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The Touch of Ghosts

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Published by Penguin

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Prologue

A jewel-clear summer's day. The kind they photograph and sell to tourists on postcards for fifty cents apiece. The late morning sun is a burning ember, a relentless, blazing diamond pinned against empty blue. Acetylene-white light washes over weathered mountain crags that pierce a vast rumpled blanket of forest. It glitters like frost from dozens of lakes and rivers.

Closer, the same light flashes from the glistening plumage of a bird diving for fish in one of these lakes and from its struggling rainbow-scaled catch. It dances from the wings of dozens of insects flitting through the trees surrounding the water. It sparkles in the hair of a running woman.

She sprints across an open stretch of wild grass, a narrow break in the tangled forest, carving a swathe of darker green bent and broken stalks in her wake. Her heart pounds against her ribcage, threatening to punch through it with every beat. Her breath burns her throat as she gulps for air. She can feel her backpack slamming into her spine with each stride, flattening her shirt against her sweat-soaked skin. She ignores it all, waiting instead for the sound she dreads.

Running footsteps, behind her. Sneakers smashing

through the grass. The man has followed her downstairs and out through the doors, no shouting, no calls – silent all the way. She knows he's no cop – they shout 'Freeze!' or 'Hold it!' don't they? They *pursue*, they don't *chase.*

More than anything, she wishes she'd never taken a look at the old building with the sagging roof, wishes that her will alone was enough to rewrite the past. Wishes she could wake up from what *has* to be a dream.

Thin, spidery branches rattle against her jeans and whip her face and arms, tracing needle-thin lines of fire on her skin. The air changes, becoming cooler and carrying the acid scent of leaf mulch. The ground beneath the canopy is rough and uneven. Roots and tough, wiry vines lurk in the plant litter that covers the floor, ready to snag her feet as she pounds past.

She could have run for the dirt track, but she saw the man had a car parked outside. She could have made for the lakeshore, hoping that someone from town would see her from the opposite bank, but she knows how far away it is. She can feel the distance, the open gulf between her and safety, tugging at her soul and threatening to swallow her entirely. Her only hope is the highway, north through the woods.

She thinks of the look on her pursuer's face when she turned a corner in the ramshackle structure and nearly walked into him. Panic. Suspicion that mirrored hers. Eyes glittering in the musty gloom. The faint sheen coming from his open jacket, dim light

sliding off the gun nestled by his shoulder. How his expression changed when he realized she'd seen it. 'I'm a cop.' His accent not local, voice getting higher, betraying the lie. Didn't offer to show her a badge. Feeling his eyes on her as she walked slowly and deliberately towards the stairs, trying to look like she believed him. Hearing him gasp as her nerve broke and she started running, uncomfortably aware of how alone she was.

Muscles burning as her legs pump up a gentle incline, eyes concentrating on the ground in front of her. Breath increasingly ragged, hacking and blowing. Trying to maintain her pace, to ignore her tiring body. Can't even hear the man's footsteps over the roaring of blood in her ears.

A flash of blackness explodes from her jaw and suddenly she can taste dirt, feel dry, dead leaves against her cheek, head swimming. Her mouth feels warm and coppery, one of her teeth shakes and pulls sickeningly as she squirms, trying to drag herself to her feet again. Weight, heavy against the small of her back, stops her and her limbs feel awkward and rubbery.

As she opens her mouth and the first notes of her scream erupt from within, a hand snatches at her hair, hauling her head back by a thousand tiny points of white-hot pain. Metal, cold, thin and sharp touches the skin of her neck.

In the microseconds it takes for the knife to draw a line of liquid ice across her throat she thinks about

her parents, waving as she pulled away in the taxi bound for the airport. She thinks about her two-year-old cousin Charlie, playing with his birthday presents. She pictures her friends from college and how she won't be able to enjoy graduation with them. She tries to remember them all, one last time.

Her ravaged arteries pump and sputter blood across the forest floor, leaving a clear path for her soul to follow after.

Crying bundle of newborn joy.

