

Invasives

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Chapter 1

Rob Teller stepped around a sidewalk grate and the warm, sour air rising from it, and glanced back through dancing vapor. The finance district streets were deserted except for a river of cabs, passengers silhouetted by the headlights of the car behind. He considered trying to hail one, but he would have had to stop walking. Not a good idea. He slowed near a subway entrance, but alarm bells pealed in his mind at the thought of going underground.

Instead, he continued north. There'd be more people on Broadway. A memory flashed through his thoughts: a documentary he'd seen on herd life in Africa, animals flocking for safety. That was him. Alone on a concrete savannah, exposed, watched, hunted.

One lousy sale, and now crap rained down on him. He hadn't thrown a lot of money at it; he hadn't been reckless. Just enough to make a little extra, to take Carol and the kids to Orlando in February. The big boys had him trading commodities—wheat, corn, even Nigerian millet, for Christ's sake. He didn't know shit about commodities, at least not compared to some of the other guys. But they were doing well, making a couple of million every few months. Where was the harm in dropping a sale for himself—in Carol's name, of course—and piggy-backing on their volume? Strictly small-time. Enough for that trip and no more. Sales guys did stuff like that all

the time.

He fished his phone from his jacket pocket, glanced up again in time to avoid walking into the edge of a scaffold set up over the sidewalk. Painted plywood covered the walls of the building beside him; icy water dripped from corrugated metal overhead.

“Call Carol,” he said, keeping his voice low.

He glanced over his shoulder. Again. Did he hear footsteps? A minute before he’d felt exposed; now he was in a cage of wood and steel, bars of scaffolding between him and the street.

Two rings. “Hello?”

“It’s me.”

“Rob? You sound strange. Where are you?”

“I’m still downtown. I’m on my way—”

“You had a call tonight. Doug somebody? Did he reach you?”

Rob’s mouth went dry and a shiver made him lurch mid-stride, as if he’d been doused with a bucket of snow. *Crap*. They’d called his home. Were they watching the house? “What did he say?”

“Nothing, really. He asked for you and when I told him you were still at work—”

“Don’t answer the phone again,” he said, the words coming in a rush. “Let the machine pick up. Turn off the lights and make it seem like no one’s home.”

“What?” She sounded confused, a nervous laugh in her voice.

Those were definitely steps behind him, and something else. Three parts. *Whu-pa-thpt!* Like someone was bouncing a goddamned tennis ball. *Whu-pa-thpt!* Not bouncing, throwing.

Skipping it off the sidewalk, into the wall, and then back to the hand. Again and again. *Whu-pa-thpt! Whu-pa-thpt!*

Rob resisted the urge to peer back, sped up a little more. He turned onto Liberty Street.

“Rob?”

“I’ve gotta go.”

“You’re scaring me. What’s going—”

He ended the call. Maybe the subway would be smart after all. A different herd, but safety in numbers nevertheless. The Fulton Street station was a few blocks north and east. First, though, he had to escape this construction zone. Just to the other side of the street. Anything to get out of this fucking plywood and metal box. But traffic flowed in every lane, hemming him in.

The bouncing ball closed on him, and up ahead, at the corner of Broadway and Liberty, someone leaned against the crosswalk signal pole.

Rob stopped, muttered a curse. The bluetooth caught it. “Name not recognized. Please try again.”

He started back the way he’d come. After a few steps, he ducked under the scaffolding. A cab whipped by, the driver leaning on his horn. Rob ran. Tires screeched, more horns blared. Somehow he made it to the north side of the street.

Without breaking stride, he turned up a narrow lane. If he remembered right, there was another entrance to the Fulton Street stop. He didn’t hear the bouncing ball anymore. For that matter, he didn’t hear horns or screeching tires, either. Maybe they hadn’t followed.

Within two seconds that hope evaporated. He skidded to a stop, shoes scraping on

pavement. A figure stepped into the alley, blocking his exit. Light spilled into the lane from the streetlamp behind him, but otherwise all was in shadow.

