, a tank top, and crocs for Yelana today. She looked up as Bernie entered with Lawson a few steps behind her.

"You again?" said Yelana.

"I could say the same thing about you," said Bernie. Lawson settled himself in the far chair and opened the case file.

"What do you want?" said Yelana and resumed her lounging. "I have things to do."

"Where were you last night between 7 and 11pm?" asked Lawson.

"I was at home," said Yelana.  
"Why?"

"We have a man in the hospital who says you were partly responsible for his kidnapping and beating," said Bernie.

Yelana let the metal chair drop forward and spat, "that's a lie. I was home all night. You can check with my employer. I booked two cruises last night between seven and eleven."

"Do you know a man named Edward Knox?" asked Bernie. Lawson pulled a photo from the case file of Edward Knox they had gotten from the CSR web page. Yelana looked at it briefly.

"No," said Yelana, "should I?" She went back to lounging, rocking the chair back on its back two legs and

staring at her reflection in the two way mirror.

"How about Eric Strickland?"  
Lawson produced Eric's mugshot  
photo from six years ago.

Yelana paused in her rocking  
for the briefest moment then continued  
and said, "no, I don't know him."

"What no follow up question or  
demand?" asked Bernie. "That's not  
like you." She narrowed her eyes at  
Yelana and waited.

Yelana said, "who is he?"  
"You and someone named Eric  
were identified as kidnapping and  
assaulting Edward Knox last night,"  
said Lawson. "You don't want that kind

of violence on your record."

"Not to mention how pissed your employer will be," said Bernie. "Those cruises won't book themselves."

Yelana glared at Bernie and set her chair quietly on all four legs. "I have nothing more to say to you," she said. "I want my lawyer."

Lawson and Bernie left the room and closed the door behind them. "She knows Eric," said Bernie.

"That's not enough to hold her," said Lawson. "Her hands didn't show any bruising or swelling. If she was literally one of the people who beat up Edward Knox, she must have been using weapons."

"She might just have been party to the kidnapping as bait," said Bernie. She knew her brother had friends who were girls that worked for him. When she asked what the women did, her brother said they were easy on the eyes and put men at ease. For a while Bernie thought that meant they were whores, then she realized they were bait or distractions for the men her brother wanted to kidnap.

"Yeah but how would Edward see the bait? They live completely different lives," said Lawson.

"Let's check his phone records," said Bernie. "Maybe someone set him up."

Lawson nodded. "You do that,

I'll get word out to bring in Eric Strickland for questioning."



## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The crowd had gathered in front of city hall and they were teeming with energy. Liz smiled and waited for her turn to speak. Samuel had done a good job of arranging this protest and controlling the makeup of the crowd. She would have to compliment him on it later. All of the signs were reasonable and none had spelling or grammatical errors. They looked as well-reasoned as any political activism group could given the strictness of their goals.

There were lots of TV crews to cover the event. Samuel stood at her

side, smiling and clapping at the right times. He had brought their daughter Maria because Liz planned to make a point about children and Samuel thought the point would be better made with Maria there.

Liz shifted a little thinking about different direction some of her speech had to take. Talking about magic users and how dangerous they are was a topic she was very comfortable with. Talking about attacks on members of political activist groups, like the attack on Edward Knox, was tricky. The topic was inherently sensitive and she couldn't look like she was pointing fingers or prematurely assigning

blame, but she wanted to subtly lay this at the feet of the pro-magic camp.

She clapped politely as one of the staff members of CSR finished speaking.

"And now I'd like to introduce Representative Liz Jacobs of the US Congress," said the woman. The crowd applauded and cheered. Liz approached the podium and waved at the crowd.

"Thank you!" said Liz. The crowd looked up at her and she tried to make it seem like she was making eye contact with everyone. "Today, we are here to make a difference!" The crowd applauded. "We often talk about how magic makes the world less safe, how

innocent people are killed everyday by its misuse. But those are statistics, things that happen far away from here. Right?" The crowd made negative noises. "Magic users would say these events are rare." More negative noises. "They would say that magic can be used safely. But in the last two days we have seen how untrue those arguments are."

The crowd made angry agreeing noises. "In the last two days," continued Liz, "we have seen two deaths by M-gun. Two lives needlessly cut short by magical violence." The crowd started to wane on her and she needed to pull them back in, but it was tricky to talk about magic users getting

killed by M-guns. Some of the more fringe elements tended to have the attitude that they got what they deserved. She needed to bring it home to the heart.

"Yurik Zubov," said Liz, "was an upstanding member of his community. Whether we liked his business or not, he was a small business owner, just trying to make a living. Some would say that he got what he deserved, but I reject that!" A little positive noise in the crowd. "Magic user or not, Yurik Zubov had a wife and three small children." A ripple of pity.

"That's right," said Liz more quietly. "Three children who lost their

father to the needless violence of magic." She let the image of sad children stew for a moment in the crowd's minds. "I know that if my daughter Maria lost either of her parents," she gestured to Samuel and Maria, "it would break my heart." Maria hid her face from the crowd so Samuel hugged her and gently stroked her hair.

"When we ask for a ban on magic, we are asking to make the world a safer place not just for ourselves," said Liz, "but for children everywhere. We will make the world safer for everyone!"

The crowd cheered and she let them have a moment. She needed to

cool it down and get them riled up enough to donate money and time to the cause. It was fine to appeal to the noble sentiments in the populace, but those feelings were seldom lasting. Anger and revenge were feelings that stuck with you and motivated people to action.

"Some of you may have heard about Edward Knox," said Liz. A mixture of nods and head shakes. "He is one of the leaders of Citizens for a Sensible Reality, the tireless group that organized this event." She gestured at the CSR staff member who had introduced her. There was light applause and a few cheers in the crowd. "I have the privilege of

working with Edward in Washington D.C. and he is a smart and dedicated man. Tragically, he was attacked and savagely beaten last night and is still in the hospital today."

A wave of concern washed through the crowd. Now that they were sad, time to work it into anger. "Some have been quick to jump to conclusions," Liz said. "Some have pointed fingers at pro-magic groups." A few people shouted support for this, but she let it go. "We must rise above the finger pointing. We must let the police do their job and find those responsible." Confusion from the crowd.

"If we need to point a finger, it

must be pointed at me," said Liz. Confusion and protest. "For it is the fault of the US Congress and everyone in it that magic is still legal!"

Tentative cheers. "It must stop now!" More cheers.

"The time to take the fight to Washington is now! We must let them know that magic will not be tolerated in our nation!" She paused to let the clapping die down a little. "For Edward Knox, for Yurik Zubov, and for his three children, outlaw magic now!"

The crowd cheered and Liz smiled and waved at them. She was less than satisfied with the speech, but there would always be other chances to

get it perfect.



## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Sargent Cumberland swore loudly enough for the entire floor to hear it. Bernie was deep into reading Edward Knox's phone records and didn't really notice. Lawson looked up to see Cumberland snatch a paper off his desk and walk directly toward him.

"Please don't—" started Lawson.

"Oh yeah," said Cumberland bitterly, "you've got a third one. Same M.O., this time it's a dancer." He handed the address to Lawson and said, "you might want to get going before I tell the captain." Cumberland stopped mid-stride and did an about

face for his desk. "Never mind," he said on his way past Lawson, "he already knows."

Captain Nisbet's office door opened and he called, "Cart, Demars, my office, now."

Bernie, still lost in the phone records actually cringed when she heard her name called. She extricated herself from her computer and followed Lawson to the captain's office. She shut the door behind them.

"I just got a call," said Nisbet, "from the press asking if this was the same killer."

Lawson and Bernie sat in silence under Nisbet's gaze.

