

Chapter 1

Strange Things Are Afoot

You want to know where it began. Fine. I was suffering through another shitty Friday night in a long line of shitty nights in even shittier Eureka, California, slaving away at *el supremo shitto* Circle K. At least, that's what I thought, before Delilah and the tweeker terror struck on the same night. I'd never dare bitch about a Friday night, let me tell you.

I worked the graveyard shift. Your typical graveyard shift worker in Eureka was either a tweeker looking for something to do during the asshole hours of the night, or someone who had drawn the wrath of their boss and the boss was trying to save herself the trouble of firing your ass. I've never been one for the normal, though. I chose the graveyard shift because I hate - well, *bated* - people. I also thought I was going to end up a great *artiste* of some merit, but we see how that went. The point being that even though I despised late nights, they were just what I needed: time to escape people and work on my art. The catch was that my social life had gone non-existent while my work improved in ways I couldn't have imagined. Goes to show there's no middle ground.

The dead of night seemed cursed, or blessed, hell, I don't know. All I know is time slowed down; everything, the demands, pressures, and expectations of the world, ground to a halt. Lack of sleep started hunting me like a hungry wolf. Mind you, I fought the wolf away, and very successfully I might add, with the aid of the Holy Trinity: Monster energy drink, Red Bull, and Mountain Dew Code Red. I always kept at least one can of these weapons in my purse, ready for rapid deployment.

Even with a good jolt of caffeine and the juice from bull balls, I told somebody - I can't remember who - that those hours were the closest you could get to understanding what it was like to be an inter-dimensional traveler, stuck between your world and the world of the mundanes. You couldn't help but let the weirdness guide your work. Charcoals and inks turned from tools in my hands into portals to surreal worlds, opening gates to those places. I'm talking real Lovecraftian stuff, beasts from beyond the stars.

Back to our particular lousy night, which was already drawing in on being a truly shitty night, although I didn't know it yet. I had my ear buds driven as deep as I could, because they tuned in the blandest damned Sirius station they could find and god forbid if they found out you touched the dial. Michael Bolton at 3 in the morning is cruel and unusual, I say. Give me some UK Subs or even some Bowie if you're going middle of the road. I need good music - it's like oxygen.

It had been a good night so far: Babes in Toyland on the iPod, canvas pad on the counter, the charcoals *singing* under my fingers. I had started with a boring little sketch of Kristy...you remember her? For now, let it be enough that she was only the love of my life and you took her from me.

I was busy turning Kristy into this sneering Nordic goddess, holding the severed head of her enemy in her right hand. Not my normal work, but the weird hours, right? Eh, she'd love it anyway. It was right up her alley, even if it I had made it as morbid as a goth at a funeral.

I was working on her eyes when the front door chimed. We had the most annoying damned chime in the world, but it sure worked. Like Pavlov's punker girl, I would sweep my pad off the counter and become the most model employee the Circle K had ever seen.

Like I said, I worked the shift escape people, so somebody coming in at 3:30 in the night was a bit...odd, you'd say. Not odd enough to anticipate the storm coming my way, but odd enough to get me a little irritated at the old woman walking through the front door.

She could be anybody's granny - had a big head of curly white hair, wrinkles around the eyes like she hadn't stopped smiling since she popped out of her mom, and bright blue eyes. It made it hard to hate on her, even if I wanted to.

She shuffled over to the Froster machine. The old biddy seemed to have a taste for the blue raspberry. I'd have gone for something with a bit more jolt myself, but maybe she just woke up? She shuffled up to the counter, and I started ringing her up.

Her behavior gave me the first clue that she might be a bit different from the old biddies that typically passed through. She didn't have anything to say about my hair color or my nose ring - how I'd be so pretty if I wasn't messing with my looks. She didn't say anything about my tattoos, either. She wasn't even paying attention to them. It made me say - and I swear to God I *never* said this sort of thing - "anything else I can get for you, ma'am?" *Ma'am!* Can you believe that?

She smiled and put a hand to her chest. "I suppose I'll need some smokes," she said.

God help me, I returned her smile. "What brand?"

"Marlboro 100s. Not the light stuff, either. Can't abide that."

I paused. *Hardcore for an old lady, but it's her lungs.* I bent down and got her smokes.

"It's nice to see someone's still awake," she said.

