

# Chapter One

February 1965

Max looked to the sky and remembered the words that Santa had once told him: "The darkness of the sky is a reflection of the darkness in the hearts of the men around you." He had hoped to see the first signs of the sun as it broke over the line between the star-filled void and the gray snow-covered peaks to the south, but he knew better and sneered at the lack of sunlight. He hated the darkness.

He grabbed his flashlight and shook his head, knowing that daybreak would not come for another two months. A bad feeling had gripped him all day; a sense of dread that he could not explain. The snowstorm that had battered his house all morning helped to keep his mind from wandering into the dark recesses of his memory. Sinking into the darkness where his demons lived was commonplace for Max.

The night sky also brought to mind the words of his late father: The best defense against the darkness is a positive attitude and a flashlight big enough to beat the crap out of anyone who approached. If it were not for the chores, Max would have crawled back into bed and held his flashlight close.

A freezing gust almost knocked him over as he stepped from the back door of his small house. The winds were strong for this time of the year, but there were chores to do. Max Sneed had an undying hatred for cold weather. He despised the feel of the stinging snow as it hit his face and melted, leaving burning streaks as they moved down his cheeks. His weathered face was the only flesh that wasn't bundled up beneath three layers of clothing.

A barn jutted out of the snow before him. Its dull red paint looked like dark blood in the semi-darkness. It stood in stark contrast to the misty gray-blue of the snow piled around it. He cautiously made his way through the snow, opened the little barn's door and pulled out a bucket of corn. Despite the deafening roar of the wind, the calls from his girls reached his

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ears. They'd seen him sloshing through the snow and knew what it meant. Their daddy was coming and had their breakfast.

His girls, Daisy and Lily, were reindeer. Both walked up to the feeding trough and patiently waited as the old man made his way to their battered shed. Max never understood how they always knew when he was out and about.

"Cold today?" He asked as he dumped the corn into the trough. The reindeer lowered their heads to eat and prodded Max with their antlers. He grinned faintly as he watched his girls. He wasn't the type to smile often and only his girls gave him a reason to be happy. There had been happier times for him, but those memories had faded from his brain in the way that color had from this bleak landscape.

Max lived at the top of the world, just twenty miles away from the actual North Pole. His modest house and barn lay only four miles from the center of the North Pole community, home to Santa Claus, his workshops and the city that had grown up around them.

The world believed the North Pole to be the happiest place on Earth, filled with the happy toy-making elves, candy-makers and bakeries. Parents told their children stories of the wonders and miracles that came to life in the northern kingdom of jolly ole Saint Nick.

Despite the stories and songs, Max was not a jolly man. In fact, if his jolliness were measured on a scale from one to ten, Max usually would get no more than four. Today however, with the frozen winds and dark skies, Max barely reached two.

He stood and watched the girls feast on the corn when something odd happened around him. Light and shadows began to appear on the ground, growing larger at first and then moving and distorting into twisted shapes. As he turned to look behind him, the sounds of an automobile engine became clear over the roar of the wind. The bright headlights illuminated the falling snowflakes as they danced their way downward. Max didn't have to wait for the bundled-up elf to step out of the modified Ford to know who owned it. There was only one car within a thousand miles of his modest home and it belonged to the North Pole

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Police Department. Upon seeing the car, his jolliness level dropped by a full point. He shook his head and cursed his luck.

A young elfish officer stepped from the car, glanced down at the clipboard he firmly held and yelled something. Max couldn't make out the words and didn't really want to make the effort. Still, he held a hand to his ear, but it failed to amplify the elf's voice when he shouted out again. Seeing this, the police officer waddled closer to Max.

He shouted the question again: "Are you Inspector Sneed?"

"No!" Max yelled back. "I'm the tooth fairy."

The officer looked down at the clipboard and then back up with his head tilted and a confused expression plastered across his sharp, angular face. He stepped forward, lost his footing, and fell face first into the snow. Max shook his head, muttered a few curse words, and pulled the officer to his feet. It had been a while since he had entertained company at his house, and there was a reason for this; he simply didn't like company. Reluctantly, he waved toward the house.

The two unbundled as soon as they entered. The officer hung his jacket on the back of a wooden chair and looked around the room as he took a seat at the small round table. To Max's displeasure, he proceeded to brush the snow from his hair on to his clean floor.

