

# POLICE DOG



# THE SCENT OF BLOOD

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## Chapter 2: The Scent of Blood

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*June 1, 1988*

*22:30 Hours*

*West Woodburn, Northumberland, North East England*

I had less than two hours to catch some rest that night. My daily schedule put me down for six hours of sleep split across three different breaks in the twenty four hour day. This was the only one I got with any regularity.

There was always a lull between the sun going down and the start of the drunks streaming from the 'Crown after last call a few hours later. Except for Zack, of course. I'd just as likely be seeing him again. He liked to get an early start on the nightly festivities, take a quick breather with a walk around town, catch a nap, then be back on his feet – figuratively speaking – for a second round with the boys.

There was no bed in the police box, it was a joke to even suggest such a thing. I'd long ago become proficient at sleeping sitting up; perched upon my backless stool, leaning against the small ledge of the desk with my tail curled around my legs. It was a precarious balance, but I rarely fell anymore... most nights.

The stars were well out and in attendance when I once again departed from my box, the majesty of an almost full moon hanging well above the horizon. It cast the world around me in an iridescent silver glow that made everything look just the slightest touch unreal.

I set out north, making my way around the edge of town, skirting the backs of buildings where they pushed up against the rolling woods and fields of the English countryside. In some places the trees had been long cleared away, leaving empty pastures where nothing more than lush green grass grew. It was there where it felt like you could see forever, to the endless hills of the horizon and beyond.

I didn't pause to take in the sight. I'd already seen it a hundred times before and still had to complete my rounds.

In due course I looped around south, making a full circuit of the town's perimeter before circling inward. The night was quiet and still, save for a single car thrumbling unconcerned along the road. There were no threats from without, no malignant presences trying to push in and endanger the town, there never were.

I had barely even so much as set foot back in West Woodburn proper before a form broke from the shadows to dash towards me. He'd been banging on the door to my box, I was surprised that I

hadn't heard the clamour while out on my rounds. I'd have to make a note to myself for next time; there had been a slight wind out tonight and it must have driven the sound away from me. I'd need to watch for that in the future.

I had to wait for the silhouetted form to come closer before I could identify it as anything more than a vaguely human mass in the darkness. The wind was conspiring against me again, blowing from behind me. I could identify most people in the town by both sight and scent, but I had to wait until he spoke before I recognized him.

It was Coalburn – I couldn't recall his first name just now – the landlord of the 'Crown. The stout man's black hair and ruddy complexion was more visible now as he came closer, pausing for breath under the wan light of a street lamp – one of only a half-dozen in all of West Woodburn.

His face was flush, he must have been shouting and banging on my door from almost the moment I'd set out on patrol. This was a man who had a history of throwing drunkards out on their ears – often right into my waiting arms – I couldn't imagine what would cause him to look so flustered this quickly.

"Pup..." He only just gasped out the word between heavy, panting breaths. He always called me by that name, despite the fact I was well past my adolescence. I'd stopped being a 'pup' when I was four years old.

"Pup," He started again, finally having the breath to string together more than two words at a time, "We need you down at the 'Crown."

I stood before him, keeping back a respectful distance. "What seems to be the problem, Sir?"

"The road, Zack wandered out onto the road..."

My blood ran cold. I couldn't keep the slightest tremble from my hands as he continued.

"And a car came by... and..."

I didn't bother waiting for the rest of his explanation, or even for him to follow behind, I set off for the 'Crown as fast as my legs could carry me.

For a moment I almost considered breaking into running on all fours – a disgusting habit they had broken me of years and years ago back at the Kennel. As I raced on I couldn't help but reflect that Zack was perhaps the only man in the whole town who had, however drunkenly, called me his friend.

It didn't take long to make it to the pub at my frantic pace, only mere seconds – I could move faster than any human could ever hope to. It was part of both my genetics and training.

The sight that greeted me, however, made me stop short, breath catching in my lungs. I went skidding. Almost ending up head over heels, trying desperately to avoid stepping in the ever expanding pool of blood that snaked across the dark asphalt.

I'd first been racing here in the faint hope of salvaging the situation, praying I'd be able to aid the man. Perhaps I could have called in an emergency air medical evacuation – the first I would have ever done – but it was all for not.