"How the hell did they know about this almost before we did?" Nisbet glared at them. "I do not ask rhetorical questions in this office."

Lawson cleared his throat. "We don't know, sir," he said, "maybe the killer is tipping off the press."

Captain Nisbet waved his hands dismissively. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Find this killer. Stop pussy-footing around and get it done. If it's someone in a political group, arrest them. If it's someone in the press, get them in here. Just find me a suspect. So far, all I can tell the press is that we've gone down several wrong turns."

"Yes, sir," said Lawson and Bernie.

They closed the door and went back to their desks to get the address to the latest murder.

"Tell me you found something in Edward Knox's phone records," said Lawson as they headed for the garage.

"There were a few calls from numbers that were blocked. The phone company insisted that we get a court order to view those records," she said. "Otherwise, not much at all."

The press was waiting for the car as they pulled out of the garage. This time it was more than one camera crew and Lawson actually swore at the swarming people. Bernie looked at him in surprise. "Are you sure you're okay to drive?" she asked.

"I'm fine," growled Lawson. "I will be glad when this case is over."

"You and me both," said Bernie. "I'm tired of politicians making hay from the tragedy in other people's lives."

Lawson grunted and they drove in silence to the scene of Griffin Smith's murder.

The building was nondescript brick with a small, but clean, entryway with buzzers for the apartments. The uniforms had cordoned off a fairly wide area to keep the hordes of press at bay. They shouted questions at Bernie and Lawson as they walked to the scene which both detectives steadfastly ignored. They climbed the

stairs to the apartment and went into the victim's living room.

Griffin Smith was sprawled on the couch with glassy eyes and a mess of mangled flesh in the area of his heart. The medical examiner, Jerry Underberg, was there already looking over the body. CSI was also there, gathering fingerprints. The apartment was tasteful and understated. Bernie looked around and frowned. It was very unlike the two previous murders.

"Jerry," said Lawson by way of a greeting.

"Cause of death is almost certainly the giant block of mangled cells where his heart should be," said Jerry pointing at the wound from the

M-gun. "I'd say sometime between six and eight hours ago."

Lawson wrote in his notebook.  
"Any defensive wounds?"

"None," said Jerry, "just like the first two, the killer was able to get inside without force and then shoot them."

Bernie drifted away from Lawson, something nagging at her mind. She looked at the tidy bookcase and the few pieces of art on the walls. She wandered into the kitchen and looked around. Something was different about this murder. The wound suggested the same caliber of M-gun and she was willing to bet that the killer was not using any wards. But

there was something else.

She wandered into the bedroom and found uniforms going through the trash in the bathroom. "Find anything?" she asked.

"Cotton balls, tissues, and a few used condoms," said the tech. "Nothing unusual."

Bernie nodded and walked back to the kitchen. Lawson had finished talking with Jerry, the ME, and met her in the kitchen.

"From the body," said Lawson, "it looks like the same guy."

Bernie frowned. "Something feels different," she said.

Lawson sighed fearing another

"gut instinct" moment. "Well, the victim did have a completely different profession," said Lawson, "so there are bound to be some differences."

"That's not what I mean," said Bernie. She looked around, helpless to explain why she thought this was different. "Did the CSI techs look at the magical traces to see if the killer was using wards?"

"Not yet," said Lawson. He signaled to one of the techs to start that process. The tech pulled out some small cubes and a large notebook. He set the cubes on the notebook and held the whole thing out in front of him while he concentrated. The white lights of magical inquiry shimmered

around him and showed a pattern of red where the M-gun had been fired.

The slight smell of ozone hit Bernie's senses like a hammer of understanding. She snapped her fingers and turned to Lawson. "That's what's different," she said.

Lawson waved to the tech to continue. He looked at Bernie and said, "what's different? So far, it looks the same."

"No," said Bernie smiling, "the smell."

"So it smells like ozone," said Lawson, "that's the same for all magic."

"Exactly," said Bernie. "And

places where a lot of magic is done smell different after a while. It's like smoke, but less intense. The smell of magic seeps into things, subtly changing it. I doubt you could even consciously smell the difference, but I guarantee you, it's there."

"So Griffin's apartment smells like magic use?" said Lawson.

"No, it doesn't," said Bernie. "That's what's different. I don't think Griffin ever used magic."

Lawson thought for a moment. "Can the residual ozone in a place be measured?"

Bernie shook her head. "No, the ozone from magic dissipates too quickly to be useful in investigations,"

she said. "The residual ozone is too low in concentration to be submitted as evidence. But we don't need the residual ozone to show that Griffin didn't use magic. If there was magic used here, there would be traces all over the apartment. Wherever Griffin went, there would be traces, even this long after his death."

Lawson asked the CSI tech to gather traces from the rest of the apartment as well as from the area around the body.

"If you're right," said Lawson, "is this a copycat killer?"

"Maybe," said Bernie, "or a crime of opportunity. Make it look like the other murders and no one looks too

closely at the details."

"Yeah, but who would want to kill a ballet dancer?" said Lawson.

"I don't know," said Bernie.  
"Let's go see who he's connected to."



## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

It was early afternoon and Eric had avoided going to Puritan-central long enough. He wasn't sure what he would find there or how he was supposed to find Zubov's killer. He wasn't gifted socially, so he couldn't talk it out of people and asking questions was always a good way to make people clam up, especially when they had something to hide. He decided to play to his strengths and blend in.

The day was hot again, but hazy, making the air feel dirtier than usual. Eric approached the front doors

of the Citizens for a Sensible Reality and took a deep breath. He had magically prepared himself for this as much as possible. He had attached his charms to a necklace and wore them around his neck and under his shirt so they maintained skin contact. In a pinch, he could use them without touching them with his hands. The charms were not as powerful as his other focuses and Eric was not about to go anywhere dangerous without all the tools at his disposal. The larger focuses in his bag were about baseball sized, so he had removed the covers of a few baseballs and cricket balls and reattached them around his focuses. That should keep casual observers

from suspecting anything. To make that disguise more convincing, he also threw in a baseball glove and some sports magazines. He wanted to bring a bat, just as weapon, but it didn't fit in his bag.

Beyond disguising his magical focuses, Eric had also bought a heavy-duty ward from one of his friends who worked for the Hidalgo family. He hoped it was enough to stop the caliber of M-gun that was used on Zubov and Ying. He had also created a few wards of his own. All of that was tiring to power, so Eric hoped he didn't have to use them for too long. He figured he probably had a few hours at most, then he would have to drop some of his

wards or risk passing out from exhaustion.

Eric wondered if Puritans would be able to tell that Eric was using magic. He hadn't voluntarily spent much time around people who didn't use magic. In prison, magic was not allowed, but Eric hardly considered that a normal environment. Walking into Puritan-central with all his wards up would be interesting, in a life threatening and terrifying kind of way. He worked up the nerve by reminding himself that a bunch of Puritans were not nearly as dangerous as Alex Petrovin when he was mad.

The front doors of Citizens for a Sensible Reality were open and fans

were blowing loudly, trying to cool off the storefront. Eric took a deep breath and went inside. There were people working at phones and on computers, some at a table of signs. The door to the office in back was closed, but Eric could see people moving in there behind the shades.

An older lady approached Eric with a smile and he smiled back.

"Hi there," said the lady, "I'm Rebecca." She offered her hand and Eric shook it. She didn't react when her hand touched his, and Eric mentally breathed a sigh of relief. So far, so good, he thought.

"Eric," he said.

"What can I do for you, Eric?"

Eric had prepared an answer for that question. "I saw the protests on the news and wanted to see if I could help," he said.

