

Chapter Three

Max had merged onto the highway, headed back downtown, when he realized what had happened. He sighed, checked his mirrors, and got off at the next exit. He'd dropped the three women off at an old Victorian in Manayunk. It was clear the three were drunk when he picked them up outside the bar, but only one of the three seemed very drunk. The fare from Center City was high enough that Max thought it was worth the risk that he'd be cleaning up vomit before he made the address. All three also seemed very young and it was getting late. He let them in the car.

The drunkest girl had been predictably obnoxious and, given the increasingly sour faces of her friends as the trip progressed, Max guessed she was getting on their nerves, too. But, by the time he pulled up outside the slightly dilapidated, pink and white gingerbread on Carson, she'd kept down whatever she ate and drank that night. If it came up again, it would soon be someone else's problem. He'd stayed and watched as her friends supported the woman up the steep set of stairs onto the house's sagging front porch and navigated her inside.

It was only now, approaching the city again from the northwest on 76E, with the green expanse of treetops from Fairmont Park to his right, that he realized she hadn't kept it all in. She'd urinated all over the back seat. Max could almost see the statue of old Billy Penn shaking his head from atop City Hall at Max's naivete. It explained the friends' demeanors. With the drunk girl sandwiched in the middle, it must have gotten on both of them. At least he had their address, their actual address, as he saw them open the door, and could get the flat fifty dollar cleanup fee added to their fare.

As he exited the expressway and turned left into a gas station at the end of the ramp, he once again silently thanked Liam for installing the wipe-away upholstery fabric on the car's back seats. It wasn't the most elegant look, but it was smart business when at least half their revenue came from inebriated passengers. He popped the trunk and took out the cleaning supplies: bleach

wipes, gloves, trash bags, and a bucket. He spent five minutes wiping everything down and getting the car back in order. He wadded up the used wipes and put them in a garbage bag. The scent still lingered if you knew it was there, but it now mostly smelled like Max had showered in lemon bleach or had terrible taste in aftershave.

It could have been worse. Vomit was definitely worse and more difficult to clean up, even with the stain-free seats, but as he walked to the set of garbage cans near the gas pumps, he thought there was something animal and atavistic about urination that left him feeling violated. Any sympathy he'd had earlier in the night for the three girls disappeared. He would get that fifty bucks. He dumped the garbage in the can and continued inside to the small convenience store next to the pumps. He nodded to the sleepy clerk, listlessly paging through a magazine, and found the coffee machine. There was a half-inch of black sludge in one pot. He detoured to the refrigerated case and chose a Coke instead.

When he returned to the car, the two-way radio the car service used was beeping. It was after two a.m. now and the bars were closed, a time of night when the calls typically tailed off. He considered ignoring it but knew that Terry, the night dispatcher, would quickly switch over to his personal cell phone if he didn't answer the radio. He was relentless. When Max had brought it up one day with Liam, after Terry had tracked him down on his off hours about a potential pickup from six hours earlier, he'd been told Terry used to be a driver but had been injured in a nasty accident that left his brain muddled. Sometimes he got stuck on things. He was too much of a risk for driving, but it made him a great dispatcher, Liam had laughed.

Max picked up the radio from the cup holder. "This is Max. What's up, Terry?"

"Got a request for a pickup at Whiskey's off Ritt Square. You're closest. You know it?"

"I know it." It was a chic little place off 18th Street near Tony Rittenhouse Square. It had an unmarked entrance and liked people to think it was a speakeasy. Not Max's style but also, he thought, not drunk twenty-somethings' style either. A single cocktail probably ran in the double figures. There were much cheaper nearby places to get drunk. He didn't think he'd be running the risk of a second cleaning fee client in one night.

"Where are they going?"

"Didn't say. The bar called it in."

That gave him pause, but it was too early to pull the plug on his shift yet. “Nothing else?”

“No, not until a five a.m. airport run.”

“All right, I’m on it.”

Ten minutes later, he pulled up in front of a brick building sandwiched between a Greek diner and a local chain coffee shop. It was now well past closing time, and the streets were emptying. He idled at the curb and was about to hop out and jog down the short flight to the bar’s entrance to see if his fare had skipped, or grabbed a passing yellow cab, when he saw two men, one wearing kitchen whites, the other sporting the manicured facial hair that said he might be a bartender, half carrying, half supporting a woman up the stairs. Max thought when she was sober she might be very attractive. She was slim with shoulder-length curly blonde hair and high cheekbones. She wore a green dress that was expensive enough that Max didn’t worry about the credit card clearing on the fare, with or without an additional cleaning fee tacked on.

But what he mostly saw was more trouble. He blew out a long breath and opened the rear door.

“What’s the story, guys?” he asked.

“Uh, found her in a back booth when we were closing up.”

“No one noticed her before that?”

“Look at her. She’s a tiny thing and it’s dark in there. Lucky we didn’t lock her in overnight.”

