

STOLEN *a*
MASON
GRAY
case

by

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"The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes."

- Sherlock Holmes

Prologue

Shamash ran. Rain pounded the packed earth around him, making the ground slick beneath his sandaled feet. Lightning sliced through the night sky, illuminating stark pillars of rock hidden in the darkness. Thunder split the air. Such storms were rare in this sun-baked land, but the timing of this one was fortuitous. Beneath his robes, he clutched the idol tightly lest it tumble from his grasp as he fled through the night.

He was likely the last priest left alive, the others slaughtered by the Usurpers. The sound of clashing weapons rose above the storm, and he knew the soldiers fought desperately so he could escape. They would be slaughtered as well. It was only a matter of time. They were outnumbered three to one.

The temple had fallen not long ago. It was their last stronghold. The Usurpers had hunted them all down, vowing to destroy every last remnant of the “false god” Shamash worshiped. The priests had been reluctant to flee, believing their faith would save them, but Shamash knew they were lost.

His last hope was to find someplace safe to hide the idol. Centuries ago it had been given to the first priest, a gift from Hadad himself. Its power was subtle but great. If it were taken, it could be used against the one who created it. As long as it was safe, though his own life might be forfeit, his god would live on.

Shamash stumbled over the loose scree littering the hillside. The driving rain might impede his pursuers, but it hindered his own attempt at escape as well. He regained his footing and scrambled on. He regained his footing and scrambled on, climbing higher. The hills surrounding the temple were rife with caves and if he could find one before he was spotted, he might be able to escape.

Shouts carried by the wind found his ears. They did not speak his language. He had to hurry. He had been spotted as he fled from the temple, but the soldiers cut off pursuit. If they had fallen already, the enemy would be upon him soon.

He grew frantic in his desperation. His head swiveled from side to side, searching for some dark hole to climb into.

Lightning flashed again, and he saw it: a black smudge against the gray stone. It was halfway down the rise to his right. He altered course and picked up speed, half running, half falling as he went. At some point in his mad dash, his feet couldn't keep up, and he pitched forward, landing on the jagged stones and skidding down the slope headfirst.

He felt the skin on his arm tear, and as he picked himself up, the rainwater sheeting off of him was tinged pink with blood.

Still, he ran on.

The shouts of the usurpers grew louder behind him.

At last, he reached the dark blemish on the landscape—the opening in the hillside. It was large enough to let a man crawl through, but not much bigger. He wriggled through; his robe caught and

ripped on the stone, but he paid it no heed. Still, he clutched the idol with one hand, the other covered in blood, leaving smears on the ledges behind.

Inside, he found shelter from the rain and wind, but he did not stop. He pushed deeper into the cave, knowing he was leaving a trail a blind man could follow, but he was out of options. Perhaps if he went far enough, they would eventually give up pursuit.

His luck did not hold. The cave extended just over a hundred feet before the ceiling sloped down too far to allow further movement.

This was it. He slumped down, putting his back to the cave wall.

Blood dripped from his arm. Wind howled. Rain fell.

Shamash prayed.

He prayed not for his life, but for his god to protect the idol. He would be heard; he knew that. Being this close to the idol, its power granted him that much, at least.

There was a brilliant flash from the mouth of the cave as lightning lanced down from the heavens, striking the hill outside. Thunder boomed as the vacuum left by superheated air was suddenly filled. The resulting explosion shook the ground. Stone cracked above Shamash's head as a great slab broke loose.

It shifted, then fell, breaking into several pieces before crashing down. Giant chunks of rock landed between Shamash and the opening to the outside, sealing off the entrance. They also sealed him inside, leaving no way out.

As the dust from the collapse settled, Shamash looked around at his tomb. No one would ever find him here. Not him and not his precious idol. His prayers had been answered.

Two months ago I learned that vampires were real.

Tonight, I was hunting a mushroom thief. Life can be weird like that.

I slipped between two stainless-steel racks of trays filled with crab rangoon and ducked around a corner. The kitchen was a cacophony of clanking pots, pans, and utensils too numerous to name, as the staff prepared the third course for the hungry diners on the floor above. I snuck down a short hallway to the closet where my stuff was stashed, ditched the culinary attire I was wearing, and hastily donned my street clothes—complete with trench coat and fedora. I was done playing dress-up and wanted to be comfortable for what I was about to do.

