

SHIMMER

(Continued...)

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CHAPTER 10

Ambrose had converted the downstairs office into a library, but was displeased with the result. Liana offered to help him decorate, but already knew it was hopeless, even with all the computers and office equipment upstairs. If Ambrose had only needed space for the large mahogany desk and three matching burgundy leather wing armchairs, the office would have sufficed, even sacrificing some wall space for several freestanding bookshelves. But Ambrose had thirty or more book-filled boxes scattered across the hard wood floor, and more than a half dozen paintings leaning against the desk, old masters in ornate frames impatient for wall space of their own.

“Had I the luxury of actually planning this trip, I would have found a sprawling mansion for us.”

“Lot of those on the market, are there?” Liana asked with a wry grin, but he ignored her comment.

“This—” He gestured at the chaos with both hands. “This is what happens when one relocates on a whim.”

Momentarily out of the way on the far windowsill, a police scanner produced occasional background chatter, the low-key, law-abiding pulse of a suburban town. Ambrose, illogically, took offense at the lack of useful rift-murder information the device had provided so far.

“I wouldn’t call it a whim,” Liana said. “Logan’s premonition was—”

“Yes, yes, I know,” he said. “The boy is unfailingly accurate and, in the grand scheme, this is no more than a minor nuisance. We shall, inevitably, manage.”

“Right,” Liana said. “We can scatter the bookcases all around the house.”

“Besides, I’m too old to fall prey to Barrett’s aversion to inaction.”

“You’re not too old.”

“If I’m not, then *who* is?” Ambrose asked with a twinkle in his eyes. “Never mind,” he added, shaking his head. “Scatter the bookcases, you say? Yes, I suppose we must.”

“And the paintings...”

Ambrose held up his hand. “We shall not scatter my paintings. I only permit myself a few as it is.” He flipped through the upright stack of paintings, a thoughtful expression creasing his brow.

“What have you got there?”

“So many in storage, so hard to decide,” Ambrose said with another head shake. “I’ve stuck with the classics. One of Bosch’s studies of Hell, Schongauer’s demons, a Bruegel, and Grunewald, ah, and the Dalis.”

“Why not choose something a little more...uplifting? Might brighten the place a bit.”

“Oh, Liana, these works are testaments,” Ambrose said with a slow shake of his head. “When I hang these, our home becomes a hall of remembrance. We must never forget what we have fought, and what we must continue to fight.”

“With you here to remind us,” Liana said, smiling, “I doubt that will ever be a problem.”

“Good to be appreciated,” Ambrose said. He stared off into the distance for a moment, but then his gaze returned to Liana. “Anything more from Thalia on the current situation?”

Liana shook her head. “She keeps saying it’s *the Dark* again. Not just darkness, but *the Dark*.”

Ambrose scratched his jaw. “Is it possible she has specific knowledge of this rift?”

“Clairvoyance? Sure, why not?”

“Perhaps not clairvoyance. Perhaps something else...”

“What are you thinking?”

“Cryptomnesia.”

“But how—when? She hasn’t crossed a rift since last year, since she lost...”

“Exactly,” Ambrose said. “Lost knowledge resurfacing from her subconscious and manifesting through her art. She went into that rift alone”—he sighed wearily—“and has never been the same.”

Liana shuddered. If the rift that had crippled Thalia’s mind was the same rift they were chasing in Hadenford, all of them were at severe risk.

Ambrose took hold of her upper arm. “Fear is natural, Liana, but you mustn’t let it control you.”

“I know.”

“There are more... sides to this rift,” Ambrose said. “More threats.”

“Logan’s right. Your pep talks need work.”

“We have the luxury of speculation now,” Ambrose reminded her. “But speculation is all that it is. We must study the unknown, rather than dread it.”

“Marginally better,” Liana said with a dry chuckle. “But it still needs work.” She glanced down at the nightmarish imagery Bosch had captured in oil on canvas. “Think I’ll be shopping for some flower arrangements this afternoon.”

“You bring flowers into our home to die and call that uplifting?”

“At least they’re colorful,” Liana said with a defensive frown.

“Fine, I’ll buy some potted plants. Better?”

“Yes,” Ambrose said with a nod as he considered the Bosch.

“Now, where shall I display the torments of Hell?”