Coalburn was right, it had been a motor vehicle accident. But more than that, it had been a hit and run. The vehicle, and the motorist who had commanded it, were nowhere to be seen.

The analytical part of my mind, the one who had been drilled over years and years back at the

Kennel, was taking this all in quickly, calmly, almost like an automaton. The other part of my mind, the part that was *me*, was not coping so well.

I could feel hot tears burning at the edges of my eyes, blurring my vision and annoying the thoughts that wanted to assess and control the situation. I couldn't help it. This was the only man in West Woodburn who had ever shown me even the slightest kindness, the least succour and respect. Even if he had been unable to raise my own dignity above any level than that of his own, the town drunk. It was still better than where I would have been otherwise.

There was no chance of Zack's survival. It wouldn't have made any difference, even if I'd been standing here when the act was committed. I didn't bother even to try any of the first aid skills that I had been trained in. There was only one man who could make any difference to Zack. And, according to what Reverend Benson said, he didn't much care to hear the prayers of my kind.

Upon assessment of the situation, I may need to re-evaluate my initial statement that this had been in fact an accident. Zack had not merely been hit. He'd been run over flat, then possibly reversed upon and dragged a good dozen feet before he had come free from the vehicle to lay spreadeagled on the road.

That left little of his body remaining to identify, and doing so was hardly a pleasant experience.

He had been squashed like a bug when the tires had run over his body, bones crushed and blood violently forced from him like watery catsup from a squeeze bottle.

His face and head were still intact, having survived the carnage that had befallen the rest of his body. His features were twisted in mid-note of a silent, agonized scream. Eyes never having closed, they now stared, empty, towards the heavens above.

I pulled on a fresh set of latex gloves from my pocket, double and triple checking them as I approached with much trepidation. The amount of blood that had been spread around was phenomenal, and the thought of coming in contact with any of it scared me more than the sight that lay before me. I had to dance my bare toes between the ever tightening rivulets of crimson that ran across the ground as I made my way closer, claws ticking out a frantic beat on the pavement.

The smell of death was heavy to the air, but it was already falling from the copper fresh tang of blood to the open sewage pipe stench of human entrails exposed to the night.

Well... I guess there was nothing for it now. I would be rousing the morgue workers down in Hexham. They would have to scramble an ambulance up here no matter what time of night it may be.

Coalburn came up behind me a few moments later, huffing and panting in the cool night air. He was more accustomed to throwing people short distances than having to run long ones.

"Is he...?" The man's voice was heavy.

"Yes." I stood up and turned around to face Coalburn, my back now to the body. I hadn't even gotten within arms' reach of Zack yet.

"Merciful God in heaven... I'd only just tossed him out on his backside not thirty minutes before..."

Oh. Yes, there was that too. I'd have to start an investigation. But first to care for the body.

"Mr. Coalburn, I need you to..." He wasn't paying attention to me as I spoke, just staring at the corpse. "Mr. Coalburn!" I waved my hand before him until his eyes focused. "Time is of the essence, please keep your wits about you." Digging into a pocket, I pulled out a leaf of scratch paper, scribbling

the line of the Hexham police's night office on it. They would have to wake the coroner.

"Mr. Coalburn," I continued, "I need you to call this number and ask them to send out an ambulance immediately." I paused for a moment, my whiskers twitching, "No. Ask them to send two vans. We have one murder and one accident. They may as well pick up both at the same time."

The paper disappeared between Coalburn's thick fingers a moment later, he almost dropped it he was sweating so. I'd be amazed if it was still legible when he got back inside the 'Crown.

Speaking of the 'Crown, the local folk were starting to poke their heads through the doors and windows. This was a small town, curiosity and morbid fascination were quickly overcoming fear and good sense.

The town mayor, a portly man named Abotsford, began tottering out of the nearby front door of the pub. It was obvious that he was more than a couple of belts beyond where he should be for a Monday night – he could barely so much as walk a straight line never mind speak clearly.

"Eh, now... what's all this then?" The alcohol in his voice made the words all but a single wet slur. He continued to stagger towards me, and the blood that lay on the ground.

