


PROLOGUE

WHEN ROBERT first saw the young woman, he thought she was a ghost. It was an old story—a woman in white hitchhiking on a lonely road. When someone picks her up, they're directed to a spot near a cemetery, where she promptly disappears.

As he slowed, though, he could see she was very much a creature of flesh and blood. A figure from a very different oft-told story, the sort found in pop songs, a pretty young thing standing in the rain while his car was warm and dry inside.

The girl stood on the gravel shoulder, her thumb out, a magazine over her head to stave off the June rain. The soaked paper sagged, water running down her white sundress, like the Sunday school version of a wet-shirt contest, and he felt a twitch of lust. He also felt his foot press the brake.

When the car stopped, she ran over and opened the door. "Oh, thank you. Thank you!"

She climbed in before he was even fully aware that he'd offered a ride to a stranger on a dark and empty country road. He didn't tell her he'd made a mistake, though. He was too busy noticing the lack of a bra under that wet sundress.



He deserved this. He really deserved this. Sure, he felt a rush of guilt, thinking of Sharon at home making him a late dinner, but it wasn't as if he hoped to run off with a girl he picked up on the roadside. No, he was just going to enjoy the scenery. Nothing wrong with that.

"You okay, mister?" she asked.

Mister? Well, that made him feel old. But he *was* probably twice her age, which he'd peg at about twenty-two. Old enough that he didn't feel like a total perv for ogling her.

He unstuck his eyes from the gaze-magnets under that dress and looked upward. She was a very pretty girl. Like something out of an ad for spring water, sweet and blond and innocent. The kind of girl who, fifty years ago, would have put flowers in her hair and joined a commune and preached free love, having sex with any guy who caught her eye and maybe a few girls too, and—

Down, boy.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm staying with a friend who lives out here. This guy in the city promised me a ride and then flaked out. I caught a cab, but my money ran out..." She gestured at the roadside with a wry smile. "Right about here. It's only five more miles, and I thought I could walk it, but then the rain started. I stuck out my thumb and hoped I'd get lucky." Her smile broadened. "Which I did."

No, Robert was certain *he* was the one who'd gotten lucky.

"Just tell me when I need to turn off," he said.

"It's about three more miles. You can just drop me at the intersection."

"Two miles from your friend's place?"

She smiled, a sweet and serene smile. "She lives off the beaten path, as they say, and I don't want you going out of your way. Or



taking this nice car down those rough roads. The rain is already letting up. Dropping me at the corner will be fine.”

“Two miles is a long walk and a short drive. The car will be fine. It has all-wheel drive.”

“If you insist...”

“I do.”

“Thank you.”

Another smile. She went quiet after that, looking out the window. Robert tried to keep his eyes on the road. But, damn, even if all he got at the end of this trip was another sweet thank you, the scenery alone was worth the detour. The phrase “ethereal beauty” kept springing to mind, and he wasn’t sure why until he recalled using it in a poem he wrote for Sharon in college.

He’d had no idea what the term meant at the time—he’d been a lovesick boy trying to impress a girl—but the young woman beside him summed up the phrase perfectly. There was a glow about her, with her pale skin and blond hair and white sundress. He imagined what it’d be like to brush the hair from her shoulder, push down that strap, watch the dress slide—

His phone rang through the Bluetooth. As Sharon’s name flashed on the screen, the girl looked over.

“Looks like your wife’s calling,” she said. “Is she expecting you?”

“Wife? No. It’s just a coworker.”

He hit Ignore. Then he put his left hand down at his side and wriggled off his wedding band. It plunked into the door storage slot. Not that he planned anything untoward. It was just awkward, ogling her while he wore his wedding band. Made him *feel* like a perv.

The Bluetooth clicked, and Sharon’s voice came on. “Hey, babe—”



He scrambled to stop the message but hit all the wrong buttons as Sharon continued, “Shitty weather out there. Be careful on the back roads. I’ll have a drink waiting—”

He disconnected the phone.

“Coworker?” the girl said.

“We...have a thing.”

