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### Prologue

Some nights are too calm to contain the turmoil of human emotion. Perhaps that was why all the boy felt was his heart's obstinate numb silence as he quietly slid his window open and removed the screen. Turning back to his bed, he grabbed a small pack of belongings: a shirt, a pair of durable jeans, a pocket knife, a small bag of dried fruit that he had taken from the pantry earlier that day, and an even smaller wad of cash containing every penny of personal savings that he'd been able to scrape together over his twelve years of life. He hesitated for a moment as he saw his stuffed bear. It's worn fur reminded him of the last time he had been happy. It had been a gift from his parents...back when they still actually made an effort to be parents. He had had it for nearly half of his life, a whole six years, and it had been there for him in a more real way than any breathing creature—persons included—ever had. Tonight, though, he would take control of that isolation. He couldn't take a disregarded existence anymore. He would reject everyone before they rejected him. He was running away, an action that made him feel empowered and terrified all at once. He dropped the bear back onto the bed.

Turning again to the window, he swung his pack onto his back.

He had been on his own for practically his whole life; his parents saw the owner of the bar down the street more than they saw him. In fact, he probably didn't even need to go out the window. In all likelihood he could walk right out the front door without being stopped or questioned...or even noticed.

He climbed out the window onto the roof and then, still clutching his pack, quietly made his way to the edge of the roof where there was a large oak tree whose branches ran parallel to the shingles, the bulk of the tree reaching the stars and the subterranean ecosystems simultaneously, providing an asguardian bridge between heaven and earth with an on-ramp from the roof—a sort of midgaud limbo between these realms. The boy dropped his pack on the ground at the base of the tree and then started following it down at a much more careful pace. He hadn't seen his parents once today...not even in the brief time when they were home between the stress of their respective jobs and the oblivion that three pints of beer and four pints of denial would bring. They probably wouldn't even notice that he was gone until at least a month had passed when they would grunt and say, "huh, that explains why our grocery bill is so much better these days," and then go for a night out on the town.

He made it to the ground, picked his pack up from where he had tossed it, and started toward the city.

"Happy birthday," he whispered to himself, finally beginning to feel something...something that no twelve year old should ever have to feel.

The girl looked out over the city: her city. It was night and she stood on the top of one of the tallest buildings in the very heart of "the beast." This particular rooftop was not a place that she came often. She had, in fact, only been up here once before when some oaf (probably in building maintenance) had left the door unlocked. Mind you, even without the challenge of a lock, getting to the door which led to the roof had been no mean feat; middle management didn't like grubby little homeless girls scampering through their corporate empires. But the view at the end had been worth it—as it was tonight—though she had had to use slightly...less conventional methods

this time to gain the same purchase. Of course she would have to leave well before people started arriving for work at five—stupid brainwashed businessmen with their overstuffed wallets and morbidly obese devotion to work. If she wasn't out before people started to arrive, then she risked getting caught as she slipped back down the stairwell: a preferable option to the fire escape. For the moment, none of that mattered. The sight of city lights from this height was akin to looking at stars. Stars, that is, almost close enough that you could see their burning filaments. Stars which arranged into a messy order of constellations: “main street” and “shopping mall” and the nebular cloud of “houses” belonging to those individuals lucky enough to...own a house. In a bizarre sort of way, the lights of this city made a galaxy that seemed to spiral around the girl. She was its black hole—unseen, but a force of gravity that would one day be realized none the less. The sky appeared to be scared of the city. Though some faint stars could still be seen fighting their way through the city lights and human air that clouded their way. These were far away but the girl felt that as soon as they could, they would, of course, join the lights on the ground as part of her city. For now, she appreciated their presence in the sky, faint though it was, and slept in their shadow.

The boy was tired. When he was still at home, overshadowed by the injustice of life and the sorrow of neglect, living on the streets had seemed like it would be a grand adventure. Now, having wandered all night, in the clutches of a bitter cold that scoured the city streets and hungry in a way that his meager bag of dried fruit could not satisfy, the boy found himself questioning whether it had been so good an idea after all. Several times, he would have turned back, but he had lost himself in a much more significant way than his spiritual deadening at the start of the night had made him think. He knew only that his body—his self—was somewhere in the

confusion of light and cold and asphalt and suburban neighborhood and monolithic modern construction which not only scrapes, but fills the sky so that its puny acolytes and votaries—CEO's and businessmen as well as janitors and impoverished renters—can never forget their new religion of depression. All of this had turned the boy's head and diverted his attention so that no matter how regret tugged at his heart he could not return to his home. At one point, he had ridden on something, a bus...a car...a trolley...he could not say for sure. He had been in and out of sleep and was eventually thrown off when someone possessing more authority than feeling had realized that he neither had money nor ticket. Now he stood on a cement corner where, if the pixelated red sign by the "City Credit Union" was to be believed, it was either fifty degrees in the morning or four o'clock cold. The boy was too tired to make sense of the world. But he had nowhere to sleep. At least, he hadn't had anywhere to sleep. With each enervating step the most uncomfortable surface became a more enticing bed until, now, the concrete on which he walked seemed more like the mythical bed of poppies—calling him to give up his quest and sleep where he stood—than the unforgiving surface it was. However, even in his confused state, he was cognizant of a need to not be trampled, run over, caught by thieves, or beset by the wandering beasts that inevitably populate the cities of a child's mind. It would be best, he concluded, to find an out of the way spot in which he could sleep without being noticed.

And so the boy walked on.

Steps seemed like miles, seconds were lost to the daze of the tired. Finally, blessedly, he found an alleyway—a place where he could surrender to sleep and remain its prisoner unnoticed and out of the way. He stumbled down the alley, passing a dumpster filled and overflowing with broken bottles and plastic-ensconced waste and made his way to the end of the alley where he sank

against the wall, hugging himself against the raging fear of spending a night alone on the streets in the cold. Fear, they say, is the mind's method of ensuring the survival of the body.

“What have we here?”

The boy looked up at the cliched phrase, jerked away from the welcome release of sleep to see two shadows standing at the mouth of the alley.

“Looks like fresh blood.”

“He can't be worth much.”

“Who cares? His clothes aren't ragged enough to live on the street. I'll bet he's lost his mama.”

“I'll bet that shirt, at least, is worth something, even if he don't have money.”

The shadows shifted and enlarged until they resolved into two figures—not specters of darkness but men in ragged jeans with worn leather jackets as though they wanted to be gangbangers but weren't honest enough for any gang to want them.

The fatigue was gone; the boy was now wide awake.

“C'mon kid. Give us what you got, and nobody gets hurt.” One of the men leered—the darkness of the alleyway making the already grotesque expression look psychotic.

“Well,” the other chortled, “no one important anyway.”

“Yeah. Too bad yous ain't important.” The men were no more than fifteen feet away by this time but the boy was frozen, unable to save himself, unable to run.

“Don't make us get blood all over those nice clothes of yours.”

“Yeah, that'd be shameful seein' how we's wantin' t' sell them.”