The kitchen felt cozy and comfortable to the officer. The smell of apples floated through the room, and the officer's mouth watered at the sight of a fresh baked pie cooling on the counter. The house looked clean, an obvious sign that its occupant had too much free time. A wispy pillar of steam rose from a small red kettle on the stove and filled the room.

Max grabbed a pair of mugs, dropped a slightly used teabag into each one and poured hot water over them.

"Sorry, sir. I don't usually bundle up so much, but I'm not used to leaving the warm zone," the officer said as he removed his black gloves and quickly grabbed the warm mug in his frozen hands. The smell of the tea filled his nostrils and brought a smile to his face. "I never understood why someone would wanna live outside of the warm zone." His hands trembled and Max

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wondered if fear or merely the cold was the cause. He settled on a combination of the two.

“This will warm you up then you can tell me why you’re here.” He returned the kettle to the stove and leaned against it to soak up its heat. The warmth felt like heaven to him. He occasionally joked to himself that he may prefer hell in the afterlife since after a lifetime in the Arctic Circle, he wanted his heaven to be hot. “Then I’m going to tell you to bugger off.”

The miniature cop’s eyes glanced around, not wanting to look Max in the eye. “I’m here on official business. I was told to collect you and take you to the trolley platform. There has been a murder. Someone has gone and killed Mr. Volsky.” He glanced nervously at Max over the lip of his tea mug and then took a sip.

“Vlad?” Max’s eyes opened more than usual. A knife had been plunged into his back many years ago, and now someone twisted it. His heart sank, but another part of him felt a strange liberation. The feeling of dread he had earlier suddenly made sense to him.

“Yes, sir; The Chief Inspector told me to get you to da platform ... to get you there as fast as possible. That’s why I got to drive the car. It’s quicker than any sleigh. Well, all exceptin’ for Santa’s,” the officer said through a weak smile.

Max looked away from the officer and grumbled, “I’m retired. Tell your Inspector to handle things by himself. If someone killed Vlad...” He stopped and cleared his throat, but his voice dropped as he added. “It’s not my job anymore.”

“But, Inspector Sneed?”

Max raised a finger and furled his brow. “I’ve been retired for a long time, it’s Mr. Sneed now.”

“Mr. Sneed, there’s been only two murders in the whole history of this place and you solved ‘em both. Nobody’s got an idea about this one; even Inspector Rennard says he’s baffled.”

John Rennard was a sharp man and Max knew it; after all, he had trained him. “What’s your name, kid?” He took a seat at the opposite side of the table.

“Reggie,” the officer replied, then added, “Sir.”

Max picked up a cigar butt from an ashtray, put it in his mouth, and lit it. The tobacco smoke filled his lungs and

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comforted Max, but annoyed the officer. Next to the ashtray sat a small plate of cookies. Max noticed Reggie's eyes kept moving toward them. He pushed the plate in front of the elf as he took another draw from the cigar.

Max couldn't help but study Reggie through the smoke. Years of police work and training had ingrained this into his being. Reggie's emotions were on display in his mannerisms and the muted expressions shown on his face. A hint of fear danced in the elf's eyes and Max realized that he had seen the body. It must have been the young officer's first encounter with death. Max had seen far too much killing during his life to fear it, but he could sympathize. His thoughts drifted away for a moment to the days of his youth. A time he desperately wanted to forget.

"No. Tell Rennard to do it himself." He shook his head as his thoughts returned to the present.

"I was told to give you this, if you said 'no'." Reggie said.

He pulled a small envelope from his clipboard and placed it on the table. A red wax seal displaying an angel holding a child held the flap of the envelope closed. Both knew who'd sent the envelope and what it would say. A look of despair washed over Max's weathered face as he tore open the envelope and pulled out a small handwritten note. Reggie lifted a cookie to his mouth and took a bite as he watched Max read.

*Max:*

*Vlad's body was found in Snowflake Garden this morning. I don't know what has happened, but I need your skills. John Rennard is a capable man, but I fear this is bigger than he can handle. He agrees that you should be here. Forget the past and think about what this would mean to you, and all of us.*

*I need you now.*

*S. Claus.*

"Let me pack a quick bag." Max moaned as his heart sank deeper.