"Sir, I'm going to need to ask you to-" I slowly raised one hand before me.

I didn't even get the chance to finish my well-practised statement. He roughly brushed my hand aside and ran straight into me, as though expecting me to shy right out of his way and let him trample all over a crime scene.

He blinked his blurry and bloodshot eyes up at me when he bounced off my hard chest, almost falling back on his well-heeled rear. I didn't even so much as sway.

"You will get out of my way immediately, *Constable*." He stressed that last word like a bad joke. "I am the mayor of this town, and I will do as I-"

"You will do no such thing!" I cut him off, levelling him a glare.

He began composing himself for a retort, but fell silent as we both heard a low growl build in my chest. It never made it out my mouth. I wasn't sure which of us was more surprised, or frightened, at the sound, him or I.

"A murder has been committed, Mr. Abotsford. This is now a police operation. You will return to the Duck and Crown. If I so much as see you again I'll book you for interference and have you hauled off to spend the rest of the night in a cell in Hexham."

For likely the first time in his life, the man was speechless.

But even then he didn't move. Against my will, I could feel my lips rising, exposing my canines to shine a bright, stainless white in the wan silver moonlight.

"Now." My voice no longer held any hint of humanity.

His face fell to a bloodless white as he turned and scrambled back through the door as quickly as his short stubby legs could carry him.

Had I just done that? Oh dear Lord.

It had to be the blood. It had to be.

Now that I paused to meditate for a moment, returning to the mental exercises that had been pounded into my weak mind back at the Kennel, I could feel it.

The blood that lay around me now was far removed from that I had encountered earlier today. Jonathan's body had been bloated and decomposing. The tang of his blood had been dilute and corrupted, and there had been little of it anyway.

Zack was not such. He had died quickly and violently, spreading his very life across the pavement as the last of it pumped from his still beating heart.

Oh dear God. Oh dear merciful God above us all, save me.

My heartbeat was quickening, and not just from the blind fear. This was not a good sign.

An instant later I was digging through my belt and pockets, emptying their contents onto a clear patch of ground in front of me. I didn't care who saw me, even if they likely thought I was going insane in my suddenly frantic search.

There was too much blood. It was in the air. It was in *me*. There was too much.

I could feel the seams of my uniform pop and rip as I moved ever faster, my thick black claws frantically scrambling through more and more pockets and pouches.

It had to be here... it had to. It was one of the things I never left my box without, second only to my badge. I hadn't been without it in over a year, but this was the first time I'd ever needed to use it.

Please, please, God, just a few more seconds. The rushing of my own blood in my ears was all but deafening me. I could feel foam growing at the corners of my lips.

I was no more than a single heartbeat from breaking into the shadows and running, just to get away from the ungodly scent, when the back of one of my knuckles knocked its hard surface.

I didn't dare even so much as breathe a sigh of relief as I pulled it free of my pocket. My salvation.

The glass cylinder was a three part container. I popped the lid on the first section, three small label-less red pills fell into my shaking palm. I knocked them back, swallowing them all whole and dry. It was easy, my mouth was already starting to drool so that I was dripping foam from my chin.

Tossing the first compartment to the ground, I flipped open the second. It also contained three pills; these ones were green and filled with liquid.

Like the last set, I threw them into my maw with the panic of a drowning man. Unlike the previous ones, however, I crushed them in my mouth, feeling their sticky goo spew forth to coat my tongue. A moment later it had disappeared, absorbed into me, leaving in their wake the cloying taste and scent of mint.

The last compartment was trickier. And it was the key to everything.

My hands were shaking violently now, like a leaf in the stiff autumn breeze, as I held up the three inch hypodermic needle. It glinted in the light thrown off the windows up and down the street, reflecting the pools of viscera that lay on the ground behind me.

I had only enough for one round of this, I didn't even know what the drug was called, and I had to get it right.

I took a deep breath despite the blood in the air, holding it, willing my wavering hands to still.

They only held for a moment, returning to a relative calm for but a second.

That was all I needed.

I thrust the needle into my gut, through the cloth of my uniform, aiming for just above the kidneys, for the adrenal glands that sat atop them. I had to get this as close as I could.