The boy finally forced his hand to move. He scrambled in his small pack of belongings until he found his measly wad of cash which he threw in their direction. The roll of bills flew only a few feet before it was stopped by the resistance of putrid air and dropped to the ground where it

bounced lightly and rolled back down the slope of the alley to where the boy was cowering as though it too were terrified of the unsavory pair. Perhaps it was because the men were distracted by this movement that they initially didn't notice the uneven rumble of cheap steel wheels on old concrete. By the time the rumble became a deafening roar—incapable of being ignored—it was too late. Twelve hundred pounds of steel dumpster and city waste rammed into the men from behind, nearly flattening them while using their supple forms as crude breaks so that it came to a stop just before crushing the boy.

Adrenaline and will to survive finally caused the boy to bolt from his place against the wall to rush around the once again sedentary dumpster and now equally unmoving pair of thieves. He raced toward the mouth of the alley, but was stopped short by a heavily accented voice.

“Oh good! I was worried I made a great mistake and smashed you as well as those terrible thugs.” The speaker was a girl, roughly the same age as the boy, with strong Spanish pronunciation and strikingly brilliant blue eyes. She was standing confidently next to the place where the dumpster had been just moments before. In her hand she was holding the small block of wood that had been keeping the container in place.

“It is terrible, the crime in this city.... Come on,” the girl said, “I’ll show you where to sleep.”

## Chapter 1

No employee wants to be hired on a basis of “I hate it, but you’re the only option I have.”

However, often, what is not wanted is still needed. Jacob Wright needed this job. He hadn’t had an income for so long that he barely knew what it meant to buy fresh food. But still, it irked him. Not the least because the manager felt himself to be some sort of superior human being to Jacob—a reasonable feeling for the dean of Harvard law or the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, but outrageous coming from the manager of a disreputable carnival struggling to survive on the periphery of a city that either didn’t know it existed, or wished it didn’t. Fortunately, Jacob neither had it in his temperament nor his wallet to quit just because the man signing his checks was a jerk. More fortunately, even an off-kilter carnival needs a security guard and since Jacob was the only fool desperate enough to take the job, the manager couldn’t afford to fire him regardless of antiquated personal views about Jacob’s background on the streets.

Jacob checked the clock hanging on the wall of his booth and realized it was time for his half-hour rounds. His job was simple: patrol the carnival every half hour and make sure people behave, follow the rules, and pay their money where money is due. In all actuality, he was more of a bouncer than strictly a security guard—a skinny, undernourished, amazingly athletic bouncer, but a bouncer nonetheless.

He moved out of his booth near the front entryway to the grounds and began to wend his way through the confused mass of drone-like people milling from one entertainment to the next. Despite being a financial near-disaster, the carnival was a large one comparatively. People from all over the county would stop by on their way through to see the sights and ride the rides. It wasn’t a magical place so much as it was a perversion of a child’s wonderland. A playground

twisted into a menagerie of small cons and slow rides. Jacob found the entire experience profoundly disturbing.

“Excuse me. Pardon. Sorry.”

The tight pack of the crowd necessitated a walk that in many ways mirrored the chaos in the bumper car pavilion, and despite his station as a ‘safety officer’ he was forced to jostle and push as much as anyone else to make his way through. Today, blessedly, there was very little need for him to intervene anywhere. He checked the game booths and the fortune teller’s tent, both of which were typically frequented by angry drunks furious at not winning the prize or at getting duped by the future. Today, though some customers grumbled as they walked away, there was none of the shouting, yelling, or threatening that required Jacob’s assistance.

He visited the “freak show” next. Though Jacob had only worked here for a few days, this was the spot that he was most careful to check regularly. While the rest of the carnival tended to engender rage in people because they had been swindled, this sideshow drew the wantonly cruel crowd who—even though Gandhi, King, and Mother Teresa had ushered in the twenty-first century with doctrines of love and acceptance—cared only to taunt, curse, spit, throw at, and mock their fellow human beings. Jacob did everything he could to stop this behavior, but he knew it was only a symptom of the real problem: the carnival itself.

“How are you doing, John?” Jacob addressed the occupant in the first partition of the squat, rectangular tent: a wizened old man with six fingers on each hand.

“Can’t complain too much,” John replied. “There’ve been some fresh fruits today.”

“There shouldn’t be any fruit.”

“Oh, come now,” John said with a trace of a grin. “You wouldn’t deprive a man of his lunch would you.”



Jacob sighed, “No, but it should be handed to you, not thrown at you.”

The old man’s soft, raspy voice chuckled a bit before a slight cough escaped him. “Not everyone is you, Jacob. Some people grew up in houses; they may have even had parents and one or two regular friends. For them, an old man with six fingers might as well be the monster under their bed.”

“I’ve heard it all before, John. But a sheltered upbringing is no excuse for treating a man like you like some sort of social pariah.”

“I am a social pariah.”

“No, you’re a kind old man and something of a philosopher.”

“Those are not mutually exclusive things, Jacob.”

“I just want to see you treated with some level of the respect you deserve.”

“Jacob, I’m in a freak show. People pay money to see freaks, not to see kind old men.”

“Fine,” Jacob conceded, “but if I can’t get you respect, then I at least won’t tolerate disrespect.”

John cleared his throat uncomfortably and Jacob was suddenly aware of a presence standing behind him.

“You will do your job the way I told you.” The voice of the new presence could only be described as an imperial whine, “Or have you forgotten that you’re only a temp here.”

Jacob clenched everything at once—his jaw, his hands, his eyes, his toes—before taking a breath and trying to force the tension away. He needed this job and could not afford to confront the manager on this, but...

“Leave the freaks to their freak lives and get on with your rounds, boy.” The manager spoke again. Jacob slowly turned to face the ferret of a man.

“Sir, people have been throwing foodstuffs at these performers.”

“It’s the people’s right. Let them have their fun.”

“At any other booth you would have me throw the troublemakers out.”

“At any other booth they would be interacting with people. Here, they’re just freaks; so let the people do what they want and get back to the job I hired you for.”

Jacob could feel his anger rising, but he did need this job. With an apologetic look at John, who just rolled his eyes in a manner that seemed to both say “I told you so” and “don’t give up” at the same time, Jacob made his way out of the tent. Once outside, he gave himself the admittedly limited satisfaction of muttering, “The only freakshow here is the one with ‘manager’ on his vest.” before he turned his back on his employer’s prejudice to complete his rounds. But, it bothered him that he had left things the way he had.

The truly unsettling nature of the encounter with his temporary employer was cut short by a loud pop, followed by the sound of metal grinding on metal.

A moment later, the screaming started.

The steady jostle of the crowd accelerated to an excited crush as though the earth had started quaking so that every person in the mad crowd was constantly falling against every other person. Jacob pushed through the people for what seemed like an eternity before he made it into the main square where the problem was finally apparent. The Ferris wheel had stopped, and judging from how wildly the carts were all swinging back and forth, it had done so suddenly. Fortunately, there didn’t appear to be any immediate structural damage. Unfortunately, this was not what had initiated the panicked cries from the onlookers; on the up-side of the round, near the top, a girl who appeared to be ten or twelve was dangling by her arms from an overturned cart.