“Ah.” Then, “She sounds nice.”

She was. More than nice. Robert knew how lucky he was, still happy after almost twenty years of marriage. But happy didn’t mean satisfied. Okay, sure, they didn’t really have any problems in that area, either. It was just...well, twenty years with one woman was a long time.

He’d never leave Sharon. Not for anyone. But if this girl wanted to give him a little something in payment for the ride, well, he deserved that, didn’t he? Cosmic recognition of the fact he worked his ass off, that he was a good husband, a good father...

And your wife?

He gave a start and looked over. The words seemed to come from the girl, but she was staring out the window. That inner voice continued,

And what about Sharon? Hasn’t she been all that, too—good worker, wife, mother? What if she picked up some hot young thing by the roadside and—

He shook off the thought. He was just enjoying the scenery. That was all. And if this girl wanted to find a way to thank him—not sex per se, but a little something—then he deserved that for picking her up, giving her a lift, being a gentleman about it.

Gentleman?

Okay, that wasn’t the word, but he was acting more respectful than most guys would. He hadn’t hit on her, and he wouldn’t try to



claim any kind of payment, not even a quick feel as he helped her out of the car.

That alone deserves a reward.

Did he detect a note of sarcasm?

“Turn up here,” the girl said. “The next right.”

He took it, and then she had him make a left, a right, a left... Soon they really were on back roads, at first tar and chip, and then gravel, and he winced every time he heard a stone bounce off the side panels.

Robert drove the regional highway daily, but this wasn't an area he'd even had reason to enter. It was...desolate. That was the word for it. Part of his architect's brain looked around and saw development potential, one of those clusters of multimillion-dollar homes, an oasis for Chicago's wealthy. But his gut said no, this wasn't the sort of place to raise a family. It just wasn't.

“Are you sure we're going the right way?” he asked, squinting against the night. There wasn't a house in sight, and he was sure they'd gone much more than two miles since leaving the main road.

“It's just up here,” the girl said, but her tone added, *I think*. And when he looked over, she was chewing her lip, looking from one window to the next, as if searching for landmarks.

“Maybe we should—” he began.

“Just a little farther. Take the next left.”

He did. Watching the odometer, though, the “next left” turned out to be almost two miles away.

“Do you have her address?” He tapped the screen on his car dash. “I can plug it into the GPS.”

“It's just up here. The next road will be on the right. Oh, there it is! See?”



He turned right...onto what was little more than a dirt trail.

"You can let me out here if you want," she said when he couldn't suppress a flinch as the tires thunked down into a rut.

He looked at her, white dress glowing in the pale moonlight.

"I'm fine," he said, reminding himself that he knew a good auto body shop if there were any scratches. "I would never leave you out here."

"That's very sweet." She looked up at him with big brown eyes. "I appreciate how kind you've been."

Did he imagine it, or did she lean a little closer when she said that? He watched as her breasts pressed against her bodice, and he adjusted his jacket to cover his reaction.

Perhaps he should *let* her see how much he appreciated the scenery. Nothing wrong with that. Just as long as he kept both hands on the wheel, allowing himself only sidelong glances, being a gentleman. Controlling himself.

He imagined getting to her destination. Her friend's house would be dark, and he'd insist on walking her up, nothing untoward. Just making sure everything was okay. He'd open the passenger door, and she'd turn and be confronted by his obvious interest, right at eye level. He'd pull his jacket shut quickly, act like he hoped she hadn't seen that. She'd smile, biting her lip as she rose. Then she'd lean in and say, in her breathy voice, "You've been so kind. I'm sorry if I've inconvenienced you." And before he could say no, no, that was fine, he'd feel the tug of his zipper and her slender hand sliding inside, warm fingers wrapping around him—

Robert shifted in his seat.

She looked over. "You really can just drop me off. You must have other things to do."



“No, no, I’m fine. Your friend is waiting.”

“Actually, she’s not home. She’s on the night shift, or I’d have called for a lift. I have the house all to myself.”