Photo in a yearbook.

Face on a milk carton.

Name on a grave.

I

A lecture theatre much like any other. Rows of padded benches spread up towards the low, wide windows at the back of the room, surrounding the dais at the bottom like the seats of a Roman amphitheatre. Forty, maybe fifty men and women are scattered around the auditorium – concentrated, I note with an inward smile, in the first five or six rows. If I'd been holding this presentation at college, the back couple of rows would be packed and only half the students would actually be listening. Here I can't see anyone whose eyes aren't on the man speaking next to me or on the notepaper in front of them. Times change.

'Your instructors at the Academy may have told you that there are two broad types of suspect,' Robin Garrett, the man by my side, is saying. My boss; a friend I just happen to work with. 'There's those who just want to get their guilt off their chest. Even if it takes you a while to get the whole story out of them, you'll get your confession, because they want to confide in someone. And there are those who will clam up and won't give you a damn thing.'

The people who've shown up here on a dreary Thursday evening at the start of November to hear

our words of wisdom are mostly trainees from Boston's Police Academy. The rest are newly graduated police officers willing to sacrifice an hour or two of their spare time on the chance it'll boost their conviction rates and help them make detective.

'The ones who eventually break down and give you everything they've got aren't a problem,' Rob continues. 'It's the second kind, whether they're experienced criminals or just plain stubborn, that'll make you work for every ounce of truth you can get.'

If I listen hard every time Rob pauses for breath, I can hear hail smashing like handfuls of pebbles against the windows at the back, even over the electrical hum of the projector illuminating the screen behind us. Every gust of wind brings a fresh batch. Rhythmic, like a heartbeat or the sound of a hundred hourglasses being turned over at once.

'Alex will speak in a little while about interrogation techniques and matching your approach to the individual suspect. That's his field. Mine is the proper preparation beforehand to maximize your chances of success, whether you're after a confession or just information.'

Every once in a while we do this. Boston PD pays us a small but reasonable amount to give evening lectures to rookie recruits and patrol division newbies desperate to get their shield. We pass on our experience – Rob as an ex-FBI field agent, myself as a one-time specialist in the Bureau's NCAVC violent crimes division. In return, we maintain our good

relationship with Boston PD, and they get cops with a slightly broader degree of training. Everyone's happy.

'If you make sure you have as much relevant evidence and information to hand as possible before you even open your mouth, you'll have more chance of cutting through any bullshit and lies they try to feed you. You may even be able to make them think you know more than you do and trick them into giving themselves up.' He pauses for effect. 'Just make sure you get it right.'

Rob taps a key on the laptop in front of him and the glow from the screen behind me changes colour. I know without turning around that he's showing them a picture of twenty-three-year-old Bernard Leon, charged with murder in Phoenix two years previously. This is Rob's part of the show. Now that the introduction is out of the way, he'll run the audience through two examples where police have had to rely on confession evidence to make their case, one failure and one success. After the story of the botched Leon investigation, he'll tell them about Dan Rothman, a career criminal suspected of holding up a Detroit jewellery store. The detective who eventually wrung a confession out of Rothman, along with the subsequent successful prosecution, was given a promotion as a result.

I glance down at my watch, trying to hide the motion from the people listening to Rob. Like the rest of Boston, it's a non-smoking building. I'll have to wait until the lecture's finished and we've gone

through all the usual questions and chat at the end before I can light up. My girlfriend recently began trying to persuade me to cut my thirty-a-day habit, so far without success. I just don't have the willpower, although the inclination is growing as it becomes harder to smoke anywhere but at home.

Look back up at the windows. Three feet high, six across. Black mail-slot gaps gazing out into darkness. Tiny silver lights twinkle and flicker across them as though there's a clear starlit night out there, not specks of sleet reflecting the lights of the city as they dribble down the glass. My mind wanders as I watch countless drops of icy water trickle and die. I think about groceries I've got to buy, laundry I've got to do. I think about the weekend.

