

## Chapter Seven

### Balloons

I chased after the kid. He was young and fast, and I was feeling the rust of early onset oldness. He disappeared around the corner of a building, and when I finally rounded the same corner, he was gone. To the left was a narrow alley filled with trashcans and shadows. Ringo was gone.

He'd robbed the still-warm corpse of his father and trucked on down the road.

But a part of me knew that wasn't right. The man stretched out across the double-yellow line back there was no more the kid's dad than I was. So who was he? Why was Ringo hanging out with him? Where was the kid now? Was he alright? Why did I give a shit?

I don't. Fuck the kid. I got my own shit to carry. My mom said that. My own shit to carry. And if you could fling it off onto somebody else, why, that makes the load much lighter.

My dad would have had something to say about that. But his voice was a thin whisper in my head. Wind in dry grass.

I went down the alley. Trashcans and plastic recycling bins overflowing onto the wet concrete. A bicycle chained to the exposed plumbing. A small door with a diamond-shaped window covered by newspaper. Maybe there was a family on the other side of the door., the mom and dad holding at least a job a piece, couple of kids taking care of each other. Or maybe half a dozen college kids living on noodles. Or maybe Ringo was in there, counting his money on his bed, saving up for that new crack pipe. You let me down, Ringo. You let me down.

A dog padded out of the shadows, sniffed at one of the recycling bins, found nothing of interest, sat down at my feet. Looked up at me with hopeful dark eyes.

"I don't have anything for you, buddy."

The dog wagged his tail and started to drool. His left ear was missing its tip. His ribs showed through his skin. The mutt was a survivor. But obviously not a master of the English language.

I showed him my empty hands. He licked my fingers.

"You seen a stupid kid come through here, Buddy? Running like he just killed a guy and stole his money?"

Buddy stared up at me, head turned to one side.

"Let me rephrase that. You seen a stupid kid come running through here like he stole money from a guy I just killed?"

Buddy lowered his nose and made a whimpery sound.

"That's all right," I said. "I don't give a shit, remember?"

All the way back to the laundromat, the dog's nails clicked on the asphalt behind me. Through the throng of cops and EMS workers and rubberneckers. He waited as I slipped inside to gather my clothes. No one said a thing to me or pointed out the scruffy dog. Good show happening on the pavement. We weren't much of a distraction.

It was when I got to my car and dropped my damp laundry into the front seat that Buddy started whining.

"Look," I said. "I really don't know what you thought was gonna happen here."

Buddy scratched his paw on the sidewalk.

"I don't have any food or Frisbees or whatever. I'm not that far removed from your situation at the moment."

His tongue poked out from his mouth, and Buddy looked for all the world like he was smiling.

"No. Out of the question. Not happening."

Another scratch at the ground and a high little yip. The dog was starting to piss me off.

The rain thickened, began to slap hard on the hood of the car. Buddy looked at me with his tongue hanging limp. I wanted to kick him.

"Get in the fucking car, okay? Sit in the back and try not to shit on anything."

There was way too much on my mind to allow it to drive, so my hands took over. And they brought me back to Monster Video. Good a place as any.

Joseph stood outside in the rain. Some old guy was with him. "Say it ain't so, Joe," the old guy said.

"It's so. It's always so," Joseph said. He looked relieved when he saw me. "John, you made it through. How's your first night treating you?"

"It's been pretty weird so far."

"It'll all normalize eventually. Then it gets goddamned monotonous."

The old guy caught my attention. His clothes were tattered and hung loose on his bony frame. He was bald like Joseph and lined with deep wrinkles.

"They're floating balloons in there," Rags McCrazy exclaimed, finger jabbing at the store. The plastic bags that hung on his arm gathered at his elbow. Their contents clanked. "Ninety-nine love balloons. But they won't let me play."

"Cut it out," Joseph said. "We've been over this before. This just ain't your scene."

"But I'm the eye in the pyramid. The maker of rules."

"Maybe back in the day, but not now. Those folks inside got a more complicated set of rules."

Rags looked heartbroken, like a kid told he's too little to play with the older boys. "That coulda been me getting all those balloons, you know. I coulda been somebody, instead of the bum that I am." His arms fell to his side. He caught the plastic bags in a dry, cracked fist.

I asked Joseph, "What's going on inside?"

His eyes shifted from me to Rags. "I tell you what. You want some coffee?"

Rags perked up. "Coffee? I like coffee. Will there be doughnuts?"

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"Sure there'll be doughnuts. And it's my treat." Joseph pulled a wallet from his back pocket, took

out a twenty, held it out to me. "John here'll take you to get doughnuts and coffee. Won't you, John?"

The last time I saw Joseph, a skull named Sven bit me and turned me into a vampire. My encounters with him kept getting weirder.

When I didn't reach for the offered bill, Joseph leaned in and whispered, "Do me this favor, John. Keep him busy for like an hour. Then come back here, and we'll start your training."

"Training?"

"For lack of a better word. You got a lot to learn about being one of us."

So in order to get schooling on how to run my brand new nocturnal life, which I wouldn't need if it hadn't been for you, I have to do you a favor? The goddamned nerve.

"Where's the doughnut shop?" I said and took the twenty.

"Down the street." He gave me directions. "Thanks, John. I appreciate it."

"You're a good man, Johnny Brown," Rags said. A grin spread across his lined face, and there was a tooth missing back there on the left side. "You complete me."

I stopped by my car to check on Buddy. He was asleep in the back, curled up, sniffing his own ass. I'd tried to shoo him off when I parked, but he looked at me with his tongue hanging out and scratched at the upholstery. So I left him there. Because of the rain, I couldn't even roll a window down in hopes he might run away. So there he was when I returned, twitching once in a while as he chased wild tennis balls in his dreams.

