

## Prologue

*Somewhere in the darkness the coarse flax fibers of the Hangman's noose sing,*

*Its hollow voice swinging to the hangman's beckoning.*

*Waiting for the answers buried into the gurgle of time and the finality of voices ending.*

*From the stillness comes a subtle calling. Echoing reminders of what remains, Disturbed and  
unsettled.*

*~Frank Talaber~*

## Chapter One

Front deskman Samuel Desmond's eyes opened in horror as the wet, naked man thumped towards him bearing only a bath towel, a watch and the look of a man stepping into a warzone. The splodge of soapy footsteps echoed behind him as he thumped down the ornate front staircase of Victoria's Fairmont Empress Hotel.

“Sir, do you realize you are naked in our lobby, dripping soap and water all over our new and very expensive Isfahan rugs?”

The man thumped his hand on the counter. Water splattered. “I'm wet, pissed, cold and locked out of my room. Jake Holden, Blanshard suite.”

Samuel looked down, bowing to the sheer anger seething in Jake's eyes, and clacked away on his booking computer. He hesitated a moment, pressed the button for the day manager and, summoning up his courage, turned back to Jake while water continued dripping onto the counter.

“It would appear you are not a registered guest. I would need ID to let you back into any suite.”

Jake stepped back and opened his towel. “Does it look like I've got any ID on me?”

Samuel's eyes widened in shock. “But I'm not allowed to let anyone in without ID.”

Jake re-wrapped the towel, leaned over and grabbed the clerk by the scruff of his neck, effortlessly pulling him over the counter, until all Samuel could see was the man's watch.

Mickey Mouse's left hand stood at ten, his right at two.

“The only ID I got are these fingerprints and if you don't let me back in my room your face is about to become an ink blotter. Kapish?”

Her private cellphone rang as Carol Ainsworth, ostensibly Day Manager, actually undercover cop on assignment, was about to bolt from her office in response to Samuel's panic button. She wasn't sure what she'd expected to find but a naked six-foot giant of a man yelling into Samuel's face and half dragging him across the counter wasn't on her list of possibilities, not in a world-class hotel.

*Forgot to turn off my phone.* Carol glanced at the text from her sister and the first word was

**Urgent.** She paused, her sister wasn't a person to send idle chat.

**Urgent! Nathan has vanished.**

As she quickly texted back Samuel struggled to reach the buzzer.

**Will call ASAP.**

Carol turned off her phone and quickly marched over to the front desk. Her and her sister, Barbara, didn't talk much but Barb was never one to overreact. Whatever happened to her nephew must be serious.

*So much for a quiet first day on the job. Okay, calm down. One thing at a time.*

“Yes, sir, how may I help you?” She dropped her hand to gain comfort in the holster she didn’t have on this assignment. *Damn it! Shouldn’t have listened to the morons telling me not to carry!* Her cop instinct took over, mentally noting every detail of any possible importance. *White Caucasian, six two, light tan, light brown hair; Mickey Mouse watch on left wrist, ripped to the max. Probable weight lifter strung out on steroids. Jeez, I might as well be back on the skid rows of Vancouver! What the hell would a real hotel manager be doing right now?*

She tried to think of something, anything, she’d learned in the week of intense hotel management training they’d put her through in preparation for this assignment that might be of any possible use to her in this situation. As a street cop she’d just chop him across the back of the knees and slap the cuffs on him as he fell. Somehow that didn’t seem like the way to treat a guest of this grand establishment. *Plan B’s definitely lock him up and then ask questions, though.*

“I asked for the hotel manager,” he growled.

Carol glanced around the newly refurbished lobby, with its gold balustrades and pastel shaded panels. Fortunately, no other guests were milling around this time of the afternoon so hopefully this wouldn’t turn into a full-blown media fiasco. That was the last thing she needed, considering the guests who’d be arriving in the next little while.

“What seems to be the problem here?” She folded her arms in front of her.

“I said I asked for the—”

“And I, sir, Am the hotel manager, and before I discuss anything with you, you will let go of my desk clerk.” She caught the nearly imperceptible rise of his eyebrows. “And gently. The Fairmont Victoria Empress Hotel does not take kindly to hotel guests strolling naked in public

areas, nor do we care to have them accosting our front desk staff.” His eyebrow raised higher as he glared at her.

Carol had certainly handled bigger men. She stood her ground and glared back. If she hadn't been on assignment she'd have told him to drop the desk clerk before she shoved his eyebrows so far up his ass it'd take a laser scope to get them out, but since she was, she didn't.

The glare-down continued as Samuel's face turned redder. Finally, Jake broke eye-contact and glanced down at her name tag. Carol had established control. She allowed herself to breathe.

*Time to press her advantage home.*

“I said Let. Him. Go. And I'm not telling you a third time.”

Jake lowered Samuel to the ground. “Sorry, didn't expect a skirt. I mean a female manager.” And he certainly hadn't expected a gorgeous brunette. She even looked good in her standard designed-for-all-shapes-and-sizes corporate uniform. She wasn't intimidated in the least, not by his size or his state of undress. In fact, she was absolutely in control of the situation. Something very sexy in that. He liked his women assertive. Her eyes, though. Something in her eyes grabbed him right in the gut. Too much knowledge of the world and how bad it could be, that was it. He'd learned long ago to read people's faces in his career, it'd saved his life many times when undercover.