The owner had hired me to investigate the night manager who was showing signs of wealth that he shouldn't be able to afford on his salary; things like a fancy new car and thousand-dollar tailored suits. He brought me in because he didn't want the establishment's name besmirched if the goings-on were less than reputable.

I ran all the usual checks. While I can't access bank account records or credit card transactions like the authorities can, there are other ways of discovering financial irregularities. Large purchases such as vehicles and property must be registered with the DMV, city, county, or state of ownership. Those, I can get. Of course, simple surveillance is the best way to get a sense of how much someone spends. Do they eat at expensive restaurants frequently? How often do they buy new and pricey clothes or accessories? What kinds of deliveries are made to their homes? My observations indicated that the manager was most certainly living above his means. But I hadn't found a reasonable source of the income boost. No great-aunt had kicked-off and left a sizable estate behind. He hadn't recently married into money. There wasn't anything above board. That left something shady.

This was my favorite part of the job. I love hitting the streets—or the high-rises— looking for pieces of the puzzle that will solve a case.

Years ago, when I worked for the Chicago Police Department, I did much the same thing. Except back then, there were rules I had to follow. You know, all those civil rights cops aren't supposed to violate. It didn't matter what kind of incriminating evidence I found if I hadn't found it the right way.

Now, in the private sector, I didn't have to worry so much about that. My clients paid me to find information, or people, or whatever. As long as I didn't break any laws myself, I could get it however I wanted.

I had followed the manager for several days, and it appeared he was taking meetings with other chefs around the city, but I still didn't know why.

So I had to get closer. My cover was simple: a new kitchen employee to be trained for a week. This allowed me to get inside the restaurant and poke around without anyone becoming too suspicious.

I'm an observant person. I pay attention to details. I see things that others miss. Which is why it only took me two nights to pick up on the scam.

The restaurant, Moxy, is an upscale place on the twentieth floor of one of the hotels downtown with views overlooking Grant Park and the lake. They specialize in high-end, gourmet cuisine. One of their most notable ingredients are truffles. They're in a lot of dishes and come with a weighty price tag. One of the cooks was skimming from the truffle stash.

Pinching an entire truffle from the stock would have been a dead give-away to the owner since they were so valuable. So the cook had to be sneaky about it. The prized fungus had to be thinly sliced or grated when added to a dish, so for each one he prepared, he'd let a gram or so fall to the counter. These cast-offs were collected and handed off to the night manager.

A few grams of truffle a night wouldn't be missed and wouldn't throw up any red flags during inventory. Of course, they'd be difficult to sell like that too, so I didn't have all the pieces yet.

Just minutes ago, there'd been a handoff. Now I had to track down the manager and see what he was doing with the pilfered product.

I poked my head out of the closet door and glanced down the hall. I suspected the manager was in the walk-in cooler. Between here and there servers waited near an elevator to deliver the third course. Now that I had changed, I needed to stay out of sight. I waited until the doors thunked open, and the servers wheeled the cart of savory delights on. When the doors closed again, I made my move. Double-timing it down the hall to the corner, I put my back against the wall, and peered around to see the walk-in cooler. The door was ajar.

I cast around, looking for a better hiding spot. Barging in on whoever was in there wasn't a good idea. I needed to wait until they left, then snoop. Of course, if I was discovered lurking in the hallway, that would be just as bad.

The interesting thing about the service areas of these buildings is that there's always stuff being stored anywhere there's available floor space. Most of it's on wheels or strapped to a dolly so it can be moved easily. These areas are off limits to guests, and aesthetics aren't a consideration when designing them. It's all about practicality. A broken industrial washer just beyond the entrance to the cooler would provide the perfect cover.

I slid down the hallway and took up position behind the stainless-steel monster. I fished the phone out of my pocket and opened the camera; It wasn't the greatest way of taking pictures. I tend to go on the cheap side when buying a phone and camera quality is one of the first sacrifices to be made. Fortunately, at close range, it didn't matter.

Within minutes the night manager came out of the walk-in and secured the door behind him. I snapped a few photos from my hidey-hole, and he didn't even look around suspiciously. He was the manager; he had every right to be in the walk-in.

He strode back toward the kitchen, and when he was out of sight, I let myself into the cooler.

At first, being in a walk-in cooler is refreshing. It's not a freezer. It functions more like a giant refrigerator for fresh fruits and vegetables. The temperature was right around 38 degrees, so I had a few minutes before I started to feel the full-force of the cold.

