

# Underground

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Extract

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## PROLOGUE

If ghosts and monsters had someone else to harass, my life would have been a lot quieter, like it was before I died. But something happened while I was gone for those two minutes—something no one has been able to explain to my satisfaction—and now I not only see ghosts and monsters and things that go “bump” in the night, I seem to be some kind of stepsister to them. I’m a Greywalker: a dual citizen of the regular world and the Grey—the creepy interference fringe between the normal and the paranormal. The Grey overlays the normal world, invisible to most people but there nonetheless. It’s a place of misty shapes and memories, shot with hot lines of living energy, layered with time and magic, where ghosts, vampires, and monsters are as real and common as dogs and cats and just as likely to bite.

I’m a private investigator. I like the job most of the time, but I have to admit it isn’t a great occupation if I want to have a reasonable social life, even at the best of times and without the complication of a client list that reads like the cast of a gothic horror novel. My profession and my ability to work in the world

of ghosts and magic seems to have tangled me up in the needs, cases, causes, and disputes of every undead thing in the Pacific Northwest. They aren't very good at taking no for an answer and they don't stick to office hours, either. As much as I might want to leave that part behind, it's a job I can't quit and it's hell on my love life.

It's my bad luck, I suppose, that I met a great guy just when my life was being turned upside down by my own death and a permanent residence halfway into the uncanny. I've never been able to explain it—I don't even try. Most people can't really swallow the idea of murderous ghosts, helpful witches, uncanny artifacts, living energy, necromancers, vampires, and psychotic poltergeists. They are even less inclined to accept that those things are all part of my daily life. I have a few friends and acquaintances who know, but they aren't exactly life-mate material and some are downright nasty. It's not surprising that my life and relationship are both pretty messed up.

My boyfriend, Will, and I were giving it another go over the holidays. A pretty rough go, I'm afraid, what with ghostly things demanding my attention whenever they took a shine to the idea. Thanksgiving had been OK, but Christmas hadn't gone so well. By the second week of January, both the weather and my relationship got hit with an unexpected cold snap. And that was when I made the acquaintance of my first frozen corpse.

**M**y knee ached in a way my physical therapist called “good” but I called “annoying.” Of course I might just have been annoyed with Will Novak and working too hard on the knee I’d messed up running from a murderous poltergeist in October. The lower leg lift I was concentrating on hurt like hell—who’d have thought that straightening my knee a paltry thirty degrees against a mere twenty pounds’ resistance would be so hard? But a lot of things are harder than they seem at first glance. What was hardest at that moment was holding my temper.

Will sat on the weight bench to my left, watching me. Resistance machines clanked and groaned around us, and free-weight lifters snorted like bulls amid the smells of rubber and sweat. “I still don’t understand how you managed to tear that knee up so badly,” he said. “What were you doing?”

“Working,” I said, grunting from the strain of the weight as I lowered my leg slowly, and muttering under my breath, “. . . three, four . . . five.” Two more reps and I could give the

knee a rest while I worked on my shoulder—also a bit banged up from October’s ugly case.

I ignored Will while I finished the knee lifts. Then I slid out of the machine and sat down beside him. It wasn’t my favorite gym, but the pre-Christmas windstorm had knocked a tree into the front of the one I preferred, so I was using the gym near Will’s hotel. Downed power lines and damage were still widespread in outlying parts of Seattle and King County, so the facilities that were functioning were packed, and the moment I vacated the machine, another customer rushed to use it.

At first, Will had taken the hotel room so he wouldn’t presume on my hospitality when he’d come back from England as a Thanksgiving surprise. Somehow the right time to move his bags to my condo had just not come around—and I felt guilty that I didn’t want it to. He’d been lucky to keep his room at the hotel, since the city had been flooded with people who needed accommodations while their all-electric houses were unlivable during the power outage. It was expensive, but it had working plumbing and heat, which even my condo hadn’t had at one point.