The stab lanced me like a fire brand to the soul. The metal tip of the needle was coated with something, they had warned me of that. They hadn't warned me how it would burn.

I had only enough of my mind still about me to pump my thumb halfway down on the plunger and withdraw the needle before falling to my knees.

My vision was watery now, but I did it again, aiming for the other gland and delivering the final blow before withdrawing the needle and collapsing to all fours.

For some reason... it smelt like I was laying belly up in a meadow of spring flowers. I could see the blazing light of the sun in my eyes and hear the lazy hum of bees in my ears as all was calm and right in the world...

Then it was gone.

"Constable? Constable, are you alright?" At first it seemed as though the voice came from a great distance, but it journeyed closer with every word until I snapped back to reality with a gut wrenching jolt that nearly left me vomiting across the pavement.

The anger that had been building in me before was gone, so was the fear that had gripped my heart so tightly. In their place was... nothing.

"I am unharmed." Even to my own ears my voice sounded flat, lifeless, like it was coming from a man-made machine, a steam engine. "I will be with you in a moment, Mr. Coalburn." I paused, sucking in a deep breath that seemed completely devoid of scent. At some intellectual level I could still sense blood in the air. "I apologize for the inconvenience."

I regained just enough control to turn my head the fraction of an inch it took to see Coalburn not three strides away. He was lit from behind by the amber glow of the inn, nothing but a black form outlined in the bright doorway.

A few heartbeats later I was able to stagger slowly to my feet, only swaying slightly. Before doing so, however, I made sure to reach out and snatch the now empty containers from the ground.

Everyone had seen me... and I had no idea how to explain it. I'd been trained in what to say, of course, but all the lines I had been fed so long ago were scattered to the four winds.

Leaning on the potted and scarred brick wall of the 'Crown, I slowly raised my eyes to Coalburn. "Have you called the morgue in Hexham?" My voice was rough and inhuman, perfectly controlled.

He blanched under my gaze, however weak and watery it may be. "Yes, Sir. They'll be here in an hour."

"Good. Thank-you." I stopped for a moment, breath catching in my throat. He had just called me 'sir'. I swallowed hard, trying to fight back the cricket ball sized lump that was forming in my throat. "Thank-you. If you would be so kind as to wait in the 'Crown until this has passed?"

"Of course, Constable." He took a half step back through the door, almost closing it before pausing to peer back out at me in the darkness. "Let me know if there is anything you need."

Need? I let a long sigh escape my lips to skitter away down the now empty street. All I needed right now was a bullet to the back of the head. That had been the first time I'd ever allowed my special



training to come to the surface in public. Shuddering, my body went cold as I wrenched my mind away from the nightmare images of what could have happened if I hadn't had my crash kit on hand.

I needed to get a replacement right away. The phone number to request a new kit was burned into my mind. It didn't matter the time of night. I would call it as soon as I got back to my box.

I fell to my haunches, leaning my back against the wall as I stood vigil over the corpse. There was little I could do until the coroner arrived. I didn't even have a camera to properly document the scene.

Looking around me, I surveyed the nearby windows. All the houses on the other side of the street were cold and dark. Either everyone was asleep, or, more likely, they were at the 'Crown. The pub behind me was the only structure that seemed to have any life on this cold and dismal night. Above, dark clouds had swept in to cover the stars. They were beginning to roll, deep and black.

The 'Crown itself was a bit of an odd building. The front door was no more than a stone's throw away, but there were few if any windows on the street-ward wall against where I now sat. I suppose it was to help keep down the noise of traffic on the street when cars passed during the day, but the side effect was that it meant no one could see the corpse. And if I'd been no more than a few feet further over no one would have seen me fall to my knees.

I fingered the smooth glass tube that was still clutched tightly in my hand. The glass was cool and free of even the slightest imperfection between the rough pads of my fingers.

I could feel something warm on my nose. My tongue flicked out to taste it before I had a moment to think. A nose bleed. I should have been petrified as my tongue returned to my mouth with its sweet red payload, but my mind was still.

