

## THE LONG FLESH OF THE LAW

The siren's cry came distant and warped, a baying wolf across the lit cityscape. Miracle Robinson would've ignored it, one more howling among nocturnal hunters, if not for the answering chirp close by, drawing her gaze to the curb at her left.

Sandwiched between an SUV and a small sedan, a city cop cruiser parked streetside at a crooked angle. Rainy residue from an earlier storm twinkled over the other vehicles, but on the cruiser it more resembled a sweaty sheen coating naked flesh, the car having foregone any steel frame to instead become a blue-and-white-skinned beast.

Mira swerved right at the next sidewalk corner, dipping under a pink neon sign. She didn't want to see the cruiser and couldn't let whoever drove it see her in return.

Her smartphone's GPS flickered and recalculated her route. She rarely used it, but the city seemed strange tonight. The streetlights cast an odd shine, yellower than usual. Every silent passerby dragged a long shadow, and the street's regular cacophony sounded as strained as a creaky old crate stuffed to bursting.

Another siren cried from far away. There were hunters tonight, yes, but they couldn't be hunting Mira. She'd carefully chosen a dark vest, long-sleeved sweater, and jeans tucked into bland brown

boots, the borrowed ensemble screaming *college student*. Above her round cheeks, flushed with the chill, sat a thick pair of old prescription glasses, giving her the look of a wizened librarian beneath her curly red hair. No one would suspect she was only fifteen.

The deception would be crucial when she met up with the others. Petra had heard of a club called Three of Diamonds that didn't check IDs, and they were all set to gather there, unbeknownst to parents. Dad was pulling a late night at the firm. He would come home at three in the morning, eyes red, tie loose, arms loaded with paperwork, too exhausted to guess his daughter had returned only shortly before him.

Mira didn't expect to find a club at the night's end. Three of Diamonds was likely some below-street gimmick restaurant five teenagers couldn't afford. They would order water and cheap food, and they'd cackle over gossip and decide they weren't losers. Mira could be a not-loser with them.

Supposing she ever found the place. The GPS's recalculation had steered her into a dead-end alley, and now it was recalculating again, aiming her southwest. And now again, aiming east.

Her fingers tensed around her phone. She hated doubling back; it was a good way for someone to catch wind that you were lost.

Like that odd cruiser.

She shouldn't have been able to see it after turning the last corner, but there it sat at the curb down the street, looking somehow counterfeit, like a clumsy drawing scribbled against the curb. Had it followed her? Or did every cruiser tonight look warped and strange?

Best to pretend she wasn't alone, wasn't lost. She angled her phone past her chin and muttered to it in a pretend phone call, as if the shitshow GPS were her friend.

So far, it had offered about as much help as her actual friends.

She'd messaged the group chat before tonight's sirens began, first to re-ask the club's name, then for directions. Each time, she'd met laughing faces and notes of *Hmm, can't you find it?* and *It's so easy*, and *Yeah, bitch, hurry up*.

That last one had turned into much-needed advice. Mira hurried around another corner and down the sidewalk, escaping the cruiser's sight again. Hopefully for good this time.

At the next corner, she lowered her phone and reviewed its map. Text and icons had morphed into unfamiliar symbols, and the lines and shapes had ceased to make sense. Buildings transformed into bridges; streets became subways. The map kept spinning, changing which direction led to the waterfront, as if the city were spiraling into the sea.

She glanced ahead, doubtful there was a subway station entrance nearby, and spotted a mouth opening downward, braced by grimy railings. Two cops in blue uniforms leaned against its outer wall, eyes on their phones, their service caps obscuring the subway route.

Mira swerved again. She didn't need them noticing her.

Another unplanned turn, another glitch across her phone screen. She stuffed the brick into her purse. Maybe if she trusted the street, it would bring her to Three of Diamonds by instinct.

But the street was alien, the pedestrians thinning, the cars occasional. Steel shutters blocked shop entrances with a firm grip, less like they'd been rolled down at closing time, more like these businesses had never been open.

The city had turned labyrinthine. It didn't want her to reach her destination. *Head home, little girl*.

Or maybe it didn't recognize her in this outfit, lent by Petra with the approval of London, Stephanie, and Mercedes. The city thought her a stranger, more so than all its tourists, and had no interest in helping her.

Around another corner. And another. Doubling back. Taking a left where she'd gone right. The asphalt became a great gray tongue, its crags sparkling with rainwater. Or saliva.

If she didn't find the club soon, she'd have to give up. And if Dad ever found out, he'd lay into her the same as he had when he'd spotted her friends picking at her clothes outside school, where a smog-belching city bus had covered her laughter.

*You don't need to impress those girls, Miracle. They're not true friends.*

There was little point in arguing with a lawyer, and besides, she couldn't blame him for ignorance over how girls made friends. How could he understand? What father in the entire history of fathers had ever understood?

It wasn't like she'd ever had a mother around. Not one Mira could remember. For the longest time, Dad had done his best to make up for that absence, ensuring he took her to friends' birthday parties or attending seasonal school concerts. Both of them had wished Mira's mother was around in their own way, but there had never been an obvious rift between them.