Right behind the wind and rain had come an epic cold snap, and the current daytime temperature hung two to ten degrees below freezing—not cold in the Midwest, but plenty cold enough for a coastal city whose winter daytime temps usually ran in the mid-forties. The bizarre weather had killed people: nine deaths by asphyxia—people trying to heat their homes with barbecues and open flame heaters; two by falling trees that crushed motorists; and one by drowning in a flooded basement office. I was lucky to have been too far away from any of those events to feel them propagate through the energy grid of the Grey—I’d felt the delayed shock of one person’s death earlier that year, and I hoped to avoid ever feeling such a thing again. Even without that it had

been a rather grim holiday season and the cold wasn't letting up now that it was January.

"I was chasing a killer," I continued. I'd said it before and I was a little galled at having the conversation yet again. In fact, I'd been running away, but the circumstances of that weren't something Will would be able to swallow. I had been running with the intention of leading something into a trap—chasing it from in front, in a way.

"It's not your job to chase murderers. That's what the cops are for. You aren't a cop. You don't have to do that."

"Sometimes I'm not in the position of saying 'That's not my responsibility,' Will. I can't arbitrarily stop at the legal limit and ignore what's morally right. Come on . . . you were at the final hearing—the guy was a whack-job. Should I have let him get away to kill those other people?"

I could tell he was trying to find a way to say yes without sounding like a jerk. I can be selfish, but not that much, and I didn't want to hear that I should be, so I tried to redirect the conversation. "Would you get me the five-pound hand weights off the rack?"

Will sighed and went to fetch the two small rubber-coated barbells. I admired his bright silver hair and his lanky frame as he loped across the room, but I still found myself heaving an exasperated sigh of my own. Where we once struck sparks, it seemed we could now only strike prickles. It didn't help that I could see his frustration with me—it radiated around him in spikes of orange and red energy visible to my Grey-sensitive sight.

I couldn't shut the Grey out anymore; the best I could do was keep it enough at bay to know what was physically present to normal people and what wasn't—I didn't want to fall over real objects to avoid unreal ones. As a result, the gym looked to me like a steamroom haunted by layers of history and gleaming with

a light show of neon energy and emotional sparks. I paid no attention to a bloated specter that lurked near the pull-up bars, but I also refused to use them.

The ghostly world was always with me and it was yet another chafing veil between me and Will—him so normal and me so . . . not. I'd tried to tear through some of those layers over the holidays, but it only made me seem crazy, which increased the distance between us. Neither of us were happy with that and unhappiness had soured into an abrasive that chafed Will into wrongheaded prying and me into silent resentment.

Will returned with the hand weights and I started doing slow lateral lifts to rebuild the muscles of my injured shoulder. I did the other arm as well, figuring I might as well get my money's worth out of the gym time. It wasn't as convenient as running, but it was more comprehensive—and seeing all those trim and toned gym rats plucked at my competitive side and reminded me of my athletic past.

Maybe Will was more in touch with the Grey than I'd credited and had picked up on my thoughts. As he watched me work out, he said, "If you keep this up, you could go back to dancing professionally."

"Too old," I said, panting between lifts.

"You're thirty-two."

I puffed and put the weights down for a short rest between sets. "For a pro dancer, thirty's old. Thirty-five is ancient and forty is the walking dead. Baryshnikov and Hines might have been able to dance in their fifties, but they danced continuously from the age of nine. I started younger, but I quit when I was twenty-four. I never wanted to make a career of it and I've only kept up my moves as an amateur."

"You could teach. . . ."

I glared at him. “Will. Let it go. I worked hard to be good at my job—the job I chose to do—and I’m not going to give it up over a few injuries and freaks.” I picked up the weights again and started on my last set. Any exhilaration I felt from working out had burned off under the heat of my growing irritation. Leaving professional dance was no loss to me: I’d hated it. It had been my mother’s dream forced upon me from the time I was little. Useful but not beloved, and I didn’t miss the pain, the paranoia, or the dieting.

“I’m not asking you to change jobs—”

“No. You’re *hinting* that I should.” Breathe, Harper, nice and slow, I reminded myself—it kept both my temper and the Grey in check enough that I could keep going. “You get me as I am or you don’t get me at all.” I finished my set and took the weights back to the rack. I didn’t even limp, which was my consolation prize, I guess, since the day itself was starting out so crappy.

