

## Chapter One

*Don't take a life unless you are willing to give up your own.* Mac Duquene wiped at the sweat dripping down his face, and stared at the red smear on the back of his hand. It must have come from the exploding sheetrock that had nearly taken off his head. The mantra repeated itself over and over in Mac's brain while he stared ten stories down to the intersection of (??? And ???), where a fourth NYC police car came to a screeching, flashing stop. One had conveniently parked itself beneath the fire escape.

Who had he told that to? The thought had come to him spontaneously at the time, trying to impress upon the boy just how unfailingly stupid it was to seek gainful employment in the business of killing people. Ah, yes. Freddie McAllister, barely old enough to grow a fucking beard. The boy had looked up to him, wanted to be just like him. Who in their goddamned right mind would purposefully choose to be a cleaner? Psychopaths perhaps and idiots named Freddie.

Killing people had not been on Mac's job list, but if you stay connected with the wrong people long enough, bad things tended to happen to bad people. Freddie McAllister had wound up sucking on the wrong end of a .45. Sadly, even smart people could fuck up. Best laid plans went astray, and forgettable, small coincidences caught up to you and kicked you in the ass. Today things had caught up with Mac Duquene.

Melinda Dillon had promptly left for her job as hostess at Bartolo's at 9:30 a.m., leaving

her embezzling, drunk of a fiancé, Marcus Redwood asleep at home, and apparently, her iPod too, still hooked to its charger on the bedroom nightstand. It was something Mac should have noticed upon entering the bedroom and rendering Mr. Redwood unconscious. Melinda had returned at 9: 51 a.m. to retrieve her precious piece of technology, which apparently was required for effective hostessing.

In one of those small coincidences of unfortunate timing, Mac had just finished hanging Marcus Redwood from the shower head and slit open both (?) arteries in his legs. In the silence, Melinda had heard the peculiar sound of dripping blood on the porcelain tub, glancing over at the cracked open bathroom door just in time to catch Mac attempting to move back into the darkness.

In a credit to hostesses everywhere, Melinda had the .38 in her purse out and firing before Mac could be surprised by the fact that a hostess needed to carry a concealed weapon. The hollow-core door exploded inches from his face, while he pulled the silencer-equipped Ruger from its holster. He caught Melinda square between the shoulder blades as she ran from the room. Occasionally, cleaning just wasn't so clean.

Those were the deaths Mac regretted, when Karma snickered at you with demonic glee. The sirens sounded before the apartment could be truly wiped clean. A neighbor had knocked on the door moments after Melinda's attempt to have him breathing through a third nostril, and Mac knew then time was short. Too short as it happened. Three emptied clips later, Mac found himself running for the roof, only to find the growing audience of NYC's finest swarming at his feet.

Jump, jail, or hail of gunfire. Mac sat on the protective wall surrounding the roof's edge, pondering the possibilities. Jumping was for cowards. Jail. Well, that was a familiarity Mac could live without experiencing for the rest of his life. Hail of gunfire was the obvious and most

notable way to go down if that was what it came too. Getting lumped into that pathetic batch of losers throughout history was not how Mac wanted to be remembered either.

Empty Ruger held loosely in his bloody hand, Mac raised his arm, pointed it at the rooftop door and waited.

He realized, while his hand began to tremble ever-so-slightly with fatigue, that he had been expecting this day for a long time. When you dealt in death, its specter perpetually lingered over your shoulder, paranoid whispers constantly in the background just beyond hearing. After a while, you either accepted the fact or drove yourself insane, finding your impending demise in every hand that reached into a pocket or car that happened to slowly drive by.

When the rooftop door finally burst open, Mac involuntarily pulled the trigger, smiling at the sound of empty “click” of the trigger. It would have been more apropos if he had been trying to kill the cop who whipped around the doorframe, finding in his moment of need, that fate had kicked him in the balls, but this was perhaps more fitting for Mac Duquene, cleaner and lover of all things “Sinatra.”

In another spot, Mac would have found himself full of 9mm shells, but the force of the first shot caught him square in the chest, rocking him backward and over the lip of the building’s roof.

*Nice shot. I might just be dead before I hit the ground.* His somersaulting body gave him a brief flash of the ground below, a gathering parking lot of flashing red lights and the curious. Perhaps some were even now pointing with surprised fingers at his tumbling body.

Mac felt his heart stop, ruptured by the spinning slug, now lodged somewhere against his spine, but fate is not kind to the cruel, and death met him in the form of the roof of a blue, double-parked, Dodge mini-van.

Or not. Mac opened his eyes to a sky hanging low with dark, misty fangs, thick with the smell of ash and decay. Daring to look to each side, he found himself lying on smooth, featureless stone. Low lying buildings a short distance away faded in and out of view through the dense cloud cover, all smooth slabs of stone with lifeless, hollow eyes in their walls that stared back at him unblinking. Mac reached up with ginger fingers and probed at his chest, finding nothing but taut, unblemished fabric.

“What the fuck?” He propped up on his elbows to find his shirt wholly intact, and after yanking it out of his pants to exam the skin, there was nothing but rippling abs and the soft fuzz of chest hair. No holes, no blood, no nothing, just whole, grey skin.

Mac held up his hand, turning it over and then back. The pallor of his skin left something to be desired. Perhaps he really was dead. He sat up, flexing his legs, his arms, and generally found nothing at all wrong with his body, short of being decidedly the wrong color. Mac got his feet under him and stood up. His initial view extended in all directions, an unending sea of gray, stone slabs, erected into a variety of squares and rectangles, piled and squashed together in haphazard fashion. Everything faded into the oppressive gloom of the low lying, foggy shroud. It looked as though someone had turned off the switch on the color palette.

At the edge of what was apparently a rooftop, Mac looked down to see the gray scabble of a dirt road. There were a few people down there, shuffling along, kicking up small clouds of dust with each step. They moved at a turtle’s pace, walking by one another without a glance, oblivious to anything except the barren road before them. No cars, no sidewalks, no streetlights, or signs demarcated the scene below with any hints of civilization. It was nothing more than the shuffling crawl of people through a lifeless stone cityscape.

“God,” Mac said, rubbing at the black stubble on his chin. “Where the hell am I?”

“Might wanna to get your dumb arse down off a’there before some Redeemer spots ya

and decides you be good target practice.”

Mac nearly jumped out of his shoes. Directly below, a walkway stretched along the edge of the building. A man leaned out over the stone rail, his head turned up to look at him. He looked like something out of a Romero zombie flick. Stringy black hair, hanging limp over a threadbare, black overcoat did little to mask the gaunt, withered face and black lips pulled into a thin slice of a smile.

The notion of a Redeemer meant nothing to Mac, but he decided it better to make no assumptions about the danger he might be in, and sat down on the edge of the roof before pivoting around and dropping down the walkway. “Who are you?”

The smile flattened. “Might be I should ask you the same, Mister, seeing as you be walkin’ ‘round on my rooftop. Thinkin’ maybe I had me an Ireling sneakin’ ‘round up there.” His black eyes squinted as he looked Mac up and down. “Not no Ireling though.”

“Mac,” he replied, hesitating to extend his hand, but then decided being impolite might not be wise. “Mac Duquene, and no, I’m not an...uhm, Ireling?”

The man transferred a rock from one hand to the other and grasped Mac’s hand. His flesh was cold and chalky, as though covered in the dust from the streets below. “New to the BD are ya then? Haven’t seen a fresh one in...” He cackled, a scraping wheeze of a sound. “Well, could be a day or a century. Don’t have much sense of time no more.”

With an eye on the rock, Mac casually wiped his hand off on his pant leg. He couldn’t help the thought that the man might have infected him with something. Being called a “fresh one” did little to soothe his unease. “Seeing as I have no fucking clue what the BD is, I would guess that makes me new.”

He cackled again. “Indeed it does, Mac Duquene.” The rock got stuffed into a half ripped pocket, and he turned toward the shadowy door behind him. “Come on in for a few. We’ll have

us a little pow-wow. Expect you got yourself a few questions about the ol' Bare Dirty.”

“The Bare Dirty?” If anything, it was an appropriate name.

“Purgatory. Hell. Call what you will, but it’s where us lost souls come to make our peace.”

“Not sure I like the sound of that, Mr....?”

“Barstow. Anyone around here who calls me anything at all just calls me Barstow.”

Mac took a look down at the street below, where the endless parade of dead shuffled along with purposes unknown. “Guess I could use a little pow-wow, Barstow.”

“Yep. Come on in. All the comforts of home.” He laughed once more and vanished inside.

Inside, Mac found the comforts of home consisted of two rooms, with a stone slab in the middle of the first. The only light filtered in through the single window or rather the hole, since there was no glass to be seen. On the slab, the familiar squares of a checkerboard were etched into its surface, light and dark stones lined up on either side.

“You’re living in the lap of luxury here, Barstow.”

“Needs of the dead are few.” He sat down next to the slab and motioned for Mac to sit across from him. “Humor your friend here, and play me a game.”

Mac watched him move a stone onto one of the squares. Not exactly what he had in mind, but then he needed info. He shrugged and sat down, picking a piece at random to move.

“So, we’re friends now are we?”

“Knowin’ people is all you got here,” he replied.

“Fair enough.” Mac countered Barstow’s next move. “Who do I need to know?”

He laughed. “Getting’ ahead of yerself there, Mac. How ‘bout you start with what brought ya here?”

“How the hell do I know that? I splattered myself on the roof of a fucking minivan and woke up here.”

His mouth tightened into a razor-thin crease. “Ah, killed yerself did ya?”

“What? No. Cop buried a 9mm slug in my chest, knocked me off a ten story tenement.”

Barstow’s eyes widened and the smile returned. “You’re a redeemable one, then. Tell me your story, Mr. Duquene. I haven’t had me a good, sordid tale in a long time.”

“Huh? Redeemable?”

“Means you’ll be getting’ a chance to fix yer soul,” he said. “Me, I’m just one o’ the lost ones, waiting for things to sort themselves out.”

“Barstow, you’re losing me here.”

“Meanin’ my little girl watched her daddy drink his self to death, and I gotta few words to be saying to her before she moves on.”

Mac nodded. “I see.” He didn’t see, not really, but it was better to play this out and see what came of it. “So, how do I get a chance to fix my soul?”

“Getting’ ahead of yerself there, Mac, and that’s not somethin’ I can decide for ya. I’m sure a counselor will be over this way before long, and get ya set straight. Meanwhile, tell me yer story, friend. We got nothin’ but time.”

He sighed. Something told Mac that roughing the guy up would serve little purpose. Hard to be motivated when you were dead. He moved his piece and began to tell Barstow his story, painting the broad, violent strokes of his life. They were into their second game when he returned to his swan dive into the minivan.

Barstow simply nodded. He looked pleased. “Lived yerself a rough life there, Mac. Pope won’t be nominatin’ ya fer sainthood I expect.”

He chuckled. “No. I wasn’t what you’d call, ‘a good man.’ Only killed those who had it

coming to them. Mostly.” Mac decided he liked this gray, withered man. It took something to not pass judgment on the kind of life he had led.

“Ever kill a child?”

Mac shook his head. “You were safe from me until you passed eighteen. After that you had better have kept your nose clean.”

“Fair enough.” He double jumped Mac. “King me. For a man in yer profession, you don’t pay close enough attention.”

He realized he hadn’t even been looking at the board. “Come on, I just died. Give me a break.” Barstow laughed and Mac kinged him. “Pow-wow from the other side, Mr. Barstow. Why am I here? Just where the hell am I? And who is it that I should be expecting?”

“Not a very patient man, are you Mac?”