"It's kind of my job," I mumbled, chewing on my nail. I think this might have been the most I'd said to a customer in months. I'd have marveled at it, but I also noticed something going on inside me. I mean, besides transforming into Polly Prissy Pants. My chest started feeling like when you're going up in the roller coaster - you know, that building feeling? Only I never liked roller coasters, so I was panicking. I went from liking the old lady to feeling in my gut that something was weird about her. Dahmer weird.

"It's still nice to see," the old biddy said. "Could just as easily sleep under there."

I forced a laugh, a little worried she would be able to tell and maybe rip my throat out. "Don't I know it? But," I said, and lifted an empty Red Bull can from beside the register, "the magic of caffeine prevails, as always."

She leaned on the counter and said. "Mmm, is that stuff safe?"

"I've never had a problem."

"Doesn't mean it couldn't start now."

"Whatever gets the job done."

"I suppose." The old biddy offered me her hand. "I'm Delilah, by the way. Delilah McKinley. At your service."

I stared at her hand.

Don't be an ass. Shake it.

I'd rather have put my hand straight up a dog's ass, but I shook it. It hadn't even occurred to me that she might be nice, warm, and soft, but she was, and it made it a little more bearable.

She expected me to give her my name, even though she could read the damned name tag. "Matty," I said. "Matty DiCamillo. At your...uh. Service. I guess."

"Good manners," she said. "You don't see that much anymore." She picked up the bag.

I faked a tip of my invisible top hat, touching my long green hair.

"When do *you* get off your shift?" she said.

Of course, that was it. She wanted to get some from me, and had picked up on my "family" vibe. It wasn't the first time, either. "I'm sorry. I've got a girlfriend."

"That's very sweet, and I'm happy for you, but I don't see how that's not related to what I asked you."

I wondered if she was for real, or playing stupid since she got shot down. Crazy vibe or not, I had to know where she going with this. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity, I suppose. You look tired."

I wasn't buying it for a second. She was after something, but I couldn't figure out her angle. "I'm fine. I get off at six. No worries."

"Mmm." She stepped away from the counter. "You take care of yourself tonight, you hear? You never know what could happen."

That *really* put the heebie jeebies in me. Dahmer weird, indeed. I shrugged, figuring the best path was to play it cool and keep my eyes open. "I try to."

She pointed at me. "I'm serious."

Believe me, I knew she was. I also knew I was ready for the bat to get the hell out of my store. "Okay, okay."

The old biddy held the finger in the air a moment longer. "Good. Maybe we'll run into each other again sometime."

Not if I have anything to say about it, I thought. "Buh-bye now." I watched her wander on out the front door. Nice or not, I was glad to get rid of her. The rising feeling vanished, along with the need to spew.

I rolled my neck, trying to clear my mind. Even without Delilah checking in, the early morning buzz in my head was coming together, threatening to rise into the last crescendo of sleepiness that tried to pull me down right before dawn.

Caffeine. I needed more. Stat. So I wandered out from behind the counter toward the drink cases, fetching another energy drink, I don't remember which, one with a name that was no doubt some "clever" sexual innuendo, like you were drinking down a load.

The front door chimed again.

Christ. I couldn't win. I wondered how my night could get any worse.

I've sure as hell learned never to ask that question again, let me tell you, because the shotgun leveled at my chest answered it.

The girl who held the shotgun was thin and scaly, her dyed black hair degenerating into something like a cross between a bird's nest and a tornado, makeup smeared all over her face. What we called a Eureka Tweeka, a meth head of the lowest class who had usually degenerated into knocking over liquor stores or their own families, whichever was easier.

I'd encountered a few in my time in the Circle K, but she was the first weapon-toting member of her tribe to cross my path. I can't say I regretted missing out on it.

"Can you control the cameras?" the Tweeka asked me, glancing at the camera over the frozen goods case.

"Sure," I lied. "Behind the counter." This just happened to be where they had plugged in the silent alarm.

She motioned toward the counter with the shotgun. "Do it."

"Your wish is my command. Stay calm." I walked toward the counter, being sure to do it nice and slow, keeping those hands in the air and visible.

She seemed to realize something might be amiss by the time we reached the counter. She furrowed her brow, and it was a cute brow, I had to admit, she might have been something before the twack, but now she was pure danger and need. "Nothing f-f-funny," she said.

"I wouldn't dream of it. You've got the gun. I'm going to hit the button that turns them off, okay?"

She nodded, three rapid up-and-down bobs.