On the corner of his desk, the telephone rang.

“Wherever your little heart desires,” Liana said, patting him on the shoulder as she reached for the phone.

CHAPTER 11

“Logan, we can’t stand here outside her house.”

“I doubt she’ll invite us in.”

Fallon rolled her eyes in exasperation. “No, but she’ll call the cops. She thinks you’re a psycho.”

“Besides,” Logan said from the shade of a maple tree.

“Technically, we’re sitting outside her house, not standing. Well, I’m sitting. You’re pacing.”

“Maybe she has a point,” Fallon said. “You are psycho.”

“Psychic, psycho,” Logan shrugged. “It’s a fine distinction.”

“Shut up!” Fallon yelled, took a step toward him, and kicked his thigh hard. Without another word, she turned and walked away.

“Hey, that hurt!” Logan said, rubbing his thigh.

“Good!”

Logan climbed to his feet and followed her, sparing a nervous sideways glance at the sprawling Tudor home. Chelsea’s green hybrid bike leaned against the porch railing. “What just happened?” Logan called after Fallon.

“Didn’t see that coming, huh?”

“No...”

“So you don’t know everything.”

“Of course not,” Logan said dejectedly. “I never know... enough.”

Fallon stopped abruptly.

Logan paused behind her, wondering what had caused her sudden mood swing. “Look, whatever I said that upset you, I’m sorry. Sometimes... if not for gallows humor, my whole family would...” He sighed. “Sometimes that’s not even enough.”

She turned to face him and he could see the beginning of tears in her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think?” Logan said bitterly, walking back to the maple tree and the two backpacks propped on either side of it. The pain in his thigh made him wince, but he clenched his jaw and ignored it.

From behind him, Fallon said softly, “Tell me.”

He sat on the curb and plucked a blade of grass. “In my family, part of the job description... Let’s just say that death isn’t the worst thing that can happen to you.”

Fallon sighed, sat close beside him, allowing her thigh to brush against his. “Sorry about the kicking.”

“No problem.”

She twirled an amethyst ring around her left index finger, staring absently at the silver band and lavender stone. “Sometimes I worry... about my dreams.”

“Why?”

“My mother,” Fallon said, looking briefly into his eyes before returning her gaze to the ring. “She had them too.”

“Kind of thing runs in the family.”

“Naturally,” Fallon said with a wry grin. “My worst fear. Ever since she left.” Fallon was silent for a while; Logan sat quietly beside her without prodding. Eventually, she continued. “Been happening to me for a while now,” she said as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. “Guess I’ve been living in denial. And I can’t talk to my father about it. He’d think I was... Sometimes I feel so alone”—her voice caught in her throat—“but that’s when I imagine how she must have felt before...before...”

“Before she left you and your father?”

Fallon nodded, swallowed hard.

Logan peeled the blade of grass into strips, head hanging. “Maybe you should call her. She might be able to help you get through this.”

Fallon laughed bitterly. “Could someone in your family arrange that call?”

“What—?”

“She left us for the Great Beyond,” Fallon said, swinging her right arm up and away. “Two years ago.”

“Oh...” Logan said softly, feeling supremely stupid. “I... Fallon, I’m sorry.”

“Everybody is,” Fallon said. With the tip of her index finger, she wiped a tear from her eye, and looked at him with a brave smile. “So, what do you think? Any hope for someone like me?”

Beneath the flippant question, Logan sensed the great burden Fallon carried with her. He opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted by an angry shout.

“Hey!”

They both looked up as Chelsea strode down the walkway that divided her front yard and crossed the street toward them.

After an embarrassed little wave, Fallon said, “Hi, Chelsea.”

“What the hell’s going on, Fallon?” Chelsea’s gaze flashed at Logan for a moment, then returned to Fallon. “Take Freak Boy and get away from my house or I’m calling the police.”

“We were just resting—” Logan protested, but Fallon jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. *Right*, Logan thought, *lame excuse*.

“Two minutes,” Chelsea said. “Got it?”

Logan nodded absently as he examined her face, waiting for a return of the gruesome death image... but no vision came. He’d like nothing better than to dismiss his premonition and leave to avoid the threat of arrest for stalking. But Ambrose would advise him to defuse the situation in order to remain in the game. As Chelsea turned indignantly on her heel and walked back toward her house, Logan rose and took a few steps after her. “Chelsea! Listen, I’m sorry about earlier. I get these really bad headaches—migraines—and I—”

“Save it!”