She hadn't noticed, with him only occasionally dating, that his only frame of reference to girlhood was her. He couldn't see how some of them showed affection by teasing each other over hair and clothes, calling each other *bitch* and *skank*.

And sometimes you decided girls were your friends whether you believed it or not. You just hoped it would become true.

If only she could find them. How long had she been wandering these now-barren streets? She wouldn't check her phone for the time. One more GPS glitch would send her smashing the damn thing over the concrete. She glanced down the next alley, expecting a dead end.

Beyond the scattered food wrappers and soggy newspaper pages, the street looked familiar. Nearly identical to a place she'd passed minutes ago.

No, worse—it was the exact place.

“Piece of shit.” She smacked her purse and started into the alley. “You win, city. I give up.”

A siren’s whoop startled her into spinning around on one heel, striking her shoulder against the brick wall.

Quivering white muscle tensed across the alley’s mouth in the shape of that freakish cop cruiser. Its driver side door hung open, and someone had already stepped onto the desolate pavement, a potato chip bag crinkling underfoot.

“Are you supposed to be here, young lady?”

His black boots gleamed with raindrops. A blue uniform crept up his legs and torso, short-sleeved and outdated in a way Mira couldn’t specify. His golden badge wore no numbers and appeared as something of a shield and a star at once, with every movement leaning the light toward one shape and then the other. A bristly handlebar mustache drooped around narrow lips and crossed his paper-pale face. Aviator shades mounted a thin nose, and a blue service cap with a black bill fit over dark, slicked-back hair.

Mira unclenched her teeth and forced out an excuse. “I’m just going home.”

“No, you aren’t,” the cop said. “You’re staying right here to yak with me.”

He had the clipped voice of someone talking in a black-and-white movie. A dampness glistened from his hair to his boots, reminiscent of sweat or fish oil. It even shined off the service pistol at his hip, giving it a strangely animalistic presence, the grip poking from its holster like a dark frog rising from the mud.

“See? You have to stay because I said so.” His boots made a sharp *clack* against the pavement as he neared. “Isn’t that a firecracker? The others weren’t joshing me about switching careers—my last job was peanuts to this one! I’ve tried out a few over a long time, looking for the shape that’s a good fit. This might

be the one. Did you know they let you kill people? It's the bee's knees."

Thunder boomed in Mira's chest, her breath quickening. She didn't dare look back, but she felt the alley stretching behind her, offering an escape route if such a thing existed. Hadn't her father advised her about cops, the way he advised his clients? Was she supposed to ask if she was being detained, or did she get that from TV?

Her memories felt distant. Had she ever seen a TV show? Did she actually know her father? Or had he died alongside her mother on the day of Mira's birth? Had she even been born, or was that a dream? Her existence might have always been this alley and the man standing here with his badge and gun. If he had detained her, it was within some city-like tumor clinging to the real universe.

He loomed, his mustache twitching. "I want you to answer some questions. Hearing you answer questions—that's better than music. Better than birthdays and ice cream."

Mira's borrowed boots scraped the pavement, desperate to retreat. She braced herself to smell the cop's breath as he took a knee, his face meeting hers, but his exhalation never struck. There was only the gasoline-and-garbage smell of the city riding a light breeze through the alley. One hand gripped a pencil; the other held a spiral notepad. Its wire echoed his arm hair, and the paper was the same shade of pale as his skin, as if the notebook had grown out of his hand.

"So then," he started. "Mira. Where were you the night of June 50th, 1983?"

*Mira.* "How do you know my name?"

The mustache arched with the cop's grimace. "Nah, you're getting it all wrong. I ask questions, you answer them. Try again. Where were you the night of June 50th, 1983?"

“I—” Mira started. “I wasn’t born yet. That isn’t a real date.”

The cop’s pencil crawled over the paper, its every touch sounding like a jagged fingernail vigorously scratching dry skin.

“Next question,” he said, slower. “Did you know a miracle can disappoint? Especially one that’s fifteen years old?”

*Mira. Miracle.* But how could he know? Mira’s stomach sucked at her throat. “No. I didn’t know that.”

“Mm. That’s a good answer.” The cop scribbled again. White debris flaked from his notepad like dandruff.

Mira didn’t think her answer was any good. Maybe he didn’t care what she said, only that she keep speaking to him, the way a boy at school used to keep colliding with her in the hallway so he’d have an excuse to talk to her, or the way an elderly woman on the bus last spring had purposely missed her stop to keep telling Mira about how downtown used to be. The cop grew rigid with intent, a pensive dog watching a busy dinner table.

Fresh discomfort rattled Mira’s nerves. “Are you going to kill me?”

“I ask the questions,” the cop said. “Next up—where’d you get a zany idea like that?”

“You said it. Your job. They let you kill people.”

“Sure, I can kill *people*. That’s part of the job. But you’re just a person. One of you.” The cop hitched his belt. “Now, if you brought me to your group of delinquents, that’d be another slice of pie. Then I could do a killing.”

“My group?” Mira asked. “You know my friends?”