I slid my hand under the counter and thumbed the silent alarm. Pretty damned smooth, if I did have to say so myself, especially considering how I was ready to piss myself. "It's off."

"Open the register."

I keyed in some bullshit transaction and popped it open. She reached over the counter and started scooping out the money. You'd think it would vanish if she didn't move fast enough. I saw

an opening where I could've *maybe* taken the gun, but no way was I going to try anything funny with a crazy twecker.

Once she was done emptying the Circle K's coffers, she pointed the gun at me again.

"Can you get in the safe?" she asked.

"It's a time lock. I can't open it at all."

She nodded. Probably needed to fix, and had everything she needed. Except that wasn't quite it either, was it? Nah.

I'm screwed. The bitch is smart enough to be dangerous, even with the thwack fucking her up. Hell, maybe even because of the thwack, who knows?

She had known to get rid of the cameras, and it dawned on me real fast that she had to get rid of the only witness.

I could almost see the thought that killing me there would be bloody and make it a lot easier to catch her cross her twisted little mind, as the wasteland that was once a pretty face went blank. I'd seen this scary little tool enough to know it well: she was turning the old emotional tap clean off so she could do whatever she wanted. That, my friends, is what makes addicts the most frightening human beings you may ever encounter.

"You're coming with me," she said.

Here was where I ran into a problem. First thing they tell you is your odds of getting killed by a kidnapper rise when you let them take you somewhere else. Problem is, I could see this little bitch was going to kill me either way. The only chance I might have was letting her think she had control of me and getting the drop on her in some other place. I yelled at myself for not grabbing the gun when she was emptying the register, but what was done was done. "Sure, okay." I walked around the counter and toward her, my heart in my throat. I wanted to think my odds of getting out of this were good, but I knew the truth of the situation. I wished I'd have had time to say goodbye to Kristy; hell, I couldn't even remember if I'd told her I loved her the last time I talked to her.

The bitch put the shotgun in my back and led me out the front door toward the most broken-down piece of crap black Cadillac I may ever have laid eyes on. It was a goddamn crime what she had done to a beautiful piece of machinery; I could have beaten her for it. Instead, I let her lead me to the trunk. She unlocked it and lifted the lid.

Ab shit, I was thinking, a trunk? I'm not one for enclosed spaces at the best of times, but the thought of getting in that thing without knowing where I was going? "Can't you at least put me in the back seat? Or up front, you can keep the gun on me there."

She shook her head, the swaying, ugly sister of her bobbing head nod. "S-s-s-somebody would see you."

"I'll get down in front of the seat so nobody can see me. I promise I won't make any trouble. Just don't put me in the trunk, for God's sake. Have a heart."

She shook her head, her hair beating her face. "Get in."

"Christ," I moaned, and believe me, I didn't mean to, but what the hell else was I going to do? I climbed in, God help me.

Chapter 4

And I Feel Fine...

Anticlimax of anticlimaxes, we went to my place, er, abode. My trailer. In an, uhm, community of mobile estates, I believe is what we called it. Fancy, right? But what do you expect when you work at a Circle K and your art isn't selling? At least I got a decent one, double-wide with good air and a solid foundation. Those things aren't as bad as you think.

I wanted to stay up and see what the hell was going to happen next, but no matter how cranked I might have been, and let me tell you I was cranked up like a tweaker on her second night of a self-destructive binge, lack of sleep was doing its thing to my head. I could tell I would start seeing things soon, so it was time for Ambien, ear plugs, the mask, and a good head of sleep.

Kristy stayed at the trailer, a combination of not wanting to be alone with the end of the world crashing down around her head, which was understandable, and still wanting to hover over me as if I would break into little bitty pieces, which was less understandable and a lot more infuriating, but she loved me, so what could I say?

I woke up around five in the evening; I remember, because it was already getting dark. Things were still a little fuzzy around the edges, though. Ambien hangover. It took me a few seconds of stumbling past Kristy sitting at my computer, her lithe, beautiful legs tucked up under her body and my massive headphones dwarfing her tiny little head.

"Oh God, you're awake." She used the bubbly little voice she sometimes affected, the one that made my head rattle. I loved her to death, but good lord she could be squeaky. She took the headphone off of one ear and looked at me like my arrival was a religious experience.

I stopped and grunted something. Who the hell knows what it was, didn't matter.

"Come here."

"You been there all day?"