Something about this woman he knew almost nothing about stirred his blood and wearing just a bath towel probably wasn't such a good idea. Especially in light of what he did know about her. She was undoubtedly Canadian undercover detective on duty Carol Ainsworth. *Our file reports don't do her justice.*

“Jake Holden, and you have my apology. I’ve been overstressed at work recently and decided to take a relaxing trip here.” He extended his hand. It was partly the truth, he’d taken this assignment to get away from LA, a place where you always had to watch your back and no man was a friend. *Especially the crazy ones strung out on drugs.*

She made sure Samuel was breathing well on his own before she shook hands. The touch sent an erotic jolt through him. He glanced down and smiled. No ring. Possibilities.

“Apology accepted. Carol Moore, Day Manager of the Fairmount Empress Hotel.” Carol studied Jake. She liked what she saw. And then again, she didn’t. Those dark eyes of his — they reminded her of places she hadn’t been and feelings she hadn’t felt in a long time. Not since Alan, her fiancé, with the same dark, dangerous eyes she fell in love with was shot dead on duty six years ago. *It’s been too long. Too damn long. So get a grip, get over it, and get on with it. I’ve got possibly even more urgent matters to deal with my nephew.*

“So why don’t you tell me the problems leading up to this little au naturel trip into my lobby, Jake Holden?”

“Two things. One, I was taking a — quote — luxurious bubble bath — unquote — as stated in your hotel’s brochure and after using over half the bottle found it didn’t even make enough suds to coat the tub. Two, seeing as how my bubble bath was a no-go, I stupidly stepped out to grab some ice for my whiskey, leaving my key inside and locked myself out of my room. And since I didn’t think the hotel would appreciate me breaking the door down, I came downstairs so someone could let me back in. That’s when this employee of yours informed me while I’m standing here cold, wet and naked, he’s not going to let me back in my room without proper ID.”

“I can verify that indeed he does not possess any identification.” Samuel straightened his tie and blushed. Of course, he took the precaution of backing as far away from the counter as possible. “Sir, the hotel’s policy is quite clear on allowing the use of an extra key. We must have ID. We have high profile clients attending and high security standards at this hotel. However, I was about to call the manager when you put my neck in a vice, rendering me unable.”

Carol caught Jake twitch one hand and decided to take over before Samuel got himself killed. “Okay, Samuel. I’ve got this.” Carol turned to Jake. “I’ll take you up and you can show me your ID then, is that acceptable?”

“Yes. And what about the bubble bath?”

“Well, I can assure you if the hotel’s brochure states we provide luxurious bubble baths, we’ll provide you with a luxurious bubble bath and I personally will make sure this matter is handled.” She passed him a business card, even though he had no place to put it. He glanced at the card and handed it back.

“Good. I’m starting to get just a tad cold, standing here in nothing but my birthday suit. Things are beginning to shrivel up into my throat.”

Jake stepped backwards. A cool rush of air reminded him he was naked except for the undersized bath towel and his proximity to Carol was making continued coverage by that undersized bath towel precarious. The scar below his left ear twinged in response to the memory of what happened the last time he’d responded to a woman. *Crazy bitch. And she was better left forgotten.*

Jake maintained as much dignity as possible as he walked toward the elevator. He had to admit the situation was totally ludicrous. He hoped to hell there weren't any witnesses and no videos of the past ten minutes captured on any unseen guest's phone. He could read the local headlines now. *Naked Man Roams Lobby of Five Star Hotel. So much for being discreet in this assignment.*

One thing he knew. By the time he'd gotten what he'd come here for, he'd also know a lot more about Carol than her name. *Maybe one hell of a long, cold shower is more in order than a hot soapy bath.*

\* \* \*

Sandy tied the rubber tube around her arm and flicked at her skin a couple of times. The stink of the sewers they were in, didn't seem to effect either. "Oh man, everybody says this White Lady skank is good shit."

"Yeah, Wildflower said it was the best, like mixed with enough fentanyl to put you away. I saw angels, girlfriend. Lights, the light. You, like, brought me back from the light."

"Cool. Yo-yoing is so freaking trippy." Cindy sat on her haunches, unable to stand. Coming back from the dead had that effect on a girl. She held the free government Naloxone needle with both hands because she shook all over. Her skinny frame was pocked with jab wounds and scabs where she'd scratched herself over and over, something she did every time she came down.

Sandy found a vein undamaged enough to take the needle and plunged it into her own arm. “You know the deal. After I go limp, count to ten and bring me back. Don’t get any better high than flat-lining and coming back.” Her needle-scarred arm shook, and she slumped backwards.

Her eyes rolled into the heavens. The needle clinked to the concrete floor.

Cindy raised the needle. “One, two…”

Blue light flooded the chamber, coming up from the sewer tunnels leading in and out of the room.

“Three, four… *what the fuc—*”

Blue flames tore up through her, the Naloxone vial exploded.

“Sandy’s gonna die without the …”

She screamed as flames tore through her, taking her over until she became the flames and the flames became her.

*You and she shall join us instead.* Another mass of blue flames descended on the drugged-up woman on the ground and lifted her body up, then slammed it to the ground. Cinders sparked upward before Cindy’s eyes exploded in embers and her body burned from the inside out. A haze of blue sparks skittered over the ground.

Both blue flame elementals stared at the two piles of ashes left behind and at the countless needles stuck into the Chambers wall, some leaking their contents onto the cold cement floor.

*Neither was the one we seek.*

*He is coming.*

*Yes, he disturbs us, the undead and those seeking deliverance.*

*We are restless and the one we dread is coming with a vengeance.*

They scratched at each other with long angry fingers. Flames and sparks exploded. They swept down the cold tunnels and left the chamber, needle tubes clinking in the dark.

*He comes.*

*In the blue glow a pair of eyes stared waiting before he moved to get up watching the blue sparks slowly going out one after another.*