Logan shrugged and sighed.

Fallon quirked a sympathetic smile. “Least you tried.”

“For all the—” He saw a slate-gray Jeep approaching. “Good! Barrett’s here.”

“Good? Stalking by the dozen? More is *not* merrier, Logan.”

Barrett made a U-turn in the middle of the street and pulled up to the curb near where they had been sitting. “Status?” Barrett asked, tilting his head out the window. “Wait—who’s your friend?”

“This is Fallon...” He turned to her. “Don’t know your last name.”

“Correct,” she said.

Logan sighed, turned back to Barrett. “She has this thing about not giving out her name.”

“It’s Maguire, okay?” Fallon said, rolling her eyes.

“Hello, Fallon Maguire,” Barrett said, flashing a high-wattage smile at her before directing a frown at Logan. “Maybe we should talk in private.”

“Little late for that,” Logan said. “She’s a dreamer. I mean, like one of us. A prescient dreamer.”

“Kid, you’re a fast operator, I’ll give you that.”

Logan felt a flush rise to his cheeks. “It’s just...”

“Forget it,” Barrett said, holding up a hand to forestall Logan’s explanations. “What’s the status here?”

“She freaked,” Logan said. “Thinks I’m a stalker. Chelsea, that is, not Fallon.” He nodded toward the Tudor-style home. “She spotted us out here and is about to call the cops in, what—?” Logan looked the question at Fallon. “About a minute.”

“Knowing Chelsea Conrad,” Fallon said with a mischievous smile. “Thirty seconds, if you’re lucky.”

“Then move along,” Barrett said. “Both of you. I’ll keep watch.”

“Alone?”

“I’d rather be here waiting for something to happen than at the house wondering if something is about to happen. Don’t worry. Tell Ambrose I’ll check in at regular intervals.”

“But—”

“Now! Before she sees you talking to me and assumes we’re tag team stalkers.”

Logan hesitated. *This isn’t how it’s supposed to happen.*

Barrett glanced at Fallon. “Go on, take him home. If you’re one of us, Ambrose will want a word with you.”

Fallon’s cocky smile fell apart. She looked at Barrett for a moment, then grabbed Logan’s upper arm and tugged him away from the Jeep. “C’mon. Let’s go!”

“Wait a sec,” Logan said, retrieving their backpacks. “I’ll be back later,” Logan promised Barrett.

“Bring a thermos of coffee—decaff,” Barrett said, grinning. “And a turkey club on seedless rye. Hold the mayo.”

“Would you like fries with that?” Logan asked sarcastically.

“No, but a dill pickle wedge would be swell.”

“Har, har,” Logan said. “C’mon, Fallon.”

For two blocks, Logan walked in self-imposed silence, contemplating the sun-dappled street as if it contained the wisdom of the ages. He refused to glance back at the Jeep and give Barrett the slightest satisfaction over trumping Logan’s position. Logically, he had to leave. Chelsea would have seen to that one way or the other. But Logan couldn’t shake the feeling he’d been relegated to the kid’s table at Thanksgiving. *Totally irrational*, he thought, shaking his head. An

impending rift was not a holiday or cause for celebration; it was a source of imminent danger. Worse, he'd been sitting there unarmed, waiting for a rift with Fallon, who had no idea what was about to happen. She might have paranormal abilities, but she wasn't even a Walker neophyte yet. She was a potential recruit and he... Logan sighed. He'd been showing off for her. Trying to impress the new girl. *Oh, brother*, Logan thought, rapping his forehead with the side of his fist.

"Do that a lot?"

"What—oh, no," Logan said. "Not enough, apparently."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No, it's stupid," Logan said. "*I'm* stupid."

"You're jealous of him, aren't you?"

"Jealous? Of Barrett?"

"Tall, dark and dashing, with an intriguing dollop of brooding, and great muscle tone," Fallon summed up. "Yeah, him."

"So you noticed."

"Hard to miss," she said, grinning. "Don't worry, though, you seem like a champion brooder yourself."

"And, of course, that's the one quality I'd want to share with Barrett."

