



**Dean Koontz's Frankenstein:
City of Night**

Book Two: City of Night

Dean Koontz and Ed Gorman

**DEAN
KOONTZ'S
FRANKIE**

DEAN KOONTZ AND ED GORMAN

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BOOK TWO

CITY OF NIGHT

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In a sort of ghastly simplicity, we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

—C. S. LEWIS, *The Abolition of Man*

CHAPTER 1

HAVING COME TO LIFE in a thunderstorm, touched by some strange lightning that animated rather than incinerated, Deucalion had been born on a night of violence.

A Bedlam symphony of his anguished cries, his maker's shrieks of triumph, the burr and buzz and crackle of arcane machinery echoed off the cold stone walls of the laboratory in the old windmill.

When he woke to the world, Deucalion had been shackled to a table. This was the first indication that he had been created as a slave.

Unlike God, Victor Frankenstein saw no value in giving his creations free will. Like all utopians, he preferred obedience to independent thought.

That night, over two hundred years in the past, had set a theme of madness and violence that characterized Deucalion's life for years thereafter. Despair had fostered rage. In his rages, he had killed, and savagely.

These many decades later, he had learned self-control. His pain and loneliness had taught him pity whereafter he learned compassion. He had found his way to hope.

Yet still, on certain nights, without immediate cause, anger overcomes him. For no rational reason the anger swells into a tidal rage that threatens to sweep him beyond prudence, beyond discretion.

This night in New Orleans, Deucalion walked an alleyway on the perimeter of the French Quarter, in a mood to murder. Shades of gray, of blue, of black were enlivened only by the crimson of his thoughts.

The air was warm, humid, and alive with muffled jazz that the walls of the famous clubs could not entirely contain.

In public, he stayed in shadows and used back streets, because his formidable size made him an object of interest. As did his face.

From the darkness beside a Dumpster, a wrinkled rum-soaked raisin of a man stepped forth. "Peace in Jesus, brother."

Although that greeting didn't suggest a mugger on the prowl, Deucalion turned toward the voice with the hope that the stranger would have a knife, a gun. Even in his rage, he needed justification for violence.

The panhandler brandished nothing more dangerous than a dirty upturned palm and searing halitosis. "One dollar's all I need."

"You can't get anything for a dollar," Deucalion said.

"Bless you if you're generous, but a dollar's all I ask."

Deucalion resisted the urge to seize the extended hand and snap it off at the wrist as though it were a dry stick.

Instead, he turned away, and did not look back even when the panhandler cursed him.

As he was passing the kitchen entrance to a restaurant, that door opened. Two Hispanic men in white pants and T-shirts stepped outside, one offering an open pack of cigarettes to the other.

Deucalion was revealed by the security lamp above the door and by another directly across the alley from the first.

Both men froze at the sight of him. One half of his face appeared normal, even handsome, but an intricate tattoo decorated the other half.

The pattern had been designed and applied by a Tibetan monk skillful with needles. Yet it gave Deucalion a fierce and almost demonic aspect.

This tattoo was in effect a mask meant to distract the eye from consideration of the broken structures under it, damage done by his creator in the distant past.

Caught in the crosslight, Deucalion was sufficiently revealed for the two men to detect, if not understand, the radical geometry under the tattoo. They regarded him less with fear than with solemn respect, as they might stand witness to a spiritual visitation.

He traded light for shadow, that alley for another, his rage escalating to fury.

His huge hands shook, spasmed as if with the need to throttle. He fisted them, jammed them in his coat pockets.

Even on this summer night, in the cloying bayou air, he wore a long black coat. Neither heat nor bitter cold affected him. Nor pain, nor fear.

When he quickened his pace, the commodious coat billowed as if it were a cloak. With a hood, he might have passed for Death himself.

Perhaps murderous compulsion was woven through his very fiber. His flesh was the flesh of numerous criminals, their bodies having been stolen from a prison graveyard immediately following

interment.

Of his two hearts, one came from a mad arsonist who burned churches. The other had belonged to a child molester.

Even in a God-made man, the heart can be deceitful and wicked. The heart sometimes rebels against everything that the mind knows and believes.

If the hands of a priest can do sinful work, then what can be expected of the hands of a convicted strangler? Deucalion's hands had come from just such a criminal.

His gray eyes had been plucked from the body of an executed ax murderer. Occasionally, a soft luminous pulse passed through them, as though the unprecedented storm that birthed him had left behind its lightning.