Will stayed where he was and watched me. I knew he didn’t like that I’d been hurt and I knew he was confused as to why I’d want to stay in a business that had suddenly turned violent after years of routine. He didn’t understand all the strangeness that collected around me. How was I supposed to explain that I didn’t have a choice about it? That it was better for me to stay in my job, where I had the autonomy and skills to maintain my independence and keep at least some of the Grey things in line, than to end up a pawn—or dead—by some monster’s whim? And I liked my job, damn it—most of the time.

I walked back to Will and looked up at him. “I have to shower and get to work.” I schooled myself and waited. I didn’t want to upset him, no matter how irritated I was. It wasn’t his fault. Was it?

“Mm,” Will grumbled.

“Hey, at least it’s safe and boring—just a bunch of witness backgrounds for Nanette Grover and some financials.” I put

my arm around his waist and turned toward the locker rooms. I hoped he'd take the gesture as a sign of truce, even though I wasn't feeling very peaceable. At least I was trying.

"Yeah . . . I have to do some work, too." Will laid his arm over my shoulders, careful not to put any weight on the dicey one, and walked with me.

At the doors he stopped and turned, putting both arms around me in a loose hug, looking down from his six-foot-plus height and making me feel delicate. The overhead lights glared off his eyeglass lenses. "Maybe we could get together for a late lunch?" he asked.

I pasted on a smile. "OK."

He leaned down and kissed me. "I'll come by your office about . . . two?"

"Two's good. I'll see you then."

"I'll call you when I'm close." He kissed me again, squeezed a little, and stepped back. I turned away, feeling odd, and went to shower.

I washed and dressed and headed out to my old Land Rover to drive to my office in Pioneer Square, thinking about the strangeness. The rhythm of our relationship hadn't ever been truly on beat—we'd always had some personal concern between us or some distance keeping us apart. The togetherness that I'd hoped would put us in sync didn't seem to be doing anything of the kind. It was like trying to dance samba while the band was playing "Dixie"—you can almost do it, but it's uncomfortable as hell and you look like an idiot.

On the drive, there was ice on every horizontal surface. The roads were mostly dry enough to negotiate during the day, but inside my parking garage, the floors were slick. I had to place my feet with care as I walked from the Rover to the sidewalk.

It didn't help that Pioneer Square is the most haunted area of Seattle, and the ice hid under a silver fog of ghosts and memory. I walked flat-footed and slowly and made it to the doors of my office building.

I considered using the elevator and giving my knee a break, but I still don't feel quite comfortable around the old-fashioned lifts since I was killed with one. Double gates and polished brass give me the creeps now. I walked up and was grateful to sit down in my desk chair once I reached it. Some days the climb is nothing to my bum knee, but with the cold, it seemed much worse. Even my shoulder was twinging a bit. Between the physical discomforts and the emotional ones, I was glad to have work to distract me and I plunged into it.

I didn't notice the time so, when someone tapped on my door, I assumed it was Will and called out, "Come in!" without looking up. My cell phone buzzed on my hip as the alarm went off, telling me the door was open. I turned it off and looked up, smiling, faking a bit more enthusiasm than I felt, and then frowning with surprise.

Quinton put his backpack on the floor and shot me a crippled grin. Like Will, I'd met Quinton when my world changed. Since he'd discreetly and quietly installed the office alarm, he'd become my regular go-to guy for anything electronic, especially if it was odd or hush-hush. A little secretive, quirky, distinctly geeky, he fit well with my own taciturn nature and we'd been instant friends—and unlike with Will, I didn't have to hide the creepy stuff from him. Now he stood just inside the doorway and looked as if he wasn't sure of his welcome.

"Oh. Hi," I said, letting my curiosity draw a little silence between us.

"Hi," he said, shifting from foot to foot. His usual ease had

been replaced with an unhappy nervousness and a swirling mist of smoky green, mottled like some kind of sick mold, wrapped around him in the Grey, clinging to his long coat. “Umm . . . Harper. I—there’s a—err . . . Can you come look at something?”

“Now?” I asked, glancing my watch. It was 1:12. Less than an hour until lunch with Will.

“Well, yeah. Now would be good. This is kind of important.”