The image flashed again, that darkened house, him opening her car door...

He replayed the fantasy, slower now, embellishing it.

“I think it’s just up here,” she said, and he jumped from his thoughts. His gaze dropped to the odometer. Twelve miles had passed since he’d last looked at it.

Twelve miles? No, that wasn’t possible. It must have been two. He’d misread the starting mileage.

“Just up here, you said?” he asked.

When she didn’t answer, he looked over to see her nibbling her lip.

“Miss?” he prompted.

“I...I thought it was but...this doesn’t look familiar at all.” She shook her head sharply. “No, I’m sure this is— Oh, there! Turn right there.”

He did and drove another half mile down a rutted road, trees closing in on both sides. Then there was a clunk, as if the tires had dropped onto softer ground. When he squinted out the windshield, he saw that the road had disappeared. He’d gone right off the end of it.

“No,” the girl said. “No.”

He looked over to see her eyes glistening with tears.

“I-I was so sure I knew where it was, and now I’ve made you drive all this way.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “Just fine.”

He reached over to squeeze her hand, and she turned to him, her eyes brimming with tears. He wanted to slide his arms around her,



pull her against him, *feel* her against him, wordlessly sooth her. Then her hand would brush his crotch, and she'd whisper, "I'm so sorry. Let me make it up to you."

He took a deep breath and pulled back. *Save the rescue fantasy until after you've actually rescued her.*

"I have GPS, remember? I just need your friend's address."

"I-I don't know it."

"Well, then let's just give her a call."

"Can I use your phone?"

"Of course." He hit the dashboard screen to bring up his phone and...

"No service." He took his phone from his pocket and double-checked. Yes, definitely no service.

"It's fine," he said with a chuckle. "We aren't exactly lost in the Ozarks. My GPS will bring up a map, and either you'll recognize your friend's street name or we can drive until I have a signal." He squeezed her hand. "I'll fix this."

Big eyes looked up into his. "Thank you."

He pressed a few buttons on the GPS. It flashed No Satellite Found.

"Well, that's inconvenient," he said with a chuckle. "All-wheel drive to the rescue. I'll back out of here and get us back to civilization and a cell zone."

He put the car into Reverse. The tires spun...and went nowhere. He checked the AWD. The dashboard indicator claimed it was engaged. He put the car in Drive and tapped the gas. The tires spun. Reverse? More spinning.

What the hell?

Robert got out, forgetting the girl now as he walked behind the car. Then he circled to stand in front of it. The tires had sunk maybe



an inch or two in the soft ground, but his AWD should be able to pull him out of that.

When was the last time he'd engaged the all-wheel drive? Winter? He barely ever used it then, and to be honest, when he flipped it on in bad weather, it was mostly just to make use of a feature he'd paid extra for. Which meant it could have stopped working long ago, and he'd never know...until he needed it.

He circled the car again. Maybe he could give it a push. Get back on the road. He couldn't have driven more than a foot or two past the...

He stood behind the car, looking at the tracks his tires had made. Tracks through soft earth. Tracks as far as he could see, with no sign of a road.

That wasn't possible. He'd been on a narrow dirt road. He'd seen it.

He strode behind the car, walking as he followed the tracks. Twin tracks that left the road and carved a path through thick brush heading toward a forest.

How the hell—?

He gave his head a shake. Not possible. He was imagining things.

"Are you lost?" the girl said, and he wheeled to see her walking toward him.

"What?" he said.

"You're lost."

"No, I'm fine. I just need to figure out—"

Her fingers pressed to his lips. "You're lost. Poor boy. So terribly lost. But it's not too late. Retrace your steps. See where you went off track. That's always the best thing to do when you're lost, is it not?"

He stared at her, and his mouth opened to brush off her nonsense, but instead he felt himself nodding and saying, "Yes."



“You have forty-eight hours to find your way. If you do not...”

She leaned into his ear and whispered, and when he heard what she whispered, his gut went cold, again ready to say no, what the hell—

“Do you understand?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Forty-eight hours.”