His brain had once filled the skull of an unknown miscreant. Death had erased all memory of that former life, but perhaps the cerebral circuits remained miswired.

Now his growing fury took him to seedier streets across the river, in Algiers. These darker byways were rank and busy with illegal enterprise.

One shabby block accommodated a whorehouse thinly disguised as a massage and acupuncture clinic; a tattoo parlor; a pornographic video shop; and a raucous Cajun bar. Zydeco music boomed.

In cars parked along the alleyway behind these businesses, pimps socialized while they waited to collect from the girls whom they supplied to the brothel.

Two slicks in Hawaiian shirts and white silk trousers, gliding on roller skates, peddled cocaine cut with powdered Viagra to the whorehouse clientele. They were having a special on Ecstasy and meth.

Four Harleys stood in a hog line behind the porno shop. Hardcase bikers seemed to be providing security for the whorehouse or for the bar. Or for the drug dealers. Perhaps for all of them.

Deucalion passed among them, noticed by some, not by others. For him, a black coat and blacker shadows could be almost as concealing as a cloak of invisibility.

The mysterious lightning that brought him to life had also conveyed to him an understanding of the quantum structure of the universe, and perhaps something more. Having spent two centuries exploring and gradually applying that knowledge, he could when he wished move through the world with an ease, a grace, a stealth that others found bewildering.

An argument between a biker and a slender young woman at the back door of the whorehouse drew Deucalion as blood in the water draws a shark.

Although dressed to arouse, the girl looked fresh-faced and vulnerable. She might have been sixteen.

“Lemme go, Wayne,” she pleaded. “I want out.”

Wayne, the biker, held her by both arms, jamming her against the green door. “Once you’re in, there is no out.”

“I’m not but fifteen.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll age fast.”

Through tears, she said, “I never knew it was gonna be like this.”

“What did you think it *would* be like, you dumb bitch? Richard Gere and *Pretty Woman*?”

“He’s ugly and he stinks.”

“Joyce, honey, they’re all ugly and they all stink. After number fifty, you won’t notice anymore.”

The girl saw Deucalion first, and her widening eyes caused Wayne to turn.

“Release her,” Deucalion advised.

The biker—massive, with a cruel face—was not impressed. “You walk real fast away from here, Lone Ranger, and you might leave with your cojones.”

Deucalion seized his adversary’s right arm and bent it behind his back so suddenly, with such violence, that the shoulder broke with a loud crack. He pitched the big man away from him.

Briefly airborne, Wayne landed face-first, his scream stifled by a mouthful of blacktop.

A hard stomp to the nape of the biker’s neck would have snapped his spine. Remembering torch-bearing mobs with pitchforks in another century, Deucalion restrained himself.

He turned toward the *whoosh* of a swung chain.

Another motorcycle aficionado, a leering grotesque with a studded eyebrow, studded nose, studded tongue, and bristling red beard, recklessly joined the fray.

Instead of dodging the chain-link whip, Deucalion stepped toward his assailant. The chain lashed around his left arm. He seized it and pulled Redbeard off balance.

The biker had a ponytail. It served as a handle.

Deucalion lifted him, punched him, threw him.

In possession of the chain, he rounded on a third thug, whipped him across the knees.

The struck man cried out and fell. Deucalion helped him off the ground by throat, by crotch, and slammed him into the fourth of the four enforcers.

He rapped their heads against a wall to the bar-band beat, creating much misery and perhaps some remorse.

Already the customers wandering from porno shop to brothel to bar had fled the alleyway. The dealers on wheels had skated with their wares.

In rapid succession, the pimpmobiles fired up. No one drove toward Deucalion. They reversed out of the alleyway.

A chopped-and-stretched Cadillac crashed into a yellow Mercedes.

Neither driver stopped to provide the other with the name of his insurance agent.

In a moment, Deucalion and the girl, Joyce, were alone with the disabled bikers, though surely watched from doorways and windows.

In the bar, the zydeco band jammed without faltering. The thick, damp air seemed to shimmer with the music.

Deucalion walked the girl to the corner, where the alleyway met the street. He said nothing, but Joyce needed no encouragement to stay at his side.

Although she went with him, she was clearly afraid. She had good reason to be.

The action in the alley had not diminished his fury. When he was fully self-possessed, his mind was a centuries-old mansion furnished with rich experience, elegant thought, and philosophical reflection. Now, however, it was a many-chambered charnel house dark with blood and cold with the urge to murder.

As they passed under a streetlamp, treading on the fluttering shadows cast by moths above, the girl glanced at him. He was aware that she shuddered.