"I noticed something else about him."

"His penetrating, sky-blue eyes? His bulging biceps? His—?"

"He was blurry."

"What? Blurry?"

"Well, that was my first impression," Fallon said. "But when I looked closer, it seemed as if his skin was... vibrating."

"You must be sensitive."

"I've always thought so," Fallon said, clutching her hands comically against her chest. "Care to read some of my poetry? My personal favorite is 'Ode to an Abandoned Gym Locker Sock.'"

"Psychically sensitive," Logan explained. "Barrett has hyperaesthesia and hyperacuity. Senses and reflexes off the charts. That muscle tone comes in handy, but I think there's also sensory prescience involved in his abilities."

"Meaning?"

"He reacts a split-second *before* something happens."

"Handy guy to have in an emergency."

"In theory."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Logan said. "Sour grapes."

Fallon chuckled. "Does he do that swoon-tingle kiss?"

"No!" Logan said too quickly. "I mean, I wouldn't know, but I doubt it. Not part of the package."

"Probably too old for me anyway," Fallon mused, watching for Logan's reaction out of the corner of her eye.

"Way too old," Logan said. "Already touching up the gray."

"You're lying."

"Am not."

"Relax, I'm kidding."

"I know."

Fallon pursed her lips. "Back there at the Jeep, you said 'she's... like one of us.' What's that mean, exactly?"

"A Walker."

"Guess you weren't listening? My last name's Maguire."

"A rose by any other name."

"We're studying Milton, not Shakespeare."

"I know."

"So you think I'm a rose?" Fallon said, grinning ear to ear.

"That's sweet."

With a sidelong glance, he muttered, "Because of all the thorns."

She poked him with her elbow. "I heard that!"

"I know."

CHAPTER 12

Soon after Logan and Fallon left him alone to watch Chelsea Conrad's house from the relative comfort of his Jeep Liberty, Barrett opened a map of southern New Jersey and draped it across the dashboard. Casual passersby would assume he was lost and checking his route. While he waited and occasionally glanced at the unfolded map, he worked his way through a bag of pistachios, tossing the half-shells in the Jeep's ashtray.

Ten uneventful minutes passed.

Maybe Logan's wrong this time, he thought. *Ambrose once said the kid's premonitions worked on a sliding temporal scale.* In other words, Barrett might have to wait five hours or five days. But Logan hadn't kept them waiting long the night before. Unbidden, the gruesome image from the interior of the white Mustang flashed in Barrett's mind. Despite his resolve, Barrett shuddered at the thought of what could have done so much damage to two human bodies in such a brief amount of time. *This one's bad, Gideon*, he thought, as if he could send the message telepathically to his absent brother. *Maybe worse than what you faced.*

Movement in the periphery of his vision grabbed his attention. Side view mirror. Black and white Crown Vic. No roof lights. Slow approach. *Terrific*, he thought, *fifteen minutes into the stakeout and I'm about to be rousted by the local constabulary.*

On the chance that Logan's grim prediction might transpire at any minute, Barrett had to stall for time. He scooped the cell phone off the passenger seat, flipped it open and held it to his right ear.

The police cruiser slowed to a stop beside Barrett's Jeep. A quick glance at the white door panel revealed the words "Police Chief" painted

in black letters. “Keeps getting better,” Barrett muttered to himself, as if talking into the cell phone.

The police chief had stepped out of the cruiser and was motioning to Barrett across the hood. Tall and lean, the Hadenford chief of police sported a severe buzz cut that revealed pale scalp underneath and wore a crisp black uniform with the radio microphone clipped to his left epaulet. Barrett glimpsed the name engraved in the brass name badge over his left shirt pocket: Grainger.

He flashed the cell phone. “Pulled over to make a call, Chief Grainger.”

“Lost?”

“Not anymore,” Barrett said. “Calling to tell them I’ll be a bit late.”

“Long drive.”

“How’s that?” Barrett asked, confused.

Chief Grainger nodded toward the rear bumper. “California plates.”

“Oh, right,” Barrett said, wondering if Grainger had already run the plates. “I’ve recently relocated to Hadenford.”

“What line of work?”

“I’m involved in security,” Barrett said. Vague but true.

“Private?”

