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CHROME SHADOW

CHROME

SHADOW

RICHARD MILLERSHIP

CHAPTER 1
RABID

*Darkness is but the shadow of the eye.
The wing beat that flees before.
The heart that beats its last.
As it peers into the eye,
All it sees is death, and the dark.*

as. . .

11:58 p.m., Thursday 28 November, 2019, New-York City

His first sensation was a strange buzzing noise. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could feel his teeth chattering, keeping time. He listened to that for a while, thinking about it through a slick of torpid half-consciousness. The buzzing grew louder, more insistent, like a machine in his head.

Consciousness touched him. He swam toward it. Surfacing was not what he expected. Pitch darkness,

stifling, empty. The air was thick, cloying, binding as he gasped, drawing snatches of it into his lungs. The buzzing was louder now, closer, sounding like a power tool, loud, God, it was so *loud*.

A tune was playing - something Middle Eastern to his ear, lilting at him from the darkness - chanting an incomprehensible something, almost a hum that rose and fell.

He craned in the darkness, trying to sit up, and found he couldn't. He'd been tied, though not heavily, just awkwardly.

He rolled himself over, trying to get some purchase as he levered himself upwards. After a moment, he was roughly sitting, his hands still bound behind him. He felt things then, bundles, bumping them as he moved. They yielded and swung a little, as though suspended from somewhere above him.

He started to work his legs back, desperately trying not to tip over again as he made to try for his feet. He didn't, as he managed to get his feet under himself, pushing himself forward to his knees. Slowly, he staggered to his feet.

It was then that the light came on.

It was then that he remembered.

Only a thin light, it lit a face from below, the shadows from its contours casting a horror. Like a demon, it leered at him. Stark naked, the rest of the body was only dimly visible.

Clenched in the figure's other hand, a buzz saw idled, its rotating blade flashing in the little flashlight's feeble spill. The face's glittering eyes watched him closely, something terrifying playing behind them.

It was then that he knew what was about to happen.

Shrieking, he ducked fast, coming to his feet and then stumbling as he lost balance and careened into one of the bundles.

Behind him, the light had begun to flash, jogging as it started to chase.

"Jesus!" he shouted thickly as he shouldered the bundle aside, catching a brief glimpse of the thing that stared back at him from within the cloth. He screamed as he blundered into another, then another, his ears full of noise, confusion, screaming tool and screaming him.

"Oh *Jesus!*"

He ran, stumbling in his drug-induced thickness, his head swimming. All at once he was up against a wall, weeping bricks vanishing into darkness above as he clawed at them with his chin.

He screamed again as the sound of the saw appeared right behind him, the flash lighting the wall brightly, silhouetting his head and shoulders.

He jumped, began running again, following the line of the wall. "Oh *sweet Jesus!*" he screamed, the sound of feet behind him, the tool screaming its electric scream, the light flashing and bouncing - right behind, hot breath on his back - "Oh *sweet Jesus!*"

Something hit his leg, snagging his calf as the noise of the tool dropped, literally falling from head height to ankle height. Then it grabbed him, the pitch dropping, his left calf jerking violently as the pain and the saw both began to coarce up the back of his leg.

He stumbled as the saw wrenched his leg out as it caught the tendons and began to wind. He made to thrust out his hands, but could only watch himself fall helplessly, face first, his hands still bound behind him.

He hit hard, his nose smashing into the hard-pack floor.

For a moment he could only feel the pain in his face, brilliant stars lighting his darkness as blood and tears flooded his cheeks.

Then his shank came back and he screamed with the agony of it. Screamed as he felt the saw begin to work at him. Yanked from his leg where it had almost stalled, up and up, it struck the small of his back and began to burrow as the figure came down on top of him, to work, the blade snagging and catching, jerking him fitfully as it was run forwards and backwards, as he struggled and squirmed in ever lazier circles.

Two blinding, unearthly screams - human and mechanical - soared upwards and outwards, into the cold, raw darkness.

12:05 a.m., Friday 29 November

Tanjil Bren woke with a violent start.

A moment's confusion as his eyes fell on the clock on the night stand, a second before he remembered where he was.

He swung his legs out to the floor, bare feet finding worn carpet, his heart still racing from the dream that had brought him awake. Something dark. Something terrifying. Feeling suddenly claustrophobic in the enveloping blackness, he reached out and turned on the bedside light.