He backed away, turned, halted again, his heart hammering. The kid standing in front of him, tossing a rubber ball and snatching it out of the air, couldn't have been more than twenty years old. Tall, lean, hair so blond it looked white in the phosphorescent glow of the streetlight. He wore jeans, a t-shirt and leather jacket, tennis sneakers, as if the cold couldn't touch him. Seeing him, Rob relaxed enough to think of ways he might put this would-be mugger on the ground. A punch or a kick, or one of the other moves he'd picked up over the years. He knew how to take care of himself.

“Who are you?” he asked, pleased by how calm he sounded.

The kid threw his ball to the side so that it bounced off the pavement and then the alley wall, before flying back to his hand. *Whu-pa-thpt!* He didn't have to reach for it, and his eyes never left Rob's face.

Rob stepped back, fear creeping over him again.

“Who are you?” No calm this time. Panic, petulance; he sounded like a frightened boy.

“What do you want?”

Whu-pa-thpt! The kid's gaze didn't waver. How the hell did he do that?

“You pissed some people off, Rob,” the kid said. “You should have been more careful.”

“I . . . I'm sorry. You're right. But it's not too late! I can give them whatever—”

The kid shook his head. “That's not an option. There are no options.” He flashed a smile.

“No pun intended.”

Options. It took him a second. Who was this? How much did he know?

The kid slipped the ball into his jacket pocket. As he did, his cheeks flushed and a trickle of sweat ran down his temple, shining with the glow of the streetlight.

Something hammered Rob's throat, the pain blinding. He clutched his neck with both hands, dropped to his knees, unable to breathe.

The kid hadn't moved; he still stood twenty feet away. He reached for his back pocket, pulled something free with a whisper of steel and leather, and a gleam of silver. A hunting knife.

Rob struggled to his feet. The kid strode toward him. Rob backed away, only to be grabbed from behind.

He was too weak to break free, too terrified to know what else to try, too hurt to scream. The kid grinned as he drew back his blade hand.

Chapter 2

Drowse watched the men through her bangs, face lowered so they wouldn't know she was looking at them. Not that they paid much attention to her. For now they cared only about the things she had brought them.

Two laptops; four phones, all recent generation; two bluetooth speakers; four or five e-readers, though a couple of these were older; and at least half a dozen watches, ranging from consumer casual to one that was super-expensive and brand new.

It was a good haul. This time of year, with people shopping for the holidays, stuff was easier to come by. Bat and Mako had done well. All three of them had, really. Mako found the watches, including that one, which was the real prize, the item that would set them up for at least a couple of weeks. Assuming Gus and his buddy didn't try to rip them off.

Gus's friend, who she didn't know, examined one of the laptops, staring hard at the metal on the bottom. After a moment, he set that one aside and studied the bottom of the other. She knew why. She lowered her gaze again, wishing they'd hurry up and pay her so she could get out of there. It was cold in the garage. Gus ran a heater that looked like it was on the verge of bursting into flames or falling to pieces, but it didn't do much. Both men wore coats and woolen caps. Drowse was bundled in the fleece she'd gotten from Mako, hands fisted deep in her pockets, her fingerless gloves almost useless. With every breath, vapor billowed in the dim yellow light of Gus's lone lamp.

"Where's the serial number?" Gus's friend asked.

“I told you,” Gus said, “Drowse takes care of that, don’t you, beautiful?”

Her skin crawled.

“I wanna hear it from her. Where are they?”

“They’re gone. I took care of them, like Gus said.”

“Right, and I’m asking how you did it.”

He straightened, eyes raking over her head to foot. She didn’t think much of Gus, but she knew him and, for the most part, had gotten over her fear of him. He was thick around the middle, average height. He probably could have hurt her if he’d wanted to, but she thought he liked her, in his own creepy, gross way.

This new guy, though. . . . She’d only met him today. She didn’t trust him, and she didn’t want to get anywhere near him. Gus had introduced him as a new buyer. That was all. No name, no word on what happened to the old buyer. The man was tall, heavy, his round, pock-marked face mostly obscured by a wild, bushy beard. He stank of sweat and cigarettes. He and Gus both.

“Why does it matter?” she asked, daring to look him in the eye.

“They look good, don’t they?” Gus said. “That’s what’s important.”

He was probably trying to help her, but annoyance flickered in the big man’s stare.

“They look too good. There’s no file marks, no scratching. Nothing. My clients will look at that and think ‘These are counterfeit.’ And what the hell am I supposed to say when they ask me, huh? I’m half convinced they’re counterfeit myself.”