"Yeah. Things are going crazy. Come on, come over here."

I fought with my desire to guzzle down every caffeinated beverage in the place (and believe me, that was quite a lot), and managed to stumble over to the computer. I laid my head on her shoulder not just out of affection but because it felt like it was going to crash to the ground at any second if something wasn't supporting it.

She let out this nice little coo, so I guess I managed to win some points. She put a hand on my face, and I kissed it.

I glanced at the computer screen. "Sweet Jesus, is this the control room?" I asked. She had at least four streaming channels running in cascading windows; I could pick out Al Jazeera English and CNN on top in a mess of movement that I couldn't put together, but I didn't recognize some of the others. They were in foreign languages; that was all I could make out.

"I know, right? I feel like a superpower." She giggled. "I told you, things are going crazy."

"Much like my router. What's going on?"

She pointed out the Al Jazeera feed. "That's a riot in Mumbai." She clicked over to CNN. "That's where somebody, like, bombed the DC Metro. Totes fucked up, I think a lot of people got killed, right?" She clicked to another window. "That's Tokyo. Nobody *really* knows what's going on there, but it sounds like somebody attacked a power plant."

A blackout in Tokyo. "Christ almighty." I reached past her for the cup of Mountain Dew sitting beside the keyboard.

She looked to me, blue eyes boring into mine. “That’s, like, the point, right? People figure they’ve got nothing left to lose.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I polished off the Mountain Dew and shook my head. “How long ‘til Humboldt goes tits up?”

“That’s the thing,” she said, clicking on an open Chrome window. “Look.”

The headline jumped out at me:

HUMBOLDT BAY IN FLAMES

I rubbed my eyes. “They’re burning the entire bay?”

“No, duh, how do you burn water? They think somebody burned the Marina.”

That would be the Woodley Island Marina. Think what you would about the rich assholes who kept their boats there, the place was gorgeous. You didn’t have to be a snot to love it or want it saved. My stomach sank. “How could they?”

“I know, right?” She looked at the glass. “You going to fill that up?”

“Yeah, sorry, hon.” I straightened and went to the fridge. I was opening the fridge when a knock came at the door. “You expecting somebody?” I said.

“Why would I?”

“I don’t know.” I sure as hell wasn’t expecting anybody. Could be Daniel stopping by, but something tingling in my brain didn’t think that was the case.

The knock came again.

“You going to get that?” she asked.

“Yeah. Sure.” Brave words, but my stomach, which was already on the bad side, gurgled at the mere suggestion. I put the glass down and went to the trailer’s front door, picking up my old baseball bat from beside the door. I kept it there for such an occasion, and had made sure it was ready ever since the run-in with the Tweeka.

“Who is it?” I asked, and the answer was another knock. “Asshole,” I muttered, and glanced at Kristy, whose eyes had gone wide, reflecting my anxiety.

“Answer me or I’m going to call the cops. You know I will.”

The answer was another knock.

“Motherfucker, if you don’t-”

I didn’t get to finish. The asshole on the other end of the door knocked the door off its hinges, the full weight of the door plowing into me. Kristy screamed and jumped up from the computer.

Before I knew what was happening, he had me by the throat and was slamming me into the wall beside the computer, holding me up by my throat.

When my head cleared, I saw the guy wasn’t a guy. I couldn’t tell *what* he was. He was a shadow, only a shadow living in three dimensions and dead-set on fucking you up.

“Watcher scum,” it hissed.

“Who are you,” was all I could manage. The world was already going dark from him cutting off my air supply. I danced on the edge of Hell’s doorstep, yet I had never been calmer. I looked at him with wonder as everything slowed. The world didn’t just go black, it went black and white.

The hell? I thought, and then reality took a flying leap off of fuck mountain. Everything lurched, like God reached down and picked up the table of the world, tilting it at a right angle. Only gravity kept everything attached in some fashion. Time and space knotted up, and the sunlight coming through the windows seemed to have gone the consistency of mayonnaise.

The shadow had frozen. I reached down and started unwrapping his fingers one at a time when that familiar, uneasy feeling from the K rose in my chest again. You know how when you get

anxious you feel like you might explode? Like that, only I felt like I *did* explode, in a burst of time and space, unwinding and knocking the bastard backwards.

Next thing I knew I was lying on my back in the side yard, staring up at the black night sky, wondering how I got there and what was going on.