“When I know what I’m doing, I’m the definition of patience,” Mac said. “When I’m a clueless fuck, I find the quickest route to knowledge.”

“Patience in all things Mr. Duquene, specially in the Bare Dirty. Otherwise, you be findin’ yerself starin’ at the wrong end of a chaos gun.”

Mac sat up straight. “You’ve got guns around here? No electricity or fire, but you’ve got guns?”

The line of his mouth curled up again. “Oh, not us, Mac. No, we lost ones don’t have nothing.’ It’s them demons that got the guns.”

“Demons.” That was an unexpected twist. “Real live demons?”

The bony points of his shoulders raised a hair. “Not sure I’d be callin’ them livin.’ His mouth twisted into a look of disgust. “They walk and talk like the livin,’ but rest assured, you don’t want to be meetin’ one, Mac. They smell you redeemables a mile off. Step foot in the wrong part of the BD and it’ll be the last thing yer poor soul does.”

Mac nodded. Not someone to be messing with it sounded like, but it was hard to deny the potential of obtaining a gun. He was pretty sure The Bare Dirty didn't get its name from skanky hookers.

"Ok. Demons bad. I'll stay away from them, but what's all this redeemable shit? You said I can fix my soul."

"Ya can," he said, "assumin' of course ya find yerself a counselor. These days that ain't so easy."

"Demons?"

"Nah, though they don't like each other much." Barstow went about replacing the stones in their rightful places after double jumping Mac yet again to end the game. "Kinda like two sides of the same coin. They both workin' fer the same guy, just one has faith in ya and the other don't."

"Guy?" Mac was perplexed for a moment but then it dawned on him. "God. The counselors are angels."

He nodded. "Yep, something like that. White, albino bastards all of them, but they're on yer side, Mac. Ya need 'em. It's them or the Irelings, and that's the path to hell, my friend."

"Great. And these Irelings are?"

Barstow jumped another of Mac's pieces. "Really, Mac. The least ya could do is pay attention. I don't get much chance to entertain. Anyways, Irelings be the irredeemable ones, those folk who gone past carin' or just too plain stubborn to think movin' on is the right thing to be doin.' Most of 'em mean as spit, and their only purpose in life be makin' everyone else's miserable, includin' the livin.'"

"Wait a minute," Mac said, absently moving one of his pieces into position to be jumped. "They can interact with the living? We aren't all dead here?"

“Oh, yer dead, rest assured. We all is dead ‘round here. King me,” he said, waving his hand in disgust. “Ain’t ya ever seen a ghost before, Mac? Heard of them vampires and ghouls sneakin’ about in the dead of night, driving fear into the heart of good, living souls?”

“Sure, I heard of them, but can’t say I’ve had opportunity to chat with one.” Mac licked his lips, feeling the cake of dust upon them. It seemed to be collecting on him like iron to a magnet.

“Well they be real. Irelings love nothin’ more than takin’ out there rage upon the living world. That and killin’ demons. You need to be careful out there, Mac. They’ll want ya, and life in the Ire can be mighty temptin.’ This place can fill ya with rage without much effort, and if ya don’t want to be redeemed, centuries here will warp yer mind.”

“This doesn’t look like an ideal vacation spot.”

“That it ain’t, Mac. Some folks be afraid of movin’ on. Some stay outta sheer spite, but there be lots o’them Irelings, and it’s mighty temptin’ to be doin’ somethin’ instead o’nothin.’”

Mac nodded in agreement. “Can’t say I’m one for sitting around doing nothing.”

Barstow’s face sagged. “I guess you’ll be headin’ out here then?”

“Sorry, Barstow. I need to figure out what I’m doing here. Can’t say I was prepared for this.” He jumped one of Barstow’s pieces. “King me.”

“No one is, my friend,” he said. “Finish the game with me, would ya? Might be years ‘fore I get someone else in here to play.”

“No problem. You’ve helped me out, and I don’t come across that much in my line of work. When I figure out what the hell I’m doing, I’ll be back by.”

Barstow jumped Mac again and smiled. “I’ll be countin’ the days.”

Mac kicked up dust with each step while he walked along a narrow street, a jumble of

stone rising two to three stories above him in haphazard chaos. Someone with a giant bucket of building blocks had come along and shook out buildings to form in whatever fashion they deemed acceptable. It was Bedrock run amok. There were no street signs, no indication of any kind about where Mac might be. Barstow had pointed out to him when he left what the direction of the center was, where folks went to “move on.” After thirty minutes of walking, Mac could no longer say which direction it might be.

Stranger still, not a single one of the shuffling dead that moved past him in the street made any indication of noticing his existence. When he purposefully stopped in the path of one, a stooped, elderly woman who didn't lift her head far enough to see beyond her toes, Mac watched her shift her gaze just enough to see his toes, and then turn to move around. They were all lost in their own little worlds, purposeless and aimless.

Barstow's yammering about the Irelings began to make more sense to him now. What kind of death was that, to be left waiting, with no sense of time, or any notion of when the end would happen? Maybe this Bare Dirty place really was Hell.

It didn't take long for frustration and unease to set in. He wanted to find one of these “counselors” and get on with things, but just sitting around and waiting for one to find him was not how Mac worked. He needed some sense of direction, a plan of action, something to put his mind to. If these angels and demons came from the center, then that was where he needed to go, and the zombified pedestrians wanted nothing at all to do with him.

He needed some height, a place to look down on this endless city from. With a little luck, perhaps he would see where this “center” was. So, choosing the highest building he could see beneath the dust-raining cloud cover, Mac climbed up, taking stairs, and using railings to hoist himself up until he had reached the roof.

“Fuckin'-A,” he said, turning in a full circle. From his height, it seemed as though he

could reach up and touch the wispy threads that dangled from the ashen blanket overhead. While it did afford him a more distant view, it was still an endless sea of stone, with no indication of which way might prove the right one.

Shaking his head in disgust, Mac jumped back down and walked on in a random direction to try again.

Six more attempts and Mac was no closer to having an answer. The dead were of little help. The blank stares and shrugs or worse, the knowing little smiles, only worked to hype Mac's frustration. He swore the next smile he got was going to get a mouthful of fist.

At the top of a sloping street, if a ten foot rise could be considered much of an elevation change, Mac figured it could be the highest point for miles around, and looked for the highest building to climb atop. When he approached the stacked slabs that passed for stairs, he found someone standing at the corner of the building, half hidden in the darkness between two of the buildings. Unlike everyone else, this guy eyed him with a careful, steady gaze.

"Won't see anything from up there, buddy," he said. A mop of black hair hung in a limp, greasy mass around his face. He looked young, and Mac pegged him straight off as any number of sleazy punks he had come across in his years of running through the worst parts of cities.

Mac checked to make sure the man was talking to him, thought about walking up to him, but then decided better of it. Punk or not, he had no idea what people were capable of around here. "I'm looking for the center of this fucking place. I'll be your buddy if you can point me in the right direction."

He gave Mac a slippery smile. "New here, aren't you?"

"That's no concern of yours," he said. "Either you know or you don't. Which is it?"

The smile receded. "You looking for a quick death?"

"Isn't that a little redundant?"

“Real death, buddy. You look for the center of things and all you’ll find is the kiss of chaos.”

“You trying to be cute or something?” Mac stepped toward the punk. “I’ll worry about the demons. I just want to find me a counselor, that’s all.”

He snorted at Mac, but did not move. “You don’t want to mess with that bullshit, trust me.”

“I didn’t trust your type when I was alive,” Mac said, looking down on him now. He was a good five inches shorter. “Why would I trust your type now?”

“Listen, buddy,” he said. “You got three kinds of dead here. You got the waiters, who sit around letting their brains turn to mush. You got the fools who think they know better. Then you got people like me, who know that this is all one big crock of shit, and are looking to make something out of what they’ve got.”

Mac reached out and balled the punk’s shirt into his fists, yanking him up close and personal. “Call me buddy one more time and I’ll break your greasy ass into enough pieces it’ll take you a fucking century to get across town.”

He didn’t look like he cared one way or the other about Mac’s intentions. “Suit yourself, man. You’ll never find the center from here. You want a chance to do something,” he said, glancing down at the fists pulled up under his chin, “you’ll come with me. I’ll show you what the dead can do.”

“Yeah? And where might that be?”

He smiled, a grin greased with the oil of a con artist. “We call it, The Ire.”

Mac dropped him back to the ground, Barstow’s words ringing in his ears. “Irelings.”

## Chapter Two

They walked for a while, minutes or hours, Mac could not tell. He measured time by Dillon's incessant yammering about how fabulous it was in the Ire.

"We're building something here, Mac," he said. He had lost the "buddy" phrase after Mac cuffed him upside the head. "An army if you will. The system is going to change, and you got something, I can tell. You'll do well here."

"Look, you fucking grease monkey. Quit trying to convince me. You can't. I'm not interested in your army. I'm interested in figuring out what the hell I'm doing. You Irelings are just part of the equation. So, give it a rest before I decide to break something just to shut you up." Mac tried to spit out the dry cake of dust collecting in his mouth, but once again realized, that sort of body function no longer worked. "What is it with the goddamn dust everywhere?"

Dillon gave him a hapless shrug. "You see any brooms? Anyway, it ain't dust. It's ash."

"There a spewing volcano somewhere?"

He laughed. "Might as well be. It's remains, dude. Chaos gun blows a body apart, and the shit just floats away. You've got millions of dead folk floating overhead."

Mac stared up into the frothy, dense cloud cover. It was raining minute particles of ash. He licked his lips and grimaced. It was the dead upon his tongue. "Shit. That's fucked up."

"That's the BD, man. You can play their game or you can tell them to go fuck themselves. They don't care either way. You can move on or you can join the crowd." He

motioned at the sky above. You don't strike me as the joining type, dude."

They walked on in silence, and Mac shoved his hands into his pockets. He suddenly found the thought of the dead collecting on his skin disturbing. How many bits of incinerated people had he been trying to swallow away in his mouth since arriving? *I think I might kill someone for a shower about now.*

"How do you go back?"

Dillon's sideways smirk returned. "Getting the picture now, eh Mac?"

"How the hell do you go back?"

"Doors all over the place, if you know where to look."

"Really."

"You play checkers?"

Mac stopped. "What?"

"Checkers. You know, game where you jump each other's—"

"Yeah, I know what it is."

"You see a checkerboard etched in the stone, and you're by a door."

"Fuckin-A."

Dillon laughed loudly, soundly far too much like Barstow's cackle. "Saw one, didn't you?"

And like he had any idea how to get back there. "Yeah, I did."

He slapped Mac on the shoulder. "Don't worry. We know where a lot of them are, but wouldn't have done you much good to go back."

"And why is that?"

"You don't know what to do, what you can do," he said, and began to walk again. "The Irelings know. We know what's possible. Unless a Counselor gets a hold of you. Then you're

fucked.”

“Isn’t the whole point of being here to redeem yourself?”

“They don’t give a fuck what happens...”

Dillon’s voice trailed off. His head cocked to one side. A moment later, Mac heard it too, a faint whisper carried on the floating debris of the dead. The whisper turned into a moan, slowly building in volume until it became the constant caw of a flock of crows.

“Shit. Fuck! Come on,” he said, his voice an insistent whisper. “Follow me.”

Mac tried to get a sense of direction on the sound, but it seemed to be descending down all around them. “What is it?”

“Demon!” He began to run at a full out sprint, yelling back over his shoulder, “Come on.”

For a split second, Mac considered hiding out in one of the buildings and watching for the thing. He was curious, and it supposedly carried a gun. Regardless of the situation, having a gun provided a certain amount of security. Guns were a man’s best friend. They were loyal and helped you out whenever you needed them. Far more reliable than any human being. But the thought of floating around in the skies as a puff of ash and settling on some dry, gray tongue eliminated the thought in a hurry. Mac took off after Dillon.