'And now Alex Rourke will discuss the different interrogation techniques themselves,' Rob says, bringing me back to the present. 'They're all yours, Alex.'

I stand up and quickly run my part of the lecture over in my head. A hundred-odd eyes blink and glitter at me as I begin.

An hour and a half later, the last of the newest additions to Boston's police force have filtered away, leaving the two of us to pack up and head for home. I've just dropped the laptop back in its holdall when the door at the side of the room opens again to admit Lieutenant Aidan Silva, a man who always reminds me of a bear given human form. A mop of chestnut

hair matched by a bristling beard flecked grey by the advancing years, and between them a round, heavy nose and a pair of dark, sunken eyes. How and when he and Rob became friends, I don't know. They shake hands before Silva leans over and offers me a paw.

'I don't know what your people have been putting in their food, Aidan,' Rob says as he stuffs our notes into a bag, 'but we actually had some intelligent questions at the end. Caught me by surprise.'

Silva grins, baring his teeth. 'I hear there's a couple of them can walk and chew gum at the same time, too,' he responds. 'Better hope it's not the start of a trend, otherwise I'll be obsolete in a couple of years.'

'You and me both. We'll end up in a retirement home together. Alex can come look after us and make sure our copies of *Sports Illustrated* are kept up to date. What's on your mind?'

'Jolene's decided to invite some people round for dinner and drinks on Saturday night,' the lieutenant says. 'I figured I'd see if the two of you were free. She doesn't want it to be an all-Department gathering, so I need as many non-cop friends there as I can lay my hands on. Otherwise, I'll have to make small talk with the neighbours.' He shudders.

'Sounds good to me,' Rob says. 'How about you, Alex?'

I shrug. 'I'll have to check. Gemma's coming down tomorrow night so it'll be up to her whether we're there or not.'

'Well, if she fancies a drink Saturday, my place at eight,' Silva says. 'I'll see you guys then, or not.'

I give him a wave as he ambles out through the doors, then go back to making sure we've not forgotten anything. Rob and I head out to the parking lot, instinctively hunching once we've left the shelter of the building and face the full fury of the elements.

'You got anything else planned for this evening?' Rob asks as though we don't both have cold water seeping rapidly past our collars and under our shirts.

'Tidying,' I say, sweeping back my hair where it's become plastered to my forehead. 'I've got to get the apartment neat before Gemma gets here.'

'Don't wear yourself out. You've got to meet a client first thing tomorrow.'

I grimace in mock pain as he drops into his car, then hurry over to mine, trying not to drown. Even in the downpour, my pale blue 1969 Stingray Corvette – a gas-guzzling piece of history that I hardly ever use in Boston – cuts a sleek form, its almost aquatic lines making it seem totally at home in the wet. I dive into its welcoming interior and sit for a moment, wiping water out of my eyes and trying to think warm thoughts. Run-off from the roof sluices down the windshield in front of me, laced with ice crystals that melt and vanish as I watch. Rob's tail lights blur red as his car pulls out of the lot, then disappear altogether.

Only then do I snap out of my trance and fumble

in my well-worn tan leather jacket for a pack of smokes.

At two minutes to nine the following morning I reach the door of the building that houses our company. A five-storey red-brick edifice that, though not hugely inspiring, is smart enough to look good on the brochures Rob occasionally throws together for potential clients. There are a couple of copies of that very same promotional literature in the lobby, alongside similar efforts belonging to the other five firms renting space here.

Robin Garrett Associates, the copperplate text on the cover reads. *Licensed private investigators, process servers, business security and criminal consultants.* Most of these end up in the nervous hands of small corporate outfits with problem employees, suspected low-level fraudsters or other sources of the white-collar work which is one of our two main money-spinners. The second field we specialize in – again, something the police would in theory handle if they didn't usually have more pressing problems – is missing persons. Being a college town, Boston has its fair share of students who drop out and, when their parents make their feelings on the matter clear, stop keeping in touch with their families back home. Once things have cooled down, people sometimes need help locating their errant offspring, which is where we come in.