She suddenly opened her eyes and laughed, then listed to port. The bartender on the left propped her back up. Max put a hand on her head so it wouldn’t clip the door and they slid her inside. “Take me home, please,” she said before her eyes closed again.

“Did either of you get an address out of her?”

The cook handed Max a light tan coat and a small black purse. “These were next to her in the booth. Couple business cards and an ID in the wallet. Looks like a valid driver’s license with an address out in Merion.”

Max rubbed a hand over the leather purse. Not cheap. “These would match her clothes,” Max said, looking back into the car. The woman’s head was tilted back against the headrest and her mouth was wide open. Merion was on the Main Line, a wealthy suburb ringing Philadelphia. The two men started walking away. “Hold on. You’re my witnesses.” Max opened the purse and

checked the address so he could plug it into the car's GPS. "Forty bucks in cash. Lipstick tube. Compact. License and an ATM card. That's it." He held it out so they could see inside. He found the slim case of business cards, opened it, glanced at the info, then checked it against the ID. The names at least matched. "Erica Childs. Works at Brennan and Waites according to her business card. She's a lawyer. She calls to complain, or claim I robbed her, you guys better vouch for me."

"Man, she's not gonna remember any of this. The way she was drinking, she'll be lucky to remember any of last week. I can still smell the gin from over here."

In the car, he tried to rouse the woman, but she was comatose. The entire situation made him nervous. He wanted her out of his car, quickly but safely. He had a general idea where he was going but plugged the address into the GPS for guidance on the last couple of miles and put the car in drive. He turned the radio to an all-night talk station and listened to the host and callers ramble back and forth about the upcoming local election and the rising gang violence in certain sections of the city. He checked the rearview mirror every few minutes, but the woman's position rarely changed. Her soft snores told Max she was at least still breathing.

Thirty minutes later, he exited the expressway, turned off the radio, and tuned into the GPS directions. He followed the directions down dark roads and eventually pulled the car into a driveway that matched the address on the license.

Then things got weird.

Max got Erica Childs out of the car and helped her down the brick walk beside the neatly landscaped shrubbery and fall flower beds. A light snapped on by the front door and he spotted a head in a downstairs window. He was relieved someone was home. He had spotted no keys when he'd searched her purse for a name and address. He wasn't sure what he would have done if no one had been home and the doors were locked. And the doors would certainly be locked in this neighborhood.

He stood in the halo of light, an arm around Erica, who was still mostly unconscious with her head leaning on his shoulder, so whoever was inside could get a clear look. When nothing happened for ten seconds, Max cleared his throat and said loudly, "I'm the car service driver. I

picked Erica up in the city. She's had, mmm, some drinks. This was the address on her driver's license?" He realized this last bit came out as a question. Something wasn't right here.

After another pause, Max heard the locks turning and then the door opened. The man who stepped out was tall and angular with thinning hair. He wore blue scrub pants and a gray T-shirt. He looked over his shoulder, then quietly pulled the door closed.

Max took a step forward and shifted Erica's weight toward the man, but he just held up both hands.

"Whoa, buddy, that's not my wife."

"What?"

"That's my ex-wife. We divorced three years ago. My current wife is upstairs in bed."

"You're joking."

"No, I'm sorry. Her ... drinking was the major reason our marriage fell apart."

"Well, what am I supposed to do with her?"

"Last I heard, she was living with her parents in Cheltenham. That's probably your best bet. Hold on, I've got an address." He disappeared back inside and reappeared three minutes later and handed Max a scrap of torn paper with an address. Cheltenham was only ten or fifteen miles away, but it would be a circuitous trip over a mix of roads even at this time of night.

It could have been worse. She could have lived somewhere in Jersey.

The ex-husband helped load her back in the car and then kissed her forehead before shutting the door.

Just over a half-hour later, Max pulled into the driveway of a stately two-story stone house. An older man wearing a bathrobe and slippers was waiting. The only thing he said was 'thanks' then took his daughter in his arms and led her inside.

Max had taken the driving job because he needed something to occupy his time, and it helped him learn this new city. He hadn't counted on these intimate glimpses into people's lives. He rolled onto 76E again, feeling sad.

Chapter Four

Max had passed Love Park with the iconic Robert Indiana sculpture and skirted around City Hall Plaza onto South Broad Street when the two-way rattled in the cup holder again. He'd already made his nut on the weekly lease from Liam. He was in the black and the college kids and Erica Childs had drained his energy. He didn't need to push any more fares tonight. He'd planned to turn in the keys and head home. He was looking forward to a cold beer, some hockey highlights, and then some sleep.

But Terry had other plans. The radio vibrated again like an angry insect. Max picked it up with a sigh and keyed the transmit button. "I'm not up for that airport run, Terry. Find someone else." Airport runs were heavy with city tariffs and fees and were highly profitable for the drivers. Terry would have no problem finding another driver.

"Already got that one covered. This is a different job."

"I'm five minutes from the house. I was going to call it a night. Anyone else available?"

