

CHAPTER TWO

Raker

Boston

The coffee arrived half cold in a chipped mug. Raker dumped sugar into the tepid brew and stirred it in, watching the granules dissolve. The diner was quiet, the smell of grease and cigarette smoke stale, the worn seats in the few booths empty. A fat man three empty stools along the counter was blinking at the sports page. Grease stains spotted the front of his post office uniform and he was resting his elbows either side of a half-eaten plate of food. Out beyond the glass front of the diner, the street was folded in the warm dark of a summer's night. On the other side of the street, Raker could see the train station, the stone pillars set into its curved front framing high windows that spilled light onto the street. At the peak of the station's curved front, the hands of a half-visible clock lay in the small hours.

"Anything else?" asked the girl on the other side of the counter. She looked tired, thought Raker, like him. He noted the creases on her face that came from worry rather than age, the wary look of someone waiting to see what dream would wither next. He knew that look: it was the one he had been dodging all his life—sometimes, he even managed it for awhile.

“No, thank you,” said Raker. He smiled. “Keep the change.” She looked at the money in her hand and back at him. He read the question on her face: *sure you don't need it yourself?* He had to admit that he did not look his best. The brown suit he was wearing did not quite fit, he needed a clean shirt, and his corn blond hair needed a cut and comb. He had not had a chance to get himself cleaned up in the last couple of days, and the suit was one he had borrowed in the hope that it might make him more difficult to recognize. But, he thought, he could be in a worse state—a lot worse.

He flicked another glance at the clock and at the time on his train ticket; time seemed to be limping past. He wanted to be gone from Boston, gone now. Gone before the people he owed found him. He wanted to be moving before they figured out that he was not going back to his apartment. They would come after him, he knew. You did not just run away from the amount of money he owed. He was doing the smart thing, going where no one knew him, vanishing. He snorted to himself. *First smart thing you've done in awhile*, he thought.

He looked at the well-thumbed photograph he had been turning over in his hands: a pretty face, hair cut short enough to cause outrage, lips drawn back to laugh, a flash of mischief in the eyes. He grinned to himself and flicked the picture over to look at the words written on the back:

*To my Charlie,
So you don't forget
—V*

Her name was Vivian, but she liked to be called “V.” They had met at a party two years ago, the kind of party where the shadowy world of people who lived on the edge of the law and the very rich met over glasses of expensively illegal liquor. He smiled at the memory, still bright in his mind. She had been in Boston staying with friends for a few months—a cluster of bright young people

who thought that it was great fun to touch the underbelly of the world, confident in the knowledge that they could retreat back to their safe, moneyed lives. Vivian had been different, though. She'd had a thoughtful distance from her dilettante friends that no one else seemed to see—at least no one apart from Raker. They had talked and laughed. She was so clever and she did not judge him; she made him better somehow. They had had six months—a glittering, unreal six months—then she had said that her mother and brother had bought a house in an old town only two hours away by train and they wanted her home. Raker had wondered if they were trying to stop her less-than-respectable lifestyle. She had smiled grimly at that and said she would write.

Raker ran a hand across his chin, felt the two days of stubble on his jaw, and put the photo in his pocket. He had dreamed of buying enough respectability that Vivian's high society family might accept him, so he'd tried to make his own money. For a man like him, the only way to do that was on the wrong side of the law. Prohibition had created endless possibilities for fast and tainted money. He knew it had not been honest. *Find someone making pure, honest money and you will be looking at a poor man*, he'd thought. Then, a few months ago, Vivian had stopped writing, and he had started taking more risks, bad risks, as if the danger would make his doubts and fears about Vivian fade.

What did her not writing mean? Had she forgotten him? Or was it that damn family of hers? The ice-eyed mother and the slab-bodied pig of a brother—had they found out that she still wrote to him? The thought would not shake, though, and had clung to his thoughts as soon as he'd known he would have to run. He looked at the train ticket again. He would find out why she had not written soon enough. After all, he had no one else he could run to.