“They’re not!”

“Then tell me how you did it.”

“Those computers look like every other computer Gus has bought from me, and he’s never had a problem. Tell him, Gus.”

“She’s right.”

“I don’t give a goddamn. I’m buying from you now, and I’m telling you that from now on it’s going to be a problem. So answer the fucking question!”

She couldn’t. Not without making things much worse for herself. A stubborn fence was bad enough, but telling them. . . . Mako and Bat didn’t know; that’s how deep a secret it was. They’d all think she was a freak—more of one than they probably thought her already. Word would spread and pretty soon no one in the city would want anything to do with her. Or worse, people would want her to do all sorts of stuff that she had no interest in doing. She didn’t know much about the power she had, but she knew enough to keep it secret, to understand that the more people who knew, the more danger she’d be in.

Fortunately, she was smarter than Gus and his friend. She was smarter than most people she knew. Except maybe Bat. He was crazy smart.

“I’m not telling you a damn thing,” she said.

The man opened his mouth to argue. She didn’t let him.

“If you had a business secret, one that made your goods better than everyone else’s, would you blab it to every asshole who demanded to know how you did it? Or would you tell that guy to go fuck himself?”

It bothered her to swear, even now, years removed from a life in which cussing had been a big deal, punishable, “*inappropriate*.” But for a girl like her, dealing with men like these, it was

sometimes the only way to be heard.

Talking back that way carried risks, though. The man's eyes narrowed to slits, and she feared she'd pushed him too far.

But God bless Gus.

"She got you there, man," he said, laughing. "I mean she nailed your ass. You know it as well as I do. What she does is goddamn *proprietary*."

"You've got a smart mouth, kid. You should watch yourself."

"Don't be like that, man. She's just doing business, like you and me. That's all this is, right? We all want the same things: quality goods and legit buyers. Drowse has been bringing me quality for a while now. She and her crew—they do good work." To Drowse, he said, "Cooper here, he's all right. He's watching out for himself and his clients, like anyone else. You two can make a lot of money together. All three of us can if we remember that we're all after the same things. Right?"

Drowse gave a reluctant nod.

Cooper's mouth twisted the way it might if he'd bitten into a mealy apple. "You swear the goods are real?"

"Yeah. I know how they look. People like them clean—that's what we've learned, so that's what I did. But if your hackers are any good, they'll know what to do with these when they switch them on. They'll find all the software they expect in there. These computers are the real thing."

"Well, I guess I have to take your word, don't I?"

“No,” Drowse said. “You can give all this stuff back to me and I’ll sell it to someone else. Your loss, not mine.”

She was bluffing. Probably she could find another buyer, but this late in the day, with another cold night in the forecast and their food running low, she didn’t want to. She wanted her money and she wanted out.

Cooper glanced at Gus, lifted a shoulder, and then dipped his chin in a shallow nod.

Gus rubbed his hands together, and bared yellowed, crooked teeth. “All right. We can give you seventy-five for each of the laptops, twenty for each of the speakers, and ten for each of the phones.”

“*Ten?*”

“Phone companies are giving away new ones. No one expects to pay for a phone anymore. These are pretty new, and they’ll sell eventually, but not for a lot.”

Cooper stared at the floor, his expression completely blank. She wouldn’t have wanted to play poker against him. They were cheating her. She was sure of it. Not only with the phones—seventy-five for the laptops was low, too. She hoped the watches would make up for it.

“The e-readers . . .” Gus dismissed them with a wave of his grimy hand “I can give you twenty for the lot, but that’s all.”

“What about the watches?”

“Three hundred for the lot.”

“No!” She shook her head, hair flying into her eyes. “The Tag Heuer alone is worth twice that!”

“The Tag will *sell* for twice that,” Cooper said. “Maybe. And we have to make our profit, too.”

Gus held it up for her to see, showing her the underside. “Plus, counterfeit watches really are a thing. Clearing the serial number off the computers was smart. Clearing the back of this. . . . That was a mistake, love. People look at the back to check it’s legit. You cost yourself there.”

She wanted to cry. She wanted to tell him not to call her “love.”

“Then give them back to me. I’ll sell them to someone else.”