“Looking for work, actually,” Barrett said to ward off questions about his employer. “Staying with relatives.”

“Best of luck, then,” Chief Grainger said. “Have a good day.”

Reading between the pleasantries, Barrett heard, “*Move along now.*”

“Thank you,” Barrett said. While Chief Grainger climbed back into his police cruiser, Barrett made a show of talking into the cell phone cradled against his ear, while simultaneously refolding the map on the dashboard with his free hand. He fumbled with the map long enough for the Crown Vic to turn a corner, out of sight.

Barrett wondered how convincing his patter had been and how much time he’d have before Chief Grainger decided to make another sweep along Maple Lane.

He glanced at the Conrad homestead and hoped it would be long enough.

CHAPTER 13

Chelsea had tossed her tiger-striped bicycle helmet on the living room sofa, an act of random sloppiness sure to annoy her mother when she came home in a few hours. At the moment, Chelsea had more pressing concerns than her mother's eventual displeasure. With a half-dozen textbooks spread in a semicircle around her three-ring binder on the dining room table, Chelsea attempted to wade through her considerable homework, but found her attention wondering from AP calculus to the front windows.

Normally she would be studying in her bedroom, sitting at the scuffed student desk crammed between her dresser and the window, within headphone distance of her stereo. Today, unfortunately, had taken a turn from normal, courtesy of Fallon Maguire and the new kid who had at first seemed cute in a distracted way but who now seemed weird in a neurotic way. Yelling and cursing at her for no reason. After she'd offered to help, to call a doctor. She'd thought, *Whoa, some major issues here... or drugs. Maybe drugs.* Same thing, when you came right down to it. Now he seemed fixated on Chelsea for some reason. She hadn't been bluffing when she threatened to call the cops. *Too many nut-jobs running around loose*, she thought. Fallon was Chelsea's friend, but maybe her judgment had lapsed. How long had Fallon known this guy? A few hours. *More trusting than I am*, Chelsea thought as she tapped her pencil eraser against the blank page.

After trying to wrap her brain around a particularly vexing calculus problem, she glanced toward the window and saw a police car stopped in the middle of her street. She pushed back her chair and walked over to the window, peering through the white lace curtains as the chief of police stood outside his cruiser talking to a tanned, buff guy

in a dark gray Jeep. Guy had a map open over his dashboard, looking confident but lost.

Chelsea looked up and down the street, but saw no sign of Fallon or Weird Boy. *Probably ran when they saw the cop car*, she thought with a smile. Regardless, she wasn't as nervous with Chief Grainger nearby. She hadn't called the police yet, but was glad Grainger had chosen this particular moment to make a pass along her street. It would certainly look as if she'd carried out her threat, and should convince Fallon and—*what was his name?*—Logan, to take a hint and get lost.

Maybe now she could lug her books upstairs and finish her school work with the accompaniment of some choice tunes. Something to help pass the time. If she was being honest with herself, she had to admit that staying in the house alone had added to her anxiety. Her older brother, Chad wouldn't be home from work for another hour or so, long enough to change his clothes, eat dinner with Chelsea and their mother, then rush off to his evening college courses. For now, she was alone. And sometimes the house seemed too big a place for one teenaged girl.

The thought sent a chill down her spine.

Chief Grainger, however, seemed satisfied with the situation outside. He climbed back into his cruiser and pulled away. The guy in the Jeep examined his map again, trying to regain his bearings. Chelsea noticed the out of state license plate on the back of the Jeep and it all made sense. With a sigh, she felt the tension easing out of her neck and shoulders.

She stepped away from the window, trusting in the competence of Hadenford's finest, and decided to head upstairs. She stacked the books, capped the uneven pile with an unopened can of diet soda, and mounted the stairs to her bedroom. She hoped a return to routine would instill the sense of normalcy she'd lost.

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a flicker of shadow slide down the wall of the stairwell. She turned her head, like a startled bird, but saw nothing to account for the shadow. *My imagination's running wild*, she thought. *I'm a little spooked. That's all.*

* * *

Moments after she closed her bedroom door, an ill-defined shadow rippled across the dining room floor, slipping over the furniture like an oil slick, oozing across the living room sofa, passing over the tiger-striped helmet—and settling there for a moment. Then the shadow shimmered out of existence, and the helmet was gone.