Shelves lined the walls. I could see greens of all kinds stored in plastic tubs, a few root vegetables, and trays of what looked like lamb quarters. That wasn't what I was looking for.

Then I saw a shelf of dressings and other condiments, so I directed my attention there. I

rearranged the big plastic jars of mayo and pickles and spotted something in the back—glass jars full of oil with dark shapes floating around. I pulled one to the front for closer inspection. I'm not a culinary guru, but it looked like the truffle scraps were being used to infuse olive oil. I did know that oil like this went for about six bucks an ounce, and these were gallon jars. Even if he was selling it at a discounted rate, which he probably was, the manager could easily make a grand on these three alone. Especially since he wasn't paying for the truffles to begin with. I wasn't sure how long the infusion process took, but if he'd been doing this for a while, it could account for his additional income.

I snapped a couple of photos, then put the jars back in place. The cooler shielded the signal from my phone, so I'd have to send them later.

That's when the searing pain stabbed into the back of my eyeballs.

My vision swam and I dropped to a knee, clutching the sides of my head.

They started just after I'd learned about the vampires. Have I mentioned that yet? I had a run-in with a couple of them while I was working a case. A girl was missing and I tracked her to an old warehouse where she was kept sedated while her blood was harvested. At least, that's what it looked like to me. The people who took her got really pissed off and tried to lure me into a trap by kidnapping my mentor and business partner, Frank.

There were two of them. Both were incredibly strong and super fast. They shrugged off injuries that would send a normal person to the hospital for a week; blows that should have been lethal weren't. I found that out the hard way. However, they had a weakness to silver. I used that to my advantage and put both of them down. But not before they killed Frank and nearly mashed my skull to pulp.

Those injuries healed with surprising speed. No one could explain it, but I was pretty sure it had to do with the strange dreams I'd been having. In them, I saw pulsing cords of red and blue energy flowing around me. Touching them had strange effects. The blue ones gave me a sense peace and joy and seemed to help me heal. The red ones made me angry; filled me with rage and incredible strength. I didn't know how any of it was possible, but after tangling with vampires, my sense of what was possible had been shattered.

The headaches started soon after. I didn't know if they were a result of the beating I'd taken or if they also had something to do with the dreams. Whatever the reason, they were becoming a major problem, and this was the worst one yet.

I knelt on the floor of the cooler for a few minutes—the cold helping to dull the pain. When the throbbing eased, I used the shelving to regain my feet. The pain wasn't gone yet, but it was bearable.

I had what I came for. It was time to leave.

Stumbling to the door, I half fell into it, using the safety handle to push it open. I stepped into the corridor—and came nose to nose with the night manager. He was a pretty big guy. I had maybe an inch on him. I think he worked out, too. Behind him stood the cook that had handed off the truffles. He was shorter. And fatter. He also held a cleaver in a meaty fist.

Surprise registered on the manager's face.

"What the hell were you doing in there?"

“Headache,” I said. “The cold helps.”

He looked me up and down. “Why are you dressed like that? You’re still on the clock.”

I didn’t have a clever response. His expression darkened and I could tell jig was up.

I could hit him. He’d probably go down with one punch. I wasn’t sure about Cookie though. He looked like he could hold his own. Of course, they’d done nothing but scowl at me. Violence wasn’t called for yet. I doubted, however, they were going to let me just walk away. So, I did the only thing I could: I turned and ran.

I covered about twenty feet before the shock dissipated and the two came running after me. There was an emergency exit door at the end of the corridor. I slammed it open without breaking stride, coming into the stairwell. Up or down? I considered the question as I ran. Though I had a several second lead, I’d lose it trying to run down nineteen floors. I was sure the manager would catch me, and I didn’t like the idea of being caught in tight quarters with no witnesses. So instead, I went up, taking the stairs three at a time.

The door slammed open behind me, and they paused briefly before hearing my footfalls above. The manager shouted at me to stop.

When I reached the landing, I yanked the door open and dashed down the much narrower hall back toward the service elevator. An ice machine and drink station were set up beside a set of swinging double doors that I guessed would open into the dining room. That’s where I was headed. I doubted the manager would make a scene in front of all the guests, and I’d be able to figure out my next move there.