I found myself standing up and reaching for my own coat without giving it any thought. I owed Quinton, I liked him, and I’d only seen him nervous and jumpy once—not even vampires caused him to lose his cool—so whatever was bugging him had to be nasty. “What’s the problem?”

“I really want you to see it first—before anyone else gets to it. I don’t want to give you false information because I don’t know what’s going on myself.”

“All right. Where are we going?”

“The train tunnel.”

“Oh, goody,” I said, grabbing my bag. “Frozen gravel and garbage. My favorite.” In spite of my cynical tone, I felt a little tickle of pleasure at getting out from under the paperwork on my desk.

“Uh . . . Are you carrying?”

“Is that going to be a problem?”

He looked relieved and hiked his backpack up on to his shoulders. “No, no. I just want to be sure. Just in case.”

That piqued my caution and curiosity. I followed him out the door and paused to lock it behind us. “In case of what? Is this going to get hot?”

“Shouldn’t, but . . . I don’t know what’s going on, so I figure it’s better to be prepared.”

I nodded and we went downstairs and out of the building.

Quinton hurried me along but said very little as we wound our way through the historic district and down to King Street Station. Since lunchtime was over and the commuter trains hadn't yet started the evening runs, the train yard and rails near the station weren't busy. Quinton led me up to the Sounder train entrance at Fourth Avenue north of the train station.

"Why here?" I asked as we worked our way down the stairs toward the platform. My knee felt stiff but it wasn't throbbing, and I thanked my foresight in putting on the goofy-looking elastic brace under my jeans.

"It's closer to the tunnel than going through the station, and the platform personnel won't see us if we swing around the bottom and stay behind the stairs while we walk. They don't care that much since there're no freights at this time of day, but they're supposed to run you off if you're down on the grade."

"I don't think anyone's going to come out of that nice warm station if they can avoid it."

"Probably not," he agreed, "but we don't want them to get interested in us."

"You're being very mysterious about this," I commented, ducking around the bottom of the stairs and onto the tracks in his wake. He kept his personal life to himself, but this sort of dodginess was unlike him and it intrigued me even more than what we might be approaching.

We began crunching through the gravel and cinder toward the mouth of the Great Northern Tunnel, our breath coming up in puffs that vanished rapidly in the cold, dry air. It was a distance of about a block, but it felt longer. There were concrete walls on each side that held up the streets and buildings above and made the stretch from the stairs to the tunnel mouth seem close and claustrophobic even with the blue-white winter sky above us. A

few crows cawed at us from the street railings, but the area was surprisingly uncluttered with Grey things.

“Have there ever been any accidents in this tunnel?” I asked as we neared the portal.

Quinton looked back at me, startled. “Only a couple that I know of. Nothing spectacular and gory, though. No deaths or fires. Why?”

“I don’t see anything—that’s strange. This tunnel’s—what—a hundred years old or so?”

“About that,” he replied, ducking into the darkness.

I followed him, putting my left hand on the cement wall as I went. The cold was shocking, but not preternaturally so. I wished I had gloves on. The interior of the tunnel was like a freezer and I shivered as I went forward.

Once we were a short distance from the station, I heard Quinton’s coat flap and rattle. A light snapped on and he directed the beam against the corner where the wall met the floor. A few feet farther away a dark stain seemed to have grown on the wall. As we got closer, I saw it was a hole.

The cement lining the tunnel was about four feet thick at that point, but someone had managed to make a hole through it about two feet across and three feet high. Lying at the foot of the hole was a dead man, scruffily bearded and dressed in ragged layers of filthy clothing. One of his legs was missing from mid-thigh down.

I stepped back, repelled. “Damn, Quinton . . . He must have been hit by a train.” I’ve seen bodies before, but this one upset me more than I cared to admit. There was something wrong about its disposition that unnerved me and urged me to flee.

Quinton shook his head. “I don’t think so. There’s no blood. And if you look at the wound . . . it kind of looks . . . chewed.”