It was nothing more than a benign side effect of the drugs that now coursed through my veins as surely as my own blood did.

I didn't have the wherewithal to look for the time, but I must have sat there, only a step above comatose, for a good fifteen minutes. Little more than my heartbeat betrayed the life that was still hidden away in my body, hardly contrasting the form that lay barely beyond my toes.

That's when I saw it.

At first I thought it was nothing more than a trick of the night, no more than a wavering flutter in the deepest shadows. Then it came again.

It was a texture to the darkness, a flavour. No human eye would ever have been able to detect it.

One moment it was in the churchyard down the street, the next it was between the buildings across the way. It crossed the distance in the blink of an eye, impossibly fast.

I thought at first that I must be seeing things. Every time I tried to focus on it the flash was long gone. But it would only stay away for an instant before appearing somewhere else, seemingly at random.

"Who's there? Show yourself." My voice was little more than a hoarse whisper in the darkness.

Nothing happened. For a moment I thought I must be going mad, another side effect of the drugs... one they hadn't told me about? But then, after a pause, it came again.

It was slower now, more careful, deliberate. And... definitely a person.

I'm not sure how I could tell. Something in the way it moved, flinched every time it made a sound. This was no stray house pet or wandering livestock.

It flitted closer. Now just across the street, almost within the radius of the blood splatters.

Standing up, I expected to be uneasy, wavering, but rather I was rock solid, as if made of the very earth itself.

I spoke again, but my voice did not match my motions. It was no better than last time. "Show yourself. This is a police crime scene."

As quickly as it came, the shadow melted into the night. Gone. For a moment I was about to let him, or it, go. Then the wind shifted.

The nose of a Police Dog is far keener than that of any human. Our major disadvantage is that much of the brain that had formerly, in true canines, been devoted to scent was now confiscated for analytical thought. I could smell him... I could sense him... but I couldn't place him.

Somewhere, in the dark black corners of my mind, that which had never been touched by the scientists or Handlers, the urge to chase sprang forth like a bubble rising to the surface of a cauldron.

An instant later I was skidding across the cobblestones and pouncing the shadows where I had last seen... whatever it was.

There was no one there, but the scent shot my nose twitching and alighted alien impulses in my brain that I didn't wish to dwell upon.

From the corner of my eye I could see something move. I made off for it, flying through the night. My fingers brushed the ground under me.

He retreated west. I could detect the cut of fear beginning to permeate his scent. It was only an instant before we left the buildings and structures, civilization of West Woodburn falling away behind us. We raced through the verdant green fields and between the soft shadows cast by the silver, almost full moon.

He headed towards the old Roman fort of Habitancum, it was only a matter of seconds before we were there. Not that much was left of the old site, it was little more than a few pillars jutting up from the earth to push towards an empty sky.

It took me a moment to realize what was wrong. I hadn't caught up to him yet.

This wasn't right. No human ran as fast as my purpose designed legs could carry me. I was at the edge of my endurance, tongue hanging from my mouth as I panted for breath, yet the form still remained stubbornly dim and distant.

Even back at the Kennel I had been among the fastest. There was no human in the world who could outrun me, and few other creatures on two legs who could even hope to match my sprint.

My quarry slid behind one of the stone pillars, disappearing into the deep shadows of the night. I skidded to a stop in the middle of the humble site. The weak rays of the moon threw just enough light to cast shadows across the landscape, making the night a patchwork of greater and lesser darkness.

My night vision had long ago kicked in, throwing the whole of the world into nothing but tones of black and white. Almost septa, like an old, faded photograph come to life.

"Show yourself." My voice was returning despite the run having left me short of breath and panting.

No one responded. I could hear nothing over the beating of my own heart. The aftertaste of the drugs grew in my mouth, preventing me from tracking him properly by scent, it was a wonder that I'd been able to smell him at all.

"It is a criminal offence to disobey the direct order of a police officer," I continued. Nothing but the calm sounds of the rural night came back to me.

I stalked forward into the crisscrossing shadows, my ears swivelling for even the slightest sounds of my quarry attempting to escape.