Small room, the abruptly lit walls plastered with press clippings: frozen, frightened faces staring blankly from their black and white, newsprint bordered frames.

He went for the phone.

"FBI," a voice answered abruptly.

He recognised it: night desk. "It's Tanjil Bren," he said.

A pause before it returned, "Sure, Bren, what can I do for you?"

He thought about it for a second. "Has anything come in, for me?"

"Hold a second." Sounds of tapping on a keyboard. "Nope, nothing here. You expecting something?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Nothing. Thanks." He got up, feeling a sudden chill before he grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around himself.

It was a still night beyond the window. He absently began reading the clippings he'd stuck to his bedroom wall.

East Side Vanishings.

Five men missing - no sign, no clues. Nothing at all. Just missing. Even as he read the pat little press pieces, he couldn't seem to get it out of his head, the dream he'd just had, the person who'd been in it.

The shadow again, lithe and languid, like black silk death - and something else this time. Someone else. And he couldn't seem to get that out of his head, either.

He suddenly thought about calling him, stopped himself - he knew it would be a stupid thing to do, especially at this hour. No reason for what he felt. No reason at all. He'd just look foolish, and that was the last thing he needed.

He dropped his head, thinking about just going back to bed, forgetting about it. But he knew he wouldn't.

A toke might help and it was a tempting thought, but he needed to relax, to forget about it, if he was going to try to sleep. Only, he knew nothing was going to help him do that - not now.

"My name is Tanjil Bren," he said softly to himself as he turned and headed back to bed. "And I am not insane."

10:14 a.m., Tuesday 3 December. New York
Police Office New-Russell Complex. Bruckner
Boulevard. South Bronx

Inspectorate Captain Hall Stamet had been waiting for the call since he'd arrived. The pressure was beginning to tell. Weeks of blanks, dead-ends, no firm leads. Now this.

Stamet was aging before his time and he knew it, forty-four, going on sixty. He'd finally succumbed to the drugs

almost a year ago now, only a little while after the Dagger case.

Now it was just a question of how much and what.

An arsenal of stimulants occupied the bar in his tired apartment. A lonely place, he never much cared to be there. Getting out was part of his life now.

A conscious escape every time he walked out the door.

The work pursued him like a banshee, filled his life: his waking hours with a cacophonous bung of mental noise; his sleep with a procession of nightmares whose terror was only marginally surpassed by their eccentricity.

But he didn't like to think about it all that much.

When the screen blinked finally, he was still deep in thought. Then his eyes focused, his gaze shifting to the screen.

"Yes?"

"He's ready for you."

He nodded without replying.

DC Prestring was alone when Stamet arrived. A wiry, thin-looking man with a shock of white hair, his chair was turned to face the windows. He was rocking himself gently, the motions keeping time to the metronome-like beat of the rain against the glass. The buildings did that. Way they were layed out. Something about the dynamics of the wind as it coursed the labyrinth, he'd heard once. Strange.

"Take a seat," Prestring said without turning.

Stamet sat, the creak it made causing an answering jolt in Prestring. The man swivelled like a top.

“Any news?” he stabbed.

“None,” Stamet said.

“He’s been missing four days.”

“I know.”

“Then we can make it official.” Stamet nodded. “Who can we put on it now?”

Stamet looked thoughtful as he ran a finger around the lobe of his ear. “Got a few people free. I guess only one springs to mind.”

“Got the years?”

Stamet hesitated. “Yes - he has. He’s a little unorthodox, though.”

Prestring snorted. “What’s orthodox about the way a freeagent does anything?”

Stamet nodded only partial agreement this time. “Yeah. But there are ways, and there are ways.”

“Who’ve you got in mind?” Prestring pressed, ignoring the comment.

Stamet paused before he replied. “Callard.”

Prestring tensed. “Callard,” he repeated slowly. He fell silent, his eyes distant before he said, “You’ve been keeping him on ice since the Flynthoff business.” He whispered the name, like it was some unspeakable invocation. He had reason to - they all did. “You’ve only really started assigning him again in the last couple of

months.” Prestring gave Stamet a long look. “You think he can do this?”

“He’s the only one I’d choose.”

“Yes, but should we?” Prestring swivelled again, his eyes drifting to the window. “That business went bad for us,” he reflected quietly. “Enquiry was a blood bath. More than enough aspersions cast about the case’s connections, Callard’s involvement in the assassination of Rydell. But then,” he added quietly, “he wasn’t the only one questions were raised about.” He gave Stamet a knowing look and let it rest at that.