There is a moment in every hero’s story when action is no longer driven by honor or valor but by the simple necessity of terror. This is the point at which rational thought is curb-stomped and left

to die while individual expertise and training will make all the decisions without consulting the logic center of the brain. This all happened in a moment for Jacob. He did not mean to be a hero, nor did he pause to consider the effect of his subsequent actions in his own life. Rationality and danger to himself bore no part in his decision-making process. All that mattered was the terror that he felt: the terror that he would witness a young girl fall to her death. The terror that humanity itself would fail in its most basic charge of caring for its young. Eight years of living on rooftops, nearly three thousand nights of scaling the sides of high-rise buildings and apartment complexes to find a safe place to sleep (just like Lydia had shown him) propelled Jacob forward, launched him onto the metal side of the monolithic wheel where he shimmied up almost faster than a man could run. The eight seconds that it took Jacob to scale the ninety-foot wheel ticked by with interminable certainty, each second in danger of bringing death to the girl who seemed to sway as her grip loosened. It seemed like a miracle of fortune that she was able to hold on until Jacob was right below her, before her fingers slipped and she fell to—as she thought—a broken and steely death. She was still screaming when Jacob caught her. Her panicked, shock-ridden brain was wholly unable to comprehend the hand that snatched her from the pull of gravity or the chest to which her struggling form was pressed while she was carried six feet farther up, back to the relative safety of the offending cart—which had, without the unbalanced weight of a desperate body holding on to the safety bar, righted itself. As far as the girl was concerned, when the world came back into focus she was seated as before: in her seat, on the Ferris wheel, still very much alive. Only, now there was a concerned stranger squeezing her hand and lightly slapping her cheeks. The ineffectual treatment was abruptly stopped when, upon at least partially coming back to her faculties, the girl burst into tears and collapsed against the shoulder which she now recognized as her salvation.

Though he had just scaled four stories and saved a limp child from plummeting to an almost certain death, Jacob found himself out of his league when she started sobbing. He somewhat awkwardly patted her head and muttered “there there”s as well as “you’re safe now”s to the girl for what now seemed the third eternity in the last five minutes. Finally, the wheel started again. It was quickly cycled to the pair’s cart to allow the girl to get off. Jacob had barely stepped onto the dismount platform when a pale face with fluttering eyes and heaving shallow breaths flashed past him to engulf the girl in a hug. Once the face had stopped moving, Jacob could see that its owner was a man to whom the girl bore a remarkable resemblance. The man checked her over for injury and asked if she was okay three times to which she responded each time “Pappy, I’m okay, he saved me,” to which the man would inevitably reply, “I know, Bella, I saw the whole thing.” Finally, the man seemed to be satisfied that his daughter (Jacob had by now determined that the man was, in fact, her father) was okay and none the worse for wear, if a tad shook up emotionally. That was when, to Jacob’s amazement, the man’s face bled from a bloodless pale to a deep red. His shallow gasps began coming in slower ragged heaves and Jacob was suddenly gripped by an irrational concern that every one of the throbbing blood vessels in the man’s head would simultaneously explode.

“Where, pray, was Buck? During all this?” Despite the intensely angry look of the suited man, his words were deathly silent.

“Oh daddy,” the girl said, “don’t be angry, I made him let me go on the Ferris wheel by myself. It can be so tiresome to have a guard all the time.”

“I don’t pay him to obey you.” The man’s icy voice came again, “I pay him to protect you.”

There was a pause before the man's demeanor collapsed back to something closer to his original state, his face this time fading some pink so that it was neither entirely pale nor all red, but rather a patchy combination of both.

"Never mind," he said in a nearly comforting manner, "I'll take care of that later."

Finally, the man turned toward Jacob with a sigh that seemed, Jacob hoped, to indicate a milder emotion than the intense storm he had just been going through.

"You saved my daughter's life," the man said. "How can I ever repay you?"

"It's a service freely given," Jacob said. "I wouldn't accept payment even if you could put a price on a life."

The man paused before pensively saying, "Please, do not think me disrespectful, then, if I offer you a job. I would give you any amount of my sizable fortune as a reward if I thought you would take it, but this offer is not a reward. I am impressed by your quick action. I would like for you to be my daughter's new caretaker."

"I appreciate the offer," Jacob said slowly. "Heaven knows I need a stable job; but, I'd be terribly under qualified. I don't know the first thing about caring for children."

"That's not what I'm offering," the man replied. "I have servants to take care of her. I want you to protect her. Keep her safe."

"You mean be her bodyguard?"

"If that is the term that you best understand, then yes. You would ensure that she remains safe in all circumstances, human or nature."

Jacob didn't have time to ponder this statement too deeply before the man said, "You will be provided with a good salary—I would imagine at least twelve times what you are making at this dump. Additionally, your housing and food will all be provided. You keep my daughter safe and

I will ensure that you are well cared for; not to sound threatening, but anything happens to her and you will wish you had fallen from that Ferris wheel yourself.”

Jacob studied the man’s intense face and short, determined five-foot-six posture. “If you’re serious about this job offer, then I won’t say no. In fairness to you, however, before you offer the world, you should know that I am homeless and have been since my twelfth birthday. I’ve struggled in life because employers tend to mistrust my situation. I only managed to land working security here technically as a temporary position because the carnival had no other options.”

“If you’re half the man I’ve seen today, then these other employers are fools.” The man smiled. “My name is William Osborn. You show up at this address early Thursday morning and we’ll take care of the details there. For now,” William reached out to clasp Jacobs hand in both of his own, “I cannot thank you enough for saving my daughter’s life. In fact, your kind words to her afterwards seem to have been almost as helpful for her mental state as stopping her fall was for her physical safety. Thank you.”

While William had been talking, a well dressed attendant who had hitherto remained unnoticed stepped forward to hand Jacob a silky smooth, gold embossed card bearing the inscription “William Osborn—4353 Withington Estate, Withington Place.” Once this business was completed, William turned on his perfectly polished, patent leather heel, and walked away, appearing not unlike a lion stalking its prey.

Before the entire group had gotten very far, the girl, whose life Jacob had saved and who was now apparently about to become his charge, turned and ran back to hug him, her arms barely coming up to his waist, before again following her father into the confused muddle of people that made up the crowd.

For just a moment Jacob stood silently in the midst of the crowd's dull confusion. Then his reverie was lost.

"You! What have you done?!"

Jacob sighed at the obnoxious voice and turned to see the manager bumbling his way through the crowd.

"I take you on, practically as a charity case, and what do you do?! Let something like this happen! Do you have any idea what the legal ramifications of an event like this could be?"

"What are you talking about?" Though Jacob was not used to the man's irrational prejudice, he was at least accepting of it, but what the man was saying now might as well have been pig-Latin for all Jacob understood.

