

## 1 – Dark Dealings

Ward Dyer was due to retire in less than a month. He'd been on the job for twenty-two years, since the second week after he finished his four-year stint with the Marines. If you asked him, he'd put in his dues. It was time to move on to something where he might be appreciated a bit more.

He'd done his time in the uniform, and maybe things had been different twenty years ago, but he remembered people in his neighborhood liking him. He'd gotten waves and "Hellos!" and people had been eager to chat him up when he got home from a shift. Sure, they were neighbors, not the people on his patrol, but even considering that, he hadn't felt things had been so ugly. "Yeah, things are definitely different now," he grumbled, looking at the gray tenement through the drizzling rain.

He couldn't really find it in himself to feel resentful. He knew there were some real shitheads in his line of work. Was he an altar boy? Hell no, but he could say, with a straight face, that he always tried to do right by people. Maybe it was easier for him, being a criminal investigator for the Port Authority. He wasn't on the streets like those SPD grunts, so he really couldn't relate to all the stuff in the news. However you looked at it, Ward was ready to be done with the department, ready to move on to something a hell of a lot quieter as he slowly aged into obscurity.

"Eighteen years investigating everything from missing boats to human trafficking, and this is how I go out? Watching one broken-down building after another? Sitting on my can in a car with worn-out seats, waiting to see if this creepy SOB pokes his head out? I should just go sit at Harvey's—sip coffee, eat some slices of pie, flip through my socials. What're they gonna do? Fire me? Shit, I have enough sick leave to go home right now, finish out my year in my boxers—" He cut his monologue short as a figure wearing a heavy, dark trench coat exited the tenement. He had the collar pulled up, and his face was down, but damn if he didn't have the same shitty combover as Lafferty.

"Is that you, you slippery asshole?" Suddenly, his thoughts of ducking out early, of riding out his last year from the comfort of home, didn't seem so appealing, not next to the idea that he might bag a genuine serial killer before he started his new career as a landscaper. That was his big plan—get out of the force while he still could and work in his brother-in-law's landscaping business. He'd only do it until he was old enough to start collecting his police pension. The whole idea was to avoid ending up like those dinosaurs who worked a desk until even the union couldn't defend their screwups. No, Ward wanted to get out while he could still enjoy life a little. He grunted softly as he slipped out of the driver's door, careful not to make any noise when he pushed it closed.

The rain drizzled off his hat and ran off the shoulders of his waterproof overcoat. He'd worked in the Pacific Northwest long enough to know how to dress for a stakeout. He had to hop over the little stream of rainwater running along the curb as he shadowed the figure—Lafferty, he hoped—up the street, walking briskly uphill. "Gotta love Seattle," Ward grumbled, digging in, climbing the steep grade, careful to keep parked vehicles between himself and his quarry. He was pretty sure he'd seen a dozen cars slide down a hill like this during the last freezing rain. People never learned. They'd think, "Oh, I have front-wheel drive! I can climb this hill!" Next thing you know, seven cars would be piled up at the bottom.

Ward's breath was getting a bit short as he crested the steep grade, but he was all right; he'd been doing his cardio. Shit, in fact, his neighbor had talked him into joining a CrossFit gym a few months back, and he'd actually been enjoying it. It felt like he was back in the Marines, working with his unit on PT. He knew it wasn't anything near as intense, and the stakes weren't anywhere close, but still, it was nice to have a kind of drill instructor telling him what to do so he could shut his brain off while he exercised.

Lafferty—Ward had decided to be optimistic—turned suddenly, heading down an alley between two tall buildings. No one was out, at least not on that street, and Ward thought it was a pretty damn weird place to be turning. Who walks into an alley two blocks away from their apartment building in the middle of the night, in the rain?

"Fishy," he muttered, edging up to the corner with his shoulder against the brick wall. As the rain drizzled on the brim of his hat, he peered into the darkness. Thirty yards ahead, he saw Lafferty step behind a dumpster. "The hell are you doing in there?" Ward was careful to keep his voice close to a whisper. "Something definitely hinky going on." He reached into the seam of his dark gray overcoat and pulled out his snub-nosed .357 revolver.