"I know where you are. That's why I'm calling. The fare is right on Ellsworth at Federal by the subway stop. You almost have to drive by it to get to the house. And she's only going back up to The Clyde. Twenty minutes tops. Easy money."

"Did she sound drunk? I can't take any more drunk shenanigans tonight. I've had my fill, believe me."

"No, she just sounded tired."

"What's the name?"

"Uh, she didn't leave a name. Said she'd be on the steps of the shrine and you'd know her when you saw her."

That was cryptic, but even with only six weeks on the job, Max felt like a grizzled veteran. He'd already heard it all driving the night shift.

"Okay, I'll take it."

The dead leaves and scattered trash blew along in the gutters and across the city sidewalks in swirling eddies. At four thirty a.m., on a cold October night, Ellsworth Street in South Philadelphia was quiet and deserted. Three, four a.m. It was the only time the city truly seemed at rest. In less than an hour, lights would turn on, people would start moving, but for now, it still belonged to the creatures of the night.

Max pulled the car to the curb in front of the white and tan sandstone Baroque shrine to St. Cascia. The steps were empty, but then a shape moved out of the shadows from behind a large pillar on the left. She passed through the dim lights mounted over the shrine's doors and came down the steps toward the car.

She wore a classic white wedding dress with a scuffed leather bag slung over one shoulder.

Max shook his head. He thought he was hallucinating. He'd heard about other drivers seeing strange things on the road. He would have been less surprised if the Virgin Mary had floated down the stairs.

He glanced up the street to see if there was anyone else to witness this strange apparition, but the street remained empty. When he looked back, she was still there, still in the dress, crossing the sidewalk toward his car.

She was tall and lithe and moved with a grace and surety that made Max think of a dancer or athlete. She kept one arm tight against her side. Max watched her do her own quick check of the street as she approached. She opened the door and climbed in behind Max. He heard her put the satchel in the footwell. She blew on her hands and rubbed at her bare arms. A sleeveless dress, even a bulky gown, was no match for the October air. Max bumped up the heat a few notches and waited as she buckled her seatbelt. Up close, the dress was dirty and torn in places along the edge. He could see a few places dotted with dark stains. She looked up and met his eyes in the mirror.

"The Clyde Hotel?" Max asked.

"By City Hall, in Center City. You know it, yes?" Her voice was deeper than he expected and tinged with an accent.

Max shook off the strangeness and put the car in gear. Do the job, then get home for that beer. "Yes, I know it. It will be a quick trip."

He turned left at the end of the block, headed south on 15th before a second left on Wharton and finally north again on Broad Street toward the cluster of hotels around City Hall, Jefferson Hospital, and the various historical buildings, like the Constitution Center, that attracted millions of people each year.

Max usually let the customer drive the interaction. If they wanted to talk, fine, he could do small talk or sports or a little business. If they wanted quiet to read the paper or a book or scroll through their phone or just stare out the window, that was fine, too. But the dress and utter strangeness of the encounter made his curiosity get the better of him. While the woman looked out at the empty sidewalks and passing buildings, he broke the silence. “Coming from a party?”

Their eyes caught in the mirror again. “Excuse me?”

“The dress. Halloween isn’t too far away. I was just wondering if you were coming from a costume party.”

The woman looked down at her dress and almost seemed as bewildered as Max at what she was wearing.

“Something like that.”

He watched a small trickle of blood drip from behind her ear and down her neck. She didn’t appear to notice.

Max cleared his throat, and she looked up again. “You’ve got, ah, something ...” He moved his own hand across his ear and down his neck.

She mimicked the gesture and then looked at the blood smeared on her palm. She didn’t seem surprised and instead leaned down and took a small cloth from the bag at her feet and pressed it to her head. “Thank you.” She didn’t offer any more explanation and returned to staring out the window.

He tried to study her in the mirror without being obvious about it. She wasn’t conventionally beautiful. She had an oval face highlighted by high cheekbones and dark arching eyebrows over brown eyes set a little too close together. He could see that her nose had been broken at one time. There were two thin, white, horizontal scars running parallel to each other just over her left eyebrow. Twin comet trails on her dark skin. Not beautiful, but the overall effect was striking. She wasn’t someone you looked at and forgot two minutes later. He also

noted the dark circles under those large eyes. She caught him looking at her at a red light and held his eyes until the light changed. Max looked back at the road, feeling his cheeks flush in embarrassment. He now felt her watching him during the rest of the ride. He didn't meet her gaze, just stayed focused on his driving.

He braked to a stop in front of The Clyde. The woman climbed out after saying a soft thank you and picking up her bag. She declined a receipt. A doorman in a green and gold brocaded jacket stepped outside and held the door open for her. He gave no reaction to her appearance. Either he was a veteran of the night shift or he was very good at his job. The bride gave him a quick nod and then disappeared into the hotel.

Max stared after her. What had she been doing out there alone, in that dress, with the creatures of the night?

(~3300 words)