"Somebody almost died on one of our rides! On your watch!"

Jacob was genuinely confused.

"You mean the girl whose life I just saved?"

"If you had been doing your job correctly, she wouldn't have needed saving!" The man was livid.

"Ensuring machine maintenance isn't my job," Jacob said. "It's yours."

Normally, Jacob would not have made a comment like that. He would have taken every measure not to anger his employer, but some levels of stupidity were beyond his ability to endure.

"You're right; it's not your job." The man spat. "Not anymore...you're fired!"

That was a bit surprising.

Jacob bit back the retort which, according to his overly excited conciseness, threatened to crush the cockroach of a man seething irrationally in front of him and instead reminded himself that he

had just been offered a better job with better pay from an employer who genuinely seemed to value him. With all this in mind, he managed to growl, “I’ll be out in the morning, sir.”

“You’ll be out right now,” the manager retorted, “and quick, before I call the police to have you thrown out.”

That really was too much.

Jacob had a sudden realization of how easy the man’s ferret neck would be to grab in one hand and how funny those skinny legs would be as they kicked frantically in the air—how satisfying a shade of red the face would turn and how bugged the eyes would get as they expanded into blood heavy saucers.

*Breathe: one, two, three.*

Jacob left.

Jacob was nearly out of the park when Oliver caught up to him.

“I heard what happened!” Oliver sounded much more excited than Jacob thought the situation warranted, but that seemed to be his *modus operandi* no matter how bad the situation, so Jacob didn’t put too much stock in it. “Good job on saving that girl! People are talking about it! They say you were like an urban ninja.”

Oliver made some poorly executed karate gestures in the air around Jacob as though he were an imaginary attacker.

“Everyone says you’re a hero.”

“Not everyone,” Jacob grumbled.

“Oh, don’t tell me that sourpus Samuel actually gave you grief for saving someone’s life?”

“He didn’t give me anything...except for a pink slip and ten minutes to vacate the premises.”



“Wait...what? He *fired* you!?”

“So fast you could see the after-shadow.”

“He’s an idiot. Not that it matters, I hear you got a better offer anyways.”

“Dang, news does travel fast here. Where did you hear about that?”

Oliver gave Jacob one of his classic, if-I-didn’t-know-any-better-I’d-think-you-were-an-idiot eyebrow raises before saying, “You saved someone’s life in a very public and, may I add, spectacular manner and then were offered a job by a man who, I might again add, was not only wearing a suit at an amusement park, but was apparently rich enough to keep a bodyguard for his daughter full time. And, this all happened in the middle of the main square. The miracle is that it hasn’t been printed in the daily paper yet. There were at least ten carny workers there watching the whole thing; it’s all anyone’s talking about.”

“Yes, well, after he hears about my getting fired today, I doubt Mr. William Osborn will be so eager to hire me.” Jacob sighed and scuffed at the earth as he walked.

“Are you kidding?” Oliver snorted. “Getting fired by snot-nosed Samuel is an endorsement. Worse thing I ever did for my career was work so long for that fool. It’s like pre-you high school all over again...but, you know, without the wedgies.”

“Whatever.” Jacob wasn’t entirely convinced, but even hearing the words did make him feel better. “I’m just sorry I wasn’t able to work with *you* longer. I really do appreciate your getting me this job in the first place.”

“Hey, anything for you.” Oliver got slightly more serious than his normal self. “I just hope things work out at your new gig. It sounds too good to be true...but nobody deserves that more than you do.”

“Yeah, you know, if it actually is everything he promised, then I can put in a good word for you.”

“That would be amazing! Just not right away. You shouldn’t strain your relationship with your new boss too early on.”

“Sure,” Jacob shrugged, but Oliver continued.

“Also don’t let me stop you from doing what you think is best, though. After you’ve been there for a few weeks and you’ve established a rapport with this employer guy, then by all means move me up in the world.”

Oliver winked and Jacob laughed.

“Sure, sure, sure,” was all he said.

They reached the front gate of the carnival in companionable silence and stopped for a moment on the border between the commercial crush of crowds, cons, smells, sights, and sounds and the comparatively empty silence of the rest of the city.

“Hey,” Oliver said, “let me know how your new job goes. If it goes wrong, then I’ll be there for you.”

“You’ve been there every time all my other jobs went wrong. I didn’t expect anything different this time.”

“Those were jobs?” Oliver said with a smile, “I thought they were charity cases that your employers took on for the tax benefits.”

“Har har.” Jacob’s long suffering deadpan met the banter on its own grounds but Oliver’s loyalty—which had, next to poverty, for years been the only constant in his life—won out so that Jacob let out a brief but sincere chuckle before telling Oliver to stay out of trouble and then turning to go.

## Chapter 2

The destitute face a number of fundamental problems in the hunt for a job. For example, he who does not have a house, does not have a closet. If there is no closet, then it stands to reason that there will be equally no suit, tie, or shiny black suede shoes; and if one doesn't have a suit, tie, or shiny black suede shoe, then it becomes very difficult to find an employer willing to look past the coal-like exterior to see the slightly more shiny coal underneath. Humans have become excellent at not judging books by their cover. But employees, it turns out, are not books. It was generally suspected that this, among other things, had been one of Jacob's primary struggles for the last twelve years as he had applied for, and been rejected from, the host of jobs which had all stated their "regret to inform [him]" that...nobody has ever read past that opener, and we're not about to break with tradition now.

Fortunately, even the most severe problems can be remedied with a little creativity and after a morning of wandering around a local university, Jacob had finally acquired a suit that he felt was presentable enough for his new employer to not feel (as Jacob did) that he had made a terrible mistake. How did Jacob find such a serendipitous set of garments in his care? We shall say no more than that the natural transaction of promises and lies were exchanged. Yes, Jacob was a student. No he couldn't find his ID because he was on a...cough...exchange program and wasn't used to the rules here. Yes, of course he would have the suit back to the collection before Tuesday. No, he wasn't trying to impress a girl—as he had said before, this was strictly a class project. He didn't feel too bad about lying to the bored curator of the collection; he did, after all, intend to have the suit back by Tuesday. If his new employer was to be believed, Jacob would make enough money by then to buy three suits—all nicer than this one.

"Now to make the man match the clothes."

The key to being homeless is confidence. Okay, that's not entirely true. The key to life is confidence; the key to being homeless is not getting caught. Currently, all Jacob needed was a wash. Even something so simple, however, requires keys. If one wants to wash without having to pay for a gym membership, there are two options: the river, or a communal apartment shower. Housing with shared showers is a dying breed—a breed that should not be approached without shower sandals—but it does still exist in the poorer parts of towns, probably because neither building inspectors nor health boards ever bother to actually look in the slums. Technically there is a third option: using the showers in the high school locker room. However, Jacob had decided that was no longer a good idea when he stopped looking young enough to be a high school student. Unfortunately, both of the other options had drawbacks. However, since his objective goal of “not getting caught” was less likely to be achieved in the open space of the river, Jacob preferred the rarely cleaned communal showers of the economically oppressed. He just had to keep his shoes on and not think too hard about the mold that often shared the always moist shower space with him. Once he had overcome his natural reaction to the horrifyingly unimproved sanitation of the low income public showers, the rest of the cleansing process only took just over an hour including finding a building, trying a few combinations on the ridiculously easy to bypass keypad, showering, and leaving without saying anything to anyone except to say that he's—errr—involved with their neighbor.