"Wonderful," said Rebecca, "you can help me with this signs or I can get you some envelopes to stuff." She gestured to the signs behind her. Eric thought that lettering signs would take too much concentration when he needed to be fishing for information, so he opted for stuffing envelopes.

"I flunked art," said Eric, "so I'll stuff envelopes."

Rebecca laughed and brought over a box of envelopes and a stack of papers. She indicated a folding chair at the same table as her and Eric sat

down. She showed him a trick for folding and stuffing in one fluid movement. After a few tries, Eric got the hang of it and Rebecca went back to lettering signs for protests and rallies later in the week. Eric let the routine of mindless work flow over him. He remembered why he both loved and hated that kind of work. It was monotonous, but strangely relaxing, almost like meditation. For a few hours, it would be pleasant, but then his mind would get anxious and restless. He had tried light factory work after prison and found that his mind wandered too far from the work at hand. He made mistakes and was less productive because his mind

wasn't engaged. Fortunately, he didn't have to do this for any longer than he wanted to.

"What kind of work do you do?" asked Rebecca, conversationally.

Eric had prepared for that line of questioning as well. "I work in tech support," he said. It used to be true, so it was at least a convincing lie.

"Computers," said Rebecca distastefully. Eric wondered if they were also anti-tech in addition to being anti-magic. But she continued. "I can't make those darn things work," she said. "My son is a wiz with computers, but I'm all thumbs."

Eric laughed politely. "Yeah, they can be tricky," he said. After a

few moments of silence he said, "how about you?"

"Oh," said Rebecca, "I'm retired now. I used to work in the county clerk's office, filing papers, answering phones. That's where I learned that computers and I just don't get along."

It always irritated Eric when people referred to computers as being "unhappy" or "cranky" as if they were small children or puppies. They followed rules and did what they were told. But modern computers were built by thousands of people, all telling the computer to do different things. When computers didn't do what they were supposed to, it was because of people,

not the computer itself. That fit with almost all of Eric's experiences, both with magic and computers: people were the cause of all the problems.

Eric chuckled politely. He figured enough time had passed that he could broach a more sensitive topic. That was why he was here, after all. "So, I heard on the news about the protests," said Eric. "Was it all about that guy Zubov a couple of days ago?"

"Oh no," said Rebecca, "that was just the beginning."

"How so?"

"Well," said Rebecca conspiratorially, "first, it was just the one man, Zubov. Then, there was a second man. I can't remember his

name. Something oriental."

"Ying?" said Eric in what he hoped was a casual tone.

"That's it," said Rebecca. "Well, those were both magic users, so it was bad, but lots of people here thought they got what was coming to them."

"Hmm," said Eric noncommittally.

Rebecca looked around the small office to make sure no one was listening. Eric wasn't sure anyone could hear anything over the roar of the fans. "I didn't much care if they were killed, tell you the truth," said Rebecca. "But what got me really fired up was poor Edward."

"What happened?" said Eric. He already knew what had happened to Edward and wasn't entirely comfortable with it, but he had to find Zubov's killer and part of that was chatting up anyone here who would talk to him.

Rebecca leaned back and shook her head. "Oh, it was just too awful," she said, tears in her eyes. Eric stopped what he was doing to lay a friendly hand of support on her shoulder. She sniffed a bit and said, "poor Edward, someone beat him up and he ended up in the hospital."

"That's terrible," said Eric. "Is he okay?" Eric didn't care if Edward was okay or not, but if he had died of

his injuries, Alex would want to know that. He was pretty sure that Edward survived, but it was worth making sure.

"He's being released from the hospital today," said Rebecca. "They did some tests and think he'll be okay, eventually."

"How did you know Edward?" asked Eric, turning back to his envelopes.

Rebecca frowned, but let whatever troubled her go. "Why, he's one of the leaders of CSR," she said. "His father, Harold Knox, is the president, but Edward is his right hand."

Eric refused to let that

information break his flow with the envelope stuffing. Shit, he thought. No wonder this group was out in force today. If Edward had been their number two guy, it must have felt like a personal attack. But that still didn't help Eric figure out if anyone here had killed Zubov. Still, Edward had come to Yelana's after the tip they planted for the killer, so he was probably involved somehow. Much to Eric's annoyance, he was going to have to keep digging. He wanted to ask about Harold and when he would show up, but it would seem too much like fishing, so he let it go.

"Well," said Eric, "I sure hope I get a chance to meet the leaders of

CSR sometime."

Rebecca turned back to her signs. "I'm sure you will," she said. "They're very hands-on kind of leaders."

The only question in Eric's mind was how dirty were they willing to get those hands in support of their cause. He stuffed envelopes and waited for Harold or Edward.



# CHAPTER THIRTY

After several hours of checking Griffin Smith's friends and family for a connection to the first two killings, Bernie was at the end of her rope. There was no connection as far as she could tell. Griffin didn't use magic, he didn't have any connection to Zubov or Ying. After hitting wall after wall, Bernie threw down her pen in disgust.

"Dammit!" she said.

"Still nothing?" asked Lawson.

"Nothing," she said, "not a God damned thing. Griffin Smith might as well have been from a different planet for all the commonalities he shared

with Zubov and Ying."

Lawson leaned back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Maybe it was a copycat killer," he said, "and they're not related."

"In that case," said Bernie bitterly, "we're completely failing to find two killers instead of one. That doesn't make me feel any better."

Lawson chuckled.

Bernie stood up to stretch. She picked up her coffee cup and headed for the kitchen. She thought a new perspective or a bit of time away from the case would help. Maybe she would go for a walk or get coffee down the street instead of here. She returned to her desk without having filled her

coffee cup.

"I'm going for coffee," she said.  
"I need some fresh air."

"Want company?" asked  
Lawson.

"Nah," said Bernie, "I'm just  
going down the block. I'll be right  
back. Want anything?"

"Yeah, get me an overpriced  
espresso drink of some kind," he said.

"Do they sell anything else?"

Lawson chuckled. He was  
focusing on Griffin's killer. If nothing  
else, he was higher profile in the  
community and the outcry over his  
murder was likely to be even more  
vigorous than what they had seen for

Zubov and Ying. He had to nip that in the bud.

Bernie left the police station by the back door, doing her very best to avoid any and all protesters and press. She emerged from the alley at the far end of the block and looked toward the station. The entrance was swarming with protesters and even a few press were up at the coffee shop, interviewing people for their reaction to the latest killing.

She decided to go for a walk and find some other coffee shop while her head cleared. She didn't think about the case. Instead, she thought about whatever was in front of her, the mailbox, that discarded cup, the guy

walking his dog. She needed to let her subconscious work on the problem without her interference. The subconscious was the mental part of her gut instinct and she had learned to trust it. She walked and let the change of traffic lights determine her path.

After twenty minutes, she had wandered past pigeons and street mimes, kids in school uniforms and business men in suits. If her subconscious had anything valuable to contribute, it was taking its sweet time about it. Frustrated, Bernie started listing people and their connections, hoping something new came out of it. The thing that didn't seem to fit was the attack on Edward Knox. If he was

telling the truth and his kidnappers were trying to find Zubov's killer, then either Edward or his attackers knew more than they were letting on. If she had to choose between an upstanding member of the community and Alex Petrovin for knowing more than they were letting on, her money was on Alex Petrovin. The two people that Edward had named were connected to Alex.

Bernie clenched her fists and headed for the nearest subway station, her mission for clearing her head and coffee completely forgotten.

Alex had finished his lunch and was enjoying an espresso while he looked over financial reports from the

legitimate side of his holdings. The scuffle at the entrance to the club pricked his ears and he motioned to Gregori to check it out. After a few moments, Gregori returned and whispered in Alex's ear.