The elevator doors ground open and a server wheeled a cart out into the hallway at the same time the manager burst through the door behind me. I picked up the pace, not wanting to get cut off. It was close. I slid through the doors just as the servers got there.

As soon as I stepped into the dining room, I slowed to a casual stroll. In contrast to the bright lights of the kitchen and service area, the lighting in here was dim; the walls painted a dark burgundy. Windows lined the far wall, giving diners a nice view of the city. I heard a commotion and raised voices behind as the manager and servers tried to sort out who was going through first. Every head in the dining room turned to see what was going on, but I paid them no mind. I wove my way between tables, heading for the exit.

I pulled out my phone and checked to see if it had service. It did. I pulled up the photos I’d taken and quickly sent them to my client. Now, even if I got caught, the job was done. I had no intention of being caught, however, and the traffic jam at the doors gave me a few extra seconds to get out of sight.

I nodded to the host as I left the dining room and turned the corner on the way to the guest elevators. I pushed the button then started running again. I hadn’t done any snooping up here and didn’t know the layout, but I figured that being a hotel, another stairwell was around somewhere. There was. It only took a minute to find, and I took the stairs two at a time, making my way down twenty floors.

I felt pretty good about the evening’s outcome as I wound through the maze of hallways on the

first floor looking for an exit. I'd found the dirt my client was after, hadn't broken any laws myself, adrenaline had killed my headache, and I'd avoided any kind of violence. Wanting to keep it that way, I decided against using the main lobby. I hadn't seen or heard anyone on my way down but figured they might be waiting for me to come that way, so I was looking for a back door. Turning the corner, I found one—excellent.

Cold wind and snow swirled about me as I stepped outside into the night. It was mid-December, and the air had long since stopped being brisk and become bitter with a side of frigid. I looked around to get my bearings. Wandering through the hotel had screwed with my sense of direction. A quick glance up and down the street told me I was at the back of the building, not far from the service entrance where my night had begun. Perfect. My car was parked two blocks west of here.

Driving was a relatively new addition to my life. But then, a lot had changed over the last two months. For most of my adult life, I'd been a loner. I had few friends, no family in the city, and, other than the occasional short-lived romance, no love life. But when Frank died, I grew a lot closer to his widow, Nancy, and their two daughters, Alice and Maggie. I could never take his place, and didn't want to, but I could take more responsibility. Anyway, Nancy gave me Frank's old Buick. She had a much newer car and figured I could use the old one. It had come in handy a time or two, and I certainly appreciate not having to stand in the weather on nights like this. Of course, I still took the train plenty. Sometimes trying to find parking isn't worth it.

I flipped up my collar against the wind, shoved my hands into my pockets, and started walking.

I'd taken ten steps when someone stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of me. He was short. And fat. Crap. It was the cook. He glared at me—then raised his cleaver.

I took my hands out of my pockets and threw them up, taking a step back. "Whoa, buddy. Calm down."

He spat a string of curses at me in a language I didn't understand.

"Okay, I get that you're upset," I said. "I was just doing my job. It's over now and I'm going home."

"No. You're not," he said and took a step toward me.

Normally, I would have drawn my piece to warn him off, but I'd locked in it the glove box of the Buick before starting the shift. I was just about to turn and run again—I figured I could outdistance him quickly—when someone else stepped outside. A woman with close-cropped hair the color of ink and wearing slim black slacks with a crisp white button-up under a navy pea coat glanced between me and Cookie.

"What's going on here?" she asked.

He tensed up at the sound of her voice. "None of your business, woman."

She bristled at his tone, stalked toward him, and launched into a tirade in a foreign language, presumably the one he'd used earlier. He lowered the cleaver and turned to face her. He tried to interrupt, but she was having none of it. I had no idea what she was saying, but the scolding cowed him quickly. When she said her piece, she stood there glaring at him until he huffed in frustration and stormed past her back to the entrance.

When he disappeared from sight, she turned to leave.

"Thank you," I said. "Things were about to get pretty hairy."

She looked over her shoulder and arched a dark eyebrow. "I'll say." But she kept walking.

She was going my way, so I caught up and walked beside her. "I'm Gray, by the way."

She stopped to face me. "Look, I don't really care who you are. I've had a long day, and that was the last thing I needed."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bother you, but you kind of saved my ass back there and I owe you one."

"Yeah, well..."