The department made him qualify with the Glock they'd issued him, but he also was qualified with the revolver, technically his backup gun. It was the only gun he ever carried on duty, though. He liked the Glock all right, but everyone gave him grief about his Smith & Wesson, and, at this point, it was as much a personal challenge as a preference. He liked going against the grain, and the fact that everyone else in the CID walked around with identical nine-millimeter, black semi-automatics was a point of pride for Ward.

Holding the chromed barrel close to his chest, he proceeded into the alley. When he stepped away from the streetlight, he paused and fished his little hand-held flashlight out of his jacket pocket. He didn't turn the light on right away; Ward was still hoping to figure out what Lafferty was doing in that alley, and he'd never know if he spooked him into running.

He stepped carefully, avoiding litter and puddles—no telling how deep they were—and approached the dumpster. He was getting a little concerned by the fact that Lafferty hadn't emerged from behind it, that he hadn't proceeded further into the alley. What was he doing back there? Was he setting an ambush? Ward angled away from the big, rusty, green trash bin, holding the gun close so it wasn't an easy grab, just in case the little jerk was waiting to surprise him.

Oddly, though, as he cleared the corner of the dumpster, there wasn't any sign of the guy. "Huh." Ward tilted up his plain black ballcap to scratch his brow. He had an itch where the rough, scratchy inner band rubbed against his hairline. He'd bought the hat and four others for fifteen bucks off the internet, and he was regretting his penny-pinching. He rubbed the cool metal of his little pocket light back and forth over the itch while he edged toward the dumpster and peered within.

The lids were hanging behind it, left open by the sanitation workers, and it was easy to see that nothing but a few bags of garbage sat at the bottom of the reeking container. He backed away, then edged around the side again, trying to figure out if he'd just been seeing shadows or if Lafferty had somehow crawled between the big metal container and the brick wall. "What the shit?" Ward stepped forward and thumbed his flashlight on, pointing it into the foot-wide gap behind the dumpster.

“Well, well, well.” Sure enough, a square of bricks had been removed from the wall behind the big garbage container, something like two feet by four. “Did he really squeeze in there? Sonofabitch.” Ward crouched down, peered behind the dumpster, poking his little flashlight toward the hole in the wall. When he pressed the button on the bottom, and the beam illuminated the dark hole, he saw concrete steps leading down and a shadow that bolted out of sight.

The furtive movement startled him, and Ward stumbled back against the wet metal of the garbage bin and slapped his flashlight hand against his pocket, digging for his phone. He stuck the end of his light in his mouth, and then, with his gun still pointing at the hole, he thumbed a message to his partner, Tony Demonte. *Found Lafferty. Hole in alley behind dumpster!!! Between galactic donuts and hoyt's music. Call me backup!*

Ward slipped his phone, light, and gun into his coat pocket, grabbed the side of the dumpster, and heaved, trying to give himself a couple more inches. It was almost empty, and he was a big guy, but it didn't budge. “Dammit! He braced a foot against the bricks and strained, pulling against the wet, rough metal. He jerked and pushed with his leg and was awarded by the metal scraping over the ground a hand's breadth. “Good enough.” With his flashlight in his left hand and his magnum leveled toward the dark hole, he wedged himself behind the garbage bin and proceeded, crouching, into the hole.

He found himself in a damp stairwell with concrete steps and moldy drywall completely covered with graffiti in a thousand different styles. A latched metal door led further into the building, but the movement he'd seen had been toward the steps leading down, so he pointed his light that way. He saw a dark, trash-strewn landing and more concrete steps leading further into darkness. The metal railing was damp with moisture and rusted where the ancient blue paint had chipped away. Ward put his back to the wall and carefully descended.

Something stank in that stairwell, and it wasn't just garbage and mold. It smelled like something had died a while ago, and the pungent, gag-inducing reek was enough to make Ward shift his grip on his light so he could hold his jacket sleeve in front of his face. He got to the landing and aimed his light down, only to reveal another twist in the stairwell. He kept on, slowly descending, wondering why he was going in there alone without waiting for backup. He even went so far as to tell himself, “I should wait.” Still, he pressed on, and that's when he saw the source of the stench.