They zigzagged through the streets, kicking up a cloud of dust as they ran. Mac caught up to him after a few seconds. “You know where you’re going?”

“Ire,” he said. “We’re too easy to spot out here in Mushville.”

“Can they sense us?”

They ducked into a dark, narrow alleyway. “Yeah, dude. Redeemables stick out like sore thumbs.”

Several minutes of running, and Mac realized he was not even winded. There were no

burning muscles or aching feet. He felt no worse off than if he were walking. Despite the endless sprint, the cawing of the crows continued unabated. If anything, Mac swore they were getting closer.

“How fast are these things?”

“Faster than us. Dude, just run. We’re almost there.”

Mac wondered how it could matter if the thing had a gun that would blow you into a million particles of ash. Did they have their own guns some special defense against it? At the least, it was worth finding out. Barstow’s words might be true, but firsthand knowledge was invaluable. And if they indeed had guns available, well...

The thought process cancelled abruptly with an explosion of rock and dust when the corner of the building they were running by erupted, launching Mac across the street and over a second floor balcony. His legs caught the edge of a doorframe and sent him whirling into a darkened room. He came to rest sitting against the far wall.

It took a couple of seconds for him to regain his bearings, and to realize he was still remarkably in one piece. “Jesus-fucking-Christ.” Chaos guns delivered as promised.

Against the adjacent wall, a shriveled, balding man raised his head to look upon him with lifeless, crusted, eyes. There was barely any recognition in his gaze.

“Pardon the intrusion,” Mac said and pushed himself back to his feet. There was only a window on the wall behind him.

Outside, shifting, fluttering darkness descended upon the doorway. The cawing of crows ate at the dust-choked air with scavenging glee. Mac took the only option available to him, and leapt up through the window, falling out and down to the ground. A fifteen foot fall and his legs took the impact with little effort. With no clue where to run to, Mac took the road away from the initial blast, rounded another corner, and found a juggernaut of gray flesh descending upon him.

“What the hell?” Slipping in the dusty street, Mac scrambled into the nearest doorway as the horde of yelling, screaming bodies flooded passed him.

It was all arms and legs, some bare, others shoed. Some carried rocks, others just balled up fists shaking at the sky. There were hundreds of them. The river of bodies continued to file past, charging at the cawing, fluttering darkness that had sniffed him out and come with incinerator in hand. Unable to get out the door, Mac pulled himself out of the window in the back and made his way up to the rooftop above.

A dense, black cloud had enveloped the buildings across the street. The crows continued their incessant cawing, the air whipping about with the invisible flutter of wings. The sound was nearly drowned out now by the screaming mass of bodies surrounding the area. Everywhere Mac looked, the gray army of dead filled the streets. Black dust continued to bloom in all directions, and the air grew thick and acrid. Somewhere on the next street over, the thing with a chaos gun was obliterating the dead by the dozens.

Mac walked over to the edge of the roof, looking for a possible avenue of escape. It was time to get as far away from the destruction as possible. Whether or not the demon was driven back, it had been after him, and might continue to do so if the tide of lemmings failed to overwhelm. The Ire was nearby, though in which direction Mac could not tell. If this was their method for attacking though, Mac wanted no part of it. Cannon fodder was not on his list of potential new jobs.

Below, the street still teemed with the sea of the dead, pushing and shoving its way forward. If he were to get anywhere, it would have to be along the rooftops and walkways of the upper stories. Mac leapt down to the adjacent roof and then pulled his way up on to the next. He made his way quickly to the end of the row and found himself staring down at an intersection packed tight like sardines. Getting through the mess would be impossible. He would have to try

and leap across to the adjacent row some fifteen feet away, with no more than a dozen feet of rooftop to get a running start.

Around the end of the next row of stone slabs, darkness blew out in all directions, and momentarily shrouded Mac in a choking curtain of ash. When the fluttering wind cleared it away to a foggy haze, half the intersection had been cleared. The tide of dead quickly recovered and began to rush back, flinging stones and insults as it closed in. In that brief clearing, Mac finally caught a glimpse of the demon and its gun.

A great, black, tattered cape swirled around its body, seeming to come apart and flow back together at its edges like the flutter of wings. A tangled mass of dirt-brown dreadlocks tumbled down over its shoulders with a life of its own. Its skeletal face, in a permanent mocking grin of teeth, laughed at the onslaught, and focused on them with tiny smoldering embers residing deep within hollowed sockets. The body, shifted and danced upon the ground, a boney skeleton draped in a loose, sinewy mass of dusty, blood-red muscle, tied at random points over its body which bowed and stretched as it spun and leapt over the ground, turning its shining, silver gun upon the surging mass of bodies.

The air rippled out from the gun's tip, spreading in an ever-expanding wave until it struck the charging masses. Bodies did not even have the opportunity to get knocked back as the charge of the blast instantly blew them apart into dark clouds of smoky ash.

With each discharge of the gun, the demon would spring over into the vacated space and turn to fire in another direction, ignoring the rain of stones that came from all directions. Mac watched for a moment, frozen with awe. Good thing he had decided to stay away. That thing kicked ass.

When he finally broke his gaze away, Mac realized there was a small group of people gathered on the rooftop on the other side of the intersection. Between them, they carried a hunk

of stone roughly two feet on a side. They were working at hoisting it above their heads; all the while the demon was oblivious to their presence. The crowd on Mac's side surged forward, exploding again in a massive burst of ash. Mac realized that there was actually a plan to their suicidal madness. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of deaths to take down one. He was impressed and appalled at the same time.

The way the thing moved, Mac wondered how they planned to get it to keep still long enough to get a clean shot, but the stone-bearers on the roof remained in position, unwavering. The destructive dance continued, and twice Mac thought they would hurl the chunk of stone, but they waited. Then the demon finally leapt close to that corner of the intersection, and in unison they heaved the rock over the edge.

As with most penultimate moments, Mac watched the rock fall slower than the laws of physics would allow. The demon started to jump while the stone was still in mid-flight and apparently sensed the incoming projectile. Even in the air, the thing moved like it still stood flat-footed. It turned, trying to bring the chaos gun to bear, but its timing was off just enough. The boulder caught it flush in the chest and face, flipping its feet out from under, and pile-drove the spring-loaded body into the ground. The gun went off, blowing out the bottom floor of the building the bombers were standing upon. Three stories of stone slabs began to crumble down into the intersection.

Mac got no chance to see what the Irelings would do to the thing once down. When the demon's head met the ground behind the force of a 100 pound rock, a single, piercing cry went out, the caws of the crows turned up to single, deafening screech. Then it exploded.

Stone from the collapsing building, about to bury the demon, burst out in all directions, launching a shower of pebble to bowling ball sized rocks in all directions. When the first one struck Mac in the shoulder, he turned to jump off the backside of the building, but then another

caught him in the head and dropped him to the rooftop. For a few moments, the world spun around with a dazzling display of pinpoint lights.

Mac rolled over onto his back and stared up at the clotted, drifting sky. He touched his scalp. No knot on the head or bleeding wound. Being dead had at least one advantage. He looked to his right at the scattering of pebbles and stones littering the rooftop. *So, no dropping rocks onto demon heads.* Another rule added to the growing list of how to stay alive in the BD.

Upon turning to his left, Mac paused, blinking away the dust and ash caking his eyes. He blinked a few more times, waiting for the image to go away. Three feet away, lying propped against a softball sized rock was the silvery canon of death. The chaos gun.

He stared for a few moments longer, wondering if it was even safe to touch the thing. It had a grip, but no apparent trigger. The long barrel was slotted at regular intervals, and the body was all curves and flowing lines. It looked like the carved sculpture of a gun, a surreal representation one might find on display in an art gallery, and hardly capable of incinerating everything in its path. With thumb and forefinger, Mac reached out and gingerly grabbed the gun by its grip.

It weighted next to nothing. Mac turned it back and forth, holding it overhead while making sure the barrel pointed out into open space. The last thing he needed was for it to go off accidentally and leave him floating off into never-never-land. The trick was going to be how to use the damn thing without triggering it and alerting everyone within five miles of his presence. The Irelings down below presented another problem. How to get away from the area without them realizing?

Shouts from below answered his question. It quickly went from a few scattered voices to a cacophony of yelling and screaming madness. Mac could hear the sound of their running, a jumbled chaos of pounding feet like a wild herd of buffalo. Not wanting to let go of his prized

new possession, Mac inched along with one arm to the edge of the roof and peered down. The intersection was empty.

He scanned the perimeter, wondering if perhaps another demon was on its way, having overhead the earlier battle. There was only rubble. On the far end, Mac could see a charred imprint on the ground where the demon had been. What the hell had scared them off?

Something cool struck Mac in the face just then, and the shock of it had him rolling back to the center of the roof. Wind. He chuckled, amused that he had been reduced to fear of the shifting air. The ashen clouds above flowed by, galloping along where once they had lingered with depressing misery. Mac could not recall smelling a sweeter thing. It had the odor of...life.

Back at the roof's edge, Mac looked down and saw light approaching from beyond the far side of the intersection. It flickered and shifted along the slabs of stone, creating dancing shadows along the walls of the houses. The ashen air rushed away from it in all directions as though terrified of its existence. A moment later, a long figure walked into view, pale and dressed in the brightest, cleanest white, Mac had ever seen. There was little doubt what the figure was. Barstow had described them accurately enough.

A redemption counselor. An angel now stood below him surveying the rubble strewn streets.

She had no wings, no golden halo floating over her head. Her hair, barely shoulder length, hung straight and loose, the color of bleached bone, with errant strands curling around her face in the breeze. Her skin had no color either, completely drained of pigment. She was white upon white, with boots laced up to the knee, silky, billowing pants, and a blouse that rippled around her willowy body. Hardly the nightmare presented by the demon, but Mac got the sense she was far more dangerous.

She stepped up to the black smear on the road and squatted down, tracing her finger

through the black, dusty remains. After rubbing it between her fingers, each one disappeared briefly into her mouth returning pristine and white once again. The angel removed a small book clipped to her belt, opened it and began to write. A moment later she returned it and sat motionless, arms resting lightly upon bent knees.

She then lifted her head and looked directly up at Mac, an expressionless stare on her face.

Mac rolled away from the edge. “Sonofabitch.”

He held the gun against his chest, staring up at the sky, now devoid of the ashen clouds. The ring of darkness in the distance formed a sharp edge where the wind finally ceased. He considered for a moment, the notion of trying to shoot her, to see what the chaos gun’s effect might be, but he let it go. Odds were, it would have little effect or worse, just piss it off. Having an angel pissed at you could not be a good thing.

Inching back up to the edge of the roof, Mac raised his head just enough to see below. The angel had moved, and now walked with smooth, cat-like grace in his direction. Indecision knotted up Mac’s gut. Supposedly the angels were on his side. He needed them if he wanted a chance at redemption. The Irelings obviously thought otherwise, but then if you didn’t want to be redeemed, hooking up with an angel was likely the lowest on your list of options.

Mac stared at his newly acquired mystery weapon. It might pose a problem. She might not care for the fact he had acquired it, and might wonder why and how. Perhaps killing a demon put you high on their shit list or worse, having possession of a chaos gun meant an instant death sentence. He could leave it and just pretend it didn’t exist, but Mac felt a certain amount of comfort in having a weapon at his side, even if he had no clue how to use it. It was power, and in his current position, that said a lot.

Below, a voice called up to him, full of iron and oozing honey. “Maxwell Duquene. You

will come down here now. Bring the gun.”