She seemed as bewildered as she was frightened, as if she had awakened from a bad dream and could not yet distinguish between what might be real and what might be remnants of her nightmare.

In the gloom between streetlamps, when Deucalion put one hand on her shoulder, when they traded shadows for shadows and fading zydeco for louder jazz, her bewilderment increased, and her fear. "What...what just happened? This is the Quarter."

"At this hour," he warned, as he walked her across Jackson Square, past the statue of the general, "the Quarter is no safer for you than that alleyway. You have somewhere to go?"

Hugging herself as if the bayou air had taken an arctic chill, she said, "Home."

"Here in the city?"

"No. Up to Baton Rouge." She was close to tears. "Home don't seem boring anymore."

Envy seasoned Deucalion's ferocious anger, for he had never had a home. He'd had places where he had stayed, but none had truly been a home.

A wild criminal desire to smash the girl raged at the bars of the mental cell in which he strove to keep imprisoned his bestial impulses, to smash her because she could go home in a way that he never could.

He said, "You've got a phone?"

She nodded, and unclipped a cell phone from her braided belt.

"You tell your mother and father you'll be waiting in the cathedral over there," he said.

He walked her to the church, paused in the street, encouraged her forward, made certain to be gone before she turned to look at him.

CHAPTER 2

IN HIS MANSION in the Garden District, Victor Helios, formerly Frankenstein, began this fine summer morning by making love to his new wife, Erika.

His first wife, Elizabeth, had been murdered two hundred years ago in the Austrian mountains, on their wedding day. He rarely thought of her anymore.

He had always been oriented toward the future. The past bored him. Besides, much of it didn't bear contemplation.

Counting Elizabeth, Victor had enjoyed—or in some cases merely tolerated—six wives. Numbers two through six had been named Erika.

The Erikas had been identical in appearance because they had all been engineered in his New Orleans lab and grown in his cloning vats. This saved the expense of a new wardrobe each time one of them had to be terminated.

Although extremely wealthy, Victor loathed wasting money. His mother, otherwise a useless woman, had impressed upon him the need for thrift.

Upon his mother's death, he had not stood the expense of either a service or a pine box. No doubt she would have approved of the simple hole in the ground, excavated to a depth of four rather than six feet to reduce the gravedigger's fee.

Although the Erikas looked identical to one another, numbers one through four had different flaws. He kept refining and improving them.

Just the previous evening, he had killed Erika Four. He had sent her remains to an upstate landfill operated by one of his companies, where the first three Erikas and other disappointments were interred under a sea of garbage.

Her passion for books had resulted in too much introspection and had encouraged in her an independent spirit that Victor refused to tolerate. Besides, she slurped her soup.

Not long ago, he had summoned his new Erika from her tank, in which universities of digitized education were electronically downloaded into her absorbent brain.

~~Ever the optimist, Victor believed that Erika Five would prove to be a perfect creation, worthy of serving him for a long time. Beautiful, refined, erudite, and obedient.~~

She certainly was more lubricious than the previous Erikas. The more he hurt her, the more eagerly she responded to him.

Because she was one of the New Race, she could turn off pain at will, but he did not allow her to do so in the bedroom. He lived for power. Sex was, for him, satisfying only to the extent that he could hurt and oppress his partner.

She took his blows with magnificent erotic submission. Her many bruises and abrasions were, to Victor, proof of his virility. He was a stallion.

As with all his creatures, she had the physiology of a demigod.

Her wounds would heal and her physical perfection be restored in but an hour or two.

Spent, he left her on the bed, sobbing. She wept not merely because of the pain but also with shame.

His wife was the only member of the New Race designed with the capacity for shame. Her humiliation completed him.

He showered with much hot water and a verbena-scented soap made in Paris. Being thrifty about disposing of dead mothers and wives, he could afford some luxuries.

CHAPTER 3

HAVING JUST CLOSED the case on a serial killer who turned out to be a police detective in her own division, with the usual chasing and jumping and shooting, Carson O'Connor hadn't gotten to bed until seven in the morning.

Four dead-to-the-world hours in the sheets and a quick shower: That might be the maximum downtime she could expect for a while. Fortunately, she had been too whacked to dream.

As a detective, she was accustomed to overtime whenever an investigation approached culmination but this current assignment wasn't a typical homicide case. This was maybe the end of the world.

She had never been through the end of the world before. She didn't know what to expect.