The result of all this effort was to take an ill looking scraggly boy of twenty four years and turn him into a competent looking man: the sort that one would find interning at a law firm or printed in the “top thirty under 30” section of Life Magazine. Just enough scruff to look intellectual without looking unkempt, just enough of a suit to look professional without looking sycophantic,

and just enough body odor to have a musk without being repulsive. He was ready for his job. At least, Jacob thought that he should *feel* ready. The truth, however, was complicated. The strange events leading up to his new job gave the entire experience a dreamlike quality such that Jacob was terrified that the first presentation of reality would resolve the entire affair in the hideous manner of most modern dreams—with no change to the basic miseries of life. This thought carried him out past the edge of the city where he followed the instructions provided on the card to an estate of considerable size.

Set off in the forest, the architecture was something of a surprise with its blend of traditional Mediterranean style and glass ultra-modern feel set against walled grounds, perfectly manicured in what appeared to be a dated Victorian style. The effect was at once discordant and intriguing. The estate was made all the more intimidating by the fact that Jacob viewed it through thirteen foot, gold-plated iron gates. The gates were, of course, made more intimidating by the guard house situated just to their side.

Jacob felt slightly foolish walking up to the guardhouse. It was a little like going through a drive-through on foot—only, in a drive-through the customer is always right, while at a guardhouse there is no such assurance.

Inside the guardhouse, there was a guard, obscured by a newspaper which was in the act of being read.

Jacob cleared his throat.

“Excuse me?”

The newspaper dropped enough to reveal a pair of lethargically drooping eyes which looked up at Jacob without disturbing the slightly bowed position of their accompanying head. The scene

was one of abject boredom with just a dash of annoyance, and Jacob found himself wondering whether this “security” really was secure.

“I...uh...I’m here for a job.” Jacob was suddenly acutely aware of his awkward sentence phrasing, of the alternate, and seemingly more obvious, meaning of his word, of his hair, of his borrowed suit, of his lack of mechanical transportation, of a million little things that—taken together—seemed like an insurmountable mountain. Surely even this bored, newspaper reading security guard relegated to the front gate would see him for the insecure homeless man that he was and tell him to stop making trouble and get lost.

The guard looked lazily at Jacob for three interminable seconds.

“And your name is?” When he finally spoke his voice was monotone, emotionless. It didn’t betray any of the scorn that Jacob’s feverishly anxious mind had feared. Simply put, the man didn’t care.

“Jacob. I’m supposed to be the new...uhh...bodyguard for the daughter of William Oscar.

“Oh yes,” The man glanced down at a piece of paper on his desk. “Yes, you’re expected. Hang on.” He picked up a phone and pushed a button. “Mr. Oscar? Yes. He’s here. Very good. Very Good. Yes, sir.” He put the phone down and pushed a different button. “Go ahead. You can leave your luggage at the top of the steps. One of the servants will take care of it for you.”

Jacob wasn’t sure whether the man was merely unobservant or whether he was being sarcastic about the luggage since Jacob didn’t have so much as a wallet, let alone a suitcase, but the paper had already resumed its post, obscuring the man from Jacob’s view.

As Jacob watched, the heavy iron gates swung open. He steeled himself with a breath and strode through, certain that the gates were the threshold to his destiny.

Up close, the grounds that Jacob walked through were as immaculate as they had seemed from a distance. Ten acres of perfectly trimmed lawn sat homogeneously next to a row of trees so straight that they seemed to have been planted on a laser line. Each tree was the same shape so that they looked not trimmed so much as grown from the same seed. These trees lined the driveway...road...massively-wide-cobblestone-thoroughfare on either side to stand as sentinels on the long way up to the house. Jacob regretted having to approach the house on foot, but taxis were a luxury for which he rarely had money. Upon reaching the house, Jacob was again gripped by awe. Though he had spent his first ten years in a comfortably wealthy (though unloving) home and was no stranger to the wealth of others, Jacob was staggered by the sheer style and size of the mansion before him. It was incredible: red stucco walls and a Venusian red tile roof were complemented nicely by its sprawling design and variety of non-repeating gables, levels, and room compositions. It was the kind of place that one could not describe without using words like “veranda” and “scutcheon”—not, mind you, because other houses didn’t have these elements, but rather because every element on this work of art was too far gone in what the world would call “class” to be referred to by their common names—there was nothing common about them. A set of flaring steps led from the mahogany door down to the road which curved gracefully around to form a loop, ostensibly so that the flow of traffic coming and going could be in agreement. In the center of the loop there was a fountain of the sort that could put on a water show as easily as it could provide an unobtrusive centerpiece. Altogether, the effect was less removed than it had been from outside the gate but more magnificent. Jacob thought that he just might be sick. It all seemed like the sort of cruel joke that the universe liked to play on unsuspecting underdogs. “Here, you want a job that is the definition of too good to be true? Cosmic PSYCH!”

The universe could be a vindictive diva.

Jacob nervously made his way to the massive front door and pushed at the bell. After a moment an austere man wearing an old fashioned tail suit and a shiny bald head answered the door.

“Yes?” the butler—for he clearly was a butler—asked in a clipped but surprisingly Southern accent.

“I’m here to see William Oscar. I have a job?” Though he meant to phrase it as a statement, Jacob found himself intoning his words into a question to reflect his own uncertainty.

The butler blinked once. “Yes, of course,” he said. “The Employer is expecting you.”

Jacob was put off by the way the butler said “the employer,” as if it contained a capital E.

However, he didn’t give it too much thought as his attention was arrested by the spacious and incredibly ornate intestines of the building. The front entryway was done in the warm brown tones of natural woods. The floors were intricate intarsia patterns of flowers and vines made from oaks, walnuts, and various mahoganies. There were two large staircases on either side of the entryway leading up to an area of tiered balconies surrounding a large crystal chandelier which dangled from the mural covered ceiling. Off to either side there were large double glass doors and the room extended back at least a hundred feet past the staircases. Every inch of wall space that was not a doorway was dedicated to exquisite impressionist paintings with vivid colors making up sublime landscapes.

“Ahem,” the butler cleared his throat and Jacob realized that he had stopped in the still open doorway. The butler gestured impatiently for Jacob to move the rest of the way into the mansion.

Mumbling an apology, Jacob did so.

The butler nodded. “Please wait here. The Employer will be with you shortly.”

“Yes, sir.”



Jacob probably didn't have to call the butler 'sir,' but he couldn't think how else to address the man, considering he didn't know what his own rank in this household would be any better than he knew how to navigate the concept of 'rank' at all.