Now? The least she could have said was “please.” Too afraid to just tuck the gun into his belt, and frankly of the opinion that the Redeemer was one scary bitch in general, Mac kept it gripped in his hand and leapt off the back of the building. No need to look back. No need to wonder.

With the cool, sweet wind at his back, Mac ran.

### Chapter Three

Despite the advantage of tireless running, every time Mac looked up, he was greeted with clear, windblown skies. In the distance, the sharp edge of drifting ash could be seen, and occasionally he got closer to it, but at no time did he get beyond the Redeemer's influence. Barstow's words continued to creep back into his mind. *They're on your side*. So, why did the white woman freak him out so badly?

When was the last time a woman had caused him any concern at all? Seventeen? Had there been anyone since Moira? No. When you dealt in blood, guns, and death, the heart was your potentially greatest weakness. You put it in an iron box, bound it in chains, and buried it in concrete where no one could find it. The problem of course, was losing track of it yourself.

"So, why the fuck are you running, Mac?" he asked himself while running up some slabs stacked into a makeshift stair. He glanced in doorways as he ran along the second level, hoping for the tell-tale checkerboard rock sitting on someone's floor. "You got no reason to be afraid of this bitch." *Bring the gun*. All right, perhaps one reason. Turning over the gun would be giving up the one source of leverage he had. She could just turn around and shoot him with it as well.

Then there were the Irelings. They had swarmed a demon in suicidal madness, but ran screaming like seven year old girls when the angel showed up. Mac did not get the sense of danger from the angel he typically got from people he knew were just as likely to kill him as say hello. It was the overwhelming sense of powerlessness he felt in relation to her. Mac had no

doubt he was just a little fly for the spider to toy with. She would tell him to jump, and he wouldn't even ask, "How high?" He would just start and never stop until she decided he was no longer amusing.

The chaos gun was his insurance. Or not, but Mac was not about to give it a try and see what happened. He just hoped the threat of it would be enough to deter. She did not appear to be worried about him using it on her, but Mac had no idea if that meant it would not affect her or she knew he would never figure out how to use it. He needed some time, a place to hide, and that meant only one thing.

Where were all the damn checkerboards?

Mac's pondering got snapped back to reality. One of the Mushies in the endless parade of oblivious lost-souls-in-waiting turned on him as he ran by. "Hey! You've got a gun."

He pointed it in the man's direction, who bolted into a side street. "Great." How long would it be before every Ireling in the city was after him? Where the hell was Barstow when you needed him?

The question answered itself immediately and Mac wanted to smack himself in the head. He began to yell out as he ran down each street. "Checkers! Who's up for a game of checkers?"

A few minutes later he was reward with someone poking their head out of a doorway as he ran by. "I'll be glad..." The man caught sight of the gun in Mac's hand and ducked back inside.

"Shit." Mac turned and ran for the dark entry and found the man cowering against the back wall. "Look. Not here to blast you, old man. I'm just looking for a board."

He pointed a trembling hand at the wall. "Up at the corner. First floor."

"Thanks."

Mac turned and sprinted up the street to the intersection. On the opposite side of the

street, Mac found what he was looking for. Inside, a man and woman sat around an etched, stone slab in the middle of the room. Their gazes didn't even turn his way when he ran in. After moving one of her pieces, the young woman looked up at Mac, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of the gun in his hand.

“Where'd you get that thing?”

“Long story,” Mac said. “I need to find the, uhm...portal thing. Kind of in a hurry.”

The balding man across from her made his move before looking up at Mac. His face tilted up as he sniffed at the air and his pursed lips spread into a knowing smile. “Angel's coming.”

Mac waved the gun at him. “I know. Where's the fucking portal?”

The both looked at him with blank, lifeless stares.

He pointed the gun at the woman and then back at the man. “The portal! Where is it?”

“What are you talking about?” the woman said.

The man shrugged. “No portals around here that I've seen.”

“Seriously? They said the portals are near the checkerboards.”

They were obviously perplexed by Mac's claim. “Well, this here's a checkerboard. You seen any portals, Emily?”

She shook her head. “Nope. What's it for?”

“Jesus-fucking-Christ,” Mac said, throwing up his hands in disgust. He did not have time for this.

Flickering shafts of light danced across the walls, illuminating the empty room. Mac turned on his heel to flee and found himself face to face with the woman in white. Her thin figure blocked the doorway.

“Mac Duquene,” she said, cool, fresh wind blowing out of her mouth as she spoke. “I am

Sasha, your redemption counselor. Give me the gun.”

Mac stepped back until his back was against the far wall. “Think I’ll hold on to it for a while.” He hefted it in his hand, but feared setting it off in the confined space. The blast would likely take out the front wall and bring the whole building down on top of him.

Sasha came in out of the doorway. “Robert, Wendy, you may leave now.”

It was far from a request. The two got to their feet, and in typical Mushie fashion, shuffled their way out. Robert turned as he stepped through the doorway. “Good luck, boy.”

Mac tried to blink away the dust that now circulated through the room. Sasha stared at him, devoid of any expression, and then pulled the notebook from her hip. She flipped through several pages before stopping. “Maxwell Reginald Duquene, you killed forty-seven people. You lived a selfish life with callous disregard for the well-being of others. I am here to offer you redemption. Give me the gun.”

*Christ. It’s God’s own terminator.* “And if I don’t?”

“You will not be redeemed.”

“Care to explain that to me? I’m not real clear on this whole procedure.”

She took another step in, now standing across the checkerboard slab from him. Mac noticed the etched lines on the board took on a faint, white glow with her presence, as though lit from beneath.

“Redemption is the clearing of your soul,” she said. Her voice had the quality of reading from a textbook. “You will return to the living world and right your wrongs.”

“Assuming I do this, what’s in it for me?”

“Your soul will be ready to move on.”

“Beyond the pearly gates? Will I get to frolic in flower filled meadows and live happily ever after?”

Her moment of silence spoke volumes. “No.”

*Ok, this chick could probably kick my ass without even lifting a finger. So, why doesn't she just come over and break my fucking arm and take the gun?* “Your salesmanship leaves something to be desired, Sasha.”

“I have nothing to sell. You will be redeemed or your soul will die.”

He raised up the gun, waving it in her direction, but she did not even blink. “With one of these perhaps?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Or you can live in the BD until such time that you decide you want redemption.”

“You saying I actually have a choice in the matter?”

“There is always a choice, Mac Duquene.”

On the table, Mac witnessed a most peculiar thing. Right before his eyes, the checkers pieces gradually sank into the board and disappeared. Mac began to wonder if the light was indeed coming up from beneath.

“So, let's say I go along with this,” he said. “You going to tell me what I'm supposed to do?”

“Yes. I have a series of tasks for you to accomplish.”

“How many?”

“That depends upon you, Mac Duquene.”

“What kind of tasks?”

“They are different and many.”

Mac watched the dust in the room settling on the board, only it was not settling at all but passing straight through. “You're a fountain of knowledge Sasha, you know that?”

“I only know what needs to be known.”

“That’s handy for you,” Mac replied. “What would be my first task?”

“Give me the gun.” Her hand reached out to him over the stone slab.

Mac pulled it back, smiling. “Ok, I see how it is. You aren’t allowed to harm me, are you?”

“How would you find redemption if I harmed you, Mac Duquene?”

He got the vague notion that their definitions of harm varied greatly. “Fair enough. How about a hint then. What sort of task must I accomplish?”

She glanced down at her notebook. “You must help someone not end up like you. Now, give me the gun.”

It was the first hint, infinitesimal that it might be, of an emotion coming from her, and Mac got the bad feeling his redemption was about to be force fed to him from a dainty, bone-white fist with the power of a sledgehammer behind it.

“Not like me,” he said. “Is that supposed to be an insult?”

“It is only what it is. If you wish to begin, you must give me the gun.”

“Why do you need it back so badly?”

“It is not allowed,” she answered.

He waved it at her again. “Afraid you’ll end up floating through the sky with all the other poor bastards.”

“It cannot harm me, but it is dangerous to others and yourself. Your redemption will not succeed otherwise.”

“Won’t succeed or you just won’t help me?”

“Yes.”

Mac realized his obsession over keeping the gun was probably a stupid decision. He had no idea what the ramifications might be if he tried to hold on to it. The Irelings would certainly

want it, and they likely would all know he had it very soon. Living in the Bare Dirty would be next to impossible if they were chasing him all of the time, and the angles and demons would be following too. On the other hand, all he had to do was make sure someone did not end up like him. How hard could that be? His life was a complete fuck up. He could look back at all kinds of decisions that would have utterly changed the course of his life had he made a different one. It was all about good choices. He had made a couple. He could do that.

“And what about that guy there?” He pointed out beyond the door. “Would you help him?”

Sasha glanced over her shoulder at the empty space. It was only for the span of a second, maybe less, but it was all Mac needed. He clutched the gun against his chest and hopped up onto the chessboard.

The Counselor looked like she had expected it. He had hoped for surprise or even mild annoyance, but as he sank into the bright light of the portal, she merely closed her notebook and looked down upon his dwindling figure, her voice fleeting and soft.

“Be wary, Mac Duquene.”

White darkened to grey and then to black, coalescing into two intense points of light. Mac found himself standing on hard firm ground. It was asphalt, and the lights rushed at him with incredible speed. He leapt to the side, far too slow to avoid the oncoming Mack truck, and cried out when the broad, chrome bumper caught him across the waist.

Mac fell to the ground untouched, rolling to the side of the road. The truck had passed right through him. Cars and trucks flew passed along four lanes of interstate, oblivious to the ghost at the side of the road. To his left, familiar specks of light towered into the air. New York City. To his right, Mac stared at an overhead sign spanning the freeway and groaned. Newark.

“Fucking Jersey. Great.” Of all the rat holes he could have jumped to, it had to be Newark.

Be wary. Mac sat on the gravel of the emergency lane for a few minutes, expecting Sasha to come through at any moment. Be wary of what? Irelings perhaps? Would they come after him here? Would they even know how to find him? Lots of questions with no answers. Most intriguing of all was why Sasha had just let him go. Mac had little doubt that she could have stopped him with no effort.

*There is always a choice.* So, it was his choice then, and he had chosen to tell her to fuck off. Likely not the wisest choice ever made. Mac had a nagging suspicion that his choice was not only unwise, but downright poor. It had come out of fear, and nothing good generally came of that. At least he still had the gun, a currently useless weapon of mass destruction.

He stood up and looked over the guardrail. Asphalt disappeared beneath him and stretched north. The smattering of porch lights, veiled windows, and streetlights did little to tell him exactly where he was, but he had a pretty good idea. Jersey City was not far to the east. Rutgers and Seton Hall were not far to the south and west. Mac walked east a few yards and hopped the rail, shuffling his way down an embankment through weedy undergrowth and a canopy of oak leaves. At the bottom he found himself in an abandoned construction yard, choked with cement highway dividers and assorted, rusted debris.

A street sign across the street read, “Martin Luther King Ave,” and Mac recalled where he was. It was Seventh Avenue, a mix of Puerto-Rican and Italians, re-gentrified in parts and divided by tracts of the urban poor, quiet or dangerous depending on which street you happened to be walking down. Mac stood on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets and looked into the darkness beneath the overpass and then back toward the heart of Seventh Avenue.

“Hmm. What to do,” he muttered.

A black man walked out from under the overpass, dressed in black, and looking like a deeper shade of night come to life. Mac held his ground and put one hand on the butt of the chaos gun. Old habits died hard.

The man's casual saunter did not change, his voice quietly thumping out the tune of some monotonous rap song. He looked right through Mac.