She lifted on tiptoes, her lips brushing his. Then she disappeared.

ONE

GABRIEL

GABRIEL WALSH was waiting for a phone call. He would settle for a text. Even an e-mail. But a call was what he wanted. His cell phone, however, was not complying, no matter how harshly he glared at it.

Yes, Olivia was not due to call until tomorrow. That was what they'd arranged. She was heading back from vacation with Ricky, due to arrive Thursday night or Friday morning. Earlier, he'd sent a message suggesting that it might be more convenient for her to call today. That was his way of saying he wanted to speak to her but had no work-related excuse to do so. As for the idea of just saying so—*Hey, if you're free, give me a shout*—that went too far. Which was exactly how they'd gotten into this predicament in the first place.

A month ago, a car on a dark road, the two of them arguing. She said something about them being friends, an offhand comment. And he'd...

He wasn't sure exactly what he'd done. Made some dismissive noise. A snort. A grunt. A laugh. He'd been hurt and confused, and he'd lashed out and been cruel. Yes, cruel.



Then afterward, once the dust settled, their case solved...

When you said we were friends, and I laughed. I was angry. We are. I hope you know that.

How long had it taken him to work up the nerve—and shoulder past his pride—to say those words? Too long. But he'd done it. And he'd watched her squirm. Too little, too late. The problem stayed, and Olivia left.

Not *left*. She went on vacation, and she was heading home now.

When his cell phone rang, he snatched it up. It wasn't Olivia's ringtone, but it could be her, so he grabbed the phone and...

Call display showed a client's number.

Gabriel grunted. Therein lay the problem with giving clients his personal number. They tended to use it.

He let the call go to voicemail and made a mental note to tell Lydia to deliver an update. That's all the message would be. The client looking for news on a legal matter that was of utmost importance to her—one that guaranteed she'd stay on the preferred side of a prison wall—but to Gabriel, it was just another such matter on a calendar filled with them.

When he had news, he would give it. Until then, reassuring a client that he was doing his best to keep her out of jail was ultimately a waste of time. Of course he was doing his best. He was Gabriel Walsh, thirty years old and already one of Chicago's most famous—some might say infamous—defense attorneys. One did not achieve that status through lackluster effort.

He put away his phone and skimmed the day's schedule. Plenty of work. None of it interesting. That's the type of client call he'd prefer. A lead on an interesting case for Olivia when she returned.

I bring you the gift of murder and mayhem, a puzzle to be solved, a mystery to be cracked.



A case for them to investigate together.

Finding that was proving more difficult than one might expect. True, in a city the size of Chicago, there was always murder, always mayhem, but lately it seemed only the pedestrian sort that would induce yawns from his new investigator.

Oh, look, another drive-by shooting.

In desperation, Gabriel had resorted to a tactic he hadn't used since he first hung out his shingle: monitoring the police scanners. He didn't necessarily need a terrible crime. In fact, it would be better if it weren't. Olivia was the daughter of a serial killer, and like Gabriel, she had fae blood—both of which meant she was not particularly altruistic. But she wasn't cold-hearted, either. The ideal case for her was more mind-twisting than gut-wrenching. A puzzle rather than a tragedy.

But the only intriguing case on last night's scanner came from a man who'd reported a disappearing hitchhiker. A preposterous story from someone who failed to recognize a hoary urban legend. Yet that was the part that intrigued Gabriel. He'd picked up enough from the scanner conversation to know the man seemed to be a sober middle-aged professional. Why on earth would he risk his reputation reporting an obviously fabricated story?

Intriguing, yes, but it wouldn't be enough for Olivia. He needed—
“Good morning, Gabriel.”

His office door swung open. In walked a man who looked about Olivia's age. Dark hair, worn somewhere between hipster and bohemian. Sharp eyes, sharp cheekbones, sharp chin. He bore a broad grin and two cardboard cups of coffee, the latter of which he deposited on Gabriel's desk, along with a creamer, milk, sugar and sweetener.

“Someday, you're going to tell me how you like your coffee,” Patrick said.



