
Chapter 1

Strange Things Are Afoot

You want to know where it began. Fine. With my suffering: 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 again, 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, *hated* - people. I also believe I would end up a great *artiste* of some merit, but we see how that went.

My point is that even though I despised late nights, they were just what I needed: time to escape people and work on my art.

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 might feel 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 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, turning my beautiful woman into a 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 I had made it as morbid as a goth at a funeral.

I shaded the corner of her eyes, sticking my tongue out, when the front door chimed. We had the most annoying chime in the world, but it sure worked. Like Pavlov's punker girl, I swept my pad off the counter and became the most model employee the Circle K had ever seen.

Like I said, I worked the shift to 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 didn't even notice 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 felt a little panicked. 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 related to what I asked you."

I wondered if she was for real, or playing stupid since I shot her 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 didn't buy it for a second. She had some sort of angle, but I couldn't figure it out. "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 would be 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 serious. 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 felt just fine getting 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 some marketer no doubt branded with "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 learned never to ask that question again. The shotgun leveled at my chest answered it.

The girl who held the shotgun was thin and scaly, her dyed black hair looking 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 usually degenerated into knocking over liquor stores or their own families, whichever was easier.

I'd encountered a few in my time at 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, 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. I had to admit that it was a cute brow. She might have been something before the twack, but right then she had turned into 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 say so myself, especially considering that 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 would I try anything funny with a crazy tweeker.

Once she had finished emptying 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.

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 her realize that killing me there would be bloody and make it a lot easier to catch her, as the wasteland that had once been 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.

I ran into a problem here. First thing they tell you is that 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 emptied the register, but what was done was done.

"Sure, okay." I walked around the counter and toward her, 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

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.

Ah shit, I thought, 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 2

Got No Room to Breathe

The trunk smelled like a droid died in there. Gas, dirty motor oil, filthy metal, all that good stuff. Of course I couldn't focus on the wonderful smell because panic had set my mind on fire. I could breathe, but my brain played tricks on me, telling me the thing was air-tight, and I would run out of air any second.

Calm down. You can find a way out of this. Nothing's over. She opens the trunk, you grab the gun and pop her in the jaw with the butt. No problem, right?

The little girl in my brain wouldn't listen. Too busy throwing one queen of a shit fit.

Thank God I didn't have to drag her along much longer. The next second everything went *boom*, and me and all the other crap in the trunk slammed up against the inside wall. Knocked the wind out of me. At least she hadn't bound me up or God knows, with my luck, I'd have hit my head and never have gotten to tell you this fabulous story.

Everything got quiet after I'd rolled on top of the spare tire. I lie there wondering if she was dead - would I starve to death, or would the cops figure out what happened?

Then she started screaming like Freddy Krueger was on her tail.

Something heavy hit the gravel outside the driver's side.

I heard the Tweeka, clear as day.

"I didn't mean it, I swear, I'll give the money back, please, just don't-"

She never got to finish the sentence. Something made a heavy thud - I guess she got smacked over the head - and everything went quiet again.

So I laid there not knowing what the hell was going on, heart ready to explode in my chest, as I heard what I imagined was a serial killer reaching inside the driver's side, then heading toward the back of the car.

Oh shit, I thought. *He knows I'm here, and I'm next.* Hell, maybe the killer had targeted me all along. Who knew? My night hadn't exactly been full of luck.

The keys slid into the trunk and turned, sounding like God coming to get me. The trunk popped open, and everything was quiet except the killer's heavy breathing. My eyes were having trouble adjusting to the street light over the killer's shoulder, so all I

saw for the longest time was an ominous shadow, standing there and weighing my life.

The killer spoke. "Are you okay?"

My brain shut down for a second. No kidding. I don't know where I went, but when I came back, I knew who spoke to me: Delilah McKinley.

You have got to be kidding me, I thought. "Please don't kill me, I'm innocent, I didn't do anything," I babbled, trying to push my atoms through the trunk wall.

"Please, calm down. I'm not here to kill you, I promise."

I wanted to buy it, but the little girl was back and ready to crap her pants. "You're lying," I panted.

"*God never made a promise that was too good to be true.*"

Was she *quoting* things to me? To this day I can't figure out if she was sincere or trying to calm me down. I didn't know what to say.

She touched my shoulder. "Come on, let's get you out of there."

I let her take me. I couldn't believe it myself. She put her arm around me, pulling me toward the front of the trunk like I was made of porcelain.