Michael Maddison, her partner, was waiting on the sidewalk when, at noon, she pulled the plainwrap sedan to the curb in front of his apartment house.

He lived in a bland apartment in a plain slab of a building, on a nondescript block just off Veterans Boulevard. He said the place was "very Zen," and claimed to need a minimalist retreat after a day in the perpetual carnival of New Orleans.

He dressed for the Apocalypse the same as he dressed every day. Hawaiian shirt, khakis, sport coat.

Only in footwear had he made a concession to doomsday. Instead of the usual black Rockport walking shoes, he wore white. They were so white they seemed radiant.

His sleepy-eyed look made him more delicious than usual. Carson tried not to notice.

They were partners, not lovers. If they tried to be both, they would wind up dead sooner than later. In police work, kick-ass and grab-ass don't mix.

After getting in the car and pulling the door shut, Michael said, "Seen any monsters lately?"

"In the bathroom mirror this morning," she said, accelerating away from the curb.

"You look terrific. Really. You don't look half as bad as I feel."

“You know how long it’s been since I had my hair done?”

“You take time to go to a hairdresser? I thought you just set it on fire and burned it off now and then.”

“Nice shoes.”

“The box said they’re made in China, or maybe it was Thailand. Everything’s made somewhere else these days.”

“Not everything. Where do you think Harker was made?”

Detective Jonathan Harker, who had turned out to be the serial killer that the media dubbed “the Surgeon,” had also turned out not to be human. Neither a 12-gauge shotgun nor a four-story fall had fazed him.

Michael said, “I don’t quite see Helios building his New Race in the parlor of his mansion in the Garden District. Maybe Biovision is a front for it.”

Biovision, a cutting-edge biotechnology firm founded by Helios when he first came to New Orleans more than twenty years previously, was the holder of many patents that made him richer year by year.

“All those employees,” Carson said, “all those outsourced services coming in every day—you couldn’t conduct a secret people-making lab in the middle of all that.”

“Yeah. For one thing, being a walleyed hunchback in a cowled cloak, Igor would really stand out when he went for coffee in the vending-machine room. Don’t drive so fast.”

Accelerating, Carson said, “So he has another facility somewhere in the city, probably owned by a shell corporation headquartered in the Cayman Islands or someplace.”

“I hate that kind of police work.”

He meant the kind that required researching thousands of New Orleans businesses, making a list of those with foreign or otherwise suspicious ownership.

Although Carson disliked desk-jockey sessions as much as Michael did, she had the patience for them. She suspected, however, that she didn’t have the time.

“Where are we going?” Michael asked as the city blurred past. “If we’re going to Division to sit in front of computers all day, let me out right here.”

“Yeah? And what’ll you do?”

“I don’t know. Find somebody to shoot.”

“Pretty soon you’ll have lots of people to shoot. The people Victor’s made. The New Race.”

“It’s kind of depressing being the Old Race. Like being last year’s toaster oven, before they added the microchip that makes it sing Randy Newman tunes.”

“Who would want a toaster oven that sings Randy Newman?”

“Who wouldn’t?”

Carson might have blown through the red traffic light if a refrigerated eighteen-wheeler hadn’t been crossing the intersection. Judging by the pictorial advertisement painted on the side of the truck, it was loaded with meat patties destined for McDonald’s. She didn’t want to be hamburgered to death.

They were downtown. The streets were busy.

Studying the swarms of pedestrians, Michael wondered, “How many people in this city aren’t real people? How many are Victor’s...creations?”

“A thousand,” Carson said, “ten thousand, fifty thousand—or maybe just a hundred.”

“More than a hundred.”

“Yeah.”

“Eventually Helios is going to realize we’re on to him.”

“He knows already,” she guessed.

“You know what that makes us?”

“Loose ends,” she said.

“Totally loose. And he seems to be a guy who likes everything tied up neat.”

She said, “I figure we’ve got twenty-four hours to live.”

CHAPTER 4

CARVED OF MARBLE, weathered by decades of wind and rain, the Virgin Mary stood in a niche, overlooking the front steps of the Hands of Mercy.

The hospital had long been closed. The windows were bricked shut. On the gate in the wrought-iron fence, a sign identified the building as a private warehouse, closed to the public.

Victor drove past the hospital and into the parking garage of a five-story building that housed the accounting and personnel-management departments of Biovision, the company he had founded. He slotted the Mercedes into a space reserved for him.

Only he possessed a key to a nearby painted-steel door. Beyond lay an empty room, about twelve feet square, with concrete floor and walls.