Then there are non-student missing persons cases,

which are much more difficult and which have a much smaller clear-up rate. I'm pretty sure this morning's is going to be one of those, if the preliminary information our secretary Jean gathered over the phone is correct.

Jean herself has just settled into her seat when I step out of the elevator and head for the office. I doubt that Rob or any of our three junior staff are in yet. She smiles at me and says, 'Morning, Alex.'

'It is, and I'm certainly feeling it,' I reply. 'My body clock keeps telling me I should still be dozing.'

'Rough night? How did the lecture go?'

'Okay, same as usual. But then I had to spend three hours tidying my apartment. It was midnight before I got to sleep.'

She shakes her head. 'Next time a client calls I'll tell them we can't make any early appointments because none of the staff crawls out of bed before noon. I hate depriving you of your beauty sleep.'

'Thanks, Jean. That sounds like a great idea. I'll mention it to Rob.'

She laughs as I walk past her, into our airy squad-room-style office. Relatively uncluttered, but still with all the furnishings any self-respecting small business should have. I'm a little disappointed to see that Kathryn, one of our junior staff – 'the kids' – has beaten me in. The feeling quickly fades when I realize it's given her time to get the coffee machine on and ready. I help myself to a cup before I've even sat down. There's barely time to find a place to put it

amongst the drifts of paper covering my desk when the phone rings on its internal circuit. The client is here.

I look up as the door at the far end of the room opens and a woman somewhere in her forties steps hesitantly over the threshold. Dark hair now going grey, neatly tied back out of her eyes. Steel-rimmed glasses on a lined, tired-looking face. Emerald green wool coat, charcoal sweater and matching pants. Sensible shoes. All of it looks fairly new. Over her shoulder is a brown leather bag.

On the desk in front of me is a short list of Jean's handwritten preliminary notes, based on what the client said when she called us.

Colleen Webb.
Son Adam (25) last heard of nearly two months ago – Burlington, VT.
Husband dead – car wreck – six months ago.
Moving out of old neighbourhood – insurance money.
Can't find son to tell him/discuss with him.
And, in Rob's handwriting:
Don't think she's a time-waster. See what you can do.

At the bottom is her phone number and address in Roxbury. I slide the note underneath a stack of old paperwork and stand to greet her. When she shakes my hand, her palm feels damp and papery but her grip is firm. I give her my best professional smile and offer her a seat.

'Mrs Webb, I'm Alex Rourke. How can we help?'

She sits very straight, with her bag clasped on her lap. Hazel eyes dart quickly over my desk, me, the rest of the office, as she replies. 'It's about my son Adam. He hasn't been in touch in months and I haven't been able to get hold of him.'

'Where was he last time you spoke to him?'

'A place called Burlington in Vermont. I don't know if he was living there or not. He travelled around.'

'Did he have a regular job?'

Mrs Webb shakes her head. 'I don't think so. He used to pick up work now and then, but he never said anything to me about settling down. When we spoke last, he said he was a tour guide. But that was back in August, and I don't know if it would have been for much longer.'

'Did he ever mention a girlfriend or anyone else he knew up there?' I manage to knock back a couple of mouthfuls of coffee while I wait for her answer. In the end, she shakes her head.

'No. At least, I don't think so.'

'Does your family have any relatives in the north-east outside Boston? Anywhere he might have gone?'

'There's just me now. My husband Billy died six months ago. Him and Adam never got on; I think that's mostly why he left, and never came to see us. I thought, now Billy's gone and everything, he might like to come and stay with me for a while. I'm moving to a proper house with the insurance, so there'd have

been no problem putting him up.' She looks down at her lap and trails off into silence.

'Okay, Mrs Webb. I've got some standard questions that I have to ask. Don't take offence at any of them.'

She nods.

'Have you told the authorities, filed a missing persons report with the police, things like that? If not, you should.'

'I spoke to the Vermont State Police. That was a month ago. They haven't done anything.'

I grab a pen. 'Do you remember who you spoke to? I'll give them a call and see if they've turned anything up.'