A short time later, he emerged from his bedroom, carrying a small travel bag. A number of sleeves and pant legs dangled out of it. Reggie looked up from his place at the table. His mouth was

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full of cookies and the plate was empty. Max remembered why he hated having company.

“Anytime you’re ready.” Max rolled his eyes in annoyance as he made his way toward the door. He set the bag down and slipped on his coat and scarf.

Reggie also slipped on his jacket in haste. The wind hit him like a thunderbolt as the door opened. He quickly adjusted his scarf across his face before plunging into the Arctic wilds of Max’s front yard

“Sir, can I ask what makes you wanna live so far outside of town? I mean, it’s warmer in town or even a little closer to the fringe neighborhoods,” Reggie shouted over the roaring wind as he stepped through the door.

Max looked through him and chose to ignore the question, gazing instead at the lights of the nearby metropolis. Below the elfin city and the ice sheet it sat upon, churned a sunless sea. Much like the city, the sea was cloaked in darkness and would seem peaceful, yet was filled with hidden currents and eddies, waiting to pull the innocent down into its unseen horrors. Max saw the similarities and he knew Reggie did not.

“You’ll make sure someone comes to feed my girls?” Max stepped out and nodded towards the feasting reindeer.

“Yes, Inspect...” Max’s head jerked around causing Reggie to panic. “Sir, yes sir, I’ll have someone take care of ’em.”

Max hidden his grin beneath his scarf. He didn’t want Reggie to know how much he loved making people squirm.

They battled their way through the snow and gusts to the car. Reggie had left the engine running and it had produced a thick fog of exhaust that surrounded the black Ford. The cloud hovered close to the ground and the smell annoyed an already disgruntled Max. The warm interior brought relief to both as they closed the doors.

“Why keep reindeer?”

“Because, I don’t like the way they’re wasted. No animal should be used like they are and then treated like shit once they can’t do their job anymore.” Max turned his head to look out the window. “No life should be forgotten.”

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The DC3 cargo plane sat on the packed snow of the only runway at the North Pole's airport. The lone passenger jumped from the hatch as soon as it opened and stood to take in the sight. He was a stranger to this frosted land, but had a delighted look on his face and a pair of suitcases in his hands. He lazily looked up at the night sky, amazed at the sight before him. More stars than he had ever seen, filled the darkness. A band of swirling, dancing lights hung just over the horizon in every direction. The lights faded and flashed as they changed from one color to the next. The illuminated maelstrom became easier to see when the runway lights blinked off. The aircraft's two-man crew climbed out and stood beside him to take in the sight.

"Aurora Borealis; I never get tired of looking at it, myself. One of the few perks of making these flights. I never saw this until I started coming up here," the pilot said.

"It's quite lovely, almost hypnotic." Robert Watson looked at the pilot then back to the aerial light show. Rob had been grinning nonstop for the past two weeks, ever since the invitation from Santa had arrived on his editor's desk. He was of the rare type of man that usually stays in the best of moods, which routinely made him the man that everyone at work despised.

"So let me ask, shouldn't they keep the runway lights on?" Rob asked.

The pilot laughed. "Waste of power. There won't be another plane coming in for a couple of weeks."

"Oh? So what do you chaps normally bring in on these flights?"

The co-pilot chimed in. "Maybe a passenger now and then, but mostly cargo. Goods and materials the factories need or special things for the markets and such. Last flight, we brought up a load of medical supplies for the hospital and that Air Force guy. The heavy stuff gets transported overland from Canada. We only bring the things that are needed quickly or have..." he searched for the right word.

"Priority," finished the pilot.

"Yes, that's it. We made about forty flights up here two years ago and thirty-two flights last year, but this year it looks like we

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will only get about one or two flight a month. Not that much coming in or going out anymore. 1965 is gonna be a slow year.”

Rob adjusted his jacket and looked around at the snow-covered ground. A strange odor permeated the air but he couldn't determine the source. It smelled like a combination of Christmas and smog. The air was cold, but not arctic cold. It felt much like the winter air of his hometown, London.

“Not as chilly as I thought it would be.”