He sighed dramatically and leaned back in his chair. "Let her in," he said. "And bring another espresso for our guest."

Bernie walked to Alex's table, only slightly flushed from the confrontation in the entryway.

"I hope you're in a more civil mood today, Bernadine," said Alex.

"Let's find out," said Bernie. Alex gestured to a chair and

Bernie sat down. Her copper hair shone and her green eyes blazed. Part of Alex wanted to make her happy, just so he could see her smile again. The bigger part of him was annoyed that she was here and debated whether to contact his lawyer about suing her for harassment.

"What is this time?" he asked. He was in no mood for verbal sparring.

"Where were you last night between 7 and 11pm?"

"I was at the gym," said Alex. "I had a bare knuckle sparring match with Gregori." He waggled his bruised hands at Bernadine. She looked up at Gregori and noted the bruises on his cheeks and chin.

The espresso arrived and the waiter set it in front of Bernadine.

"You don't have any bruises on your face," she noted, taking a sip of the coffee.

Alex smiled. "What can I say? I'm much better at it than Gregori is."

Bernie chuckled and set her tiny coffee cup back down. That was all the confirmation she needed that Alex had been the one to beat up Edward Knox, but she still didn't understand why he had done it. She assumed that he knew who killed Zubov or had been responsible for it. If he was grilling Puritans for the information, he really didn't know and no one had come forward from the

families claiming credit for it. That was unusual and suggested to her that the killer was someone outside the families. For the first time, she considered that Alex might be innocent in the death of Yurik Zubov.

"Did you know Ho Ying?" she asked.

"Only be reputation," said Alex. "We don't have a lot of friends in common." Bernie considered whether Ying had been killed in retaliation for Zubov's death. But, if Alex really didn't know who killed Zubov, it was unlike him to fly off the handle and start a war where there wasn't one already.

"How are things between you

and Ying's friends?"

A smile twitched at Alex's lips. The insight into crime families was part of what made her so dangerous as an opponent. The interactions of people with secret agendas were second nature to her, even if she resisted using her instincts to their fullest. Alex dreaded a time when she loosed herself from the shackles of the police force. She had more than enough brains to take over her father's organization and, if push came to shove, she had the cold hearted fortitude for it, too.

"Things are quiet right now," said Alex.

Bernie nodded. If he beat up

Edward Knox, he would know why Edward had been pointing fingers at Yelana Lobacheva and Eric Strickland. She leaned back in her chair and studied Alex. He was obviously hiding something, but that was always true of people she questioned.

"You heard about Edward Knox, the Puritan that was attacked last night?" she asked.

"On the news," said Alex, nodding.

"Funny thing," she said, "Edward fingered two people you know as his assailants."

Alex didn't miss a beat. "Is that so?"

"He said the people that attacked and kidnapped him were Yelana Lobacheva and Eric Strickland," said Bernie. Alex said nothing. Bernie waited a moment then said, "I've met Yelana twice now. I believe she could sell an M-gun if given detailed instructions on how to do it, but she's not the sharpest knife in the drawer. I don't think she could have masterminded a kidnapping if her life depended on it."

She sat forward and took a sip of her espresso, watching Alex. He fought the urge to have her removed from the club right then and there. He was tired of answering her questions on this fishing expedition.

"Eric Strickland, on the other hand," said Bernie, "he's more than capable of making sure people show up where he wants them to. As are you."

"Bernadine," said Alex quietly, "you need to tread carefully." His voice was quiet and tight with contained rage.

"How did you know Edward Knox?" asked Bernie.

Alex took a deep breath. He didn't want to lose his temper over this. "Lobbyists are not generally well-liked," said Alex. "Maybe you need to ask who Edward Knox knows."

Bernie blinked as nagging

details in her mind clicked into place. The anti-magic groups were having a field day with the killings. Edward Knox had been fairly hostile when they visited him at the office. Then he had been attacked, becoming the focus for anti-magic rallies. He would not have been the first person to stage his own abduction for political gains. Her mind pointed out that she had no proof of a connection between Knox and any of the murders, but her gut was running the show now. Edward Knox had been at the middle of this since the beginning. It was time to pay him another visit.

"Thank you," said Bernie. Her almost cordial tone made Alex blink in

surprise. She stood to leave and said, "thank you for the coffee."

Alex sat back in his chair and watched her go. His mind whirred trying to figure out what connections she had made that he was missing. He motioned to Gregori and told him to have a text message sent to Eric Strickland warning him that Bernie might be on her way to where he was.



# CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Harold returned from his meeting with the lawyers in a foul mood. They were not hopeful about Harold's idea to sue the city for failing to keep his son safe. They said they would look into it further, but random muggings happened all the time and it was hard to prove the city was negligent in protecting its citizens. Harold told them it was not a random mugging, but they didn't seem to believe him.

No matter. Harold had other ways of dealing with problems.

He walked into the CSR offices

and was pleased to see some new faces. He smiled and waved to all the volunteers as he headed for the back office. Two of his staff members were there.

"Maureen, Kevin," said Harold, "how does the budget look?"

They smiled at him and Kevin said, "in the last two days we've received more donations than in the previous six weeks."

"That's good news," said Harold smiling.

Maureen nodded. "It may not last, so we were discussing whether to fund a special project or whether to keep applying it to operating expenses."

Harold settled himself behind his desk and let himself get lost in discussion. More money was a good problem to have. He considered briefly that the money was the direct result of the deaths of two magic users and the attack on his son. If it had just been the magic users, he would have felt glad of the extra money. The lives of two guilty magic dealers was a small price to pay for raising awareness about the dangers of magic. But the attack on his son had gone too far. He was saddened that all people were willing to do was send money. It was an outrage. More people should be up in arms over the violence.

The conversations about the

budget reached a lull.

Maureen said, "how is Edward doing? We've all been thinking about him."

Harold swallowed and tried to keep his tone light. "He was released from the hospital about an hour ago," he said. "They ran all the tests they needed to. Other than time to heal, he should be okay."

Maureen and Kevin smiled sadly at him. "Well, that's good to hear," said Kevin. "I can't imagine what you've been going through."

"It hasn't been easy," admitted Harold. "But Patricia has been a rock. She was always the strong one between us. She's been with Edward since it

happened."

After a moment of silence, they noticed some commotion out in the front part of the building. Maureen stood and opened the door.

"Oh," she said, "Edward is here."

"What?" said Kevin incredulously.

Harold mentally scolded his son. The boy had spent too much time around politicians. He didn't know when to keep your personal business personal. He was certain Edward thought he would be helping to light a fire under people to work harder to donate more by appearing in his bruised and swollen state. This event

was not a badge of honor and should not be aired so publicly. He pushed past Maureen to go talk with Edward.

Eric had been relieved to see Harold Knox return to the office. At least he'd get a chance to ask Harold some questions soon and hopefully get the hell out of there. Ten or fifteen minutes after Harold had arrived in the office, Eric made his move.

"Hey, Rebecca?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think there's any chance you could introduce me to Harold?" said Eric. He tried to sound like an eager fan and hoped it didn't come out like a crazy stalker. "I would love to meet the man responsible for

this movement."

Rebecca looked up from her signs but didn't say anything. Eric was pretty sure he'd blown it. He looked at Rebecca and her gaze was fixed on the two people who had just come through the front door. One was a short plump woman with graying red hair. Her face was lined with worry that she tried to mask with a slight smile. The other was Edward Knox.

Eric's heart pounded and his mind raced, trying to find a way to slip away or a reason for him to be there. He was pretty sure Edward hadn't seen him at last night's violence-fest, but he couldn't take any chances. Rebecca stood up and went around to the front

of her table to greet Edward and Eric leaned down to his bag on the floor. He made a show of searching it for something until Edward turned away. His heart slowed a little. That maneuver could have backfired if Edward had become as paranoid as some of Eric's buddies. He could have assumed Eric was searching his bag for a weapon. Apparently Edward still had some trust left in him.