"What did you say to him? That was a pretty quick turnaround." I was impressed with how she handled him and didn't mind admitting it.

"I reminded him of his duties to his wife and kids and pointed out that if he went to jail it would kill his mother. Now, if you'll excuse me." She continued down the sidewalk.

I followed behind like a puppy. I knew I should just let her go and forget about the whole incident, but for some reason, I couldn't. "What language was that?"

"Greek."

"Oh." *Shut up, Gray. Leave her be.* "Can I buy you a drink?" *Ugh.*

"No, thanks," she said and picked up the pace a little.

"Okay, but at least take my card." I held it out like a peace offering. "I owe you a favor. If you need anything, give me a call."

She slowed down long enough to take it from my outstretched hand and shove it into a pocket. After that, I stopped. A few seconds later I called after her, "Thanks, again!" *Real smooth, Gray, real smooth.*

2

It wasn't quite ten o'clock when I got back to the Buick—still too early to go home, considering how hyped up I was from the chase—so I decided to go back to the office. I had another project to work on, one that seemed to take up all my spare time these days.

On the drive there, my mind kept going back to the woman I'd just met. I wished I'd gotten her name. I wished I had some way to get in touch with her. I wished I hadn't been so awkward. I knew I shouldn't dwell on it. I'd probably never see her again, but I couldn't shake the thought of her.

She was the type of woman I was drawn to: petite; dark, olive skin; big brown eyes; high, full cheeks that sloped down to a chin that could cut glass.

I sighed, knowing I'd be thinking about her for the next week or two, frustrated there was nothing I could do about it.

I went up the back way to the office, as usual, and our resident alley cat, One-Eyed Willy, meowed at me. He was a scruffy, orange tabby cat with ragged ears and a missing eye. I had a soft spot for him because of the tenacity it took to survive on the streets, and even more so because he saved my life two months ago right here on this very landing. Since then, I made sure to leave a bowl of food and water out for him every day. I bent down and gave him a good scratching behind one mangled ear. A deep rumble sounded in his chest.

I unlocked the door and as was about to push it open, when Willy thudded into it with his shoulder. He'd been trying to get in for a while, but I didn't think that would bode well for the tidiness—or smell—of the office.

"Not now, buddy," I said as I moved him out of the way with my foot and slipped inside, closing the door behind me. I could hear his answer through the door as a miffed mewl. A twinge of guilt twisted my heart, but I ignored it and flipped on a light.

The back door opened into the kitchenette and I hurried through and down the hall, past Frank's old office to mine. I dumped my coat on the back of the couch, then pulled out a whiteboard stashed along the wall and wheeled it to the center of the room. Taped to its center was an array of photos and a web of lines drawn between and around them. This was what I'd been working on.

After Ellie McCarthy's kidnapping and Frank's murder, I turned my attention to the CPD. Since being drummed out of the department myself, I had a bone to pick, and the fact they had done so little to investigate these cases stank of corruption so bad I couldn't help but sniff around. I was still in the early stages of the investigation and hadn't found much, but just the attempt was therapeutic.

I examined the faces taped to the board. I'd gotten copies of all the police reports relating to the cases from my old partner, Jack Larsen, and used them to create a flow chart of those involved. I said each name aloud as I studied their picture, knowing them all by heart at this point.

Detective Rowe was up there. So were several beat cops: Nathan Drury, Doug Kinney, and

Damon Rivers. Detectives Bryan Sullivan and Alex Conrad, Sergeant Rhonda Hatfield, Lieutenant Donald Wiggins, and Captain Robin Woods rounded out my cast of players. So far, I had basic information about all of them and was mapping out their connections. I was looking at Conrad the hardest. He was the detective in charge of the McCarthy case and had done next to nothing to investigate it. I needed to know why.

I booted up my desktop and dug into Conrad's life. What I really missed about working for the department was the access to personal information like bank accounts and phone records. I could get them with a subpoena just like the cops, but the likelihood of getting a judge to sign off on it for a private investigator was almost nil, especially since I was investigating the cops. Instead, I turned to social media. People who post frequently leave a neon trail with brightly glowing breadcrumbs everywhere they've been.

Conrad wasn't a frequent poster, but that actually made my job easier. I didn't have to comb through hundreds of pictures looking for places that appeared the most. What I did find were a handful of photos of Conrad and friends hanging out at a local establishment called Smitty's. That was promising. I hadn't been able to talk to anyone involved yet. Perhaps I could drop in and poke around, find out when he was likely to show up, and have a conversation with the guy.

