

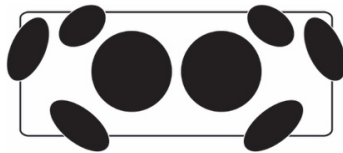
CHAPTER ONE

Dennis Belmont ran, his breath ragged white bursts in the moonlight, as the shadow creature glided after him. He wiped blood out of his eyes with the sleeve of his coat. The laceration on his forehead throbbed in the frigid wind.

A late-winter cold front had drenched Atlanta in freezing rain for the last four days, and Dennis almost crashed to the ground when his foot hit the edge of a frozen puddle. The lights of a passing car threw his own shadow long in front of him, and he rasped out, “No, no no, please no,” praying the creature wouldn’t emerge from it. Ahead of him on his right, a rail overpass crossed Arizona Avenue, and sodium-vapor lights flooded the space beneath it with a harsh yellow glare. Dennis ran faster, lungs aching, legs on fire. If he could just make it to the light...

He skidded to a stop in the middle of the underpass and half-collapsed against the mural-covered wall, heaving, panting. Hands on his knees. The yellow light surrounded him, welcome as the sun’s rays—

—until he noticed one image, nestled among the mural’s stylized shapes. No bigger than the palm of his hand, but staring at him. Accusing him. He knew what it was called: The Eyes of the Widow.



The truth of the situation clicked in his head. Dennis said, “Oh shit,” just as the shadow creature stepped into the light at the far end of the underpass.

She was tall, towering, her long, lean frame hugged tight by gray segmented body armor. The black spots on her helmet mirrored the symbol on the wall, the rest of her armor dabbed with paint like a pattern from a spider’s abdomen, and involuntarily Dennis breathed out her name. “*Gray Widow.*”

Steel knuckles glinted gold from her clenched fists. One of them still dripped with Dennis's blood, where it had sliced open his forehead. The Widow's words crunched out into the near-freezing air. "You're only making this worse."

Dennis screamed and ran again. Out from the underpass, off the road, into a stand of trees, a prayer on his lips that he could lose her. It wasn't his fault. He said it to himself again and again, chanted it, it wasn't his fault. There was no way he could've known how old that girl was. No way. She came onto him! He couldn't control how drunk she was! Dennis crashed through the trees, zigging and zagging around trunks and bulling through undergrowth, and between the branches whipping at him he saw a parking lot ahead. Maybe he could get to a car, hotwire it, get the hell away from there. Away from her.

Something caught Dennis's foot. He crashed chin-first into the frozen ground, scrambling and flailing to get away, sure that the Widow's armored hand had clamped around his ankle. But when he turned, ready to kick and fight, the dim light filtering into the trees from the parking lot's streetlights showed him what had entangled him. Dennis froze. Staring. Staring as steam rose into the night air from the mangled horror still caging his foot.

Dennis screamed, and kept screaming, hysterical tears running down his cheeks, until the Gray Widow stepped out of the shadows behind him and delivered a pile-driver blow to his jaw with a steel-knuckled fist.

* * *

"Dammit, J. There's proper ways to do this. And you're not doing it the proper way."

Janey Sinclair ducked her head, since she knew Feygen couldn't see her facial expression behind the helmet's faceplate. "Sorry. I thought you'd want to see this before anyone else did. Before the press did."

Not quite half an hour had passed since Janey had knocked Dennis Belmont unconscious. Belmont now sat in the back of Detective Zach Feygen's car in the nearby parking lot, handcuffed and eager to tell anyone who would listen that yes, he had assaulted an underage girl earlier that night, that no, he'd had nothing to do with the corpse in the woods and, if asked, that at no time had he seen or interacted with the vigilante known as the Gray Widow. He'd stumbled, literally, across the corpse and, having one of Detective Feygen's cards in his wallet, placed a call. Janey had ensured Belmont's cooperation with a few brief, pointed words after he'd awakened but before Feygen had arrived. She'd put particular stress on the ways she'd break his legs if he said anything he wasn't supposed to.

Now Janey and Feygen stood beside the corpse that had tripped Belmont up, Feygen illuminating it with a powerful flashlight. Feygen said, "Yeah, well, uniforms'll be here soon, and I know you don't want to stick around for that. So... exactly what the *fuck* am I looking at here?"

Janey wished she knew what to tell him. Her gorge rose, and she had to swallow hard and take a couple of deep breaths to keep her voice steady. Stretched out on the ground just inside the woods lay the body of a woman Janey guessed to be in her early- to mid-thirties. The woman's name, according to the Waffle House employee name tag on the ground beside her, was Carol, and from the neck down, Carol had been...what? Janey wasn't sure what to call it. She said, "I don't think this was an animal attack."

Feygen grunted and shined his light on Carol's face. A few thin wisps of steam still rose from the ruined body. "I think you're right. See where the wounds stop? Right at the neck—nice clean line." He looked up at Janey. "This isn't like what Simon Grove did, is it?"

Janey shook her head. "No. He drained people. Sucked their blood out through their skin. This is..." She didn't have words for it. The corpse's skin had been split open and peeled back, down the torso and along the lengths of all four limbs, and the muscle tissue beneath it was just...gone. The organs inside the ribcage and the intestines remained, untouched as far as Janey could tell, but—the thought appeared in her head, grisly and unwanted—all the *meat* had been taken. Janey crouched and peered at the exposed knee structure. "Look at the marks on the bones here. And the ligaments—severed. What made those marks? What kind of cutting instrument did the killer use?"

"Beats me. That's a question for the M.E."

Janey stood and moved around to the corpse's head. Carol, when she lived, had been a woman who took care of her hair. She had a lot of it, dark blonde, thick and carefully maintained. Janey started to reach for it, thought better, and snapped open an aluminum police baton. With the tip of the baton, she moved a section of Carol's hair, and sucked in a sharp, queasy breath.

Feygen joined her. "What? What is it?" He trained his light on the corpse's scalp. "Oh...*fuck*."

A smooth-edged, round hole the size of a ripe lemon had been bored into the top of Carol's skull, and Feygen's light illuminated nothing inside the cranium but darkness. Feygen took a couple of steps backward. Janey said, "Someone or something stripped all the meat off this woman's bones and sucked her brain out of her skull."

Feygen rubbed his face. "Succinctly put."

Past the parking lot, blue and red lights appeared, approaching rapidly. Janey said, "First thing either of us hears about who or what might've done this, let's let the other know, okay?"

"You got it." The lights got closer and brighter. "Go on. That'll be the lieutenant. We'll take it from here."

Janey collapsed the baton and slid it into the holster on her thigh, stepped back into the thickest of the darkness among the trees, and with a brief, smoky flicker she disappeared. Steam hissed from the leaves of nearby trees in her passing.