"Hey man. What's up?" Mac waved, but the man did not stop, and he braced himself for the possible collision. "You hear me?"

He stepped into Mac, and continued on without stopping. A couple of steps beyond and he stopped, turning back toward Mac, his eyes narrowed into sharp, white slits. After a cautious look around, he shrugged and continued walking.

"Yo, nigger!" The man ignored Mac, his figure shrinking down the sidewalk, a dark shadow and then a ghost in the sporadic glow of the streetlights and oncoming cars.

Could nobody see him? That might prove to be a problem. Sasha had said he needed to keep someone from becoming like him, but that kind of required some sort of interaction. *What if it's one particular person?* And Mac had left without asking. He had to assume his arrival in Newark was not random bad luck. If it was, he was fucked and might as well sit down at the curb and wait for white lady to show up and kick his ass for being an idiot. The person he needed had to be somewhat close.

Mac stared north across the street at the rows of apartments. Hundreds of people lived in that complex. Any number of them likely needed saving. A couple of blocks to the east, Broadway Street ran north into the heart of Seventh Avenue and turned into Bloomfield Street. It was a depressing string of furniture stores, hair salons, and corner convenience stores that liked to call themselves "supermarkets." It wasn't too hard to score some crack or a cheap lay there, either. If someone needed to be saved, that was as good a place to start as any.

Half the stores already had their metal shields pulled down over the doors and windows, the clearest sign you weren't walking in the safest of neighborhoods. At the intersection of Broadway and Crane, Mac stood in the middle of the street letting late evening traffic pass through him. In the dark, shadowed entry of a pistachio green furniture outlet, three men were making a drug deal. Across the street, the heaviest traffic was moving in and out of the graffiti painted brick of Home Liquors. Behind him, above the shuttered window front of a beauty supply store, the muffled sounds of a crying baby grated on his nerves.

"What to do," he said again. Being a ghost was lonely work. Not that being a cleaner was a socialite's dream, but you could at least talk to people, even it was just to tell them to, "fuck off." After a time, the baby's incessant wailing quieted. Mac decided he could do little other than continue his aimless walking.

He wandered up Bloomfield Avenue, passing by and through the depleting pedestrian traffic, occasionally trying to get someone's attention, and keeping an eye out for someone, anyone who might realize he was actually there. Mac decided that being invisible was not the glorious superpower he had imagined as a kid. In fact, it sucked.

At Branch Brook Park, Mac turned onto the cement walkway, following along the winding pond with its spraying fountains. Here, illicit activity flourished in the dark, overhang of maple and oak. Heroin was exchanged. A quick blowjob for a twenty. All under the oblivious eye of the cop who rode his bike along the path looking for an easy bust or just not giving a damn what people did. Out of sight, out of mind.

Mac reached the southern end of the park and began to follow the road out. Traffic was light now. He figured it had to be after midnight. At an overpass, where the footpath crossed beneath, Mac stopped. Somebody was having a little sex in the tunnel, but it was muffled enough that he couldn't make out what was being said. Curious, Mac stepped off the road and hopped

down the embankment to the path below.

An amber floodlight perched itself over the mouth of the tunnel, illuminating the first few feet, but the center was dark. Likely there had been lights inside at one time, but someone had seen the need for some privacy or a place to hide and knocked them out.

“Come on, baby. Get it all the way in there.” The voice was rough but definitely female.

“Fucking slut,” a male voice replied, huffing with effort. “I’m gonna ream you a new one.”

“Oh, that’s it, darlin’,” she said. “Goin’ to make me cum you keep that up.”

Mac moved in on silent feet. Once out of the light he could see them, a young man, Puerto-Rican by the look of him with a baseball hat pulled down backward on his head. His pants were down around his ankles. His skinny ass thrust against the woman who was pushed up against the cement wall, her three inch heels bouncing with quiet clicks against the pavement. Mac folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the opposite wall, a smirk on his face. Humanity at its finest.

It did not last long, less than a minute if Mac had bothered to time it. The punk knotted her hair up in his hands as he reached his climax, furious in both motion and words as he mashed her body into the concrete. She made little cooing noises as he did, giving him cheesy, pornographic squeals with the final thrusts.

He pushed away from when he was done. “Fuckin bitch. Hardly worth the time. Why don’t you get down there and clean me up. Have yourself a little dessert.”

She turned around, mouth drawn into a hard, thin line, all signs of pleasure gone, if there were any to begin with. “Fuck you. I want the rest of my payment. You want more, we can discuss it then.”

“Fuck that, bitch,” he said. “You want your rock, you can clean my dick.” He reached up

to grab her by the hair again, but the woman's arm flashed up and knocked it aside.

“Payment, you fucking grease monkey. You paid for the ass, not the mouth. Now, give it to me.” She shoved him back, causing him to stumble over the pants around his feet and fall on his ass. She pointed at him with one, long, talon-tipped finger. “Reach for that knife and I will break your fucking fingers.”

Mac's smirk broadened into a grin. *This should be entertaining.*

“Cunt!” He scrambled to get his pants pulled back up. “I ain't givin' you nothin'.”

She was on him before he could button his fly. “Give it to me, you mother-fucker.” Her voice had gone feral, full of desperate rage.

The man grabbed at her, ripping down one strap of her top, but his efforts to knock her off proved futile. The woman knew how to fight. She punched him the face and then tried to reach into his jacket.

Spanish flew out of the man's mouth, a torrent of insults no doubt, as she sat astride his chest, bringing her fist down again and again on his face. “I don't have no more,” he finally yelled out.

“Bullshit!” She reached down beneath one leg and yanked out the knife in the guy's belt. “Where is it?”

Mac laughed. “You go girl.” He was about to continue, but then stopped short. The laughter died in his throat when the woman looked directly up at him.

“Fuck,” she said, eyes wide with surprise.

The john took advantage of her lapse and threw her off, sending her sprawling across the concrete. Mac got a splendid view of her splayed legs, right up beneath the thigh length mini. Back on his feet, the punk took a kick at her, connecting with an ankle.

“Give me the knife, you fucking bitch.”

She waved it at him and scrambled to her feet. Mac was impressed. She struck a proper defensive posture and held the knife at the ready. If the idiot knew what was good for him, he would leave while the leaving was good. Her eyes kept flicking in Mac's direction. When the john finally got the picture, he looked back over his shoulder, and she made a lunging swipe at his midsection.

"I'm going to kill you with the next one," she said, her voice steady and dangerous.

The guy zipped his fly and stepped back. "You're the one who's dead, bitch." The words lacked her confidence however, and he continued to back away, passed Mac and into the light outside the tunnel. When she began to walk after him, he turned and fled.

After picking up her small handbag off the tunnel floor, she walked back over to Mac, still holding the knife in her hand. "Get your jollies off, Bub?"

Mac kept an eye on the knife. "You fight pretty good for a hooker."

"Fuck you," she said, pointing the knife at his chest. "Why don't you..." She paused, looking at him closely. "You don't look so good." She took a step back. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing that can be fixed, trust me," Mac said. "What's your name?"

She backed away from him into the light. "None of your fucking business." Mac took a few steps out of the tunnel, standing beneath the lamp post. The woman's eyes went wide with fear and she pointed the knife at him again. "Stay away. Come any closer and I'll cut out your heart."

Mac smiled at her. "Not sure that would really do anything. My name is Mac by the way. I'm here to, uhm, save you, I guess."

"You! You stay away from me." She continued to back away, holding the knife out in front of her.

Mac stayed where he was. The dead look was not the rage apparently. “Have a nice night, Miss...Hooker. I’ll be seeing you.”

She fled, high heels clacking on the walkway, furtive glances back over her shoulder every two seconds until she reached the street and turned the corner out of sight.

“Yeah, this is going to be shitloads o’ fun.” At least he had found her. Hands thrust back into his pockets, Mac began to follow.

## Chapter Four

Mac followed her down Seventh Avenue, keeping a safe distance on the opposite side of the street. She walked at a pace just short of running. How she did not stumble or trip in those heels was a minor miracle of balance. Passed the massive brick box of St. Lucy's Community Center, she stopped at a door next to the entrance of Dreamer's Supermarket, which like most in the area, had little to offer beyond the local gas station convenience store.

It was an odd group of three buildings, leftovers from the gentrification that had been occurring in the area. A pair of upscale townhouses flanked it on one side, while a newer, sprawling apartment complex lined the other side of the street. A dilapidated building of brick and wood with living space on top of each. The two groceries and a liquor store had seen their best days a couple of decades ago. The clearest sign of their age was the black iron stairs of the fire escape descending down from the fourth floor window to the Dreamer's awning.

Mac watched a fourth floor light turn on as he approached. The rest of the windows remained dark. "Ok, Ms. Hooker, how do I get up there?"

The fire escape might work, but it would require a way to reach the lowest rung of the ladder. Outside of the door, Mac studied the frame and lock. They were likely the newest items in the entire building. He tested the handle and reached right through the door. Mac laughed at his arm, gone from the elbow down. It had not even occurred to him that being dead would allow him to pass through. It should have, given his recent experience with street traffic.

Paint peeled from the ceilings of the stairwell, and the carpet upon the stairs had worn through to the wood in places. A single, bare bulb illuminated each floor. At the top, Mac stepped out onto wooden floors, spotted black with buildup and age. At the end of the hall he found the door to 4A. In the early morning silence, he could hear the muffled sound of the television.

He tried to knock, forgetting already that physical objects and the dead did not interact in the usual manner, and watched his fist pass through the door like open air. Scaring the shit out of her appeared to be the only option. Mac added another deathly benefit to his list and stepped through.

The front half of the apartment was a remarkably clean living-dining room. On the wall immediately to his left, a grandfather clock as tall as himself ticked a beat or two slow. It was a second-hand store showroom for furnishings, worn but all in decent shape. Somehow, Mac had envisioned the slothful pigpen of a junkie. He had come across his share while alive, and most junkie's ranked cleanliness on the bottom of the priority list.

Passed the closet on his right, the apartment turned the corner into a kitchen. It was there he could hear the sounds of Ms. Hooker cooking away on something. Mac side-stepped by the clock to the front corner of the room to get a vantage point. She wore a wine-red, terry cloth robe tied loosely enough around her waist that the soft curve of her breast was easily viewable. The gas of one of the stove's burners glowed with blue flame, and she hovered over it with a metal spoon, gently moving it into and out of the heat.

In the dim light of the corner, Mac watched with a curious eye. He had never used the stuff, though the offers had been plenty over the years. On an occasion or two, the offers had been tempting, but shitty as life was at that point, he could never push himself over the hump of jamming a needle in his arm to feel better. A fifth of Jack was far easier to deal with.

When she turned away from the stove, Mac realized there was a 9 mm sitting across the kitchen on the counter by the sink. *Well now. That might pose a problem.* Given how she had handled the knife, Mac had no doubt she could wield a gun with reasonable efficiency. He did not believe it would have much effect on him, but the question lingered. Regardless, he did not need the cops showing up after Ms. Hooker had tried to fill his chest with lead.

So, Mac let her finish, fascinated and amused, as she made up the syringe, placed it on a plate of cheese and crackers, and walked out into the living room with the plate in one hand and a bottle of Bud in the other. She made it behind the sofa in the middle of room before noticing Mac standing in the corner.

He had to give her credit. She did not panic or scream. She just froze in place, staring at him in disbelief. Her pale blue eyes, puffy but still intense, glanced over at the window next to Mac, over at the door, and then back to him.

“Curious, isn’t it?” Mac said. “How does one get into a locked up apartment without making a sound?” She took half a step back, and Mac pushed aside his jacket to expose the handle of the chaos gun. “Please. Don’t. I’m not here to hurt you or steal anything or take your drugs.”