“Delivered by my admin assistant.” Gabriel shot a glower out the open door.

“Lydia’s not there. She slipped out to turn off her car alarm. Seems to be on the fritz.”

“You set off her car alarm so you could sneak into my office?”

“I wouldn’t need to if you’d tell her that I’m welcome to visit anytime I like.” Patrick thumped into a chair. “That would be the wise thing to do, Gabriel. I’m on my best behavior with her, for your sake. That won’t last, and then I’ll be forced to resort to type.”

By “type” he meant fae type. Patrick was a bòcan. Better known as a hobgoblin, though Patrick hated the term. It conjured up images of twisted goblin-like creatures. A bòcan was a fae trickster, and like all tricksters, Patrick had an air of the passive-aggressive about him. Treat him well, and he’d return the favor. Mistreat him—or fail to pay him his perceived due—and one would see his less generous side.

Gabriel wasn’t worried about offending Patrick. Following Olivia’s example, he’d learned how far he could push while taking advantage of the fact that Patrick liked to be on *their* good side. As for why Patrick wanted to be there, that situation was at the root of Gabriel’s fractured relationship with Olivia and therefore not something he wished to consider. Suffice to say the circumstances made Gabriel a valuable ally. So he took the coffee and said, “I appreciate you stopping by, Patrick, but I’m very busy—”

“So I see.”

“It’s eight-thirty in the morning. My appointments begin at nine—”

“Then you have a half an hour for me. And I’m teasing you about not being busy, Gabriel. I know you are. Particularly with Liv jaunting off with biker-boy.”



“His name is Ricky. Please show him some respect.”

“I find it hard to respect anyone who goes by *Ricky*.”

Gabriel walked to the door. “I’ll see you out.”

“Fine, I won’t insult young Mr. Gallagher. You do realize he’s the competition, right?”

Gabriel tensed. “Olivia and I are not—”

“I wasn’t talking about Liv. But, since that’s where your mind went, let’s follow it. That conversation is well overdue, and I’m glad to hear you acknowledge that you do see Ricky as a rival in that regard.”

“I believe I was saying he is not.”

“Because he’s no competition for you? Agreed. Ricky and Liv, while a darling couple—”

“I have work to do. If you’ll excuse me...”

Patrick sighed. “Fine. We’ll drop the subject and move on to the point of my visit.”

“There’s a point?” Gabriel murmured. “That’s new.”

“Ouch, you’ve been hanging around Liv too long. There has been a reason for all my recent visits, Gabriel. We call it socializing.”

“To which I do not see a purpose. But you said there was an actual point to this particular visit?”

“I’ve brought you a case.”

“The very thing I do not need, having just said that my roster is full.”

“This one’s different. This one is interesting.”

Gabriel hesitated just a heartbeat. Then he picked up a file folder and leafed through the contents. “Yes, well, given that I have quite enough—”

“You’re bored.”

“I am far too busy to be bored.”



“Nope, you’re not. Liv’s gone, and you’re bored.”

“With Olivia gone, I believe the proper word would be *resting*.”

“Ha. No, sorry. After she left, I bet you had exactly twelve hours of mild relief that the rollercoaster had stopped. Then boredom settled in. You’re missing her, too, but it’s easier to say you’re bored, so we’ll go with that. So I have brought you a case. A ghost story.”

Gabriel closed the folder and laid his fingertips on it.

“Ah, that got your attention,” Patrick said.

“Only because I cannot imagine how a ghost could pay my rates.”

Patrick sipped his coffee and settled in his chair. “Picture the scene. It’s a dark and stormy night.”

“If that’s how you start your stories, it’s a wonder you sell any books at all.”

“It’s not how I start them, which you would know if you *read* my books.”

“I scarcely have time to eat, let alone read.”

“Oh? I seem to recall a boy who would eat while reading. And walk while reading. It’s a miracle you survived childhood without getting hit by a car, your nose stuck in some book. You can’t tell me you don’t read fiction.”

“Not the sort you write.”