The butler disappeared down the long hallway and left Jacob standing alone with the wood floors and the painted landscapes.

For the briefest moment, Jacob felt that his life really was about to be perfect.

"Jacob?" Jacob felt a young form practically crash into him from behind as Bella, the girl whose life he had saved and on whose behalf he was standing here now, rushed to greet him.

"Woah! Hello there!" Despite being nearly thrown off balance by the rambunctious little form, Jacob was glad to see the girl as he knew that she, at least, had no preset expectations that he could disappoint.

"I'm so glad you're here!" The girl seemed genuinely excited to see him and he found that the feeling was contagious, adding to his already present sense of dreamlike euphoria which was mixing in uncomfortable ways with his nervousness. Rather than relax him, the experience merely reinforced the sense of terrible responsibility that had been plaguing him all day. From now on, it would be his charge to ensure that this precious child would be safe.

"How have you been?" For lack of anything else to say, Jacob asked the girl the standard question.

"I haven't fallen off any Ferris wheels for at least a day," the girl said with a giggle that suggested she already found the whole experience to be funny rather than the traumatizing ordeal that it was.

Jacob laughed softly, "That's good."

"Are you staying here?"

Before Jacob could answer the question the butler reappeared.

“The Employer will be with you momentarily.” He said, then: “There you are, Mistress Bella.

It’s time for your midafternoon garden walk.”

The girl looked crestfallen, but the white gloved butler whisked her away before she could protest.

Jacob watched them go, wondering what kind of person would require a midafternoon garden walk for their child, and—idly—why he could feel a draft...an odd thing, he thought, for such an otherwise eerily immaculate house.

It was twenty minutes before Jacob began to get concerned.

After thirty he started to wonder if he had been forgotten.

By the time an hour had passed, Jacob had gone through every terrible scenario from “prank show” to the employer changing his mind about hiring decisions. He even considered, if only briefly, the possibility that he was unwittingly waiting for a religious cult to sacrifice him in a ceremony which was at that moment being delayed by the new arch druid’s obnoxiously long prayer.

One way or another, Jacob wasn’t going to turn back now. If he was going to be thrown out on his ear, then they’d by golly well have to do it in person. They weren’t going to be able to ignore him away.

When other recourse no longer seemed possible, he decided to find his employer himself.

The entry had two openings situated in the back which each led to a hallway so that there were two large halls running parallel to each other with (as Jacob discovered after a preliminary investigation) a spacious ballroom occupying the space between. Along the outside half of each

hallway was a series of doors leading to studies, libraries, billiards rooms, and sitting rooms. Jacob made his way down each one calling, “Mr. Oscar?” as he went.

In retrospect, Jacob would find these actions childish; he would even, at times, wish he had simply walked away—given up when he was left alone in the entryway. But to his frantically stressed mind, it seemed in the moment like the best course of action.

He had only made it about halfway down the hall, checking the room behind each door, when a bang made him jump so hard he fell to the ground. It wasn’t that he had never heard a gunshot before—you can’t live on the streets of a major city for as many years as he had without running into gun violence once or twice—but he had never heard a gunshot indoors, and he didn’t expect to run into one here. The acoustics and his expectations turned what may have otherwise been a pop into a terrifying death knell.

Without thinking, he scrambled to his feet and sprinted down to the end of the hall where the sound had originated. There was a door ajar here and without arresting his momentum at all, Jacob threw it open just in time to catch the barest glimpse of a tattooed ankle disappearing through an open window.

In the moment that it took him to get to the window, he also realized that there was a body lying prone on the ground with a small pool of blood growing around it like an amorphous amoeba attempting to consume the rich cream colored rug which served as a canvas for the grizzly picture.

Jacob ran to the window but found only a drop of about twenty feet onto a perfectly manicured yard below. There was no tattoo, no ankle, no person in sight. A moment later he was at the barely living corpse’s side.

It was William Oscar: stranger, employer, millionaire, father, and mortally wounded body which no title nor possession could now save.

The man coughed weakly and his eyes fluttered as he struggled to focus on Jacob.

“It’s...you.” His voice was a whisper, a rasp of flesh in heavy air.

“William,” Jacob was in shock, uncertain what to do, unable to think clearly. “I’ll...call the ambulance.” He was about to run for the phone to do just that when his would be employer weakly grabbed his hand and said:

“No time.... it’s...too late. I’ll die...just...take care of...Bella. This...is all for her.” He pressed a key into Jacob’s hand. “Under the...west oak... All for Bella. Don’t let...not safe with...state.” his gasps were becoming more frequent and his breaths were shallower.

“Who did this?” Jacob felt helpless as he desperately tried to staunch the bleeding with his hands. But he knew there was nothing he could do; he couldn’t not push against the inexorable creep of blood as it escaped its cage of ribs to run free across the floor.

“I’ll call an ambulance, I’ll...” Jacob cut his sobbing words off as William weakly grabbed his now bloody hand and pressed a blank slip of paper into it. “Take...care...of...Bella...go there...help her....” He pointed weakly to the paper and took a final shallow, shuddering breath. His hand fell to the ground between Jacob’s kneeling form and his own lifeless body.

Jacob felt himself start to shake. He couldn’t think. His vision flickered. He felt cold. Each of these sensations were experienced in a removed way, as if he were seeing someone else entirely experience them.

*I...police.* He thought slowly. *I should call the police.*

He stumbled to his feet and toward the phone which sat on a desk across the room.

A door next to the desk quietly opened and a six foot penguin entered the room carrying a tray in his hands. Hands.... Penguin.... Not a penguin.... A butler.... the butler who had met Jacob at the door. The butler froze. The tray crashed on the ground. The penguin's...man's...butler's eyes formed perfect circles.

Jacob heard his own voice say, "Mur-der."

The man lunged for a broken display case that Jacob had not seen before. He picked out an antique looking pistol and pointed it shakily in Jacob's direction. What was he doing?

The man slowly walked to the phone without taking his eyes off of Jacob.

"Hello?" he had picked up the phone, but Jacob hadn't seen...couldn't think.

"The Employer has been murdered." The butler's voice was violently uneven as he spoke; "Yes, I have the killer in custody. Notify the police immediately."

Killer in custody? That was...excellent news! Jacob couldn't bear the thought of that scumbag getting—

He looked down at his blood soaked hands. He considered the occupants of the room. The pieces in his head finally snapped into place. Oh...

At the beginning of the day Jacob had been euphoric. He was on top of the world. He was taking the first step to living his dream.

Jacob's dream had become a nightmare.

"And you say that you had nothing to do with the murder?"

"I've told you! All I know is that I saw someone leaving as I walked in!"

"Ahhh, yes, the mysterious ankle. And tell me, Mr. Wright, how exactly would a person exit a window in the way you describe?"

“I don’t know! It was all so fast—It’s just what I saw! I saw what I saw!”

It had been nearly eighteen hours since the murder. Jacob was sitting in a small, bare room. In the center was a table, at which he was currently situated, surrounded by three chairs: one filled by him, the other two occupied by a man and a woman both dressed in button up shirts and relaxed suits with their backs to what was certainly a two way mirror.