Stamet stayed stony-faced. There’d never been anything proved about Battery Park. It was a night none of those who’d known the truth had ever been allowed to forget. The CIA Director, Rydell, had been killed - but not by Callard, and not by any of the other ITs who’d been out there with him. Battery Park had been the culmination of some titanic struggle; a struggle they had only touched the surface of. Like they had all been children playing among the feet of shadowy giants.

“Bad business,” Prestring said, breaking into his thoughts. “Not good at all. Where I was happy to let a probationary reactivation ride while he was on minor assignments, this is a whole different ball game. I’ll get questions. Questions I don’t want to answer,” he added with a shallow shrug.

“Callard’s good,” Stamet countered. “One of the best. We can’t afford to lose him. I can’t justify keeping him out

on the basis of aspersions alone.” He watched Presting for a reaction. “If he’s going to come in again, this is the one to test the waters with.”

“We’ll certainly be doing that” Prestring said. “But I don’t know about - ” He trailed off into silence as he thought about it a second, his fingers steeped before his face. “Give it to him.”

Silence a moment.

“What do we do about Norstrand?” Stamet said.

“Depends on why we think he disappeared. Any clues? Anything he said to any of the others?”

Stamet shook his head. “Nothing. He was pressing hard. We got his last report - evening of the 28th - since then, nothing.”

“Get it back on track as quickly as you can,” Prestring said. “As far as Norstrand goes, we’ll list him ‘missing’.” He shrugged. “I think that’s all we can do for now.”

“Surely we need to find out what happened to Norstrand.”

“We don’t have a good enough reason, and we don’t have the people to spare.”

“I can get Callard to take a double barrel?”

Prestring thought about it a moment. “If it doesn’t encroach on the main lead, I don’t have a problem with that.” He paused, giving his chair a few extra rocks. “Ball’s in your court. You call it as you see fit.”

Stamet took the authority as a dismissal. He rose, began to leave, half expecting to be stopped with another aside. It didn't come.

Prestring had already forgotten him.

Stamet put his call through the moment he got back to his office. "Main board. Callard. ASAP." He sat back to wait, leafing through the missing Norstrand's file notes with a feeling of vague unease.

10:25 a.m., Tuesday 3 December, Worth Street,
China Town

Sunlight glinted through shattered windows, dust motes glittering and dancing. Callard stood there, his still smoking gun in his hand, the twitching body of the man he'd just shot, spread-eagled on the ground in front of him.

A silence had fallen, a blanket of quiet as he watched the dead man, the blood flowing from the chest wound like an ebb-tide - the *blood* . . .

Flash back.

The images fluttered through his mind like it was yesterday:

The beginning, the first killing - the girl - huge volume of blood, the corpse all but unidentifiable as a human being's - severed head and hands, screaming death at him - torso stripped, flensed like a killing house carcass. . .the drug that had been in the girl's system - the Dagger. The image of Flynthoff, the murderer, gaunt, white face -

laughing at him, mocking him as he drew a huge, three bladed sword.

Then the truth.

Roates, the CDA executive, terrified and guttural, as he told him what he knew: about the enzyme Dagger had created, a brain destroying enzyme that had created Flynthoff and God knew how many others. His words: 'they just left it, covered it up. . .because they think it might be in the food chain now. . .'. A nightmare unfolding: the reality of what was happening - as he was betrayed - as he was hunted down like a dog. Then the confrontation as he'd bargained for his life, haggled with an evil that surpassed the homicidal psychopath, Flynthoff, surpassed anything he'd met before. The mountaintop had been Battery Park, and Satan had come as Bakke Chrystler Rydell. Black, killing eyes - Rydell's words, his voice, his face, as he told him why he had let Dagger run, why he'd consciously orchestrated a horror of such unbelievable magnitude. 'The Lord thunders, he sits enthroned forever. . .He it is who will judge the world with justice and try the cause of the peoples fairly. . .The world is in our hands, Mr Callard. The power to change everything there is.'

Then he'd watched as a bullet hit Rydell full in the chest, spinning him to the ground like a doll, shots all around, ringing out in the night, a hail of bullets. He'd run, and run. . .