A corpse with bloody, exposed bones and not much flesh sat in the corner of the next landing. Ward could see the rotting skin around the figure's neck and chest, but its hands and face had been nearly picked clean. Rats by the dozens scurried and squeaked as his light fell on the scene, and Ward was suddenly grateful that he hadn't eaten dinner. Still, his gag reflex heaved, and he pressed his sleeve tight to his face. He looked away from the corpse, shifting his attention to the stairs leading further down; now more than ever, he had to be ready for an ambush. Things had just escalated to life and death.

“Can't stop now.” Of course, he could, but that idea didn't register. He turned the corner on the stairwell and continued down, and this time, his light illuminated a closed, brown metal door at the bottom. He approached, fearing he'd be locked out, but then he saw that the door latch had been removed. A rectangle of metal had been cut away, leaving the door hanging loose in the frame. “Huh. Sawzall, maybe? Angle grinder?” He carefully grabbed the rough metal inside the cut and pulled it wide. A dim corridor extended to a distant corner, illuminated by yellow-orange,

flickering light fixtures. This was getting weird. Had he descended into part of the old Seattle underground?

“Maybe backup isn’t such a—” He stopped muttering at the distant sound of a scream. “Oh, dammit!” Ward started forward again. “Am I really going to get my ticket punched right before retirement? Isn’t this a cliché?”

Ward wasn’t really worried. One thing he’d never been accused of was being a chicken-shit. Dumbass? Sure. Still, he didn’t feel, at that moment, that he was being stupid. He was doing his job; he had a dangerous suspect cornered, he’d seen evidence of a possible murder, and he’d just heard someone scream. The department would be pissed that he didn’t wait for backup, but waiting around wasn’t why he’d signed up. He’d signed up to help people who needed it, not *after* they needed it. Besides, he didn’t give a shit if he got written up for breaking policy; he’d be gone before the paperwork got anywhere.

Ward crept up to the corner and peered around it. Another long hallway led away, but this time, it ended in an open doorway, backlit by more flickering orange light. He didn’t like walking toward that opening through that long, empty hallway—it set him up like a fish in a barrel if anyone wanted to take a shot at him. Regardless, he crouched low and, bad knee screaming at him the whole way, hurried toward that opening.

Nothing happened; no one popped into view and blasted him to bits. Ward reached the opening, and when he peered through, he had to step back, squeeze his eyes shut, knock his head against the wall, and reopen them to have another look. He must have been seeing things.

“What in the name of—” His bewildered curse was cut short as a hooded figure looked his way, and he had to duck back. Ward felt like he was losing it. He’d seen not just four hooded figures but an ancient ballroom—a vast, dusty, wood-paneled room straight out of some 1940s musical, five stories underground in the middle of a city.

A massive chandelier hung in the middle of the room, flickering with spotty electrical service as half its ancient bulbs struggled to work. Beneath the chandelier, carved into the old, water-damaged hardwood floors, was a strange, circular pattern. Crazier than all that, he’d seen a naked woman on the ground in the middle of the circle and Lafferty standing above her, flipping through the pages of a dictionary-sized book.

“Nah. To hell with this.” Ward stood up and lifted his gun. He strode into the improbable chamber with its vaulted, crumbling plaster ceiling. “Get the fuck on the ground, assholes!” Lafferty glanced at him with wide eyes, looked back to his book, and kept on reading, mumbling some weird words that didn’t sound like English or Spanish or any other language Ward had heard. “I said, get on the ground!” He jerked his gun for effect, approaching the bizarre group. None moved, though Ward could see the woman writhing against her bonds.

He was only about fifteen yards from the first of the robed figures when the guy turned, lifted an eight-inch butcher knife, and charged toward him. “Drop the knife!” Ward screamed, and when the guy didn’t comply, he squeezed the trigger. A fountain of blood sprayed out as his magnum hollow point erased half the guy’s neck. He tumbled, sliding with the momentum of his sprint, and his knife clattered and bounced past Ward on the wooden floor.