Opposite the outer door, another door was controlled by a wall-mounted keypad. Victor entered a code, disengaging the electronic lock.

Past the threshold, a hundred-forty-foot corridor led under the hospital grounds, connecting the adjacent buildings. It was six feet wide, eight feet high, with block-and-timber walls and a concrete floor.

The passageway had been excavated and constructed by members of the New Race, without public filed plans or building-department permits, or union wages. Victor could come and go from the Hands of Mercy in complete secrecy.

At the end of the corridor, he entered his code in another keypad, opened a door into a file room in the lowest realms of the hospital. Rows of metal cabinets contained hard-copy backups to the computerized records of his many projects.

Usually, Victor enjoyed hidden doors, secret passageways, and the hugger-mugger that was necessarily part of any scheme to destroy civilization and rule the world. He had never entirely lost touch with his inner child.

On this occasion, however, he was annoyed that he could get to his laboratory only by this roundabout route. He had a busy day ahead of him, and at least one crisis needed his urgent attention.

From the file room, he entered the basement of the hospital, where all was quiet and, in spite of the corridor lights, shadowy. Here he had once conducted his most revolutionary experiments.

He had been fascinated by the possibility that cancer cells, which reproduce with reckless speed, might be harnessed to facilitate the rapid development of clones in an artificial womb. He had hoped to force-grow an embryo to adulthood in a matter of weeks instead of years.

As will now and then happen when one is working at the extreme limits of known science, things went awry. What he ended up with was not a New Man, but a highly aggressive, rapidly mutating, ambulatory tumor that was, to boot, pretty damn smart.

Because he had given the creature life, he might have expected at least some small measure of gratitude from it. He had received none.

Forty of Victor's people had perished here, trying to contain that powerful malignancy. And his people were not easy to kill. Just when all had seemed lost, the atrocity had been subdued and then destroyed.

The stink of it had been terrible. All these years later, Victor thought he could still smell the thing.

A twenty-foot section of the corridor wall had been broken down in the melee. Beyond that ragged hole lay the incubation room, dark and full of wreckage.

Past the elevator, half the width of the corridor contained sorted and arranged piles of rubble: broken concrete, bent rebar, steel framing knotted as if it were rope.

Victor had organized but not removed this rubble and ruin, leaving it as an enduring reminder to himself that even a genius of his caliber could sometimes be too smart for his own good. He had almost died here, that night.

Now he took the elevator up to the ground floor, to which he had moved his main laboratory after the ungrateful tumor had been destroyed.

The hallways were quiet. Eighty of the New Race worked in this facility, but they were all busy at their assigned tasks. They didn't waste time gossiping around the water cooler.

His immense lab was furnished with fantastic machines that would have mystified not just the average man but also any member of the faculty at any department of science at Harvard or MIT. The style was operatic Art Deco, the ambience Hitlerian.

Victor admired Hitler. The Führer knew talent when he saw it.

In the 1930s and '40s, Victor had worked with Mengele and others in Hitler's privileged scientific class. He had made considerable progress in his work before the regrettable Allied victory.

Personally, Hitler had been charming, an amusing raconteur. His hygiene had been exemplary; he always looked scrubbed and smelled soapy.

A vegetarian and an ardent animal lover, Hitler had a tender side. He would not tolerate mousetraps. He insisted that rodents be captured humanely and turned loose in the wild.

The problem with the Führer had been that his roots were in art and politics. The future did not belong either to artists or to politicians.

The new world would not be built by nazism-communism-socialism. Not by capitalism, either.

Civilization would not be remade or sustained by Christianity or by Islam. Neither by Scientologism nor by the bright-eyed adherents of the deliciously solipsistic and paranoid new religion encouraged by *The Da Vinci Code*.

Tomorrow belonged to scientism. The priests of scientism were not merely robed clerics performing rituals; they were gods, with the power of gods. Victor himself was their Messiah.

As he crossed the vast lab, the ominous-looking machines issued oscillating hums, low pulsing throbs. They ticked and hissed.

He felt *at home* here.

Sensors detected his approach to his desk, and the screen of his computer brightened. On the monitor appeared the face of Annunciata, his secretary at the Hands of Mercy.

“Good morning, Mr. Helios.”

Annunciata was quite beautiful but not real. She was a three-dimensional digital personality with an artificial but wonderfully smoky voice that Victor had designed to humanize his otherwise somber work environment.

“Good morning, Annunciata.”