"Be careful," she said, and helped me climb out. I could feel every single bruise as the effects of the fear high wore off, and climbing out was pure agony.

"She was going to -" I gasped.

"I know. Thank goodness I got here first, eh? Couldn't have you going and getting killed."

I rubbed my hip. *Nearly lost it there, girl*. My death at one hand or another had been a constant reality for the last five minutes or so, and returning to a world with any other possible outcome was one bitch of a transition. "Guess not. How did you know I was out here?"

"I saw her putting you in the trunk. I followed you."

"That doesn't make any sense. She had me--"

She cocked her head. "Do you hear that?" she asked.

I'm not about to fall for that one.

I shook my head. "No, I-" I spoke too soon. I did hear it: sirens. "How the hell did they know?"

"They know because I called them." She smirked. "Now you can either come with me, or you can stay here and explain what happened to that poor girl."

I must have been a little slow on the uptake because only then did I catch on to what she had done here. Pissed at myself that I hadn't sniffed out the set-up, I shook my head. "That's stupid. How the hell am I supposed to explain where I went? Tell them the tooth fairy rescued me?"

"I don't think you understand, dear. You don't get to go back. You go with me."

Anyone else would've asked her where the hell she planned on taking them, but I

didn't need to know. This *was* Delilah after all, and I didn't like the crazy gleam in her eye. Anywhere she was going was no good. "I don't think so, chief."

"You can always stay here and explain who beat that girl, but you have to make a decision soon."

She had that right. The sirens weren't getting any farther away.

She opened her mouth and made my mind up for me. "You *must* come with me," she said. "You've been chosen."

"Chosen? What the hell's that's supposed to mean? Chosen for what?"

"Something special, but come, there's no time." She took my hand, like she was my mother.

Let's say I'd never been one for the maternal type stuff. I shook her off. "Uh uh. I'm staying here."

"Are you crazy?" she asked.

Let's face it; we didn't have time to discuss the matter, because those sirens were getting closer and closer. She had to make her move now, so she started moving toward her Pontiac. Nice little black piece by the way, I'd guess the latest model G6 if you put a gun to my head. Who says insanity means you can't ride in class?

I started climbing back into the Tweeka's trunk. "Nope. I think that's you." The answer had been staring me in the face: *I was in the trunk officer, honest, no idea what happened.*

"We'll meet again," she said, like some cartoon villain.

"Let's not do that." I muttered, and closed the trunk. You know I want to get away from someone when I'm willing to put myself into a car trunk. I laid there in the darkness for awhile, smelling the dead droid smell. She started the Pontiac and tore out of there minutes before the cops arrived. I couldn't be sure if they saw her or not, but I'm guessing from what followed, they had no clue.

The cops got there not too long after her.

Before you ask, no, I didn't tell them about Delilah. Was I supposed to tell them some granny whacked a Tweeka with a baseball bat? Sure, things might have turned out differently, but coulda, woulda, shoulda.

Instead I told them my sob story about being robbed at Circle K and tossed in the trunk. I didn't know what the hell happened because she'd knocked me out cold, and I only woke up when they opened the trunk. The cameras and my bruises backed it up.

Poof. Done. I wanted to go back to my life. It wasn't much, but it was at least *a* life.

Of course, Delilah McKinley had not disappeared from my life. Not by a long shot.

Chapter 3

Bringing the Irony

I think you might be getting the sense by now that I don't like to do what people expect of me. Hell, I *hate* doing what people expect of me. I'm sure there's some deep Freudian thing going on. No doubt my continuing attempt to piss off my mom, good old Melinda DiCamillo *if you please my dear*. She expected me to do the whole college thing and squirt out two point five kids for some bland suburban tool. Still, knowing why it happens and changing it are two separate things.

I tell you this so you understand why I went back to work pretty quick. Not the next night, but within two nights. My good buddy good pal, Daniel, took over a shift or two, before I could talk our bitch of a store manager into letting me have my shift. She wanted me to share it with Daniel for awhile, but I refused; no one would fawn over me, not under my watch. Kristy had been up my ass ever since I'd gotten out of the police station, and while I loved her to death, I needed a break.

Thank God I had been blessed with an average night. At least, until the sun started coming up. Business picked up around 4:30 in the morning, and Daniel came in around 5:00 in the morning, so we could work the shift together for a little bit. Fascinating life. Things got quiet again around 6:00; a certain type of folk got out of bed at that time, and most of the