Feeling like I'd made a step in the right direction, I shut the computer down, wrote "Smitty's" next to Conrad's photo on the whiteboard, and flopped onto the couch.

Brenda arrived bright and early the next morning. I'd hired her just after Frank's death— partly to fill the emptiness, partly because I needed help running the place, and partly because I felt responsible for her. She had worked for a crooked real estate company involved with the vampires, though she was in the dark about their true nature. She had provided evidence about the company's other illicit dealings, and the authorities shut them down. I was surprised it happened so quickly. It seemed like a lot of effort had been made to keep them from being discovered in the first place. Whatever the reason, Brenda had been left jobless, and it seemed only right to offer her one.

It was one of the best decisions I could have made. Brenda shot past competence and rocketed into indispensable within the first month. While she still didn't know the ins and outs of the detective business, she knew how to run a *business*. From accounting to marketing, she was streamlining things I never knew Frank was responsible for. And she was a people person. Because she was taking care of the administrative side of things, I was free to do what I do best: investigate. I got results for our clients. She kept them happy. And happy clients give referrals. I was busier than ever and I had Brenda to thank for it.

She roused me from the couch and told me to get cleaned up. I had an appointment at ten with a new client. I pulled a clean shirt out of the coat closet and went in the bathroom for a quick sponge bath. While I was doing that, Brenda put on a pot of coffee.

"Be on your best behavior," she told me after I was dressed and pouring a cup. "This is a big one. You're going to the Field Museum to meet with one of the curators. Go to the east entrance and ask for Dr. Halgrave."

"Field Museum? What's the case?" I asked.

"I don't know. They refused to discuss the details over the phone. Said the doctor would fill you in when you got there."

"Did they say why they chose us?"

"Not exactly. They said they heard you had a reputation for solving tough cases."

"Huh," I said. "Okay. Anything else I should know?"

"Yeah, take the case. Right now, you're going for a consultation. If you accept, they're paying five thousand up front."

I nearly choked on my coffee. That was a lot for a retainer.

"Yeah," she continued. "They really want you on this."

Next, I told Brenda what I'd learned last night at Moxy and that as far as I was concerned, the case was closed. She went back to her office, Frank's old one, to process billing while I finished my cup of coffee. After another trip to the bathroom to make sure I was presentable, I grabbed a pen and notepad and headed for the door.

"Keep your parking stub!" Brenda shouted down the hall. "They validate."

"Thanks!" I shouted back on my way out the door to the Buick. Willy glared at me from the porch the whole way.

3

The Field Museum is the natural history museum in Chicago. It's located along the lake just south of the loop on the museum campus, a sprawling public park, where Soldier Field, the Adler Planetarium, and Shedd Aquarium are also situated. Sue, the T-Rex skeleton is probably the most iconic feature, but it's full of many others: anthropological exhibits, geological collections, and zoological displays. My favorite is the Hall of Gems. I always end up in the darkened room staring at the crystalline beauty created deep in the bowels of the earth, then cut and polished by man into valuable treasures I could never afford.

Multiple theories of what they wanted rattled around my brain on the drive over. I suspected it had something to do with investigating the authenticity or origins of some new acquisition. Of course, there were far more qualified people for that. Or perhaps one of those priceless gems had been stolen and they wanted me to recover it on the DL so the insurance company wouldn't be notified. But honestly, I had no idea what I was walking into.

Mind buzzing, I pulled the long silver sedan into the mostly empty parking lot. The tourists aren't as thick in the winter, but there are always some willing to brave the biting wind for a look at the latest exhibition. I found a spot as close to the building as possible and made for the east entrance.

The main entrance to the museum is an imposing sight of neoclassical architecture with a set of marble steps framed by massive ionic columns. Most visitors use this entrance during business hours. The east entrance, however, is a modern addition at ground level primarily used as handicap access and an entrance for special events. Security's tight. It's always manned by at least one guard and there's a walkthrough metal detector.

I pushed through the door and sidled up to the station where a guard sat reclined in a metal chair behind a small plastic table. Aside from me and the guard, this section of the building was empty. He looked up from his cell phone.

"Morning," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I have an appointment with a Dr. Halgrave at ten o'clock," I informed him.