People came to the center of the office to shake Edward's hand and give him soft words of encouragement. The door to the back office opened and Harold emerged. Eric thought he looked pissed under the slight smile he had adopted. He considered grabbing

his bag and leaving, but he dared not leave until he'd exhausted his chances of finding Zubov's killer. If he did anything less, Alex would have his head on a plate. He edged around the table he had been working at and waited.

Harold walked to his wife and gave her a hug. It seemed genuine and other volunteers were tearing up and whispering. He turned to Edward and said, "I'm glad you're up and about, son."

"Thanks, dad," said Edward with a puffy half-smile.

"You should be at home resting," he said sternly. There was anger in his eyes and Edward blinked.

It wasn't like his father to get angry. Harold got frustrated and serious, but Edward had never seen him angry.

"I will," said Edward, "I'm going there now. I just—"

"Go home," said Harold. He wanted to give his son a longer lecture about appropriate behavior, but now was not the time or place for it. Unlike his son, he refused to air his personal life here for all to see.

Patricia noticed the tension between her husband and son and said, "he's right, Edward. Let's get home so you can rest."

Edward didn't understand his father sometimes. Here he was, trying to boost the cause, and all his father

could do was scold him. Harold should be embracing this opportunity to say something to all the volunteers to harden their resolve, but instead he was throwing it away. Edward gave in and let his father have his way. There would be other chances to rally the troops.

Edward nodded. "Okay," said Edward. He took the arm his mother offered him and looked up to engage with the volunteers again on his way out. As he turned to the front of the storefront, someone else was coming in.

Bernie looked at Edward and Harold and said, "good, you're both here. I have some questions for you."





## CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Eric quickly hid his face under his hand, pretending to cough, and turned away from the door. His heart sped up again. Damn it, this wasn't getting any easier. It was that cop Cart. His chance to talk to Harold and see who killed Zubov had evaporated as soon as she walked through the door. She wasn't going to let him hang around while she asked Edward and Harold questions. And he thought she might remember him from that thing last year. There was no way he could convince her that he had given up magic so thoroughly to be

volunteering for an anti-magic group.

"I was just going home to rest," said Edward testily.

"This won't take long," said Bernie. She gestured to the back office. "If you don't want to talk here, we can always go down to the station."

Harold's temper flared but he held onto his control. "Of course," he said, "won't you come in?" He turned and started back towards the office. Maureen and Kevin stepped out of the way and watched, concerned. The other volunteers whispered as Patricia, Edward, and Bernie started towards the back office.

Rebecca turned to Eric and said, "well, Eric, it looks like I won't

be able to introduce you for a while."

Eric's blood turned to ice. God damn loud-mouthed Puritans he swore to himself, almost afraid to look up and see if either Cart or Edward had recognized him.

Bernie turned to see who had been talking and did a double-take. She did not expect to see Eric Strickland at all, least of all here. Her eyebrows shot up, but she recovered quickly.

She started to move towards Eric and said, "Eric Strickland, you're wanted for questioning-"

Eric couldn't be taken in for questioning with all his magical focuses on him. Most of them were not

legal and he wasn't allowed to do magic at all since his conviction. He thought about running, but he couldn't leave his bag and he didn't think he could get it and get out before Cart could get to him. In a panic, he did the only thing he could think of. He grabbed Rebecca's arm and yanked her in front of him. He wrapped his arm around her neck and held one of his magical focuses to her neck. It was not a particularly powerful focus, the magical equivalent of holding a pocket knife to her neck, but it could kill her all the same.

"Don't come any closer," said Eric, "or I'll open her artery."

The other volunteers let out

stifled cries of panic and froze in place. Eric looked at Bernie and tried to make himself look menacing when he was actually terrified of the mess he was in. This was not at all how he wanted this to go.

Bernie froze and locked eyes with him. Everything she knew about Eric Strickland said he was bluffing. She had a pretty good idea of his character from the last time they had interacted and she was fairly sure he wouldn't actually hurt the woman. But Bernie wasn't willing to bet someone else's life on it.

"Okay," she said, "just take it easy. No one has to get hurt here."

Harold had been almost to the

office door when Rebecca had been grabbed. He continued to inch his way towards the office door. If he could get to his weapon, he could level the playing field. He didn't trust the police to do what had to be done. A magic user, here? His revulsion and anger pushed him forward.

Bernie didn't dare go for her gun. Her best hope was to give Eric what he wanted so he'd let the hostage go, even if that meant Eric escaped. They could find him again, if necessary.

"What do you want, Eric?" said Bernie.

Adrenaline flooded Eric's system and he couldn't think. All his

brain could do was bounce around throw poo like misbehaving monkeys. In his arms, Rebecca was shaking and a cold sweat coated her skin where he was holding her. He licked his lips and said, "I want to get my bag and leave."

"Okay," said Bernie, "we can do that. Just take it nice and slow."

Eric edged towards his bag then realized he couldn't pick it up while holding Rebecca hostage. There was no way he was letting her go until he had a clear shot out the door. He stopped and said to Rebecca, "reach down and pick up the bag."

She whimpered a little, but extended her hand towards the bag. She almost had it when Harold shouted

from the back office.

"Let her go, or I'll shoot!"



## CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Bernie winced and turned as quickly as possible towards Harold without making Eric lose his cool and kill his hostage. Eric squeezed his arm tighter and put more of Rebecca between him and Harold.

"Harold," said Bernie, "put the gun down. No one has to get hurt here."

Harold's eyes blazed with anger and madness. He held the M-gun firmly. This had gone far enough.

"Dad, what are you doing?" said Edward with a tinge of panic in his voice.

"What am I doing?" asked Harold, incredulously. "What are you doing?" He held the M-gun aimed at Eric, but glanced at his son.

"What do you mean?" said Edward. His voice was shaky from the adrenaline and stress his body was already under.

"All those names," said Harold, "in your notebook. Names and numbers of magic users. How could you be consorting with those types of people?"

Despite the adrenaline fueled panic Eric was in, a small surge of hope flared in him. Maybe he would find out Zubov's killer after all. If he didn't get shot or arrested. Eric hoped

for a miracle.

Bernie looked at Edward in time to see his reaction. He looked hurt and a little confused. Bernie guessed that two of the names would be Yurik Zubov and Ho Ying. Edward did seem to be at the center of this, but he wasn't the one holding the M-gun.

Edward swallowed. "I wasn't consorting with them, dad," said Edward, "I just want to know who the enemy is."

"They are the enemy!" said Harold. "And so is he." He looked back at Eric who shrank behind his hostage.

Bernie was willing to let Eric get away, but Harold was quite possibly holding the weapon used in

two or three murders. She edged a bit closer to Harold. "Harold," she said, "put the gun down."

"No!" said Harold. "I'm done talking. I'm done with all the lies. They're never going to outlaw magic. For every step we take, they push us back two." His body shook with the intensity of his emotion. "I can't allow it," he said. "I won't allow those kids in my class to have died for nothing. That horrible day, the innocent lives snuffed out. I swore I wouldn't let it happen again."

Edward's stomach sank to his feet. He understood what his father had done. Without knowing it, Edward had helped him by finding magic users. He

felt sick.

"Dad, what did you do?" said Edward. He hoped his father would deny everything, or at least be clueless, but he didn't.

"I did what had to be done," he said. His shaking lessened as if talking about it made him feel more in control. "Those useless politicians in Washington were never going to do anything and day after day, more people were being hurt by magic. I made the world a safer place."