Delilah appeared over my head, smiling at me with her freaky young-and-old face.

“She appears to be awake, dear,” she said to somebody I couldn’t see.

“What the hell?” I said.

“Thank God.” That was Kristy, and she was all over me, hugging, kissing, making it so I couldn’t see Delilah.

Kristy and Delilah. Together. I didn’t like that idea one bit.

“Yeah, it’s me,” I returned a few kisses before I pushed her away and sat up, raising an eyebrow at Delilah. “So you came back for me.”

“I saved your life.” She folded her hands at her waist, prim and proper. “That’s twice now. I do believe you owe me.”

“Saved my life? What? How?”

She *tsked*. “I took care of your assailant, of course. He won’t be bothering anyone anymore.”

Damn. Add another kill to Granny’s body count. “How did I get out here?”

Kristy answered. “Oh my God, you have no idea. It’s *so* badass.”

“What’s badass? What’s going on here?” *For that matter...* “Where are the cops?”

“They’re, uhm, occupied,” Kristy said. “I couldn’t even get through to 911, but we don’t even need them. Everything’s going to be okay.”

I was too tired and disoriented to fight. “If you say so.” I tried to rise, but that was a tall order. Took the both of them to get their arms under me and lift. “Tell me what’s going on. The condensed version, please. I’ve had a hell of a week so far and I don’t know how much more I can take.”

“Mmm, indeed you have. Kristy, can you get the door?”

“No problem,” she said, and she was gone again.

I blinked. The door in question belonged on the passenger side of Delilah’s Pontiac, and Kristy stood beside it, holding it open like she belonged on the Price is Right. I had this little flash of Delilah holding the little microphone Bob Barker used to hold, and I almost chuckled. Almost.

“Where are we going?”

Delilah looked to Kristy. “My, my, we forgot to tell her, didn’t we?”

“Shoot, we did.”

“Forgot to tell me what?”

“We’re going to Vegas,” Kristy said.

“What?”

“Vegas.” She bopped across the grass. I guess in her mind everything was going great, and we were heading out for a fun vacation, not taking a one-way road trip to Hell. “Come on, silly.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think I’m going anywhere. Not with her.”

The old woman sighed. “After all you’ve seen, you still don’t believe?”

“It’s not that I don’t believe. That’s not the problem at all.”

She advanced on me, one finger raised and poised, like a weapon. “I don’t think you understand. You have no choice in the matter.”

“Oh I don’t, huh? What, you going to kidnap me?”

“Don’t you think I would have already done that by now if I planned to?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’re devious. Why do you we have to go anywhere with you?”

She pursed her lips, going duck-faced. “Do you not recall what you did in there?”

Time and space slowing down, some weird explosion, waking up on the lawn. Hm. “Nah, it wasn’t very memorable.”

“Sarcasm does not suit you.”

“Shows how well you know me.”

In between us, Kristy was the kid watching mom and dad fight, eyes huge and shiny. “Aw, come on. You should give her a chance. She, like, probably saved my life. Probably yours, too, you know.”

“All right, all right. I don’t know what the hell it was, but I do know something happened in there.”

Delilah clapped her hands. “Wonderful. You see? That was your power. The one I told you about. I’d be happy to tell you more, but we do need to get going.” She looked toward the horizon. “This town will not be safe for long.”

“What? Why not?” I asked.

“Surely you are aware of what’s going on in the world at large.”

“I *totally* am,” Kristy said, not helping the situation one iota. “I was watching everything I could find. It’s *totes* going to shit.”

“I know that,” I said. “Okay, but you’d better spill.”

“I will tell you all I know.” She went to the Pontiac.

“Wait. I need to pack.”

“Oh.” Kristy giggled. “*So* on it. Already did it. It’s in the trunk. Oh and...” She went to the car and opened the back door, fetching my purse and presenting it. “Here.”

How long was I out? “Hm. Okay. iPod?”

“Check.” She saluted.

“Cell phone.”

“Duh.”

“Kindle.”

“In the suitcase.”

Kristy knew what was what, what was important to me. I don’t know what got hold of me, but I grabbed her and planted a giant kiss on her, right there in front of Delilah. Even gave her a little tongue action, I knew she liked that.

When I was done, she took a step back, waving a hand over her face. “All right,” she said, and climbed into the Pontiac.

I nodded at Delilah. “Okay. You saved my ass a couple times. The least I can do is give you a chance.”