“The corpse of Detective Jonathan Harker has been delivered by your people in the medical examiner’s office. It awaits you in the dissection room.”

An insulated carafe of hot coffee and a plate of pecan-and-chocolate-chip cookies were on Victor’s desk. He picked up a cookie. “Continue.”

“Randal Six has disappeared.”

Victor frowned. “Explain.”

“The midnight census found his room deserted.”

Randal Six was one of many experiments currently living at the Hands of Mercy. Like his five predecessors, he had been created as an autistic with an obsessive-compulsive tendency.

Victor’s intention in designing this afflicted creature had been to determine if such a developmental disability could have a useful purpose. Controlling an autistic person by the use of a carefully

engineered obsessive-compulsive disorder, one might be able to focus him on a narrow series of functions usually assigned to machines in contemporary factories. Such a worker might perform a repetitive task hour after hour, weeks on end, without error, without boredom.

Surgically fitted with a feeding tube, catheterized to eliminate the need for bathroom breaks, he might prove to be an economical alternative to some factory robots currently on the assembly lines. His food could be nutritional pablum costing a dollar a day. He would receive no pay, no vacation, no medical benefits. He would not be affected by power surges.

When he wore out, he would merely be terminated. A new worker would be plugged into the line.

Victor remained convinced that eventually such machines of meat would prove to be far superior to much current factory equipment. Assembly-line robots are complex and expensive to produce. Flesh is cheap.

Randal Six had been sufficiently agoraphobic that he had not been able to leave his quarters voluntarily. He was terrified to cross the threshold.

When Victor needed Randal for an experiment, attendants brought him to the lab on a gurney.

“He can’t possibly have left on his own,” Victor said. “Besides, he can’t have gotten out of the building without tripping an alarm. He’s here somewhere. Direct security personnel to review yesterday’s video from his room and from all the primary hallways.”

“Yes, Mr. Helios,” said Annunciata.

Considering the high degree of verbal interaction she maintained with Victor, Annunciata might have appeared, to an outsider, to be a manifestation of an artificial machine intelligence. Although she did interface through a computer, her cognitive function in fact occurred in an organic New Race brain that was maintained in a hermetically sealed tank of nutrient solution in the networking room, where she was wired into the building’s data-processing system.

Victor envisioned a day when the world would be inhabited only by the New Race living in thousands of dormitories, each of which would be monitored and served by a disembodied brain like Annunciata.

“Meanwhile,” Victor said, “I’ll be studying Harker’s cadaver. Locate Ripley and tell him that I will need his assistance in the dissection room.”

“Yes, Mr. Helios. Helios.”

About to take another bite of the cookie, he hesitated. “Why did you do that, Annunciata?”

“Do what, sir?”

“You repeated my name unnecessarily.”

On the monitor, her smooth brow furrowed with puzzlement. “Did I, sir?”

“Yes, you did.”

“I was not aware of doing so, Mr. Helios. Helios.”

“You just did it again.”

“Sir, are you sure?”

“That is an impertinent question, Annunciata.”

She looked appropriately chastised. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Analyze your systems,” Victor directed. “Perhaps there is an imbalance in your nutrient supply.”

CHAPTER 5

JACK ROGERS, the medical examiner, maintained an office in which an avalanche of books, files, and macabre memorabilia might at any moment bury an unwary visitor.

This reception lounge, however, was more in line with the public perception of a morgue. Minimalist decor. Sterile surfaces. The air-conditioning was set to CHILL.

Jack's secretary, Winona Harmony, ruled this outer domain with cool efficiency. When Carson and Michael entered, the top of Winona's desk was bare—no photographs, no mementos—except for a folder of Jack's notes, from which she was typing official autopsy reports.

A plump, warm-hearted black woman of about fifty-five, Winona seemed out of place in this barren space.

Carson suspected that stuffed into Winona's desk drawers were family photos, Beanie Babies, beribboned sachets, small pillows with feel-good mottoes in elaborate needlepoint, and other items that she enjoyed but that she found inappropriate for display in a morgue reception lounge.

"Looka here," said Winona when they came through the door. "If it isn't the pride of Homicide."

"I'm here, too," Michael said.

"Oh, you are *smooth*," Winona told him.

"Just realistic. She's the detective. I'm the comic relief."

Winona said, "Carson, girl, how do you stand him being so smooth all day?"

"Now and then I pistol-whip him."

"Probably does no good," said Winona.

"At least," Carson said, "it helps keep me in shape."

"We're here about a corpse," Michael said.

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