"Oh, Harold," said Patricia, "that won't bring those kids back." Her eyes were filled with tears.

"I don't care!" yelled Harold. "I had to do something. That little boy

Nick down the block, some kids were bullying him with magic. I couldn't stand by and do nothing!" He shook and started to cry as he looked at his wife. "I took their weapon, this weapon, and turned it against the monsters that sell this kind of thing to kids."

Bernie was closer to Harold now, almost within arm's reach of the M-gun. Eric prepared himself to grab his bag and run as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Now that he knew Harold had killed Zubov, his job was done. All that was left to do was get out of there alive and tell Alex. He braced himself for the right moment. He had been in enough

standoffs to guess at when violence was imminent. He just hoped he guessed right.

"It was better than they deserved," said Harold bitterly. "They died quickly. The kids in my class, their parents suffered for years. I suffered for years! I won't let them cause the same pain in others. They deserved to die."

Bernie lunged forward, batting the M-gun out of Harold's hand, but not before it went off. Eric had sensed the moment and pushed Rebecca away from him and towards Harold. He grabbed his bag and felt as though a freight train hit him in the shoulder. There was a bright green flash of light

as his ward countered most of the M-gun's magic. Some of the intent got through the ward and scrambled the skin on Eric's left shoulder blade. He howled in pain and instinctively dropped it out of the line of sight, pitching forward. Then the energy tax from the massive ward hit Eric and he was unconscious before he hit the floor.

After batting the gun away, Bernie quickly twisted Harold's arm up and away from him at an angle, forcing Harold to his knees. She held him there and didn't dare glance away to see what damage the gun had caused.

"Harold Knox," she said,

"you're under arrest for murder."

Harold gasped at the pain in his shoulder as Bernie held it. He protested loudly, but didn't resist physically. "You don't understand," he said, "they deserved it. They were just as guilty as the boy who killed my students."

Edward looked at his father and said, "dad, be quiet. Don't say anything else." He was shaking, but he had his wits about him.

"Edward, son," said Harold, "you have to finish what I started. You have to make those monsters pay."

Bernie recited Harold's Miranda rights then looked up at Edward. "Call 911," she said. "Ask for

an ambulance and Detective Lawson."

She left Harold lying face down while she checked on Eric and his hostage. Rebecca was shaking and pale, but uninjured. Eric was out cold, so she handcuffed him and left him where he was. Everyone else was crying and shaken up, but unharmed. Bernie was grateful for that. It could have gone much worse.

As she was walking back towards Edward, Lawson came through the front door of the office.

"Everything okay?" he asked in a rush.

"We're okay," said Bernie.

"I saw the green flash and

feared the worst."

Edward finished his call and said, "they said an ambulance is on the way."



# CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Bernie and Lawson got the volunteers calmed down a bit. They watched them all for signs of shock until the paramedics arrived and took over.

Bernie handed off Harold Knox to the first police cruiser on the scene. He was still babbling about the monsters who got what they deserved. Edward Knox had given up trying to get his father to shut up and was on the phone. Bernie guessed he was talking to lawyers for Citizens for a Sensible Reality.

Eric woke up with his left

shoulder a blaze of pain. He tried to move his hands to push up off the floor and couldn't. He turned his head to look at the rest of the office and realized what had happened. He swore profusely under his breath. In over his head again, he thought.

Bernie noticed Eric stirring and went over to him.

"Eric Strickland," she said, "so glad you made it. You're under arrest for possession of unlicensed magical focuses. We'd also like to talk to you about where you were last night."

Bernie read him his rights and hauled him to his feet. Mercifully, she used his uninjured arm to do it. She thought it wise to keep Eric Strickland and

Harold Knox far apart from each other, so she put Eric in the back of Lawson's car. She was careful to remove his charm necklace and put it and his bag in the trunk.

After the immediate crisis had resolved, Bernie approached Lawson.

"How did you get here so fast?" asked Bernie, in hushed tones. "We hadn't even finished calling 911."

"When you didn't come back with coffee," said Lawson, "I got worried and had the techs track your cell phone."

Bernie belatedly remembered her promise to Lawson to call him if she got any more ideas or leads. She also remembered that her visit to Alex

Petrovin, while mostly civil, might result in another complaint. Alex could be that petty when he wanted to be. She wasn't going to bring up her visit to Alex unless someone else did first.

"Sorry I forgot to call," she said. Bernie turned to go back into the office, but Lawson grabbed her arm to stop her, then let it go.

"Bernie," he said, "when I had the techs track you, you were at a club in midtown."

She felt her temper flare. It was one thing to check on her location to make sure she wasn't in trouble. It was another to watch her because he didn't trust her. She had to know whether he still trusted her.

"What about it?" she asked.

Lawson sighed, "Bernie, don't get defensive. I just want to know if Alex had a part in all this."

Bernie took a few breaths and watched Lawson's face, trying to gauge his mood. "He had bruises on his knuckles," she said finally. "He said he was in a bare knuckle fight at the gym with one of his bodyguards."

"But you don't believe him," said Lawson.

"Of course not!" hissed Bernie. "Intimidation is just an appetizer for him. I think he beat up Edward Knox and realized they got the wrong guy. So, he sent Eric Strickland down here to kill Harold."

Lawson raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You think Eric Strickland is capable of murder?"

"Everyone is capable of murder," said Bernie. "You just need the right trigger."

Lawson considered this and wondered how much death she had seen in her childhood and at what age. She was sometimes casual about death and sometimes it got under her skin. In the years they worked together, he hadn't been able to figure out a pattern. If there was a pattern. As the months went by, Lawson was growing more concerned that whatever Bernie's trigger was for murder was close to surfacing. He didn't want to be around

when it happened.

"Well, we have no hard evidence on Alex Petrovin," he said. "Let's get Eric into interrogation and see what he gives us." Lawson started walking back to the office and the ambulances to help take witness statements.

Bernie swore under her breath.

"Problem?" asked Lawson, his tone tight and confrontational.

"No," said Bernie. Her nostrils flared and she clenched her fists. "I'll take Eric in," she said through clenched teeth.

"Good," said Lawson. He walked away and resolved not to look

back or pick any more fights with Bernie that night.

Bernie swore some more and hit her fists on the car's door frame. She took a few deep breaths and got into the car behind the wheel. Eric looked at her in the review mirror. He was sweating from the heat and probably from the pain in his shoulder. By all rights, she should let an ambulance take him and question him later, but she was in no mood for that. She could get one of the medics at the station to give him an ibuprofen or something.

"Do you really think everyone is capable of murder?" asked Eric. He had seen Bernie and her partner talking

and could sometimes read lips, but he wanted Bernie to think he had heard everything.

Bernie gripped the steering wheel tight to keep herself from turning around and punching Eric. "Care to find out?" she said. Eric flinched involuntarily at the venom in her voice. God damn, he thought, if this was the Cart family when they were good guys, he never wanted to meet one without a badge.

"You want Alex, right?" said Eric. His voice barely shook and he was proud of that.

Bernie let out the tension in her shoulders in a mirthless chuckle. "Do me a favor and wait until we get back

to the office before you roll on your boss." She turned to look at him. "The paperwork is a bitch when you start talking now."

Eric had been racking his brain for the last fifteen minutes, trying to save his ass. He needed to not get booked and not give the police anything too damaging to the family. After all, he didn't want to avoid jail just to have Alex Petrovin kill him. He had been mentally cataloging the contents of his bag, trying to figure out exactly how much trouble he was in when he remembered. He forced his voice to be steady and confident.

"Do me a favor and let me go," he said. "I can make it worth your

while."