“Get on the ground!” he screamed again. Lafferty’s voice had risen in volume the whole while Ward had approached, and now, as he saw his companion get blasted, he began to shout the weird words, competing with Ward as he doggedly repeated, “Get on the *ground!*”

Ward wasn’t a rookie, and he knew the next asshole might have a knife, too, but he wouldn’t stand around and wait for Lafferty or one of his cronies to hurt the girl. He didn’t know why one of the robed guys had charged him while the others hadn’t, but he needed to make them understand that he meant business. He strode up to the one opposite Lafferty in their little circle and grabbed him by the back collar of his robe. He stepped back and yanked. “Get on the *goddamn* ground!”

To Ward’s surprised embarrassment, the robed “guy” let out a high-pitched scream and tumbled back, much lighter than he’d expected. The woman smashed onto the ground with a startled cry, and it seemed to Ward, when he looked into her wide-open brown eyes, that she was disoriented—surprised to see him. Had she not heard his commands or the gunshot?

“Didn’t you hear me? Stay on the ground!” Ward looked back at the circle just in time to see the other two robed figures turn toward him and lift long knives. “Drop ‘em!” he roared, stepping back, only to trip his heel up on the woman he’d pulled down.

He fell backward and caught himself on his left hand with a painful crack. He collapsed to his elbow, his wrist unable to hold him. He flailed his other arm but managed to hold onto his gun. Ward swung the barrel toward the knife-wielders and didn’t hesitate: He blasted. Ward might not be the best at paperwork, but he was a damn good shot. He took both assailants in the chest, one shot each. He didn’t always double-tap as some “experts” insisted; he only had six shots before he’d have to reload, and it wasn’t like he was working with a pea shooter.

As Lafferty’s two cronies fell, both unmoving and gushing blood from massive chest wounds, Ward, functioning on adrenaline, struggled to his feet and shouted, “Drop that *goddamn* book and get on the ground!”

Lafferty shrieked something in that weird language, and then he looked up from the book, clapping it shut. His neon-orange eyes might be enough to give most people pause, but Ward had just blasted three people, and he wasn’t in the mood to be scared off by Halloween props. He looked Lafferty in the face and said, for what felt like the hundredth time, “Get on the *ground*, asshole!”

“Too late, fool. Observe!” Lafferty’s final word was a triumphant crow as he dropped his book and yanked a long, curved, snake-like knife out of his robe, lifting it high. Ward was done. He was injured, alone, and already looking at the worst psych review he’d ever experienced. He pulled his thick finger against the trigger of his trusty .357 and put one right between Lafferty’s eyes. The madman collapsed in a heap, his brains painting the wooden floor in a fan-shaped spray.

Ward stepped forward. “You okay, lady? Don’t worry, I got him. Let me see here, uh, I can put my coat over you, but let me get a look at these ropes . . .” Ward’s words trailed off as he got a better look at the woman. Her wrists and ankles were tied to stakes that someone had pounded into the floorboards. As he’d noted, she was naked, but something else was off. She looked up at him, and he saw that her mouth wasn’t gagged. Why wasn’t she yelling or speaking or crying or . . . something?

Ward paused at the circle's edge, contemplating waiting for backup before he did anything else. He'd neutralized the threats, right? He could take things slower from there. "Threats—" Ward jerked his head to the right and started to turn. He'd forgotten the hooded woman! What kind of rookie move was that? Never take your eyes off a suspect! Never turn your back on one! He'd just started to berate himself when he felt something like a punch in his kidney. It was worse than a punch, though, worse even than the time he'd gotten in a fight with Lewis Thibodeaux at the Lucky Star, and he'd ruptured his spleen.

He finished turning, sweeping his uninjured gun hand in an arc, knocking the woman who'd stabbed him to the side. She spun on him, a savage grin on her face with narrowed, scowling eyes—definitely no longer disoriented. Ward felt hot fluid pumping down his pant leg, and he knew he was pouring blood out of the spigot she'd just put in him. "Drop it!" he barked. In answer, the woman growled and lifted the knife. Ward shot her in the center of her chest, and she collapsed. The knife clattered to the ground by his feet. "Dammit."