Her slack-jawed shock tightened up into a frown. “Then why are you here?”

Mac smiled at the irony of his situation. “I believe I’m supposed to save your soul.”

She inched backward again. “If I needed saving, I’d go to St. Lucy’s down the street. So, why don’t you just leave now and save yourself the trouble.”

“Look, Miss... what’s your name?”

One bare foot crept up onto its ball. “Lucinda. You can call me Lucinda.”

Mac withdrew the gun. She wasn’t much of a liar. “I meant it, when I said don’t. Now, how about your real name.”

The foot settled back down and she stared at the gun. “What the fuck is that thing?”

*Good question.* “It’s called a chaos gun. You have no desire to see it in action, Miss Hooker. So, can we stop considering the mad dash for the Glock, and sit down?”

The tension in her body eased a hair. She stepped over the back of the couch, giving Mac a flash of cotton, bikini briefs and sat down on the end of the couch as far away from him as possible. And as close to the Glock as she could get. She put the plate on the coffee table but kept the bottle in hand. Her grip did not indicate much desire for drinking.

“Why are you here?” Her tone was a healthy dose of anger and fear.

Mac decided to stay where he was. Any closer and he might inspire panic. “It’s a long story, Lucinda. But we can start with your real name. Mine’s Mac, Mac Duquene.”

Her mouth pursed for a moment before relaxing. “Rebecca Moynihan.”

He smiled. “See? Not hard. That’s far better than Miss Hooker.”

“If you’re just looking to fuck, Mac, you can make an appointment.”

“Nothing so simple as that I’m afraid.” Mac was beginning to realize he did not have the foggiest idea about how to explain things in a way that made any sort of sense. “Though I don’t doubt you’re a pretty good lay.”

Rebecca took a swig from the bottle. “Fuck you. You could have helped me back there, you know.”

“Actually, I couldn’t,” Mac replied. “I’m not much help in that way.”

“You sick or something? You look like death warmed over.”

Mac smirked. “Something like that.”

“You want some stuff?” She nodded at the plate. “I’ve got enough to share. You look like you could use it.”

“Wouldn’t help, but thanks. You go ahead.” When she didn’t move, Mac continued. “I’m

not going to take advantage of you when you're stoned, don't worry."

"Then what the hell are you doing here, Mac?" She shifted on the couch and leaned forward, waving a dismissive hand at him. "You don't want my stuff or my cunt. I've got nothing worth stealing, and if you wanted to kill me, you would have already. So get on with whatever it is you need to say and then get the fuck out of my apartment."

Mac tucked the gun into the back of his pants. Unfortunately, slapping her upside the head was not an option. He could think of no adequate way to explain himself without sounding insane. She would laugh, and then try to get to the Glock. Be nice if he could tie her to a chair, maybe beat some sense into her. That was a method he had some familiarity with.

"Can I sit down without you leaping for the gun?"

Rebecca shrugged. "Whatever. You've got five minutes."

He walked over to the other end of the couch and sat down. She took another sip from the bottle and watched him with a wary eye. "I wasn't lying when I said I was sent here to save you."

"By who? Was it that Marzetti bitch from Lucy's?"

"No. You don't know her," Mac said. "That's irrelevant. I'm here to save you from turning out like me."

"What?" She started to laugh and then stopped. "You are sick, aren't you? This is some kind of AIDS thing isn't it?"

"This..." Mac held up his hand turning it over between them. It actually did not look that bad at the moment, more of an Elmer's glue look than B-movie zombie. "Isn't AIDS. I was a perfectly healthy guy not too long ago. Might have given you a good night of it even."

"Hardly," she said. "So, what happened?"

"I took a bullet in the chest and belly-flopped off a ten story tenement."

The Bud paused halfway to her lips. “That had to hurt. How’d you survive that?”

Mac gave her a smug smile. “I didn’t.”

“You didn’t?” Her brow furrowed. Mac could see her trying to decipher the information.

“What do you mean? Like they revived you or something?”

He shook his head. “No, I died.”

“Wait a minute.” She waved the beer bottle at him and shook her head. “If you died, what the fuck are you doing here?”

“I came back,” he said.

“You died and came back to save some worthless whore from fucking Newark, New Jersey?”

Mac could see that he was not scoring many points for believability. Honestly, he did not believe it himself. Why did he have to save this particular woman? “Yeah. Don’t ask me why. I don’t understand it myself, but you’re the one.”

Rebecca frowned, shaking her head. “Gotta do better than that, Mac.”

“Look,” he said. “All I know is that I had to come back and save someone. She didn’t tell me who, just that I needed to.”

“Who told you? And how do you know it’s me? I know any number of girls around here who need saving a hell of a lot more than I do.”

“I know it’s you,” Mac said, “because you’re the only one who can see me.”

She laughed at that, and Mac could see the fear creeping back into her face. “So, you’re a ghost, is that it?”

He nodded. Maybe she was going to get this after all. “That’s exactly it. Think of me as like your own personal—“

The speed with which Rebecca moved caught Mac off guard. She had begun to relax or

so it appeared, but it was a ruse. Mac realized, in that half second it took for her to swing the beer bottle at his head, that she had duped him into losing focus. Being dead had already dulled his skills, but the biggest surprise came from the bottle itself. He never expected it to actually make contact.

The Bud exploded in a shower of beer and glass against the side of his face, knocking him sideways. He reached for the coffee table, but it was too far away and he crashed to the floor. For a moment, the world was nothing but blinding, twinkling lights. He righted himself on the floor to the familiar click of a gun being cocked.

“Get out, you crazy, fucking psycho.”

Mac’s vision cleared, and he found Rebecca standing behind the sofa, the Glock pointed at his chest. She held it with purpose and conviction and a steady hand. Mac got the feeling he was not the first nor likely the last to be staring down the business end of that 9mm.

“Was that really necessary? I said I wasn’t here to—“

“I don’t give a fuck why you’re here.” Her teeth were clenched in anger, her lips barely moving. “You’ve got three seconds to get up and get out that door before I blow a hole in your chest.”

“Christ, you stupid bitch.” Mac put a hand on the sofa cushion and pushed back to his feet. She backed up a step. “I’m here to help you.”

“One.”

“Shooting me isn’t going to solve a damn thing.”

“Two.”

“Put down the gun, Rebecca,” he said, raising up his hands in a gesture of acquiescence. “You don’t want cops in here finding your stash do you?”

“Three.”

She began to squeeze the trigger and Mac stepped back. “Ok, ok! God damn. You win.” He moved toward the door. “Get some of that junk in your veins and mellow out a little.”

“Get out,” she yelled. “I see you again and I swear I’ll blow your fucking head off.”

Mac stepped to go through the door and his foot met solid resistance, causing him to stumble against it. “Sonofabitch.” He undid the deadbolt and chain and opened the door. “Think about, Ms. Moynihan. You could probably use a guardian angel.”

“Fuck you!”

She slammed the door in his face, and Mac heard the deadbolt turn and the chain get hooked back in place. This was not off to the start he had hoped for. Then again, what the hell was he hoping for? What was he supposed to do with her? And how was it physical objects near her became solid? Too many questions and no way to answer them.

Regardless, next time Mac decided he would wait until she was stoned out of her gourd to talk to her.

He gave her thirty minutes. Mac knew junkies. She was freaked out, and the quickest way to calm the nerves was a needle in the arm. To kill the time, he walked through the apartment across the hall, finding a greasy, fat Italian sleeping in a nest of dirty sheets and a sea of unwashed laundry. Mac wondered if he scored on occasion with his neighbor, but Mac forced disturbing image out of his head. It was not a place any mind should find itself.

The picture of Rebecca Moynihan however, did not conform to the usual stereotype of a prostitute. She had a harder edge to her, a criminal bent not formed out of desperation. Whores did not wield a Glock with such expertise. They didn’t wield them at all. They didn’t kick the ass of an angry John. The junk was another matter. That shit made you desperate, made you do things no sane, healthy person would do.

Redemption required a certain awareness of your faults. Mac knew a lot of his. He had

cultivated them and honed them to a fine, razor's edge. Ms. Moynihan needed some awareness, and that required being junk-free. Getting her off of heroin wouldn't save her, but it was a start, and to get started, she needed to believe in who he was. To make any progress, he had to feel confident that she would not try bash his head in every time he looked away. It was a goal, and for Mac, having goals gave purpose to life, and death for that matter. With nothing to focus on, he might as well hang out with Barstow and let his brain turn to mush.

There were things he could do to make her believe. A few demonstrations would probably do the trick, but he had no clue about how to go about getting her off of the smack. If it came down to it, he could just tie the bitch to a chair and let her sweat it out. He would just cross that bridge when he came to it.

Mac entered her apartment from the end of the hall by the stairs. It was the bedroom, tidy, clean, and emotionless. There were no pictures except for a pair of abstract, color prints above the dresser. A free-standing mirror stood next to it in the corner. Next to him was a small vanity and wooden chair, cosmetics arranged in neat rows and designated holders. On the far wall, a wooden headboard had a stack of pillows thrown against it, and the bed swelled with an enormous, burgundy comforter. From what Mac had seen, it was likely the most expensive item in the apartment.

The door opened directly onto the kitchen, the fridge immediately to his right, and an open door into the bathroom on his left. Beyond, Mac could see the square, chrome plated dining table with two chairs parked against the wall, and the edge of the sofa. The television was quietly spewing forth infomercials. He stepped forward on silent feet until he could see that Rebecca lay on the couch. One foot was propped up on the back cushion, while the other dangled to the floor.

The Glock rose and fell on her stomach with each sleeping breath. On the coffee table beside her lay the plate with three crackers, a piece of hardening cheese, and an empty syringe.

Rebecca snored softly, mouth parted, and a clear trickle of drool had spilled down her cheek and was soaking into the couch cushion. Cute in a sad, pathetic sort of way.

Mac reached down and gently picked up the gun. He moved over to the chair adjacent to the couch and sat down. With quiet efficiency, the clip was emptied and replaced. Mac pocketed the shells and set the gun down on the table within easy reach of Rebecca's hand. He withdrew the chaos gun and set it on the arm of the chair.

The early edition of the news was about to come on, so he settled in, propped his feet on the coffee table and waited. The dead had nothing but time on their hands.

After a while, Mac grabbed the remote from the table and turned off the television. Every commercial that came on was a painful reminder of what he lacked. The thought of food sparked nothing inside him. He tried one of the leftover crackers and spit it back out on the plate. It had the texture of sand and no taste whatsoever. He could smell nothing. Rebecca likely wreaked of cheap perfume, but the air around her was stale nothing. Even the exposed flesh of her thighs, smooth and firm clear up to the pink, cotton panties created no sense of desire in Mac. A couple of days ago, he might have taken advantage of the situation. Junkies were nothing if pliable.

He wondered about Sasha, and if he had made a grave mistake in fleeing her. Perhaps she would have told him what he needed to do to save this woman or if this was even the woman he needed to save. Why else could she see him though? Could there be any other reason? No. Rebecca Moynihan had to be the one. More troubling though was what it did for him? How did saving a junkie-prostitute provide any redemption? There were no answers. He had clung to his prized possession and fled like a frightened schoolgirl.

The quiet gong of the grandfather clock chimed ten a.m. and snapped him from his reverie. The tenth chime was followed by the clicking hammer of the Glock.

This time, Rebecca did look frightened. The gun did not point at him with steadfast

resolve, but with the tremble of someone who realizes something seriously fucked up is going on.

Mac straightened up. "Sleep well?"

"I'm calling the cops," she said. She sat up, keeping the gun trained on him.