In spite of myself, I moved forward and peered at the poorly illuminated corpse. The leg ended in a gnawed stump, and though it was hard to be sure with the amount of dirt on his clothes, there truly didn't seem to be any blood. He stunk of filth and smoke, but the guy hadn't been dead very long. Even discounting the cold and the darkness and the indifference of the station crew, someone would have spotted him if he'd been lying there for more than a day. He also had a shroud of Grey clinging to him and raveling away into the hole.

I took another step closer and looked harder at the hole, professional curiosity fully engaged. The edges flickered with ethereal strands of something Grey, gleaming with a soft white and pale yellow luminescence. Although the pall of energy lying over the corpse was suitably black—black for death, I thought—the strands that led away from it and into the hole were a neutral gray that looked as soft as angora. I shuddered at the idea, but I reached out and rubbed a bit of the nearest strand between my fingers. To me, Grey material usually feels icy cold, alive, and electrified, but aside from a cottony sensation, I couldn't feel anything this time. I touched my finger to one of the brighter bits adhering to the broken edges of the cement and got a mild tingle from it as it wriggled aside like a worm on a sidewalk. I tried to look into the hole, but I couldn't get my head craned around far enough with the body lying where it was.

"It goes all the way back into the basement of the building on the other side," Quinton said, watching me.

I glanced at him. "How do you know?"

He turned his face away from mine. "I crawled into it."

"All right," I said, straightening up. "I'd like to know how you happened to find him. This isn't exactly a public thoroughfare."

Quinton kept his mouth shut.

I sighed and thought of Will's admonishments of the morning. "I'd better call the cops."

"I'd rather you didn't just yet."

"What?"

A rumbling sound started far away and a rhythmic vibration set the gravel on the tunnel floor to chattering.

"Train. C'mon!"

Quinton grabbed my wrist and hauled me along as he started running back the way we'd come.

We dashed out of the tunnel and cut to the side, pressing ourselves to the wall outside the opening, just a few feet ahead of a shrieking freight train. Something pale flipped and tumbled through the air from beneath the engine's wheels, landing on the gravel barely a yard from us. It was an arm.

Quinton's eyes widened and he looked sick. I wanted to gag but swallowed the urge. There was something particularly awful about that mangled, lonely limb lying on the gravel outside the Great Northern Tunnel, but puking wasn't going to improve the situation.

"That's it," I said, pulling my cell phone off my belt. "I'm calling the cops."

Quinton clamped his hand over mine. He was sweating, though I didn't know how anyone could in that cold air. "No! Not now. Please."

I shook his hand off mine and gaped at him. "Why the hell not? That's a dead body—a dead person—in there—"

"He's not the first!"

Damn it, I thought. I clipped my phone back on my belt and crossed my arms over my chest, glaring at him. It seemed like a better idea than screaming and trying to run away. I had trusted Quinton with secrets and lives—including mine—but I realized

then that I knew very little about him. And now he was showing me bodies in tunnels and saying they weren't the first. . . . I let one hand drift down my side toward my holster. "Talk fast," I said.

"Just give me a chance to get out of sight," he said. "I don't want the cops to know I'm connected to this."

"Connected to what? And what is it with you and cops?"

He looked around, but no one was coming out of the station to investigate us, nor was anyone stopping on the icy sidewalk above us. Any pedestrians were too anxious to get out of the cold to pause and look down at the gravel by the tunnel mouth. "Look, this guy, he's not the first dead body to turn up around Pioneer Square since the big storm. I knew some of them. And there was that article in the papers about the leg found in that construction site near the football stadium—you read about that, right?"

"Yeah. They never found the guy it came from. So?"

"Something nasty is happening and I'm afraid they'll connect me to it."

"Why? You wanted me to see this, but you don't want it reported. What kind of connection do you have to this? What the hell is going on?" I generally prefer anger over fear.

"I don't know what's going on, but I want it to stop and I don't want the cops digging around in the underground over this—or at least not digging around me."

"If you think someone is killing bums, that has to be reported to the police. That's what they do—find the people who prey on other people."

"What if it's not a person?"

"What?" I demanded, feeling colder inside than out.

Quinton started to reply, but my phone burred and cut him off. I swore and snatched it from my belt, glaring at Quinton and pointing at him with my other hand. "Hold that thought."

I flipped the phone open and answered it.

"Hey, Harper, it's Will. You ready for lunch?"