Callard started suddenly, let the gun drift down to his side, his arm aching from having held it for a time he'd lost

all track of. He panned his eyes over the debris, the chaos, his mind drifting again as he watched the uniforms move slowly around him, then finally knelt to press a forefinger to the neck of the man at his feet.

Nothing. . .just blood. . .

Dropped from the caseload after Battery Park and the aftermath of innuendo the New York Police Office had weathered. Shunned by the administration, the pariah he'd known he would become.

After that, he'd been a directionless shell. A man who knew too much about a horror he could never disclose, an unkempt and shadowy fringe dweller, descending into an isolated and bitter oblivion of alcohol and blackouts that had left him a physical wreck. He'd survived on handouts and a handful of security jobs. Scant crumbs of charity, the work gifted to him by compassionate ex-colleagues who'd got out of the freeagent wringer long ago. When he'd seen those men again - seen their eyes, their expressions - those reflections of the man he'd become telling him more than any mirror could, more than he could face: shock, concern, disquiet, disgust - a hint of fear. . .

There was more.

He'd been around long enough to know when he was being followed, his movements monitored for those even deeper in the dark. Always in his periphery, never coming out into the light where he could see them - like the hint of a scent, the rumour of a memory - something you knew was there, but just couldn't quite bring into focus.

It had kept him silent, as it had been meant to – that and the knowledge of what had happened to the other ITs who'd been out there with him that night. . .

Callard shook himself, dragged his mind back to the present. He straightened up, his gun still in his hand, and surveyed the wreckage.

Quomin Tong: illegal drug kitchen. Cutter manufacturer. It all added up to any unpleasant chemical you could stuff into a gel-fill capsule and sell to some poor bastard who didn't know any better. But that was crap, too. They all knew - all too well. A long time cutter user was a nasty sight.

Quomin Tong: the first real assignment Stamet had given him. An incongruous feeling when he'd got it, a contradiction he'd known the moment he'd felt it. It was a strange existence, ironic in a way. A job he'd hated while he'd been in; something he couldn't wait to get back into when he'd been out.

He'd got his lead on the Quomin Tong early the day before. They'd gone in at 8:00 a.m., surprised faces all around as the first NYPO units had opened fire. Quomin were vicious even by Tong standards, and only the NYPO's uniforms packed the kind of fire power and armour it had taken to pin the little bastards down. Despite the element of surprise, it had been a bad couple of minutes.

The flinty stench of burnt propellant, powdered plaster and brick dust filled his nostrils now as he wandered numbly

through the bullet riddled wreckage, giving final instructions to the Uniform in charge.

Exhausted and heady with adrenalin, a cold wind was blowing as he walked uptown along Park, the blare of ambulance sirens echoing from the surrounding buildings as he made for his car.

Air was full of smells, despite the wind: smog and cooking fat. Gray day, he watched the sky between the towers as he walked, his hands buried in his pockets.

The shrill warble from his pocket startled him.

“Callard,” he said as he got the cell up to his ear.

“IT Callard. New-Russell dispatch. Got a call-in from IC Stamet for you. Soon as you can.”

Callard made a face. “No message?”

“No.”

“On my way,” he said, and killed the line.

He hit the multi-level automatic car park only a minute later, passing through a crowd of alley-dwellers on his way. Latter day winos, the cutters they took were cheaper than booze and kicked like hell. Visibly wrecked, or rapidly heading that way, every one of them was on their way down from something. They eyed him closely, hungry, searching. And he thought of the Tong they’d just taken out. This was their territory. Waiting for the cutter dealer?

He’d be late this morning, Callard thought dryly.

Drive uptown was a long one. Heavy traffic. Even with the overways - the ‘bolt on’ attempts at multi-multi-level

expressways throughout Manhattan and the boroughs - it was still tough going. He listened to the TV as he drove, dialled up a few reports as he thought of them. The lists were endless. Cases up for grabs. A plethora of work - never enough bodies to do it - and him on a leash. Christ!

He downloaded the report he'd written the previous night for this morning's raid. Things had gone pretty much as he'd guessed.

It'd started to rain by the time he'd made the Triboro Bridge. A veil of silvery vapour as it beat down, it enclosed him utterly, Queens' and The Bronx's towering skylines vanishing behind the drifting eddies.



Callard waited in the Bull Pen while they called Stamet. Across the room, a handful of other ITs loitered. Waiting for assignments, or waiting to be paid. Either way, it was a slow process. He caught an eye, nodded a greeting before he went back to his examination of the main board.