Gus shrugged and opened his free hand. “All right. Your choice as always.”

Drowse hadn’t expected that. Was he telling the truth? Had she really cost them so much?

“Four hundred for the lot,” she said. She pointed at Cooper. “He admitted he could sell the Tag for six. And those other watches are still worth something.”

Another glance passed between the two men. After a few seconds, Cooper’s cheek twitched—something between surrender and dismissal.

“Four hundred,” Gus said. “That means . . .”

He scrunched his narrow face in concentration. Drowse did the math in a quarter of the time it took him.

“Six-thirty total,” he finally said.

“Six-*fifty* total.”

Gus frowned, brow furrowing again. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said. “No harm done.”

He always got the math wrong, and always in his favor. She’d have thought by now he knew

she wouldn't let him get away with it. He dug a thick roll of old bills out of his pocket and peeled off her payment.

"That's a lot of money for a little girl," Cooper said. "What do you do with it?"

"I have a portfolio at JP Morgan. Mostly tech stocks."

He glared. "You really are a smart-ass, aren't you?"

"I'm not a little girl," Drowse said. "And I have two partners who get their share. It's really not that much when you divide it three ways."

She crossed to them and retrieved her backpack, which was now empty except for the metal water bottle in the torn side pocket. She zipped the pack closed, noting that the tear in the fabric parallel to the zipper had gotten longer. Bat would need to find her a new one before long. She reached for the bills and tried to pull them from Gus's grip.

He held them tight.

"Cooper, take your stuff and go."

Drowse stared off to the side, pulse quickening. Cooper eyed each of them before gathering the haul in an old pack of his own and leaving the garage. When he had closed the door, Gus let go of the money.

She continued to stare at a pile of old boxes marked "LPs/CDs."

"You shouldn't piss him off. You don't know anything about him. Hell, I don't know that much either. But I know he has money and clients. And I know he's no one to fuck around with."

"Sorry," she said, voice flat, "I won't do it again."

"That's all I ask."

If only.

Gus stood, and Drowse stepped back. He held up his hands for her to see.

“It’s all right. Nothing to be afraid of.” He stepped out from behind the old metal desk and sat back against it, too close to her in the confined space. “You doing all right, Drowse? You seem . . . I don’t know. Jumpy. Not yourself.”

“I’m fine.”

“Those boys treating you all right?”

“We’re all fine.”

“You know, it’s not your job to take care of them. You’re not their mother.”

She balled her hands into fists, crumpling the bills. “Nobody said I was.” *And this is none of your damn business.* If they didn’t depend so much on Gus’s money, she would have stormed out after telling him to go screw himself. But they needed him.

“You know, I’ve got room at my place.” He looked over the space they were in, wincing at what he saw. “I know this place is crap. But where I live . . . it’s nice, you know? And there’s room. You’d never want for anything. I’d make sure of that. You’d be warm in the winter, and cool in the summer, and you’d never be hungry.”

He reached for her hand and she flinched away.

His gaze turned stony. “That’s twice you’ve pulled away from me. A man takes that as disrespect, or worse.”

“I just want to go,” she said, her voice low.

“That Mako is trouble. You know that, right? He’s no good. And the other one—I don’t

know him, but I wonder if they both take advantage of you a little bit.”

She forced herself to look him in the eye. “They don’t. Nobody does.”

Gus straightened, and she held her ground, afraid to retreat from him again. He stood a few inches taller than she, and with his greasy hair hanging to his shoulders, he appeared bigger than he was. But silver streaked the black hair, and his face had a sallow look. She thought she could fight him off if she had to.

She was stronger than most people thought, and she knew how to hurt people if she had to. Mako taught her when they first started working together. He said a girl on the streets needed to know how to protect herself.

At last, Gus turned away from her, returned to his chair behind the desk. “Get going,” he said. “It’s late, and they’re saying snow tonight.”

“Yeah, all right.”

She started toward the door.

“I don’t know how you do what you do,” he said, stopping her. She kept her back to him. “And I’ve never asked. But Cooper won’t be put off forever. You might want to come up with something to tell him, regardless of whether it’s true.”

Drowse nodded.

“And next time, don’t wipe the back of the watches.”

She peered at him over her shoulder. “Yeah, learned that one the hard way.”