“It's a little warmer in town, but,” the pilot pointed out over the runway, “head out that way for a couple of miles and the temperature drops to well below zero. You know; real Arctic temperature.”

“Good heavens, what makes that big a difference?” asked Rob.

“There's a mountain nearby with hot springs and geysers coming out of it. Whatever it is, it keeps this whole place warmed up.”

“Warmed up? Bugger. Are you saying this place could melt?” Rob pulled a few of the long, errant strands of hair out of his eyes and thought about the ice shelf under his feet. He'd been afraid during the flight of crashing into the bone-chilling North Sea, but he hadn't expected that fear to resurface here.

The pilot laughed. “Well, it's still below freezing. It's just not arctic cold. Let's say, cold enough to keep the ice intact but not bad enough freeze you up when you step outside.”

“See that building, the one on the hill? That's Kringle Castle. It's built on top of a small hill that they say is the top of the mountain.” The co-pilot's gloved finger pointed off toward the lit buildings in the distance. One of them sat a little higher than the others.

Rob looked out over the flat horizon. “I thought there were no land masses at the North Pole. Isn't all of this just a huge chunk of ice?” The idea of standing on nothing but a sheet of ice sent a chill down his spine. It was one reason why he had never taken up ice skating as a child.

“That's what they say, but who really knows.”

They quickly walked to one of the small, lit buildings. As the trio reached the door, a small man opened it. He stood about four

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and half feet tall and was perfectly proportioned. He was the first elf that Rob had ever seen outside of photographs. His facial features were sharp and angled just like his pointy ears.

“Excuse me, sir; you must be Robert Watson from England?” The elf looked up at Rob.

“Yes,” replied Rob.

He was cheerful but had that feeling of uneasiness which all travelers deal with when entering a new land. He’d just traveled thousands of kilometers by plane to one of the most inhospitable environments on Earth. This city seemed more secretive and guarded than the cities within the Soviet Union. The world considered this to be the happiest and most festive place anywhere, but to Rob it started to look like any small city in Eastern Europe, dark, dreary, and cold. Rob had felt uneasy when he’d traveled to write articles about Communist- led East Germany years earlier.

“My name is Gregory. I’m afraid that my boss isn’t able to meet you himself, but something has detained him.”

As a journalist for the Britannic Times, Rob had become an expert at reading people. He could see that the elf was upset and hiding something.

He’d been surprised when his editor had picked him to write the first real story about Santa’s city at the North Pole. Since its founding, outsiders had been kept out. The few that did come were sworn to secrecy.

Santa and his city were very private for a multitude of reasons, and then a hand-written letter from Santa himself had arrived on the editor’s desk in London. It was an invitation for one reporter to travel to the North Pole and tell the world about the wonders of this place, the real story of this city on the ice. Rob wasn’t sure how he’d managed to beat out the other newshounds who worked for the Times. He wasn’t a senior journalist, but his stories had won him a few local awards.

“If you’ll come with me, sir. The trolley station is just across the street, and it’ll take you into the center of town.” Gregory turned and began to walk away, leaving Rob to carry his own bags. A strong musky smell that could only come from the elf caught Rob’s nose and he almost gagged.

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They made their way out of the building and crossed a snow-covered sheet of ice that Rob could only assume was the street. A small but quaint-looking train platform sat on the other side; again, it was reminiscent of Eastern Europe, but painted with bright greens and reds instead of the dreary colors preferred by the Soviet Bloc. A series of electric cables stretched overhead and followed the lengths of the tracks off into the distance. He looked around, but saw no signs of a ticket booth, just a platform with a few folks who had queued up for the trolley.

“Do I need to pay? I don’t see a queue for tickets.” He said and studied the elves that stood patiently. They were all dressed in drab coats and scarves. A small group of female elves chatted amongst themselves. Rob couldn’t help but laugh as he thought about the women in his office chatting and gossiping like these elves. He’d half expected the stories of elves dressed in little green, red and white jumpsuits to be true, but the elves of the real North Pole appeared to be just like any other people in a big city.

“No. Riding the trolley is free. I best be back to my duties. Once you get into town, go to the Christmas Hotel. There’s a room ready for you. Someone will be along later to take care of you. I reckon they’ll want you there for a bit until things get tidied up.”

