

Chapter 3

I was walking down a street. Not the one I had just shot up, with debris and glass and buildings with bullet holes in them – this one was perfectly intact – but one with a similar desolation to it nonetheless.

A cold, gusty wind whipped newspapers past my feet, while mini cyclones paraded scraps of paper upward along an invisible spiral staircase before spinning them out the top. (Or maybe “out of the top”. Take your pick of whichever grammatical style suits you better.) Old buildings crowded the curb, standing tall and ominous, and a heavy gray sky hung unmoving, like a wet wool blanket; smothering everything like a a well, like a wet wool blanket I guess.

I pulled the collar of my trenchcoat up against my neck and tilted my head forward so that the wind couldn't grab my hat. I felt the reassuring weight of my gun against my hip and began taking tentative but extremely cool looking steps forward; my brow furrowed, my lips pursed.

I knew they were here. Not people; them. Skulking behind doorways. Hidden in alcoves. Shadows in the alleys. But they would soon come out, as they always did. Only this time, I would be ready for them. This time I would end it. This time . . .

Ah, who the hell was I kidding? I'd crap my pants and run like hell like I always did.

Suddenly, as if a switch had been thrown, the air was still and all sound disappeared into a vacuum. The sky, if it was possible, darkened several more shades of gray. I felt a chill up my spine and thought, “Oh shit”.

They were back. Again. Like apparitions they appeared from their hiding places. Two. Then four. Now a dozen. Looking at me with their pale faces, tilting their heads back and forth, taking exaggerated steps towards me. Black & white horizontal stripes bending and blending, making me dizzy just to look at them.

Mimes.

As usual, my sphincter forgot it's job description and I turned to run, only this time I couldn't; something unseen and immobile held me in place, allowing only a step or two in any direction. I started to panic, but checked myself. Guys like me don't do that kind of thing. Calm again, I put my hands out. And felt them. Walls. The little bastards had put me inside an invisible box.

That was a first. Forget “Plan A”. There would be no running this time. I mentally pulled up “Plan B” and instantly realized that there was no “Plan B”, or if there was, it was something stupid like “stand in the box and wait for them to get to you.” Not much of a plan. Not much of a choice though.

I looked up and saw that I was now surrounded, the circle of terror closing on me slowly. I could feel my shackles rise (whatever the hell they were) and my breathing became forced and choked. With mounting horror, I watched as the endgame began.

Mouths smiling. Eyes looking. Hands reaching . . . reaching for me . . .

I jolted awake. For a second or two I looked around my office, bewildered, wondering where the hell I was. Then reality sunk in and I let out a long relieved sigh. Just the obligatory dream sequence. A short one, but hey, it was only a nap. Seemed plenty long enough to me.

I stood, grabbed my keys, and headed for the door, my shoes crunching on broken glass with every step. Time to bolt. Stuff to do. Mysteries to solve. Well, one anyway. Wasn't going to figure it out here.

I took a look back into my office as I stepped through the door. What a mess. The window was gone. My cool vertical blinds hung in tatters. Bullet holes riddled the mahogany paneling. And the little ceramic Buddha that I'd made in 8th grade shop class lay lifeless on the floor, his white hollow insides exposed for the world to see. Bad day at the office. Somebody was going to pay for this.

Little did I know that it would be me.