“*Ouch*.”

“If you have a story to tell, please provide me the CliffsNotes version. My first client arrives in fifteen minutes.”

“Fine. Dark and stormy night, yada yada. Guy picks up a hitchhiker by the side of the road and—”

“And she disappears. Whereupon the man returns home to discover his wife drying their wet dog in the microwave, except it isn’t a Chihuahua at all, but a giant rat.”



“You know your urban legends.”

“As should you, given that you are a writer of supernatural fiction and a scholar of folklore. Yes, I heard that story on the police scanner last night. It is remarkable only for its sheer ridiculousness. I suppose she was wearing white, too.”

“Actually, yes. But—”

“And asked to be dropped off near a cemetery?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then this ghost lacks proper appreciation for the lore. I am disappointed.”

“That sounds remarkably like sarcasm.”

“Never.” Gabriel took the folder to the cabinet and exchanged it for another. “Even if there were a mystery here, Patrick, there is not a case. Not a paying client. Except, perhaps, work for a good divorce attorney.”

“Divorce attorney?”

Gabriel set the new file on the desk and opened it. “A middle-aged man in a luxury vehicle picks up a presumably attractive young woman on a rainy night? Drives her well off the beaten track? That’s almost a cliché in itself. If he has a wife, she should be in the market for a divorce lawyer, which I am not. I wouldn’t say she even requires a particularly good lawyer, considering her husband was foolish enough to report the encounter. That alone suggests—”

“Supernatural forces at work?”

“I was going to say ‘abject stupidity.’”

Patrick rose and perched on the desk instead. “You have a point, though. A very good one. Why would he report it? He is married, by the way. And the hitchhiker was young and, as you say, presumably attractive. Any man with a lick of sense would make up some story about getting lost in the rain and leave it at that.”



“Which only means he has not a lick of sense.”

“He’s a partner at one of the city’s leading architectural firms. He has his master’s in that *plus* an MBA to manage the business end. Two post-grad degrees. Not a stupid man. His wife is a surgeon. Not a stupid woman, and not one who’d fail to miss the implications of his hitchhiker escapade. So we have a mystery. As for the client, that’d be me. This story has sparked a future book plot, and I’d like to hire you to help me with the research.”

“Olivia is the investigator.”

“Until you hired her, you did all your investigating yourself. You enjoy it.”

“What I enjoy is having an actual client, which is about more than money. A case for me must pay well *and* foster my reputation.”

“And interest you.”

“That’s hardly a factor—”

“Liar. You don’t need the money. You don’t need the rep boost. What you need is what has been lacking for nearly two weeks. Something you’ve grown very accustomed to having in your life.”

Gabriel started leafing through the file. “Olivia will be back in a couple of days.”

“Again, I wasn’t talking about Liv. Interesting how your mind keeps going there.” Patrick held up a hand against Gabriel’s protest. “I was going to say that you’ve grown accustomed to having exciting cases. But, now that you mention it, there is someone who likes this type of case even more than you do.”

Gabriel glanced up from the file.

“Ah, there we go,” Patrick said. “I have your attention now.”

“No, you have less than five minutes of *my time* now.”

“Liv comes back in what, two, three days? I’m sure you know the hours, too, but we won’t get into that. Point is, she’d love this



case. You know she would. Investigating the report of an urban legend? It'd amuse the hell out of her."

"I really don't have time," Gabriel said, but even he could hear the lack of conviction in his voice. He thought of telling Olivia about this case.

Hitchhiking ghost? Seriously?

Yes, it's ridiculous. I know.

Ridiculously awesome. Let me at it.

Patrick hopped off the desk. "When do you finish work?"

"I—"

"Let me rephrase that. When do your office hours conclude, and you begin the portion of the day we call 'quitting time' and you call 'more-work time'?"

"Five, but—"

"Then I will return at five with details. I'll play Liv for you today. I'll gather everything I can find online, and we'll discuss it over dinner. This case isn't going away. I'll do the scut work, and you can have a package ready for Liv when she returns."