“Tidied up? What does that mean?” asked Rob. His reporter’s instincts kicked in at the sniff of a story.

“It means that we keep things to ourselves up here. Best be remembering that,” Gregory said.

The elf walked away, leaving Rob to his thoughts. When the elf reached the bottom of the stairs, Rob found himself surprised to hear the roar of an automobile. Gregory let out a loud screech as a black police car slid to a stop just inches from him. A pair of men emerged from the vehicle, and Rob noted that the man who exited from the passenger side looked shaken.

Now why wouldn’t he be flying in a sleigh instead of riding in an auto? He thought, and turned back towards the tracks.

“I’ve gotta drive to the garage for gas, but I’ll be in town later on if you need me, sir,” Reggie said as Max made his way up the

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stairs. “The department should already have a room at the Christmas Hotel ready from you and a sleigh waitin’ on ya at the Town Square Station. But I figure da Chief Inspector will want you at the crime scene right away.”

Every head on the platform snapped around towards Reggie and Max at the mention of crime scene. Max just waved his hand and said a few choice words about to Reggie’s mother under his breath.

Max strolled across the platform and looked out over the tracks. He turned to Rob and carefully looked over the traveler and his luggage. He didn’t like the smile and cheerful look on Rob’s face. It didn’t sit well with him. Unlike Max, Rob’s jolliness level had shot off the chart, and something told Max that if he stayed around this young man, it would soon get on his nerves. He guessed Rob’s age to be somewhere in the late twenties, with his long shaggy hair that had become a fashion statement for the young in the free world.

“You just flew in from London. Why is there a reporter from London at the North Pole, Mr. Watson?” Max looked Rob in the eyes with intensity.

“My ... my paper, the Times, was invited. I was picked to tell the world about the North Pole, what it’s really like up here.”

Rob felt uncertain about this small man beside him. He watched Max look him over again, then turned away to stare out over the tracks. Rob looked in the opposite direction for a couple of minutes and then turned back to Max.

“How did you know that? How did you know I was from London, and what makes you think I’m a reporter ... I mean a journalist?” he demanded.

A smirk crept onto Max’s face, but he covered it up and turned to Rob. Moments like this were what Max lived for.

“Your hands have the look of someone who uses them regularly in work. However, they lack the calluses associated with manual labor and the fingertips are flattened on the tips. So I’d say you type for a living,” Max stated matter-of-factly. “And what’s left of the snow on your boots.” He pointed towards Rob’s snow-covered boots. “That’s not Arctic snow.” He paused for

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effect. “No, I’ve only seen snow like that once before, about fifty years ago, in North London.”

Rob’s mouth dropped open. He stood speechless and watched as Max turned away and looked down the tracks. Then a thought struck him as he looked down at his hands. “I’m wearing gloves!”

“Yes, and I’d imagine all that London snow melted away while you were on the plane.”

“B-but...” stammered Rob.

Max pointed down to one of Rob’s suitcases, which had a large white tag of the type used by most airlines attached to the handle, “Your name, address and employer are on the ID tag.”

With a roar, the large electric trolley car came to a stop alongside the platform. An elf inside opened the door, greeted the passengers and asked them all to mind their step. Max moved in and took a seat beside the window. Rob followed him inside and gazed around. The interior of the car was a rich mahogany, lightly stained, with lush red and gold cushioned seats. The scent of cookies was in the air and struck Rob as odd. He speculated that the Queen, herself, would fancy the window seat that Max now sat in. This was exactly the kind of thing he’d expected to see here at the North Pole. It looked magical, like something from a fairy tale.

“Do you mind?” Rob said to Max and pointed to the empty seat next to him.

Max did mind, but he decided to give the stranger a break and shook his head. He turned away from Rob to take in the snow-covered dunes beyond the platform.

Rob clumsily situated his suitcases in the aisle and ignored stares from the other passengers. He fell back into his seat as the trolley jerked forward and began to build up speed. The young man relaxed and watched the view from the window as row after row of small houses went by. Small, plain, and with television antennas sticking up from their roofs like a forest of metal trees. He’d expected lots of color, odd shapes and magical architecture in the homes and buildings.