"I know that guy," Rags said.

"You mean the dog? Really?"

"Yeah. I used to see him down by the schoolyard or down there by the train. We're like kings, him and me. Aware of each other and respectful of our separate jurisdictions. But his people are not my people, you know." Rags looked up into the sky. Rain formed rivers in the deep lines of his face.

"The dog has people?"

"You bet. More than you can fetch a stick with. Burnt-face Jake and Elron. Potato Pete and Lilly Ran. They would dance and swallow the night. He'd wag his tail in time and challenge the moon." Rags lifted his arms to embrace an invisible partner. He waltzed in the rain. The plastic bags dangling from his arm rustled as he turned in a slow circle.

He stopped, released his partner, looked in the direction of my car and the napping dog inside. "I felt jealousy in my heart. No one ever danced for me. I made them beg. But there's no wealth in that currency."

Rain fell upon his bald head, pattered against the grocery bags.

He spun sharply on his heels. "Hurry up, Pilgrim. We're burning moonlight. Time to eat the doughnuts."

At this time of night I figured we'd have the whole place to ourselves. But there was a fair enough crowd. I ordered black coffee and a plain glazed. I found my taste buds no longer fired for the sugary side of the flavor spectrum. But coffee still did the trick. Not for the first time I found myself wondering when I'd feel a craving for blood. And what I would have to do to get it.

Rags got four doughnuts, slathered in icing, showered with sprinkles or powdered sugar, stuffed with cream or pudding or jelly. He nibbled at them, picked off sprinkles one at a time as if they each had a distinctive flavor.

What the hell was I doing here, babysitting Mr. McCrazy?

"Everybody needs somebody," Rags said to his chocolate-covered pastry.

What pissed me off more than being asked to do this shit job was that I so readily agreed to it.

"My karma tells me you've been screwed again."

Then I got angry at my own self pity. This was turning into my own private episode of Dark Shadows.

"I'm of the mind that makes a movie," Rags said, licking chocolate icing from his thumb.

Here I was drinking coffee on another man's dollar while Ringo was out there robbing corpses. Who was that guy I sent sprinting into traffic? The boy's pimp? The boy's owner? Street life was like prison life, right? You sell your ass to keep alive?

"All your time and honey."

It still could have been his father. I knew firsthand the horrors a father could visit on his child.

"Good to the last bitter dregs," Rags whispered.

I grabbed our cups and took them to the sleepy-eyed woman at the counter. She poured refills, dropped some sugar and creamer packets on the counter without a word or a wink.

I tried not to think about the kid. But the people I passed on the way back to my seat were all talking about him. About his dead father stretched out on the street, about the mystery man who chased him to his death. What would the kid do now? they asked each other and shifted their eyes to watch me. Who was going to take care of the boy, all alone on the streets, surrounded by hunters and snapping teeth?

"What about the boy?" Rags said as I sat down and pushed him his coffee and fixings. "How can he be saved?"

I watched him rip open four sugar packs and two little tubs of creamer, stir his coffee till it was caramel brown.

Steam rose from our cups like frail ghosts, their hauntings undisturbed by an exhaled breath.

"What are you?" I said to Rags.

He sipped his coffee, stirred it with the little, red-striped straw. "I lamely whistle far and wee. I stomp my feet and cry 'Gimme gimme gimme!'" Another sip of coffee. "What are you?"

"I'm... I'm a vampire." It was the first time I'd said it out loud. Did I get a poker chip for that?

"No, that's what you is. I want to know what you are."

Somehow, that made perfect sense to me.

"I'm worried," I said.

"That's closer to the quick. Go inward and downward."

"I'm not really that comfortable with opening myself to homeless people."

"If I lived in your heart, I'd be home by now."

I pushed into the back of my chair as he stirred and sipped his coffee. My heart may have quit beating, but it was far from silent.

I said, "I wish I was stronger."

"I hate to tell you this, but that's another weakness."

"I'm not very brave."

"The smallest toaster will turn being trod upon."

"I want to pay for everything I every stole."

His eyes widened, pupils ringed like an eclipse. "That's the juicy heart-meat of redemption. Can I get a hoochie-coochie?"

"This is fucking ridiculous. Stop expecting me to spill my guts."

"Sure," Rags said. "I wouldn't want to see that little boy spill out all over the dock."

"How do you know about him? Are you reading my mind?" Was that another gift of the undead?

This guy was dead alright, but he wasn't like me.

"I'm not reading your mind. You're reading it to me. I want you to know I appreciate the balloons you send. I surely do."

"Balloons? You keep saying that. What do you mean?"

"The balloons you keep floating up. Everybody in here is sending up balloons. That guy over there." Rags pointed at a man dunking his powdered doughnut. "His wife's been putting the horns on him most every night he goes to work. He knows it. She knows he knows. He knows that she knows he know. And the balloons go up, and they say make her stop. Make me better. Give me the gumption

to do what a man's gotta do.

"And that guy there wants a raise. And this cooky chick doesn't know what she wants. But she knows how to get it. And those there are lost, drunken men who don't know where they are and don't care.

"And that box right there puts out balloons all the time." He looked up at the TV on the wall, the volume low, guy in a suit going over the day's news, ticker scrawl sliding past underneath his calm, smiling face. "And they all say look upon my works and despair."

Rags turned back to me, grinning with self satisfaction.

"Balloons?" I said. "I still have no idea what--"

Rags punched the table top. His coffee sloshed to the lip of his cup but didn't spill over. "Not balloons. Prayers. I always pick the word's second cousin. I totally meant to say prayers."