Whoever this was, he was experienced at hiding. That fact was beyond debate. Only rarely did I hear even the slightest scrapes in the dirt, and by the time I arrived he was long gone. Even his tracks were indistinct, as though he took great pains to disguise them.

"I won't hurt you." I was starting to feel dizzy again, the world slowly falling out of focus. Perhaps yet another side effect? "I just need to know who you are..." I had to lean on a pillar now, lowering my head as the world began to spin and flex.

He took even that slightest moment of inattention to run, feet clomping over the sod behind me, any pretence of subtlety gone as he raced away.

I turned to give chase, but my head swam as my heartbeat began to pound in my ears, faster than it should ever be.

I only made it a half dozen steps before the air opened up before me and I fell to the soft dirt. The soil was cool on my face. I couldn't work up the anger to be annoyed at his escape. I couldn't work up anything.

For a moment... all I felt was a delightful lightness of being, a steady center of self, as if my mind was light and empty. Then fatigue came down on me, a lead weight wrapped in a velvet glove that bore straight into my mind.

The moon was still up when I awoke. It hadn't moved far in the sky, yet my quarry was long gone.

With a yawn and a whimper, I pulled myself up. Looking down, the front of my shirt and trousers were stained with rich black dirt. The latex gloves I had put on back at the murder scene were still on my hands, but my claws had long ago cut through the fingers, shredding them to hang from my knuckles like streamers.

The walk back to West Woodburn was slower than the headlong chase out had been, but still took only minutes. I was starting to feel an equilibrium return to my tattered and abused body and did not wish to upset it now.

I stayed both far back and well upwind of the murder scene when I returned. Across the street and only just close enough to keep it in clear sight.

Even from this distance I could tell someone had been there.

The signs weren't obvious, but it was clear to my training. Even if it hadn't been for the repugnant stench of petrol having been spilled to cover their scent.

I could see little from where I stood, but someone had dragged a thick cloth through the tire tracks that had been left in the blood, blurring and destroying the patterns before any evidence could be collected.

The body of Zack was been untouched, neither his face had been covered nor his eyes closed. He still stared to the sky above him.

I sat back on the pavement again and waited for the coroner to arrive. It was taking them long over an hour. From behind me I could hear the sounds of a ruckus arising in the 'Crown. It seemed that people were wanting to go home.

A few moments later Coalburn carefully edged open the door, no more than a crack to look out at me sitting alone and pitiful on the street.

"Sir?" His voice was weak and tired. My guess was that the adrenaline had deserted him as it had I. He was experiencing a paler shadow of what I felt.

It took me a moment to realize he was addressing me. He still called me 'sir'. The first time I had gotten a slight illicit thrill from it, now it just sounded empty. And frightened.

"Yes, Mr. Coalburn?" I stood up, feeling the joints in my knees pop and the worn muscles stretch.

"The folks want to go home. It's well past last call and people want to return to their homes."

I walked over to him, pushing the door wider as I peered in. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the light. Within, I could see the drunk and frightened faces of a good third of the town's population. A slight chill ran down my spine. They only knew half of what had happened tonight, yet they looked as frightened as I felt. There had never been a murder in West Woodburn before.

I was just glad the gene techs back at the Kennel had never designed the Police Dog's face to show more emotion. I was certain that in the shadows of the street they couldn't see the fear in my eyes, no matter how obvious it may be.

"Very well." I nodded to Coalburn and stepped back from the door as I spoke louder, addressing the crowd. "Two at a time. You must stay away from the crime scene. Do not gawk. Return directly to your homes and remain there for the night."

I waved my hand at the nearest two, an old married couple from across the street. They got unsteadily to their feet and edged towards the door. Never once did they take their eyes from me.

I wasn't sure who they were feared more. Me, or the murderer.

Slowly, the room emptied. Not a single word was said as people scurried away. Despite my warning everyone paused for a moment to stare at the corpse. The coroner still had yet to show.

At long last it was only Coalburn and I. He had let his staff go, the flagons of ale and stout still sat on the tables where the patrons had left them.

I had my back turned to him as I leaned on the wall, surveying the street when he walked up behind me to sit in the doorway. His feet were on the hard pavement, but his body was still in the pub, illuminated by the harsh overhead lights. He likely couldn't see a thing, blind to the night that lay just a hand span before his face.