She frowned at him. "Did you just try to bribe me?"

"Did you find a notebook at Yurik Zubov's shop?" he asked.

Bernie blinked at the apparent nonsequitur and studied him. She thought back to the shop and remembered the notebook. She and Lawson thought it might have been coded because it was otherwise completely useless. Eric took her silence as an affirmative.

"I have the other part of the notebook's cipher," he said.

Bernie's mind raced. Was this some kind of elaborate trap by Internal

Affairs to catch her taking a bribe? Had Lawson gone behind her back and set her up? She knew Lawson was losing his patience with her as much as she was with him, but it didn't seem like his style. She studied Eric and considered whether he was smart enough to have put himself in this position just to lure her into a trap. He was smart, but being gifted for magic or street smarts was very different from strategy. Alex could think strategically, so maybe he had put Eric up to it.

"What's in the notebook?" she asked.

"Zubov's buyers and sellers," said Eric. He wasn't sure that was in

there, but he was willing to risk it. He was already taking one hell of a risk by offering the key. If she didn't take it, he would also be charged with trying to bribe a police officer. It was also possible she would not take his deal and find the key anyway. Or, that if he gave her the key, it wouldn't work. Or, that the contacts in the notebook would be damning to Alex Petrovin. He was counting on that possibility making the deal much more enticing, but hoped it wasn't too damaging. "Zubov was connected to the Petrovin family," said Eric, trying to make it sound casual.

Bernie's eyes snapped up to his and he feared that he had pushed to hard. She couldn't take just the key

without explaining how she got it. But she desperately wanted to pin something on Alex Petrovin after all the pain and suffering he had caused on this case and hundreds of others. If Eric was lying and he didn't have the key or it didn't work, well, they would just keep the arrest warrant active.

Eric felt like a bug under a microscope the way Bernie was staring at him. After a few seconds, it started to feel like a magnifying glass instead of a microscope. He shifted.

"Where is the key?" said Bernie quietly.

"You'll let me go?" asked Eric.  
"Tell me where the key is, and we'll stop at a quiet corner on the way

to the station," she said.

Eric guessed that was as good a confirmation of a deal as he was going to get. "It's shaped like a pencil," he said. "It's in my bag, inside pocket."

Bernie nodded and turned back to face forward. She started the car and drove toward the station. She pulled into an alley that she had seen cabbies use as a shortcut before. She stopped, got out, and opened the back door of the cruiser. She pulled Eric out and unclasped his handcuffs.

"You're still wanted for questioning," she said, "about Edward Knox." She handed the handcuffs to Eric and said, "those are your problem now. While driving us back to the

station, you had some charms on you that I missed. You undid the door lock and jumped out at a busy stoplight. I pursued on foot but wasn't able to catch you in the crowd. Got it?"

"What stoplight?" asked Eric and she gave him an intersection with no traffic cameras and people who didn't gossip. "Damage to the door?" Bernie touched some studs on her belt and pushed her will into the lock. It made a fatal springing noise and refused to latch.

"Now go," said Bernie.

Eric took off at a run and didn't look back. He hated to lose all his charms and focuses, but he could rebuild them. He had all the plans

hidden at his apartment, he would just need time and energy to do it. He might actually survive this whole mess after all. Bernie had given him the escape story for both their sakes. Her for the official report and him to tell Alex Petrovin on why he escaped. At least he knew Zubov's killer now and his job was done.



## CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Harold Knox had been taken to one of the interrogation rooms by the time Bernie arrived at the station. Lawson arrived a half hour later with one of the uniformed officers. The other witnesses didn't have much to add and told basically the same story as Bernie had. They went to question Harold Knox for more details and to get his confession. If he didn't confess, they would have a harder time linking him to the killings, but Lawson felt it was good enough.

Harold's eyes were intelligent with only a hint of madness in them.

Bernie sat across from him and hoped she never looked like that some day, still mostly in control, but able to use madness as a tool. She supposed it wasn't really a tool, but a balm that made the heinous act of murder easier to bear.

"Mr. Knox," began Lawson, "I understand you've been advised of your rights."

"Oh, yes," said Harold. "I'm not going to drag this city through years of litigation over those monsters. The people deserve better."

"Tell us about how you chose your victims," said Bernie.

"Victims? Pah!" said Harold. "They were monsters who deserved to

die." There was a surge of madness in his eyes, but Harold got it under control quickly.

Lawson cleared his throat. "Okay, tell us about how you chose Yurik Zubov, Ho Ying, and Griffin Smith to kill."

"My son," said Harold, "has a misguided sense of right and wrong." He shook his head. "I blame myself for that. I taught him that magic was dangerous and the people who do magic are dangerous or in need of protection. I never made it clear that magic is ." He shook his head again and sniffed. "Edward had a small book of names, people involved with magic. I got the names from there."

Lawson said, "the police are at your house now. They should be able to find the book and verify."

Bernie frowned and said, "so you didn't know any of the people you killed."

"No," said Harold firmly. "And why would I want to? They were magic users or dealers and got what they deserved."

Bernie leaned over and whispered to Lawson.

"Do you know how Edward acquired the names he put into his notebook?" asked Lawson.

"Some shady 'informants', no doubt," said Harold with distaste.

"Going to Washington was not good for Edward. He picked up some very bad habits."

Bernie asked, "where did you get the M-gun?"

Harold shook his head sadly. "So tragic," he said. "Some boys down the street bought it and were using it to scare another young boy." His hands started to shake. "Well, I couldn't let young people be in possession of something so dangerous, so I took it from them."

Lawson whispered to Bernie before she could ask a follow-up question. She nodded and let Lawson continue.

"They didn't report it?"

Harold scoffed. "Hardly could, now, could they? They weren't licensed to have it. Nor should anyone be."

"Yes," said Bernie shifting in her chair, "you've made your opinions on magic very clear."

"No," he snapped, "you don't understand." His hands were shaking again. "The boys in my class, all those years ago, they were about the same age. I couldn't let them have the gun."

"Why not report it and turn the gun in?" asked Lawson.

"Because it wouldn't change anything," said Harold. "I had to stop it at the source."

Bernie and Lawson looked at each other and silently agreed to take a short break. They went outside the interrogation room and closed the door.

"What do you think?" asked Lawson.

"He did it," said Bernie. "I just worry he'll fail a psych exam and the confession won't stick."

Lawson nodded. "He did seem a little close to the edge in there."

"Well, let's get someone down here to take his full confession," said Bernie.

Something nagged at her about what Harold had said, but she chalked

it up to the chance she was taking with Eric Strickland. She had removed the pencil before taking the bag to evidence. She debated letting them catalog the pencil first, but she wanted to make sure it worked. If it was the other side of the cipher, she could take the pencil to evidence later. There would be questions, but she felt confident she could smooth over any doubts with the value of the information in the notebook.

No, something else was bothering her. She sat down at her desk and looked at the top page in her inbox. It was the CSI report on Griffin Smith's murder. She read the first page then grabbed her keys.





## CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

The Jacobs' house in New York was probably modest by some standards, but it looked extravagantly large to Bernie. There were several cars with D.C. plates outside. There were people moving around inside behind the curtains. She climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. After a few moments, a young woman opened the door. Even in the approaching evening, the cool air from the air conditioning poured out of the open door.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked.

"Detective Bernadine Cart, NYPD. I'd like to speak with Samuel Jacobs."

"Is something wrong?" asked the young woman. She turned back into the house and said, "no, Maria, it's not Sally. I'm talking to someone. I'll be right there."

"I just have a few questions for Mr. Jacobs," said Bernie.

The young woman turned back to Bernie and said, "I'll go get him." She shut the door and Bernie could hear her talking to someone. A minute later, the door was opened again by a nice looking man in his early forties.