"Will?" Crap. I sneaked a look at my watch. It was eight minutes past two. "I'm at the train station—"

"I'm just outside Zeitgeist. I'll walk down there."

"No!" But he'd hung up already. Zeitgeist Coffee was two blocks from the tunnel. With Will's long stride, it wouldn't take five minutes for him to reach the train station. He'd spot us on the gravel as soon as he came around the corner. And he'd spot the arm.

I jammed the phone into my coat pocket with stiff hands and looked at Quinton.

"We have a problem if you don't want the cops all over this. I have to run into the station. You stay here and block the view so no one sees that arm. I'll be right back and we'll pick up where we left off. Don't ditch me. If I have to hunt you down to get the rest of this story, you won't like it."

He nodded and shuffled closer to the arm as I scuffed back through the gravel to the station as fast as I could.

Will was just coming into the rotunda as I trotted across the main floor. He caught me by the shoulders as I reached him and frowned at me.

"Harper, you're limping. Are you OK?"

"I had to take a look at something down here and the ground's pretty rough. I lost track of time. I'm sorry." Apologies don't come easy and it must have sounded as strange to Will as it did to me.

His frown remained as he stared into my face. "You're skipping out on lunch, aren't you?"

I pulled in a slow breath. "I have to wait for the police."

He blinked. "Why? What's happened?"

"I can't tell you yet. I have to talk to them first. I'll call you when I'm done and we can do dinner instead."

"I can wait with you."

"No—" I stopped myself. If I just told him to go, he'd get balky. "It may take quite a while. It's going to be ugly work and I know you don't like this kind of thing. I'd be happier if you didn't waste your day hanging around here."

"How long will it take, this mysterious, ugly thing?"

"I don't know. If it's quick, then that's great, but I just don't know."

Will sighed. *Déjà vu*. Just like our first date, with me running out on him for some mysterious errand. I knew it ticked him off and that ticked me off. "This job of yours . . ."

My turn to sigh. "Yes. I know. You wish I did something else."

"No. No, I just wish—" He stopped and shook his head. "Dinner. We'll get together for dinner. It's fine."

"Fine" it obviously wasn't, but I'd have to deal with that later. Severed limbs and Grey holes in concrete walls had a higher priority to me than Will's sense of betrayal over a missed lunch. Dating sucked.

"Thank you, Will." I locked my arms around him as he started to turn away and pulled him down for a kiss. "I'll make it up to you. I promise." I felt like I was kissing ice that only started to warm up and flow at the end. Then he stepped back and walked off, giving me a quick wave and a thin smile as he went. My shoulders slumped and an unpleasant pricking of tears started behind my eyes.

I growled at myself. "Don't be a jackass." I straightened up and hurried back to the tunnel.

Quinton was crouching near the arm, facing away from it. He was tense and the Grey gathered around him in clinging sulfur-colored ropes. His expression was an anxious frown as he watched me return.

“So?” he asked, straightening up.

“I am going to call the police, but if you explain this to me, I may keep you out of it. Tell me why you don’t want the cops to know about you and what your connection is to the dead man.”

He drew a couple of long, deep breaths before he began, the tension in his face easing.

“I know him—knew him. There’ve been several deaths down here since the weather got crazy. They’ve all been homeless, street people, undergrounders like that guy in the tunnel. And I know them because I’m one, too. An undergrounder, that is. Homeless by choice.”

“Fugitive?” I asked. I had to wonder who I’d gotten hooked up with.

“Kind of. Fugitive by conscience, you could say. Certain government people don’t like me and I don’t want them to find me now, but I don’t want to see more of this stuff. Dead people in alleys and sewers and in the subterranean places. I want to cover my ass, but . . . not at that cost. Most of the deaths have been written off as accidents—just old drunks and nutcases who didn’t come in out of the cold and died of exposure. I don’t think they’ve connected the leg in the construction site to the bodies in Pioneer Square alleys, but I saw those, too. All the things I saw looked like that guy—bitten on. Chewed. With the bodies, the cops said it was dogs, but you saw that guy’s leg—that’s no dog bite. The leg in the construction site was the same way. Something is eating these people.”