“Look,” Jacob said, “I told you what happened. I showed up for the first day of my job. After being left for some time, I thought I had been forgotten. I went looking for my employer. I heard a gunshot, ran into the room, someone was leaving out the window, and William was dying on the floor.”

“Mmmhmm.” The woman gave a sarcastic hum accentuated by a flat stare. “So how about you explain the literal blood on your hands, the fact that nobody on the estate seemed to know who you were, and the key in your hand belonging to a safe containing, as we have found, several million dollars.”

“That money is for his daughter.” Jacob squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed at them with the heels of his hands.

“Yes,” The woman continued for him with a cynical drawl, “and I suppose you were just going to give it to her?”

Jacob sighed but didn’t say anything. It was a damning situation either way.

“Do you know what we look for in these cases, Mr. Wright?” It was the male detective’s turn to speak. While the woman’s voice was smooth and disinterested, the man’s voice sounded like gravel sliding off a tin roof. He continued:

“We look for motive, means, and opportunity. As I see it, the four million dollars stashed in that safe makes for some pretty convincing motive. The means were easy. We have the gun that you

used, taken from a display case in the room where you shot him. The opportunity was obvious, you were given access to the mansion when Mr. Oscar rashly offered you a job without even requiring a background check. Then, when you went in on your first day you were alone with him. We've got you on all three counts; you're dead to rights already, so why don't you tell us the truth? You make things easy for us now, and we'll make things easy for you later."

"I didn't do it," Jacob enunciated every word carefully. "You have the wrong guy."

The man sighed. "Okay, Mr. Wright, have it your way. Just know that the man you killed helped a lot of people, made a lot of friends in a lot of places: the district attorney's office, the media," he paused for a moment as if to add emphasis to his next statement, "the county prison."

"Guards or prisoners?"

"Both," The man said.

The implication was clear. If he didn't get the best deal possible, then he would be torn apart in twelve different ways.

"Nobody can *just* make friends," Jacob said, "even somebody like Mr. Oscar. For every person he helped, he must have made four people angry; so I'd say your threat is a moot point, even if it were an ethical way to get a confession."

He knew those kinds of statements wouldn't help his case, but he wasn't about to put up with threats, covert or otherwise.

"We're not making any threats." The words that the woman detective said were placating, but the meaning that Jacob intuited from her tone did not match.

"You're right, after all," she continued, "William did have enemies. So, what was his crime against you?"

“Now you’re trying to get me to admit to a revenge motive? Seriously?! What happened to killing him for the four million in the safe?”

“So you did, in fact, kill him for the money, then?” The male detective cut in again, clearly trying to throw him off balance.

“What? No!”

“It’s okay,” the man said. “Four million is a lot of money. In fact, I’d kill someone myself for four million dollars.”

Jacob snorted. “No you wouldn’t. You actually found four million dollars in, if what you’ve told me is to be believed, unmarked bills hidden in a safe in the woods, the whereabouts of which only the three of us knew at first, and yet your partner and I are still alive and you’re not retiring somewhere on a tropical island without extradition. Instead, you’re sitting in a room in a police precinct in a dingy city telling me lies about what you would or would not do while subsisting on a meager wage that barely covers living expenses and trying to protect a city that hates us both—you because you’re a cop and me because I’m broke. Given those facts, I would confidently say that you would certainly not murder somebody for four million dollars. Face it, Sergeant, you’re too noble a cop to get me to purger myself that way. I won’t confess wrongfully to a crime I didn’t do just because you think I’ll empathize with your lie.”

“That’s quite the speech,” the woman commented. “Did you say something similar to Mr. Oscar before you killed him?”

“Look,” Jacob said, “I told you the truth; is anyone even looking into my lead at all?”

The silence in the room answered Jacob’s question more effectively than anything could.

“I see.” Jacob sighed. “Look, I know it’s not much to go on. There are probably hundreds of ankles tattooed with phoenixes in this city, but only one of them killed William Oscar and every



minute you waste trying to get a confession out of me here is a minute that the real killer gets away. Couldn't you at least put one officer on it? Or how about just your intern?"

"Don't need to," the male detective growled. "We've got enough on you even without your confession. This is just a courtesy to the DA's office. Make their job a little easier."

Jacob sat back heavily in his chair and rubbed his head. "Well, can you at least tell me that Bella is safe?"

"Uhuh, because you were so concerned about her when you murdered her father?" The female detective's snide remarks were starting to annoy Jacob.

"Or maybe you grew a conscience when you realized that you'd condemned her to an orphaned life alone in the foster care system," the man said.

"Wait." Jacob knit his eyebrows together. "You put her in foster care?"

The female detective shot her partner a warning glare.

"I just...thought with all that money...she does get all the money? Right? I mean, it is her inheritance as well as her dad's dying wish."

"Just stop." The female detective was suddenly angry, very angry. "It's scum like you who leave little girls to grow up unloved, without parents. You can't walk in here, pretend to care all of a sudden, and think that we'll be impressed with your humanity. We're not impressed. I will personally see to it that you rot in jail for the rest of your miserable life. And when that's over, you'll rot in an unmarked grave, unmourned and unloved, the way you deserve."

"Wow." Jacob leaned back in his chair just a little. "That was intense. Honestly, I expected more professionalism, also just a little bit of subtlety...maybe some empathy building, a little good cop bad cop. You know, that sort of thing. I'll give you this though, you two make one hell of a couple." By this time he had given up the diplomacy game. There was no hope for him. No

matter what he did he would almost certainly be convicted, and he would probably spend the rest of his life in jail. Still, he would like to know that Bella was cared for and it irked him that they wouldn't talk. Not only had it been his would-be benefactor's dying wish, but he personally cared for the girl with a depth that belied the short duration of their limited acquaintance. He didn't know what it was like to have a daughter, but he imagined it would feel similar to the protective way he felt about the girl whose life he had saved.

Unfortunately, Jacob's comment hadn't helped the tension in the room. In fact, the female detective looked even more threatening than before—if such a thing was possible. Jacob wondered what had made her go from disinterested to ready to kill so quickly.

Just as she looked set to break each of Jacob's fingers one at a time, her partner placed a hand on her arm and gave an almost imperceptible jerk of his head toward the door. The two stood and left.

Jacob waited for nearly an hour alone in the room.

*I didn't think I had pissed them off that badly....* He thought. *This can't bode well.*

Finally, the male detective reentered the room.

"I must apologize for my partner," he said. "She was out of line in the way she talked to you."

"Not at all." Jacob shrugged. "I was the one who was out of line. It's just been a bit of a high stress day for me. You know, I show up for the first good job I've ever had, finally with real prospects in life, and next thing I know someone's murdered my employer and I'm left holding the bag, looking at life in jail. It's been rough."

"Yes, well—"

Jacob cut the man off, “Where I’m going with all this is that I think I’m too close to everything, and I don’t think I should say anything more without a lawyer.”