The mystique that the world had laid upon the North Pole was one of color and charm, but he saw none of this. He glanced over

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at the man sitting next to him and decided that he needed to make a friend here. Since one of them knew who the other was, Rob decided they were halfway through their introduction.

Rob stuck out his hand. “A formal introduction is in order. I’m Robert Watson.”

Max turned to look at him. “Yes, I know.” He turned back towards the window. He thought about being nice and introducing himself, but decided to make the young man work for it.

“So you know that and you know that I’m a report... a journalist. I’m a journalist, here to do an exclusive article on what the North Pole is really like. And I’d ... Well; I’ve never really had a decent conversation with, let alone an interview, with an elf before.”

Max’s head spun around and his eyes bore into the journalist. “Elf?”

“Well, yes,” replied Rob. “I mean ... you are a bit bigger than the other elves I’ve seen so far, not that I’ve seen that many.” He faked a laugh and suddenly felt more uncomfortable.

“Are you calling me fat?” Max’s eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. He enjoyed watching Rob squirm, but would never have let on.

“Umm, no... Not at all.” Rob suddenly realized that he was in trouble. This was the same problem he’d had with his ex-girlfriend, Judy, but then realized that he had this same problem with all of his past girlfriends and, on a couple of occasions, with his mother. “Maybe on the stout side, but no, no, not fat. Just taller than the other elves is all that I meant.” He looked down at his gloved hands, worried that he’d blown the chance for an interview.

“Lighten up, kid. I’m just giving you a hard time. I’m as human as you. Well, maybe a little shorter and certainly much older.” Max adjusted himself in the seat so as to see Rob a little better.

“Human? So how many humans are living at the North Pole along with the elves?”

“There are about a million elves at last count and around 50,000 humans here.” Max brought his finger to his lips and

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lowered his voice. “The humans run most things. Elves are great workers, but most of them are pretty simple-minded, if you know what I mean.” Then Max shook his head. “No. I don’t mean that. There are some great minds up here; it’s hard to find them, though.” He remembered a time when he’d been a stranger in a different world and decided to give the outsider a chance at last.

“Max, Max Sneed.” He held out his hand, and Rob gladly shook it.

“So, Mr. Sneed, may I ask where you are employed?”

Max exhaled loudly and looked out the window. He thought about saying something clever, but turned to look Rob in the eyes. His sadness was evident in his tone. “I’m retired.”

“From?” Rob persisted.

“I was a police detective,”

“Really? Blimey, I hadn’t thought there would be much crime here.”

“Not much, mostly thefts, assaults, that kind of stuff.”

“So what kind of crime scene are you heading to now, especially if you’re retired?” The look of excitement on Rob’s face bothered Max. He didn’t like the idea of some nosy reporter looking for dirt, especially considering who the victim was.

“I don’t think I’m the one to say.” Max’s face grew paler as he thought about the recently deceased.

“I’m here to scribble down a story. It would be lovely to tag along and see the real North Pole. To see what this world of yours is really like,” Rob said. He was excited enough just to visit the secret city, but now an opportunity had presented itself. A chance to see the North Pole from a vantage point he’d never dreamed existed.

Max turned back to the window and felt uneasy. “This place is like any other. Humans, elves, they all have their dark sides, their desires and demons.”

“So has someone you know been killed?” Rob said. When Max’s head shot around to face him again, he continued. “You’re a detective. You read a crime scene and deduce facts from what you see, like our brilliant Mr. Holmes, but I’m a journalist. I read people, and I can glean too much sadness and loss in your face and your words for this to be just another crime scene.”

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Max said nothing for a few awkward moments, but finally nodded and found his voice. “Yes ... yes, someone has been killed.” He studied Rob again and appraised his character. Rob’s ability to read him impressed Max and he felt a little safer letting him on the story. “As a journalist, you’re supposed to be a detective of sorts. We’ll see how good you are. Tag along with me and you’ll get your exclusive story.”

Rob smiled and let his eye wander out the window. The houses of the outer neighborhoods were behind them, replaced by buildings several stories tall. As the trolley rolled into the center of the city, it slowed gracefully to a stop in front of another green and red platform. The doorman jumped from his seat and opened the door with a loud whack that made everyone in the car jump with surprise. As they emerged, Rob was overwhelmed at the sight before him.