'I've got his name somewhere,' she says, reaching into her bag. After a couple of moments' search, she emerges with a crumpled piece of paper. 'His name was Detective Sergeant Karl Flint. I told him everything I knew.'

'Okay. Has your son ever had any trouble with the law, been involved with drugs, anything like that?'

'Not since he left Boston. Not as far as I know. He grew up in a rough neighbourhood, Mr Rourke. Things happen.'

'And how regularly did he normally keep in touch with you?'

She frowns and her lips pinch together. 'You think I'm panicking over nothing? You think I'm just a stupid woman who can't bear to let her boy out of her sight?'

'No, I don't,' I say, trying to placate her. 'But I've got to ask. I've got to know whether or not this is unusual for him, or if he's ever dropped out of view before.'

'He'd call at least every couple of weeks. And always when he was moving anyplace new.'

Without prompting, she reaches into the bag again and pulls out a couple of slightly grainy photographs. 'That's Adam,' she says, passing them to me. 'They're the most recent ones I could find, but they're still a couple of years old. Sorry.'

The pictures show a young man with short, wind-blown black hair and narrow, gaunt features, but the photos were taken from too far away and are too poor quality to get more than a general idea of his face. No distinguishing marks. Even eye colour is difficult, though I'd guess his are the same as his mother's. In both shots he's wearing a cream-coloured jacket with red flashes at the collar, pockets and cuffs. I can't make out any jewellery, a watch or anything else distinctive enough to stand out. Background is an interchangeable town skyline, different in both.

'Does he have any tattoos, piercings, scars, anything that might help identify him?' I ask.

'I don't know what else he's got now, but he used to have a tattoo of a wolf on his right arm.'

Nod and make a note. 'If it's okay with you, I'll need to keep these photos for now. If you've got any letters, cards, anything he's sent you in the past year

or so, I'd like to see those too. Also the names of any friends here in Boston or anywhere else he might still be in touch with.'

'I'll see what I can do.' Mrs Webb accepts one of my business cards. She glances behind her as Keith, the second of the three 'kids', precedes Rob into the office. Rob nods to me as he takes off his coat and heads for his desk, which sits opposite mine. 'Do you think you'll be able to find him, Mr Rourke?'

I shrug. 'Honestly, I don't know, Mrs Webb. It all depends on why he disappeared. If he's just switched jobs and forgot to call, yeah, I don't think it'll be too difficult. Same if he's taken ill or been in some kind of accident.' I sigh and look directly into her eyes. 'But if he's on the run from some kind of trouble, or if anything worse has happened to him, it could well be that we never find him. The overall odds of tracing someone who's been gone for more than a couple of weeks aren't good at all, which is why most missing persons cases have a low priority with the police. It's not nice to hear, but it's the truth.'

She nods and seems to relax a little. 'Were you ever a cop?' she asks. 'You sound like you were in the police.'

'I was in the FBI, so was Rob Garrett.' I gesture at his desk. 'I left four, nearly five years ago.'

'Why? If you don't mind me asking,' she adds.

'Health reasons,' I say. 'Then Rob offered me a job in the private sector.' I don't elaborate. I don't tell her about my parents being killed, about the

stress at work, psychotic episodes, hallucinations, my breakdown, spending time in an institution. I don't tell her I burnt out at thirty-two. I don't tell her that there have been times since when I've worried I might be losing it again. I don't tell her that I couldn't handle the pressure of working violent crimes which is why I ended up looking for runaway kids and office workers who steal petty nickel-and-dime amounts from their employers. I don't tell her that until I met Gemma a year and a half ago, I used to go home every night to an empty apartment, an empty life, because I couldn't see myself doing anything else, didn't want the responsibility.

I don't tell her because it doesn't pay to dent a client's confidence. Not before they've paid the bill.

She smiles. 'I'll call you if I find something that might help. Is there anything else you need?'

'When you spoke to Jean over the phone did she explain how our charges work and how much you can expect to pay?'