"Ah," he muttered, then reached for the walkie-talkie on the table in front of him. He said, "Come in, Cleve, come in." The radio squelched as he released the button.

A moment later there was a response. "Go for Cleve."

"Cleve, this is Rog. I got a visitor down here at East End for Dr. Halgrave."

"Roger that."

The guard turned his attention back to me. "Someone will be down shortly to retrieve you. Empty your pockets and step through the detector, please."

Instead, I took out my PI badge and laid it on the table in front of him. Then I flipped it to my weapon permit so he could get a good look at it. "I'm here on business and don't want to catch

anyone off guard. Thought you should know I'm carrying before I step through that thing."

He checked my credentials and narrowed his eyes, suddenly wary.

"Right. You just stay put until someone comes to get you then."

I stood there for what seemed like an hour acting nonplussed. I'm sure it wasn't more than six or seven minutes, but time has a way of dragging in situations like that. The guard just sat there, watching me. I thought he might go back to playing on his phone, but apparently knowing I was packing had him paying attention.

Eventually, a woman in a white lab coat came into view striding down the hallway toward us. I had to work really hard to keep my mouth from dropping open. Black heels defined perfect calves on lightly tanned legs that ran up beneath the coat that draped her trim figure. Long brown hair fell around her shoulders in silky waves. Black glasses straddled the bridge of her nose on a face that should have been in the movies. I swallowed, reminding myself not to stare. Then we locked eyes and she smiled. My heart skipped a beat or four and I heard Roger at the security desk suck in a lungful of air, like he'd forgotten to breathe for a minute. Calling her beautiful would have been like calling Jupiter big.

As she neared, she extended her hand and I was proud that I remembered how a handshake worked, yet appalled at how oafish my meaty paw felt in contrast to her delicate grip. On contact, I felt my knees literally go weak. I also felt the beginnings of a headache take root behind my eyes. A few seconds passed before I realized she was speaking.

"...but, please, call me Meredith."

"Meredith," I stammered. "I'm Gray. It's a pleasure to meet you."

She smiled again. "Thank you for coming. I'm sorry to keep you waiting. If you'll follow me, we can discuss the reason I called." She turned and walked back the way she had come. I glanced at the guard questioningly and he nodded, so I hustled to catch up.

Dr. Halgrave led me past the Underground Adventure and Ancient Egypt exhibits then used a keycard to open a security door off a side corridor. Once through, we wound our way through a warren of starkly lit hallways until we reached an office with her name beside the door. Inside was a small desk with a sleek new computer sitting on top. A low shelf was placed along one wall and held several neatly stacked volumes. Pictures of ancient artifacts and tribal artwork hung neatly on the walls. The office seemed a little too sterile. There were no personal items in view, no clutter to speak of, no evidence that she actually did any work here. She waved me in and I took a seat. She went around behind the desk and sat across from me.

"I'm sorry I couldn't provide your assistant with any details over the phone," she said once she settled in. I was only half-listening. It was hard to concentrate around her. She was beautiful, sure, but there was more to it than that. She exuded a magnetism I couldn't explain. "I felt it would be better to discuss them here. Before we begin, however, I need you to sign a non-disclosure agreement." That got my attention. She opened a drawer, withdrew a sheet of paper, and slid it across the desk so I could see it. "Take your time to read it if you wish, but all it says is that you agree not to discuss

anything you learn today with anyone—whether or not you agree to take the case.”

“Alright,” I said, glancing over the document. It seemed straightforward so I picked up a pen lying on the desk, signed my name, and slid it back to her.

She picked it up, looked at my signature and said, “Thank you... Mason. May I call you Mason?” I shuddered as a chill ran up my spine when she said my name. Normally, I didn’t like anyone to call me Mason, but the way she said it sounded so natural.

I shrugged and said, “Sure.”

She put the paper back in the drawer and laced her fingers in front of her. “As you may know, the Field Museum is home to many artifacts and collections that are not on display to the public.” I nodded so she continued. “Some of them belong to private collectors—donors—who loan them to us for extended periods of time for various reasons. We pride ourselves on the ability to care for these items and maintain their condition better than the owners could.”

“Okay,” I said.

“To the point, then,” she said after a brief pause. “An artifact belonging to one of these private collectors has disappeared. We need you to help us find it.” Her choice of words was odd.

“What do you mean *disappeared*?”