He reached into his pocket and removed one of the slugs. "Won't do you any good, Rebecca. You're the only who can see me."

She squeezed off four blank rounds, her face twisted into a snarl. "Fuck you." Rebecca slammed the gun down on the coffee table. Her voice trembled along with her hands. "What the hell do you want from me?"

"I'm here to—"

"No, goddamn you." She got to her feet, jabbing her finger toward his chest. "You're a fucking lunatic. I don't want you here. Go save someone who needs it."

"The fact that you can see me, indicates that you do."

"Oh, my god. You're crazy." She circled around the couch and walked toward the kitchen. "I'm calling the cops."

Mac pushed himself to his feet and picked up his gun. "I'll prove it to you." She stopped in the middle of the kitchen and turned around, cell phone in hand. Mac pointed to the dining table and chairs along the back wall of the living room. "Sit down, and I'll show you something." When she did not move, Mac waved the gun at her. "Please, just sit the fuck down. You can't be too close." Rebecca stood her ground, puffy, dark eyes staring him down. Mac shook his head. *Obstinate, stubborn whore.* "If you don't believe me in the next two minutes, I'll leave."

"And not come back?"

"Sure." Small lie, but whatever. "Now, sit down."

She pulled her loosened robe back together and walked over to the dining chair, turning it

away from the wall. The cell went on the table and she crossed her legs. “Why can’t I be close?”

Mac shrugged. “For some reason, everything around you is solid. Some rule I don’t get, but that doesn’t matter. Just watch.” He stepped around the coffee table and walked to the door.

“You watching?”

“I’m all eyes.”

“Smartass. Pay attention now.” Mac reached out to make sure the door indeed had no substance and then stepped through.

“Holy fuck,” came the muffled reply. A moment later the door flung open. Rebecca stared at him. She reached out and pushed on his chest. “How did you do that?”

“I’m dead,” he said. “It comes with the territory.”

“Go away,” she snapped back and slammed the door shut. The click of the locks could be heard a moment later.

“Fucking-A.” Mac walked down the hall and back in through the bedroom. He found her in the living room still staring at the door, moved silently up and tapped her on the shoulder.

“Not that easy.”

Rebecca screamed, pivoted back a step and brought a roundhouse right to Mac’s jaw. Other than snapping his head to the side, Mac felt nothing. He let her hit him again with a left before grabbing her right wrist with the next swing.

“Believe me now?”

Her knee came up and caught him flush in the groin. “Let go of me, you fucking psycho.”

Mac added another to the list of benefits in being dead. “How about you just calm—“

She yelled, a sound that came from somewhere deep within, full of panic, rage, and fear. Then with unexpected swiftness, head-butted Mac flush in the nose. He felt cartilage grind and break, but the blow did little more than snap his head back. He caught the pummeling left hand

as it tried to strike him again.

“Holy shit, you crazy bitch. Calm down.”

Her foot came up, trying to kick him again, and Mac turned to block it. She yanked hard enough that Mac feared she might break her hand trying to get free, and then actually lunged forward in an attempt to bite his hand. Reason had gone south. The woman was in full on panic mode. If he had been alive, the ferocity of her onslaught might have actually caught him off guard. Mac stepped forward with one leg and threw her over to the wooden floor.

With his weight over her midsection, Mac pinned her arms to the floor. “You done?”

She thrashed against him, bucking and kicking in a vain attempt to throw him off. “Fuck you. Let go.”

Mac leaned forward until his face was a mere foot away. Her eyes were wide with terror. “Are...you...finished?”

Her body stilled. They stared at one another for several seconds, and Mac wondered if perhaps it was another ruse. Then her rapid breathing turned to choking stutters and tears spilled down the side of her face.

Mac closed his eyes for a moment. *Lovely. Off to a shit-bang start.* “Rebecca?”

“Just...just let go. Please.”

He swung off and got to his feet. “You don’t fight like any whore I’ve ever met.”

“Leave me alone.” Pulling her robe back in order, Rebecca sat up. “Why can’t you leave? Please, just go.”

“I’m here for a reason,” Mac said. “Not sure exactly how or why, but you need my help.”

“I don’t. I’m fine.”

“Yeah, obviously. So, do you believe me now?”

“I believe I hate your fucking guts.”

“It’s a start.” Mac smiled in spite of himself. He imagined the stone-faced Sasha’s mouth cracking into a grin. Oh yeah, she was, without a doubt. Be wary, indeed.

## Chapter Five

The grandfather clock chimed 1:30 p.m. Rebecca had just spent the past hour showering, shaving, applying cosmetics, and dressing in something straight from sluts4u.com. Her one-thirty appointment was due at any moment.

Mac had spent the time flopped on the end of her bed, his feet dangling over to the ground. There was something to be said for ‘phoofy’ bedcovers. Rebecca had been doing her damndest to ignore him.

“You need to leave,” she said, pointing a stern finger at him. “He’ll be here any minute, and fuck if I’m going to do my business with you stroking yourself in the corner.”

He propped himself up on his elbows. “I don’t think I can do that anymore. No blood flow.”

The finger dropped and she shook the teased-up mane of red hair. “This is just fucked up. I’m going crazy. I must be.”

“Is this your usual getup?” Slutty or not, the woman looked completely fuckable.

“Does it fucking matter, Mac? Do you really give a shit about what I wear?”

“No, but you actually look good. If I had a beating heart, I’d be tempted to screw you senseless.”

“Dream on, Shithead.” Three faint knocks could be heard coming from beyond the door. “Thank, god! Get out of here, Mac. Now.” When he still did not move, her shoulders slumped

and her head cocked to the side. "Please."

Mac smiled. "You really don't like saying that, do you?"

She thrust a finger at the wall. "Go!"

He laughed and got to his feet, moving toward the hall while Rebecca stomped out of the bedroom. Outside in the hall, Mac studied the John standing at her door. Good-looking guy, clean cut, jeans, polo, and loafers. He stood with hands in his pockets, a casual slouch to his shoulders. No nerves at all. The guy was not worried about being seen by anyone. Still, something about the way the guy carried himself set off Mac's alarms. He was a cop.

The door opened and Rebecca's voice came through the doorway. "Hey Paulie. You're looking fine today."

He shoved his way into the apartment. "And you look like a fucking slut."

A little lunch break action. Not the first cop Mac had seen getting some on the side. A moment later, the distinct sound of a hand slapping skin could be heard coming from the living room.

"Bitch!" The cop's voice was loud and clear through the thin walls. Then the floor vibrated in his feet from something landing hard on the floor.

Mac hurried to the door and stepped through to find Rebecca sprawled at the edge of the kitchen. The left side of her face was flushing red. She scooted away from, eyes wide with fear.

"It wasn't me, Paulie," she said. "I swear. I was here the whole time."

"Think I don't know my own fucking wife when I see her?" He stepped up, reaching down to grab a fistful of hair and yanked her up to her knees. "Think just because some fat slob's dick is in your mouth, I can't recognize my own wife?"

For a second, Mac thought it might actually be real, but remembered this was an appointment. It was just a game. Pathetic bastard was playing out a marriage gone bad. This

would certainly make the top ten reasons for not getting married. There were far better ways to vent anger than beating on a whore.

Rebecca was fumbling at the cop's pants when she saw him standing in the window. Mac gave her a little wave. Oh, if looks could kill.

The cop yanked her head back. "What? Not good enough for you anymore, you lousy cunt."

"No baby. You're the best," she said with an imploring, demure voice.

"You should do porn," Mac said. "That voice drips sex."

She ignored him, watching to see if the cop heard, and worked to keep his mind preoccupied. Not hard. A woman's mouth is hovering around your cock, it does not matter how many people are in the room. Her eyes flicked his way several times while the cop busily thrust his rage into her mouth. Angry? Supremely pissed? No, Mac figured. She was beyond that.

After a few minutes of blow job, he pulled her up, one hand clamped hard enough on her jaw to purse her lips into a little, round "o."

"Just not good enough for you, eh? You stupid bitch."

He flung her sideways, sending Rebecca toppling over the sofa. One hand pushed down on the small of her back, holding her bent over the back of the couch. The other came down with brutal force across the bare flesh of her ass.

"Paulie," she cried out. "Please. It meant nothing. I swear."

The hand continued its assault, first one cheek then the other. The guy's face was now red with effort, his face twisted into a livid sneer. Mac chuckled. "This guy has some issues."

Rebecca mouthed the words, "Fuck you," and clenched her fingers into the sofa cushions. After a dozen or so ringing slaps, the cop proceeded to take her, fucking furiously into her backside for another minute or so until he climaxed. He backed away finally, his breath labored

and full of desperation.

Rebecca stood up, adjusting what little there was of her skirt back into place. She stepped up to the guy and patted him on the cheek. “All better, sweetie?”

He leaned against the wall, shoulders slumping. “Yeah. God, I hate that fucking bitch.”

“I know.” Her tone was sympathetic, but posture said otherwise. “Payment on the counter babe. Let me get a wash cloth and clean you up.”

Mac watched her go about finishing up with quiet efficiency. The guy put a hundred dollar bill on the counter along with a plastic baggie. After he got zipped up and tucked back in, Rebecca ushered him quickly to the door, a disarming smile on her face. “Same time next month, Paulie?”

“For a hundred and a rock, you should have him here every day,” Mac said.

Paulie looked over at the window, staring right through Mac. “Why do you keep looking over there?”

“Over where?”

“Out the window. You see something out there?” He pushed her aside and walked right up to Mac, leaning right into him to look out the window.

The look on Rebecca’s face was priceless. One couldn’t pay for that kind of advertising. Mac knew now she would have no doubts.

“No,” she said. “Just looking like rain, and I’ve got errands to run this afternoon.” He came back, attempting to kiss her on the cheek in passing, and Rebecca backed deftly out of the way. “Quit. You know better. Now go. Bust some hookers or something.”

“Oh, very funny.” He stepped into the hall. “If they were all like you, I’d be fucked.”

She laughed, and Mac could hear something a bit darker than amusement. “Bye, Paulie.” She closed the door. “You’re already fucked.” Mac was not sure what she meant by that, but did

not have time to ponder it. She turned on him, that taloned finger stabbing the air in his direction again. It was not all anger. Her eyes were a bit too wide for that. “You. You are the biggest, fucking asshole ever.”

He offered her a nonchalant shrug and a smile. “I was curious. You know he’s a cop, don’t you?” He had not been definite on that opinion, but her look confirmed it.

She took a step back. “What makes...How do you know that?”

Mac walked away from the window and sat down on the couch. “I killed people for a living, Rebecca. In my line of work, you learn to tell or you die.”

“Yeah, well...” She fumbled briefly for words and then threw up her hands in disgust. “I don’t care who they are as long as they pay, and he always does.”

Mac did not reply. She did care, and it wasn’t the touchy-feely sort of caring either. The question was why? She vanished into the bathroom and then the shower turned on. Why? There was something very odd about her lifestyle here. She did not fit either of the typical dichotomies of a hooker. This was no high end escort service or Craigslist masseuse, nor was she the destitute doing whatever it took to feed a drug habit. Mac had seen his share of them on either end over the years, and something about the whole arrangement did not feel right. Mac could not put his finger on it.

Rebecca stepped out with a towel wrapped around her head, the plush robe tied at her waist, and a frown upon her face. “Shit, you’re still here.”

“Might as well get used to it.”

“No.”

“How about a couple of questions?”

“No.”

“Look, you...Rebecca,” he said, forcing his temper aside. “I’ve got a job to do. I’m here

to make sure you don't end up like the selfish, heartless bastard I am, and the sooner you cooperate, the sooner I'll leave."