'She did, and it's no problem, Mr Rourke.'

'In that case, that's all for now. We'll keep you posted.'

We shake hands again, then I show her to the door. When I return to my desk, Rob says, 'So, what do you think?'

'This is either going to be pretty straightforward, or he's vanished for good. No middle way. It'll depend what the State Police have found, if anything, and whether he's got any easy-to-contact friends.'

'I figured it'd be simple for you to check out the Vermont locals next time you're up in the wilds. If Gemma'll put up with you for an extra couple of days, that is.'

I smile half-mockingly, partly in response to his comment about Gemma, partly because of his insistence that any place that doesn't have its own international airport is dangerously rural and therefore an alien environment. Rob is from Chicago and as much of an urbanite as I've ever found, even if most of what he says is just part of his witty repertoire, not genuine prejudice.

'It'll be quite a drive down to Burlington from where she lives,' I say. 'But it'll be easier than doing it from here. I'll see if she can put me up next weekend and into the week after. Meantime, I'll give Detective Flint from the VSP a call, see how things stand from the police end.'

'Sure. Can Gemma tell you whether the kid's been brought in dead at all?'

'If the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's had anything to do with it, yeah, she should be able to find out. Certainly if it came through Gemma's particular region. But we'd probably have to look for John Does since if he was identified, they should have contacted his family.'

My girlfriend, the pathologist. Regional Medical Examiner for a chunk of northern Vermont, when she's not dealing with day-to-day deaths in the small town of Newport, where she works. We don't

normally talk shop, but I make a mental note to ask about Adam Webb when I see her this evening.

'If Mrs Webb doesn't come back with anything today and you don't get anything spectacular from Flint, there's not likely to be anything else to do on her son's case for the time being,' Rob says.

'In which case, once I've got what I can out of the way, I'll do that report for Barnes & Ziccarelli, then I'll head for home.'

'You taking her out to dinner?'

I shake my head, smiling. 'I'm cooking.'

'I never thought I'd see the day. Microwave chicken, is it?'

I eventually reach Detective Sergeant Karl Flint through the Vermont State Police switchboard on the third attempt; he's spent most of the morning at the scene of a hit-and-run, away from his desk. When I explain my reasons for calling, he sighs.

'Look, Mr Rourke, you know how it is with these cases,' he says. His voice is light and quite high, but with an edge to it. 'When the guy's mother spoke to us, we got what we could out of her. I made a couple of phone calls, checked with Burlington PD, asked them to have a look anywhere that kind of transient might hang out. I had his photo sent to Amtrak, Burlington airport, taxi firms, just to see if anyone remembered him. We've had nothing back, no one's seen him, and I've got higher priorities than one guy who's most likely moved out of state.'

'Yeah, I know, and I explained it to her when she came to see us. Did you run him through the system?'

'He's got a record, but nothing other than juveniles. Nothing on his driver's licence. Nothing on tax he might be paying as an employee, but he's not on welfare. He doesn't have any credit cards, and the last time he used an ATM was back before he was reported missing. Unless this guy gets arrested or shows his face somewhere someone knows him, my guess is he'll stay vanished.' Flint pauses, then says, 'I wish you the best of luck, Mr Rourke, but I don't think I can be much help.'

'Could you fax down whatever you've got on his movements? It might not be much, but it could help. It'll also mean I won't have to go over the same ground as you.'

He thinks for a moment. 'Sure, I don't see any harm in that. You'll have to fax me something in writing first, just to confirm who you are and that whatever confidential information we've got stays confidential. Otherwise, be my guest.'

We exchange numbers, then I say goodbye to the detective and hang up. By noon, I have copies of all the information the VSP has on Adam Webb, and it doesn't amount to much. It'll save me the bother of having to go down several investigative dead-ends, but that's about it, and that's all I can do for now. I throw together a missing persons sheet on Webb anyway and print off a batch of copies in case they'll be useful.

By four in the afternoon, I've done some grocery shopping and gone home to await the only person in this world that I love.