

It was just before dawn and Alexander Clayton was on his way to a murder. He'd seen it from his house, a crimson stain in the western sky. Bloody and bright enough to bring him out at five in the morning – not that he had been asleep – and into the cold, sea-scented mist. He huffed his way through Black Cove, battered combat boots thumping on cracked blacktop as the whisper of the sea grew louder. It was close enough to dawn for the seagulls to quarrel, but far enough away that most of the houses Alexander passed were still dark and still.

At least, to eyes other than his. For Alexander, every house was alight with pain. He saw currents of deep blue and violet, bubbling out of the ramshackle houses, flowing into the street and clawing at his ankles. The pain wanted him to let it in. Usually, he would have obliged and tried to find something useful there. But tonight he was spoken for. He did his best to shake off the hungry emotions and not feel guilty about it.

The red glow faded as he hopped off the road, squirmed through the brush, and slid roughly down the embankment to the shell-strewn coastline. He was hasty, trying to pinpoint the source before it vanished. He fell and cursed as he caught himself on the sharp edges of dead shells. The light of false dawn didn't yet reach the beach, and the thin, frothy wave caps were more visible than the black water they crowned; wild squiggles of gray that hung, spectral, in the air before crashing back into the tide.

An untidy sprawl of flesh, dumped carelessly at the border to sea and land, was the fucked-up pot of gold at the end of Alexander's rainbow. He stopped well short to draw on gloves. Even from a distance he could tell there was no life remaining there, save a solitary seagull who fled with a strip of something in its beak. Evidence, no doubt. The beacon was only

an echo, an impression birthed in terror by a desperate mind. Now dead and mercifully beyond pain.

He pulled a handheld voice recorder from the army surplus coat he wore. Unlike his clothing, it was sleek, new, and well-cared-for. Alexander checked the time on his phone before he thumbed it on. "Five forty-eight AM." His voice cracked, rusty from disuse. "Body found. Adult," he could only see the back and legs from this angle, but the shadows suggested broad shoulders and powerful thighs, clad in tatters of heavy denim and plaid flannel. "Adult male. Approximate time of death," he calculated back from when the beacon had given its last burning pulse, "five-fifteen AM."

He'd been a half hour too late. He scanned the coastline, but it appeared deserted and undisturbed except by the corpse itself. The rocky shore didn't take footprints. He didn't feel any other human mind nearby. "Suspect has fled. Cause of death?"

Now, he had to move closer. Water rushed around his heavy combat boots, but his feet remained dry. He couldn't say the damn things were fashionable, but they did the job. The flashlight on the cell phone was weak, casting deep shadows and washing out the colors even as mottled skin and glistening viscera took on shape. "Massive physical trauma. Thighs, genitals, stomach, and chest have significant laceration. Ribs—"

Here, even Alexander had to stop and take a breath. Someone had opened the man like some macabre flower. His head bowed back with his throat and chest flayed and cracked, ribs making bloody petals in the air, except where they dipped into the water and were being washed to a stark white. As if that had not been enough indignity, the cavity formed by this had been filled with fruits and vegetables. They were stuffed so vigorously into the organs that only about

half had spilled into the tide. The others remained, bulging from red and gray flesh as if they'd grown there.

Alexander swallowed to clear the nausea from his throat. His voice remained steady. "Massive physical trauma delivered to the torso, perimortem mutilation with foreign objects. Extensive damage. Death would have been fast. Cavity objects suggest the body was not dumped from a boat." He scanned the sea, anyway, but found no sign of a nearby ship. "Preliminary evidence suggests assault and death took place where the body was found." He rattled off the location for the record. His eyes kept returning to the rib cage. He'd seen objectively worse crime scenes – although not many. But something about the mutilation bothered him. He wasn't sure what it was, and wouldn't be able to pinpoint it without a closer examination in better lighting.

For now, he took several pictures using his phone's camera. Not just of the body, but the surrounding area. A great deal of blood, but no sign of tracks, tools, or a campfire. The latter disturbed him the most; this wasn't the sort of work you wanted to do in the dark. If you even could. The gaping ribs suggested a monstrous amount of force. *Where was the equipment?*

People liked to say murder was senseless but Alexander had never believed that. There was passion behind the taking of lives. It made an imprint on the world. *If you could read it.*

Alexander uploaded the photos to his server before tucking everything away in a deep jacket pocket. He settled into a half-lotus on the rocky shore, a good distance from the body. His palm throbbed; he pushed the pain away. *His* pain wasn't important right now.

He *reached* towards the corpse with his mind. *Give me your pain. Your sadness.* Tell me your story.

Terror swept Alexander away. He was stretched flat on the shore with his eyes locked on the uncaring sky above. *Was I drugged?* A distant thought, his analytical mind trying to make sense of the emotional impressions that lingered. Every muscle was slack, even with his brain screaming with the urge to flee. He could hear the crunch of her feet on the shore. The scent of her perfume faded into salt and seaweed. Her voice rose and fell in a lovely croon to the backdrop of the waves:

*“Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing,
Passing from you and from me.”*

Memory and emotion this close to death was the clearest it ever got for Alexander; it was one of the few times he could read something like words. He fell deeper into the dead man’s heart. *Why was she doing this to him?* He only knew her a little. He couldn’t *deserve* this. No one could deserve this. What did he do? He tried to force the question through his lips but they refused to move. He couldn’t even blink. *Please*, he begged the sky and whatever cold God might lie beyond, *whatever I did, I’m sorry. Please save me.* The only answer was the gentle touch of her hand on his leg. Then, agony.

The pain started somewhere deep inside, like nothing he’d felt before. It clawed its way through him, rippling his skin as something inside of him cracked. He stretched until he could stretch no more. Inevitably, he tore, still trying to scream, to move, to do anything that might hold his rupturing body together. Everything he was spilled out into the night. As the pain and the darkness took him, he heard her sweet voice continue:

“Shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming,

Coming for you and for me.”

When Alexander clawed his way free of the memory there was vomit down the front of his shirt and jacket, and sour chunks lingered on his tongue. He rolled over and spat. It didn't help with the taste of bile and last night's pizza but at least it cleared his mouth. He clawed at his coat until his shaking fingers found the phone. He only had three contacts and chose the first.

Natalie's voice was tinged with end of shift exhaustion. “Black Cove Police Department. How can I help you?”

“It's Alexander Clayton.” Before she could hang up on him, he added, “I'm reporting a murder.”

Two hours later, Alexander slumped in an interrogation room chair, eyes half-closed. The room was oppressive, soaked in fear and anger from previous interrogations. He was trying to stay calm and fight off the urge to scream or weep as the emotional traces demanded. A job made harder by the new, fresh waves of burnt umber contempt coming off the detective across the table. Anton Czerny was thirty-seven years old, with the build of a former football player who thought he could preempt the spare tires of oncoming middle age with enough stomach crunches. His dirty blond hair was starting to thin, but he was still handsome in a blunt sort of way. When they had both attended the same high school, Anton had been popular in all the ways Alexander had not.

He watched Alexander with a familiar mix of pity and irritation. “Bullshit.” His tone was weary. This was not the first time they'd gone over Alexander's story.

Alexander shrugged. “I don't sleep well. I walk sometimes. I found the body.”

“Just stumbled across a corpse at five in the morning. By *accident*.”