A sharp, bark of laughter escaped her lips. "You're wasting your time, Mac."

"You're forgetting that I'm dead. I've got nothing but time."

She sighed. "Fine, bastard. Ask your questions then."

Mac settled back on the couch, his head resting on the arm so he could turn and see Rebecca. "What did you do before this whole hooker gig?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" She picked up the baggie off the counter and undid the twisty tie.

"You getting high now?"

"Next guy likes to fuck while I'm stoned. You going to watch this one too?"

"Better than tv."

She turned on the gas burner. "How have you managed to save anyone? You're such an asshole."

"I haven't. You're my first."

"What?"

"I died a couple days ago," he said. "You're my first soul."

"How unfortunate for us both."

"Yeah, well not my choice either. So how about answering my fucking question?"

Steam rose from the spoon as the heroin cooked down. "Why does it matter what I did?"

Mac got to his feet, too irritated to sit still. "Look, I don't know why. I figure if I'm going to help you, then I need some information."

"That info isn't important."

"Which is exactly why I want to know." He walked around the couch to the kitchen.

“You’re lying.”

She turned off the burner, carrying the spoon back over to the sink. “I don’t owe you any explanations about anything, Mac.”

“No, but what’s it going to hurt? You’re talking to a dead guy here. Who am I going to tell?”

Rebecca picked up a syringe and carefully began to draw up the melted powder. “No one, because I’m not going to tell you.”

He walked up and bumped Rebecca, causing the remaining heroin in the spoon to tip and spill into the sink. “Oops.”

She cried out, wheeling around instantly with her right arm, elbow aimed at his head. This time, Mac was prepared and blocked the blow aside.

“You mother fucker!”

He stepped back, letting the blow to his gut land, and then caught her right wrist when the next blow came. Mac pushed her back against the countertop, using his weight pin her. “I can play hardball too, you obstinate, Irish bitch. Far easier to answer a few fucking questions, unless of course, you’re afraid to answer them.”

She glowered. “I’m not afraid of you.”

Mac let go. She clearly was, and therein lay the problem. Fear worked in certain ways, but this was the wrong situation for that. “Yeah, you are Rebecca. And you need to get over it. I’m not the bad guy here. Much as I’d love to beat some sense into you, that isn’t going to help either one of us.”

Her voice was full of tears. “Please, can’t you just leave?”

“I can’t leave. You don’t get it. I have to help you.”

“No!” She stomped her foot. “You don’t.”

Mac leaned in, his face inches from hers. “I can’t go back until I do. So, like it or not, I’m staying. I’m watching every guy you fuck, every needle you jam into your arm, and any other stupid shit you decide to do.” He let go of her at last and stepped back. He had no clue if what he said was true, but it made sense and hopefully got the point across.

“How will you know?” Her body sagged against the counter, and she folded her arms across her chest.

“Know what?”

“When you’ve helped me?”

Mac stared at her. “Well...I don’t actually know. I’m not even sure what I’m supposed to help you with.”

“They, it, or whatever the fuck it is didn’t bother to tell you?”

“I left before she could. It’s...complicated.”

“Have anything to do with that freaky gun you’re carrying?”

Mac smirked at her. *Smarter than she looks.* “Something like that, yeah.”

“So,” she said, waving a hand at him. “You were an asshole, got killed, found this gun you aren’t suppose to have, and then came back here looking for redemption before she had a chance to tell you what you needed to do.”

He nodded. “In a nutshell.”

“God is a woman?”

“No clue. The *she* is an angel of some kind, I think.”

“What’s the gun for?”

Mac realized the conversation had been completely reversed. She was good. There was a brain inside that whore’s body. “What all guns are for. Killing.”

“Don’t they want it back?”

“The gun?” Mac shrugged. “Yeah, they do.”

“So, why haven’t they come to get it?”

“I’ve been wondering that myself.”

“You don’t seem too worried about it.”

“Not much I can do about it until someone shows up,” Mac said. “Meanwhile, I’ve got you.”

“I feel so lucky.” She turned and picked up the baggy. “You going to leave me alone this time?”

“You going to answer my questions?”

“Maybe.”

“Then maybe I’ll leave you alone.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “You’re a dick. Fine, ask me your questions.”

He asked while she fixed up the syringe with another batch. “How long you been living this lifestyle?”

“You call this a lifestyle? People don’t chose this business, Mac. It generally chooses them.”

“So why were you chosen?”

She paused, looking up at the ceiling. “Fate.”

Mac stared at her, the long, loose waves of golden, red hair falling across her shoulders, the body too thin from shitty hours and too many lunches of crackers and smack. He figured it was not long ago that Rebecca Moynihan was a damn good looking woman. Her voice however, did not hold the resignation of her body. She did not speak of a Fate unkind and merciless, but one of righteous destiny.

“You saying there’s a reason for all of this?”

She turned sharply and glared at him. "I didn't say that."

"Didn't have to." He grinned at her and sat down on the back of the sofa. "Something about you and all of this just strikes me as a bit odd."

"I don't know what you mean," she said, and set her full syringe on to a small stand on the counter.

"Where did you learn to handle a gun?"

"What?"

Oh, she had heard him all right. "Simple question. You know how to handle that Glock of yours far too well for a plain old hooker."

Mac was poking a stick in the dark. There was something was out there if he could just find the right place to jab. He could sense it.

"My, uhm...dad taught me. He was a hunter."

"Liar. If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, but I'll figure it out eventually."

She balled up her fists on her hips. "He was a hunter."

"I don't know many dad's who teach their daughters to fight like you do," he said.

"You've had training."

"Ok, so? Girl not allowed to learn to protect herself?"

"Sure you are, but I'd prefer if you told me the truth about it. Hard to help with shitty info."

Rebecca stomped her foot and yelled in frustration. "Fuck you. You don't need to know any of my old shit. All that matters is what I've got now."

"That ain't much."

A salt shaker grabbed off the counter flew at his head and Mac raised his hand just in time to deflect it away, where it went skidding across the floor toward the front door. Rebecca

spun on her heel and marched over to the bedroom door at the rear of the kitchen.

“Stay,” she ordered and slammed the door behind her.

Mac considered following, but thought better of it and let her go. He would not let it slide however. He was on to something, useful or not, and he could be a persistent prick for as long as he needed. Tally up another item on the “Top ten reasons for being dead” list.

With Rebecca too far away for Mac to handle the remote, he was forced into watching afternoon talk shows. He took the opportunity to further examine the chaos gun.

For all intents and purposes, the thing was a sculpture in the shape of a gun. It had no separate parts that he could find, no trigger, no buttons, nor any cartridge. It tapered roughly from back to front in smooth, flowing lines and highly polished surfaces of silver, white, and gray. The barrel ended in a very innocuous looking cylinder the diameter of a pencil. Even if it had been print-coded, Mac could find no indication of where or how to activate it.

Sasha had let him get away with his toy because she knew he would never be able to use it. “Fuck her,” Mac muttered and tossed the gun into the chair beside the couch.

After two hours, Rebecca stepped out of the bedroom, a far cry from her slutty incarnation as the wonder whore. She wore a tattered and faded print dress that came down to mid-thigh, shabby-chic minus the chic. The golden-red tussle of hair that Mac found to be one of her most attractive features, fell straight around her face, and if anything looked greasy. The makeup was gone which made the circles under her eyes far more pronounced. In her arms she carried a basket of laundry.

“Who are you and what have you done with Rebecca?”

“Ha, ha, very funny.” She walked up to the chair and dumped the clothing out so that it spilled out over the back and onto the floor.

“I don’t do laundry,” he said.

“Stage prop,” she replied, and tossed the basket over by the dining table. “Next one likes the strung out whore routine.”

“Whatever floats their boat, right?”

She stopped behind the couch and stared down at him, her eyes bright, polished stones. “Promise me you’ll stay out of this one, Mac. No stupid, fucking comments or leering over my shoulder. Got it?”

“You have no way to stop me,” he countered.

She turned away and walked back into the kitchen. “If you want to help me, just stay out of this.”

Mac bit his tongue. Women did not generally order him around, unless they were looking for the wrong kind of trouble. “And if I don’t.”

“I’ll never speak to you again.”

Not a likely thing to happen, but Mac could sense the seriousness of her threat, and realized she would try to make good on it. Much as he wanted the opportunity to prove her wrong, that you did not fuck with Mac Duquene in such a way, he nodded in agreement. “All right, then. Not a peep.”

“I don’t want to see you either,” she added.

“I’m as good as dead.”

Rebecca picked up the syringe and pulled a piece of rubber tubing from a kitchen drawer. “I really don’t like you.”

“That’s ok, Ms. Moynihan. You don’t have to.”

Mac waited in the hall, sitting at the window opening onto the fire escape until the next John arrived. Though it shouldn’t have surprised him, the guy struck him much the way the first had. He was a cop. This one however, did not knock. He turned the knob and barged right in,

slamming door behind him.

His voice erupted almost immediately into a string of epithets, barely muffled by the thin, plaster walls.

Mac rocked back and forth on the sill, out through the window pane and then back, wondering again upon the significance of the cops. It could be a rep thing, but that was doubtful, and too easy. Rebecca had been far too reticent for that to be the case. He could think of no likely scenarios that fit. Perhaps they had something on her that made her an easy target.

He could hear Rebecca's pleading voice, but the words weren't clear enough to make out. Then came the sounds of scuffling and a hand striking flesh followed by her sharp cry of pain. The door across the hall opened and the greasy Italian poked his head out. He stood quietly listening, and Mac wanted to reach out and slap him upside the head.

"Mind your business, you fat, fucking perv." He swung his foot at the guy's groin, only to have it swing through, and Mac nearly tumbled backward onto the fire escape.

The man turned his head toward the window, looking straight through Mac with squinted, bloodshot eyes. After a moment he wiped at the corner of his mouth and then at the goosebumps running down his arms before ducking back inside. Mac smiled at the small victory. So, perhaps people really could sense when the dead were near.

When he turned his attention back to Rebecca, he found her sounds even more muffled and distant. They had moved back to the bedroom. As desperately as he wanted to step down the hall and peek through the bedroom wall, Mac refrained. He said he would stay out and so he would. She would talk about it sooner or later.

It was nearly an hour later when the guy walked back out, not even bothering to close the door. The look on his face said it all. Hate. Loathing. The guy had not gone in there to satisfy any twisted, sexual craving. Mac hopped off the sill and entered the apartment. He had gone in there

to take something out on Rebecca.

Mac found her in the bathroom, kneeling before the toilet hurling her guts out. She held her hair with one hand tucked up behind her ear where blood trickled down from a cut above her eye. Her face was smeared with stuff Mac didn't really want to think about. The eye was already beginning to swell.

"What the fuck, Rebecca?" He opened up the medicine cabinet and found a small first aid kit. He opened it up on the sink and took out some gauze and iodine. She spit blood out into the toilet, but said nothing. "That was another cop, wasn't it?"

She nodded, the corner of her mouth twitching into a smirk while tears splashed down on the linoleum floor. "Yeah."

Mac dabbed some iodine on the gauze and knelt beside her. "What the hell are you doing with a guy like that?"

She winced when he wiped at the cut, turning her head away. "Ow! Don't."

"Shut up and be still you stubborn bitch." She gave him a look but did not move when he replied the gauze, only hissing between her teeth. Her glassy, hooded eyes avoided looking at him now. "You going to tell me what the deal is?"

Rebecca leaned over the toilet and spit out more blood and Mac swiped away the dribble on her chin with his other hand. Her voice quivered on the edge of sobbing. "I'm going to kill him."

Mac paused, holding the pad against her eye. Her story kept getting more complicated by the minute. "How about we get you cleaned up first."