“Of course, there are all kinds of other swell things I can do to you,” the cop said, ignoring her. “For example, I could lock you up somewhere out of the way for interrogation and then forget about you. I could bloat you full of drugs and drop you at Daddy’s job. Or we can keep it pleasant, and I can keep asking questions, and you can give the old college try in answering them. Now, let’s

see—those girls. Petra. London. Stephanie. Mercedes. Are they really your friends?”

He said them in the order she thought of them. She couldn't see anything through those reflective shades, but she felt his gaze crawling with a cold brightness across her skin, her purse, Petra's clothes, as if the shades were his actual eyes.

“I don't know,” Mira said.

The mustache curved over the cop's lips. “Are you familiar with a thing called friends?”

His attention poured into her, drowning her. She had to look past him to take in her next breath, catching sight of his flesh-like cruiser. It quaked with its driver's anticipation, ready to pounce. Almost as if his car was not a car but another facet of him, and if Mira could only look at it from the right angle, she would see how the cop and the cruiser were a single creature.

“Have you ever had friends?” the cop went on, eager for another answer. “Would you know?”

The cop wondered the same as her father. *You don't need to impress those girls, Miracle. They're not true friends.* Maybe Dad had known more than she'd given him credit for?

Yes, that was right—she had a past. With a father in it. And a mother, too, though they'd scarcely met, in a time before memory. A world spread past this alley, surviving outside this cop's attention. And hadn't Dad given other advice too?

*Don't talk to pigs without me. Even when you're grown.*

Mira tried to steady her voice. “You forgot my Miranda rights.”

“Miranda? Rights?” The cop stood up, arched his back away from Mira, and glanced left and right. “Is Miss Rights with us now? Or with Petra and the others? Oh, or is Miranda the name you wish yours was short for?”

“It means I don't have to answer questions if I don't want to. And I get attorney privilege.”



The cop sighed as if he'd just emptied a refreshing cup of coffee. "That isn't your only privilege. Next question. What is a *turney*, and can you have more than one?"

"A lawyer," Mira snapped. "Like my dad. When you don't want to answer questions alone, you have the right to a lawyer."

"Wait a tic—you *don't* want to answer questions?"

A gleam slashed across the cop's shades, but Mira couldn't tell where the glare might've come from, as if light and darkness belonged to him. The sky rumbled with a new storm's thunder, echoing her heart.

"Mira, use your noggin." The cop flapped his notepad. "A lawyer? Really? Who would ever want to help you? You're a kid. Nobody gives a flying fig about you unless you got a bun in the oven, and even then they hate you for it. Don't they educate you in school these days? They educated me. I've studied lots of neat things. I'm everywhere, and I'm listening and learning."

A chill spread hydra-like up Mira's arms and spine, tainting every blood vessel with isolating cold. She had never felt so alone.

Thunder groaned, another reminder that there was a world beyond this alley. Places, events, people. There was a past—*she* had a past, didn't she? She grasped at anything she'd done, anyone she'd known, even the bad parts. The boy who would always bump into her. Scoldings from her father over the kinds of friends she'd made. A lost mother, out of whose departure Mira had been named Miracle.

She was more than the girl standing here. She had a father, and she'd snuck out of her apartment, and she was on her way to Three of Diamonds to see her friends, or whatever the hell they were to her. No matter what, she had to remember she'd existed before she met this man.

Her hand crawled over her chest and touched fingertips to her purse. She eyed the cop, and then his gun, pulsating, a little black

heart at his hip. He shifted, the light falling differently, and the pistol went still.

“Is that gun real?” Mira asked, cautious.

The cop grinned. “Real as anything else.”

She didn’t like that answer, its implications, but it was all she had to work with right now. “I’m not reaching for a gun,” she said. “I don’t have one.”

“I know.” His confidence was a knife in the dark. “But I’m authorized to interpret anything you pull out as one. And then I get to say, *She’s got a gun!* and then I get to draw *my* gun and yell, *Freeze!* and then it goes, *Blam! Blam!*” He pantomimed firing a pistol. “And then you die, Miracle. You die, and you don’t come back.”

Mira swallowed as thunder boomed. “But it’s not a gun. It’s just my phone. Look.” She unzipped her purse faster than she meant to and drew out the flat brick. “See? It’s for texting, and watching videos, and sometimes you make calls.”

“Who would you call? The cops?”

Mira opened her mouth. Shut it. Watched his dark mustache stretch into a hairy serpent.

“I’m already here,” the cop said. “Protecting and serving.”

“You’re not a real cop,” Mira said. “You’re—I don’t know. Something else.”

“Haven’t you put two and two together yet? Don’t you get it?” He scoffed. “Nah, *getting it* isn’t part of your specialty. You don’t know dogs from cats about this world, never bothered with an education, you little know-nothing punk. And how can you count on anything when you know nothing? Sure, I could just be me. Or I could be the next cop you see on the street. Could be the job attracts a certain kind. We could all be like me. I could be Ev-Ree-Bah-Dee.”

*to be continued in Teenage Girls Can Be Demons...*