"I'm Samuel Jacobs," he said

without a smile. "I'd like to have my lawyer present for any questions."

"That is your right," said Bernie.

"I'll call him and—" started Samuel but Bernie interrupted him.

"Griffin Smith and your wife were having an affair," said Bernie.

Samuel stopped talking and glared at her. "That is a serious accusation," he said icily.

"If you call your lawyer," said Bernie, "my questions in this matter are on record."

Samuel stepped outside and closed the door behind him. He studied her, trying to figure out her angle.

"And if I don't call my lawyers?"

Bernie shrugged. "Just a polite conversation."

"What do you want?" asked Samuel.

"Confirmation," she said, "which you already gave me. We have DNA at the scene which will almost certainly be a match for your wife." Bernie tilted her head and added, "it might match yours, but I'm guessing it's hers."

"So what?" asked Samuel. This was not going well. He half expected the fact of Liz's cheating to get out, but only after things had calmed down and news of the murder was well in the past. If her affair was tied in anyway to

the murders, she would lose the upcoming election.

"You gave Griffin Smith's name to Edward Knox," she said.

"Edward Knox is a friend," said Samuel. "We do talk on occasion."

"You gave Griffin Smith's name to Edward Knox knowing he was the epicenter for the recent murders," said Bernie. "You hoped someone would kill Smith for you."

Samuel said nothing. If he protested or demanded his lawyer now, he would look guilty as hell. Plus he was pretty sure that, if she could prove any of this, she wouldn't be here. He prayed that Edward Knox kept his mouth shut about their conversation.

He was going to owe Edward Knox a big favor sometime in the future for his silence. Samuel did not relish that thought, but neither did he want to be arrested for conspiracy to commit murder. If she really didn't have anything, it was time to go on the offensive and push back hard.

"That is a slanderous accusation," said Samuel. "You'll be hearing from my lawyers." He opened the door and stepped back inside.  
"Good night."

Bernie nodded with a self-satisfied smile as the door closed.  
"Good night, Mr. Jacobs."



## CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Captain Nisbet finished writing the statement he was going to give to the press. Even though they had Harold Knox's confession, giving the news to the press was not going to be easy. News that a pro-magic activist, especially one as prominent as Harold Knox, was responsible for the deaths of three people was going to hit the activist groups hard. He fully expected the two sides in the debate to continue demonstrating for weeks or months to come. His people were going to have to be careful where they tread to avoid even the appearance of taking sides.

That was going to be more difficult for some of his officers than for others. He looked up from his desk and through the partially open blinds. Lawson Demars was at his desk but his partner was nowhere to be seen. Nisbet got up and opened the door to his office.

"Demars," he said, "can I see you for a moment." Lawson got up and headed to the captain's office.

Nisbet handed his statement to Lawson and said, "would you take a look at this?" He shut the door behind Lawson then went back to sit behind his desk. "You'll have to write a lot of these soon," said Nisbet, "so I thought you'd like to practice." He smiled at

Lawson who smiled back.

"Thank you, captain," said Lawson. He read the statement while Nisbet waited and watched.

Nisbet didn't yet know how Cart had made the connections that lead to Harold Knox and he suspected he never would, not really. She would spin a convincing tale of details coming together in just the right way that was plausible, but also untrue. Nisbet didn't mind his officers operating on instinct so long as they could back it up with facts and proper procedure. But Cart's reliance on instinct and seat-of-the-pants investigations was straining her relationship with Demars, whether she

recognized that or not. He had hoped that Demars would keep her on the straight and narrow, but that wasn't working.

Demars finished reading the statement and made a few minor comments about the wording. Nisbet made the changes and set the paper down on his desk. He looked at Demars, trying to judge his mood, then sighed. There was no good time to broach an issue like this.

"How are you and Cart getting along?" asked Nisbet. "I want to know if what I see is accurate."

Demars shifted in his chair. He didn't want to speak ill of his partner, but her behavior on this case had upset

him more than he cared to admit. He had been thinking of asking for a new partner but didn't want to explain his mostly personal reasons for the request. He didn't trust Bernie anymore. She had lied to him, intentionally or not, and gone behind his back too many times in the last few days. He couldn't work with someone he didn't trust.

"Not well, sir," admitted Demars.

"I'm not going to ask why," said Nisbet, "I suspect I know."

Demars nodded.

"If you want a new partner, just say the word," said Nisbet. "We're getting a rookie from the eighth

precinct to replace Simpson who's retiring next month. I'd like to pair him with someone experienced who will set a good example."

"Yes, sir," said Demars. He hesitated then said, "I think I'd like that."

Nisbet nodded and smiled sadly. "Good," he said. "I'll let him and Cart know." He gestured vaguely at the door. "That's all."

Demars stood to leave. He felt like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, but he saw that it had settled onto the captain's shoulders instead. He hesitated again then said, "thank you, sir."

Nisbet nodded and said

nothing.



## CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

The pizza delivery guy handed over the pie and thanked Bernie. She closed the door and aimed for the kitchen to set down the food. She called, "pizza's here!" over her shoulder on the way. Shawn got up from the couch and joined her in the kitchen. The eleven o'clock news was showing clips from Captain Nisbet's statement on the three murders.

"I know pizza isn't the best breakfast," said Bernie.

"It's fine," said Shawn. "I may need the ER doctors to unclog my arteries later, but at least I won't be far

from help." He stood behind her with his hand in the small of her back while she loaded two paper plates with pizza. She was in her pajamas and Shawn liked to see her more relaxed. She turned to hand him a plate and smiled up at him. He took the plate and leaned down to kiss her.

"I have some days off coming up," said Shawn. "A buddy of mine was bugging me to go parasailing with him. You want to go?"

"That sounds fun," said Bernie. "I'll see if I can get the time off."

They headed back to the living room and sat in front of the TV.

"You just caught a guy who killed three people," said Shawn. "I

think they'll give you the time off."

"Oh, but the paperwork is just beginning," said Bernie. She smiled at Shawn and they kissed again.

The TV prattled on as they ate.

"The arrest of Harold Knox, a long time anti-magic activist, has shaken members of his organization and those in other anti-magic groups," said the reporter's voice. They cut to interviews with people.

"I just can't believe Harold would do such a thing," said one woman. "He was just the sweetest man you'd ever meet."

"I don't know," said another man, "I'm here to make a difference,

but this has gone too far."

The reporter came back on and said, "the activist group Citizens for a Sensible Reality refused to comment for this report. Meanwhile, pro-magic groups are quietly making the most of these tragic events."

"We continue to push for education and responsible use of magic," said a man at what looked like a small press conference. "Pervasive Solutions for the Future is dedicated to making sure people understand the facts about magic, not the propaganda." They cut to another clip of the same speaker. "We are happy that the perpetrator of these violent acts has been caught, and we trust that

justice will be done."

The video cut to a man in front of a loose gathering of protesters. "There's no shortage of crazies in the anti-magic camp," he said. "I guess this guy was just crazier than most."

The reporter asked, "are you afraid there will be others who target magic users?"

"Nah," said the man, "one nutjob isn't enough to worry me."

The reporter said, "others had a different view." The video cut to a young woman at what looked like the same event.

"I am a little afraid," she said. "I'll probably go get an M-gun for

protection."

The video was back to the reporter. "With anti-magic groups bracing for lost membership and sales of M-guns for self-defense expected to rise, these events have shifted public opinion. As with all complex issues, only time will tell the extent of what has been lost and gained and by which side. For channel three news, Julie Chen reporting."

The TV switched back to the studio, but Shawn and Bernie were too busy kissing to notice.