There was a moment of silence as the detective stared at Jacob with his mouth slightly open.

Then he exploded in an angry splutter.

“There’s no need for all this!” the man finally said. “There isn’t anything that a lawyer can do for you.”

However, no matter what the detective said, Jacob refused to talk until nearly two hours later when a defense attorney, a short snappy woman named Liz with fiery red hair and a temper to match, showed up.

“Look,” she told Jacob, “I don’t care a minute whether you’re innocent as the pope or guilty as his wife. My job is to either get you off clean or make the prosecution damn sure before they convict you.”

On his part, she said, he could tell her what happened and then hang tight and not say anything so that she could do her job.

It took all of forty minutes for them to come to this understanding, and then she left. Jacob, when he wouldn’t say anything more, found himself escorted to a holding cell that was slightly more comfortable than the interrogation room due to the addition of a small hard cot along one wall and barred walls that made the room seem less claustrophobic even though he actually had less space. All together, it was a long, unpleasant experience that promised to culminate in a long, unpleasant sentence after what would probably be a long, unpleasant trial.

Jacob was lying on his back counting the number of tiles that would have been on the ceiling if the city had cared enough about its criminals to give them something other than cement to look at, when he heard the cell row door being unlocked.

A voice which Jacob recognized as the youngest (and certainly friendliest) officer, Officer Ryson, said, “You have fifteen minutes.”—then the sound of the door closing and locking. The significance of all this did not sink in until a different voice, one that Jacob knew perhaps better than any other in the world, said, “What part of ‘don’t strain relations with your new employer too early on’ did you not understand? or did no one ever tell you that three ounces of lead lodged in a vital organ can strain a relationship?”

Jacob sat up. Oliver was smiling mountains on the other side of the bars.

“Oliver? What are you doing here?” Jacob was glad to see his friend, but surprised nonetheless.

“What? You get a shiny new job and suddenly you’re too good for your best friend?”

Jacob leaned his head against the back wall. “Yeah, well, in case you didn’t notice, my new job has been keeping me kind of busy.”

“Well that’s good,” Oliver said. “That’s more than I can say about my old one.”

Jacob’s head hurt. “What’s the word about the case on the street?”

Oliver blew out an exaggerated breath as if to illustrate in a sarcastic way the magnitude of what was happening in the outside world. “The homeless man who murdered one of the city’s richest Tycoons...it’s all anyone’s talking about.”

Just the smallest groan escaped Jacob’s throat. “You know it wasn’t me, right?”

This was met by a snort of derision. “Of course I do! Look, even putting your character aside, it would have been pretty stupid of you to throw away the only good job you ever had by committing a crime with a weapon you don’t even know how to use. Heck, who fully loaded antique pistols on display anyways? You’re too smart a man for that, Jacob. If you had killed him, you would have used a knife or a garrote. But then, we can’t put your character aside, either. Let’s face it, you’re too nice to kill someone, no matter how much money is on the line. Anyone

with half a brain and any personal knowledge of you at all knows you're innocent. The problem is, the judge won't have either of those things."

"I don't care so much about the judge," Jacob said. "I just care that you know I'm innocent."

"Oh that's so sweet." Oliver's tone was so flat Jacob could have balanced an upright penny on it.

"How about you do one better and make sure the judge *does* know it so I won't have to go all the way to the state penitentiary for rudimentary social interaction. Dude, you're practically the only friend I've got! Don't you go bailing on me for some gang of thugs in the block. Besides, I don't know much about this William Oscar person, but I can tell you this...he didn't have nearly enough legal income to account for all his money."

"You couldn't have told me that before I took the job?!"

"Calm down there, tiger." Oliver held up his hand in a placating manner. "That's just from some digging I did this morning."

"This morning?" Jacob asked. "You didn't blow off work because I landed myself in trouble again, did you?"

Oliver raised an eyebrow. "Firstly, I'm allowed to blow off any work I want whether you're in trouble or not. And secondly, seriously? How clear can I be on this? You know the manager at that flea circus; I recommended the man who allegedly killed a patron who was about to file a massive lawsuit against them. That makes them look as guilty as heck so they're scrambling to cut all ties. That especially includes me. They fired my perfectly sculpted ass so fast that I didn't even have time to tell them 'good riddance.' Oh, and by the way, they told me to tell you not to get any ideas about collecting pay. As far as they're concerned, you owe them money for 'damages done' or some such nonsense like that."

Jacob squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh no. I'm so sorry—"

“Sorry?” Oliver asked. “What on earth do you have to be sorry for? I’ve lost count of how many debts of gratitude I owe you and this is yet another one; one which, incidentally, goes rather high on the list. I’ve wanted out of that job for years now but couldn’t bring myself to leave because I knew they couldn’t ever function without me.”

“Can’t function without you, huh?”

“Well, yeah. Again, you’ve met the manager. Without me there, I’d give them no more than three months to go under.”

Jacob laughed but quickly fell back into the same somber mood that had plagued him ever since he had been left to stew in his own cement and steel induced thoughts. “You say the whole of the city is talking about this?” he asked. “Have you heard anything about the girl?”

“The girl?”

“Yes...Bella...you know, the one I saved? The victim’s daughter.”

“Ahhhh, no, sorry, I haven’t heard a thing about her.”

“Oliver,” Jacob spoke pensively, “I don’t want you getting in any trouble with the cops...but could you check up on her? They won’t tell me anything but I have to know that she’s alright.”

“Of course! Of course I can! What are friends for?”

“Most friends are not for the great lengths that you go through for me, Oliver.”

“Yeah, whatever. I’ll see you at your preliminary hearing, then?”

The nonchalance with which Oliver mentioned the hearing took Jacob off guard. “My...what?”

“Your preliminary hearing. It’s tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Jacob said slowly, “two questions: how do you know that, and why don’t I know that?”

Oliver gave him the closest thing to a mischievous grin that a mostly grown man can produce. “I know it because I have charm, wit, and talent, and you don’t because it’s one of those ‘need to know’ things.”

“I’m the defendant! How is that not a person who needs to know?”

Oliver smiled serenely. “Well now you do know. And anyways, it’s not like you’ve got plans or anything. I checked your schedule, it’s clear as a...uh...very clean window.”

Jacob tried to show his annoyance with the joke’s bad sense of timing, taste, and delivery, but the barest hint of a laugh still escaped him.

“Ah!” Oliver made his eyes wide and his mouth round as if to indicate a mock sense of surprise.

“I knew there was still humor somewhere in that dank little cell!”

Jacob gave a little shake of his head.

“Look,” Oliver got very somber, “you’ve been my friend since we were teenagers. You were my only real friend in high school. In a very real way, you saved my life. I will do whatever it takes to get you out of this.”

Jacob gave his friend a sad smile. “I appreciate the sentiment, but you focus on helping Bella and take care of yourself; I’ll clean up my own mess.”

As Oliver left, Jacob got the very strong sense that the whole of his life was a mess.