"He liked you, you know. He liked everybody." Coalburn's voice had fallen slightly as he

spoke. He pulled the faded and stained green apron from around his waist and dragged it across his sweaty face.

"Pardon, Sir?" I walked up beside him, keeping a respectful distance, and knelt down so as to be at eye level.

"Zack. He liked you. He was a drunkard and a layabout, but he liked you. He was the only man I'd ever met who would tell it to the world, proclaim it at the top of his lungs. He liked you. Thought you were a swell guy for getting him home every night."

"That's my job, Sir..." I wasn't quite sure how to respond. "You are aware that anything you say to me is admissible in court? There is currently an investigation outstanding in his murder."

Coalburn shrugged, still staring out into the night, not bothering to turn to my face, "Yeah, sure. If you say so."

I pulled out my policeman's notebook and flipped to an empty page. Just in case.

"Am I correct in understanding that you were the last one to see him alive? When you threw him from the establishment?"

He heaved out a sigh, sounding resigned. "Yes." He glanced over at me, "Does that mean I'm responsible for his death?"

I looked up at him, careful to keep my features as neutral as possible. "Unlikely, Sir. I've seen you toss people before, including Zack, on many a night." I let one lip curve up ever so slightly, making sure to keep my teeth covered, "You are normally very careful. And have good aim. I've never once seen you eject a customer to an unsafe location, nor waiting until they are too inebriated to return home... normally."

He sighed again. "Not good for business, you understand. It doesn't do me good to lose customers."

"Yes, Sir. Quite. Were you aware of any traffic on the street when you were out here?"

"None. Nothing at all. Dere Street is always deserted this time of night. We never have anyone pass through after the sun goes down, we're too far north. Anyone who wants to get to Scotland has better ways than through here."

"As you say, Sir. So, you ejected Zack into his customary location in the parking lot, saw no traffic on the road, then what?"

"I went back inside to tend to my other customers of course."

"And they were the same people I saw leaving just a moment ago? No one has entered or left since then?" I'd taken the liberty of noting down each person who had been inside as they departed. There was no one of note, only the same people who tended to frequent the establishment every night.

"No, no one."

"And how much later was it that you were first aware that something was amiss?"

He scratched his thick black beard for a moment, thinking. "At least another twenty minutes. Maybe a half hour or more."

"You have no better estimation of the time, Sir?"

"Sorry." He shrugged his shoulders, "I wasn't looking at the clock when I threw him out, and I

was too panicked to bother when I saw the body."

I'd have to check with the patrons. At least one of them must have noted the time.

"Very well, Sir. And what was it that alerted you to the problem."

His lips formed in a thin line. "The scream. At first I almost didn't hear it over the music we had playing, but it was just enough to tug at my mind. I may have been the only one to hear it; the bar is closest to the door. I went out to check a few minutes later. I wasn't in any rush, I thought it was just Zack being sick on my pavement again."

"But that wasn't the case." I looked over to the corpse as I spoke, my voice slow and monotone.

"Yeah." The large man shuddered, body shivering in the cool night breeze.

"Then what did you do, Sir?"

"I ran to get you, damnit." He stiffened for a moment before falling back into a slouch. "I locked the door behind me and ran straight to your box as fast as I could."

"So, no one would have been able to follow you out?"

"That was the idea. They always could have ducked out through another door, I suppose. But the staff said that no one left. No one even knew what was going on yet."

"And how long did it take you to find me?"

"Not more than a couple of minutes. You were practically there by the time I started pounding."

I flipped my notebook closed and looked away. Wonderful. I had nothing. From what Coalburn said it couldn't have been anyone in the 'Crown. None of them had any chance to get out likely so much as back inside without being noticed.

Could it have been a random tourist? Someone driving down Dere Street in the middle of the night and not stopping? Unlikely. I'd just been coming from the side of town that the suspect would have had to exit through. The only other turn offs would have just led to back roads and country lanes that would leave them driving in circles.

So, there we had it. It was someone from town.

And where were the blasted people from the morgue?