Only one case really stood out.

50902, for the main board record. 'East Side Vanishing' among the ITs. It was a strange one. Five men they knew of, all within the last two months. Disappeared without a trace. No signs, no clues, nothing notable about any of them, apart from the one thing they all had in common, which is why they'd linked them in the first place.

Norstrand had it, had been running the case since they'd had the first inkling of what was going on. Word was out, though. Norstrand was missing. It was a bad whisper -

like they weren't going to be seeing Norstrand again. Question was, had he taken off, broken down finally? Or had something else happened to him? Something nastier? But then, that was the risk they all ran.

There was little doubt about the Vanishing. Not now. No coincidence of disappearances, they were as certain as they could be that the missing men had been victims, and 'serial' was on everyone's lips. It sent a mild shiver every time he heard it.

As common as they were, serial killers were still hard - unless they were seriously crazy, made a mistake, or wanted to be caught. But that was the thing. Going after a multiple murderer was a dangerous game, one he knew all too well. No resources meant they were on their own on. Like bounty hunters with a difference: a modicum of respectability as they hunted down the psychotics, the psychopaths, the homicidal.

There was another aspect to this one, though. An even darker side he could only begin to guess at, but which haunted him constantly. Norstrand had been one of the seven ITs who'd been out there in Battery Park. Now he, Norstrand and Mountgate were the last ones left. Things had happened to the others. There'd been question marks over how they'd died: suspicious circumstances - unidentified shots from the dark.

"Callard?"

His train of thought broke as he jerked his head around. A uniform, "Stamet's ready for you," he said.

He wondered about Stamet's call-in as he rode the elevator; wondered about Norstrand, about what it meant. He decided not to draw the obvious conclusion. It was too soon for Stamet to bring him all the way back in, not on something as big as this.

"Take a seat," Stamet said as Callard walked in. Stamet was working on something, barely looking up as he tossed a reader across the desk.

Callard took it, read the case header: 50902. He looked up sharply, met Stamet's eyes. The man was watching him closely.

"That's right," Stamet said.

Callard felt a cool thrill, a fluttering in his midriff. He knew what this meant.

"Norstrand's gone," he said.

"We think so."

"Are we going looking?"

Stamet's eyes dropped. "You are - while you're working his case."

His heart racing now, Callard said, "Have I got a priority?"

"Sure. Norstrand comes last."

"Rough."

"Realistic."

Callard glanced back down at the reader, scanned it quickly. "Any leads I should be jumping on?"

“Yes, if you can call them that. You’ll pick it up from the file. You’ve got a Bureau liaison, too. He’s there as well.”

He flicked through Norstrand’s notes. It was a mess. But there was something familiar about it - something he’d recognised about it: like a case he’d worked on - Alexia Sabid - *Rabid Sabid*. The IT who’d been following that one had vanished, too. . .

“When do I start?” Callard said without looking up.

“Immediately. Usual contract.”

“This everything?” Stamet nodded. “Then I’ll keep you posted.” He got up and started to leave, but turned again as he reached the door.

Stamet looked up at him after a few moments, a curious expression on his face as he waited for Callard to say something. “There anything else?” Stamet asked as the silence stretched.

“Thanks,” Callard said. “Thanks for doing this.”

Stamet gave him a thin smile. “Thanks?” he said. “I’m not sure you should be thanking me for this.” His expression was dark, his eyes unfathomable. Callard understood. In a sense, Stamet had been out there in Battery Park, too, and Stamet had watched it all unfold in exactly the same way.

Callard just nodded and left.

CHAPTER 2
NIGHT OF THE
HUNTER

Tanjil Bren watched the shadows.

Dappled, they played against the ceiling, dancing and weaving. He could hear her breathing beside him, soft and regular. Her skin was warm - hot with life.

The night had been dark before he found her, dark and frightening and furious. Faces and sounds, the lights glaring at him through the smoke shrouded club chaos as his mind had swum, spinning with the drugs.

The memory of the dream was still with him: dark and terrifying, though even he hadn't wanted to admit what it meant - not then.

Now he knew.

He'd gone out searching. Just hunting in the crowd, the glittering, seething mass of leather and hate and confusion and desire. He had no idea what he was waiting for or even what he'd hoped he'd see. Because he had no real idea what it was he was looking for; no idea who it would be, what form it would take.