The coroner's lorry rumbled up the street twenty minutes later. They had only sent one vehicle, despite my request.

It was a boxy truck, white and of an unassuming institutional design. Its brakes screamed something harsh when it came to a halting stop in front of me. Two Dogs dressed in white uniforms, as opposed to my blue, stepped out.

They were using Dogs for coroner duty now?

I walked up to the first one, the lapel on his uniform read K-9-79010419, the other one was K-9-79010422.

"Are you in charge, Nineteen?" He nodded as I addressed him.

"And you're Forty-Two, the one who called this in?" I nodded crisply in return.

They set to work without another word, just as they should. I prepared my notes to hand off to them.

They took photos of the scene. I pointed out where it had been disturbed.

It wasn't half an hour before they had dealt with the entire situation, and that included both the blood stains on the pavement and the body of Jonathan that I'd stashed in the icebox.

I felt a pang of anger in my gut as they had to carefully stuff him in beside the mangled corpse of Zack. Jonathan's small, bundled body seemed trivial, almost an afterthought alongside the mess and commotion that was Zack Crow.

"Is there anything else we can do for you, Constable?" He stressed the title ever so slightly, almost as if he couldn't believe I was in fact stationed in such a small town.

"No, thank-you... uh..." I wasn't sure what to call him. He was a Dog, but not a Police Dog, and he didn't have an obvious rank on his uniform.

"Special Examiner," He offered. Neither a smile or frown touched his lips.

"Are you a new breed?" It was an improper question to ask, and it showed how detached I was from the world, being stationed out here. But I had to know.

"Yes." Now just the slightest hint of a grin let me see a tooth glimmer from behind his black lips. "Brand new and just delivered last month. We're part of a trial program being offered to the Northumberland region, stationed in Hexham. We are among the first of our kind, trailblazers."

"I know what that feels like." I nearly said it, but bit back the words, almost splitting my tongue in the process. All I got out in the end was, "Very good. Thank-you for your help."

"Not a problem at all, Constable. That's what we're for, aren't we?"

Behind him, his partner cranked a key in the van. The old engine turned over a few times before blowing out a cloud of thick black soot from the tail pipe. A second later the engine caught, but it sounded like it was about to throw itself straight clear of the hood.

"Are you going to be able to make it back to Hexham in that?" I asked him.

He shrugged, unconcerned. It was an odd motion to see on a fellow Dog. I realized that these were the first two Dogs I had seen since I'd arrived up here.

"We'll be fine. It just takes a while to warm up again, the girl isn't as new as we are." He sat on the curb as his partner fiddled at the controls. I lowered myself down beside him.

"Have things changed much back at the Kennel?" I scratched my head as I searched for words. Small talk hadn't been something they had trained us in. And, in any event, it had been a long time since I'd had anyone to talk to – anyone on the same level as I.

He shrugged again, looking out into the darkness. "Depends how long you've been out here."

"Sixteen months."

His eyes widened slightly. "That long? You're not just some pilot project for small towns?"

"Nope." I shook my head and looked down to the cracked pavement between my feet. "This is my commission. All five hundred people of it."

We don't have the hardware to be able to whistle, but I bet he would have if he could. "Five

hundred? That's all?" He cleared his throat, making a strangled noise before asking the question I knew plagued his mind, "How did you get here?"

He had smiled and been proud to answer when I'd asked about him. Me, I wrapped my arms around myself despite the relatively warm night before speaking.

"Does the Special Examiner occupation have a Final Exam like the Police Dogs?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I scored under eighty one percent." My voice was rough.

He made that strangled noise again, louder this time. "Under eighty one? And they didn't dispose of you?"

"Seems not." I glanced over to him. He had moved away a half step, as though he feared that whatever had caused my near failure was catching. "Mind if I ask you a question?" He didn't say anything, so I continued. "What did you get?"

His eyes cast down now, voice soft, "Lower than expected. I was a disappointment. My Final Exam grade was ninety percent."

The engine warmed up soon after. That was good, our conversation was at a close anyway.

I watched them depart into the gathering rain. I had to get back to my box and order a replacement for the medication I had used tonight. I needed to get it right away before there was any chance I might require it again.