“Deep thoughts, Raker?” asked a soft voice next to his ear. He had time to raise his head and catch a glimpse of a bulky shape

behind him before a hand grabbed his head and slammed it into the counter. He tumbled off the stool, the diner spinning around him. The girl behind the counter was screaming. His nose and mouth were thick with blood. The fat postman farther down the counter was scrabbling for the door. Raker could see a figure standing over him, a long, dark coat over wide shoulders, flat face half shadowed by the brim of a hat. Another figure stood two paces behind the first. Raker saw the glint of a length of iron bar held loose at the second man's side.

"They want their money, Raker," said the first man, his voice low, unhurried, reasonable. *Schmidt*, thought Raker. The man's name was Schmidt. Raker had seen him once or twice, heard about him: a hard man, a breaker not a killer. Not that that was any comfort. Raker opened his mouth to reply. Schmidt's patent leather shoe lashed into his ribs. "No, not yet, Raker. You don't get to talk yet." Schmidt looked up and jerked his head at the girl behind the counter. "Go home. You ring the police, someone will come for you." Raker watched the girl scamper for the door and run once she was through it. The second man locked the door and carefully pulled the blinds down over the windows. Through the pain in Raker's head and his sucking, cracking breaths, he tried to think. Things were about to get a lot worse; he knew how this kind of routine worked.

Schmidt had taken two steps away from Raker and taken his coat off, folding it over a stool. Raker could see the relaxed bulk of the man's muscle moving under his shirt. He looked down at Raker with small, dark eyes.

"You know how this goes," said Schmidt, unfastening his cuffs and carefully rolling up his sleeves. "Thought you would have made it out of town by now, given us a chase." Schmidt looked at the other man. "Get him up." Raker watched as the man placed the iron bar on the countertop before he stepped closer. Raker noticed the man was licking his lips.

“Get up,” the man growled. Raker made a feeble move to stand. “I said get up!” The man’s kick was heavy, but not fast, and Raker was ready. He caught it before it reached the full force of its swing and yanked hard. The man fell, crashing onto the floor with a yell of surprise. Raker was on his feet, turning to where Schmidt stood. A punch hammered into the side of Raker’s head. He reeled against the counter, feeling his head fill with a fluid dullness. Blood flowed around his left eye as he saw a blurred shape moving close and fast. He jerked to his left and felt the punch graze his forehead.

On the floor, the second man began to pull himself to his feet. Raker reached across the counter, feeling with his fingertips, his blood-blurred eyes locked on the two men. One more blow and there would be nothing but pain and splintering bones and his sobbing pleas. His fingers touched iron.

Schmidt punched again. For a big man he was fast, bulk and muscle flowing with hammer force. Raker brought the iron bar around and felt it shake as it thudded into Schmidt’s chest. He went down with a swallowed cry, scattering chairs as he fell. The second man was on his feet, moving forward, fists balled. Raker took a fast step forward, lashed his foot into the man’s groin and brought the iron bar down on the side of his knee with a splintering noise. There was a long, boiling scream as the man crumpled into a ball holding his leg, sobbing. Raker looked around, suddenly feeling the blood hammering through his limbs, making his hands shake. Schmidt was still down, gasping, his face white, flecks of blood and spit on his lips and chin. Neither man would be coming after him. He dropped the iron bar and stepped back to the counter.

His train ticket still sat next to his half-empty coffee, a spatter of his own blood over the destination. Scooping it up, along with his hat, he made for the door, pulling it shut after him as he walked across the road to the station. Every part of his body

screamed to run, but he knew that people would look at a running man and ignore a walking one. He pulled his hat low trying to hide his bloody face. Glancing at the clock, he saw that he only had a few minutes before the train left.

The station was nearly empty—a few lonely travelers sitting in the cavernous station hall, a half-asleep man behind the ticket counter. His footsteps echoed on the polished marble floor as he walked quickly past the glass-fronted shops and wooden benches toward the platforms. He occasionally glanced behind him, wondering how long it would be before Schmidt or the other man were found or called for help. He hoped neither had seen the destination on his ticket before they'd slammed his head into the counter. He thought about what Vivian would say when she saw him.

At the entrance to the platforms, an inspector frowned at the blood spots obscuring the destination on Raker's ticket.

"Where are you headed?" asked the inspector, eyes moving over the blood on Raker's face.

"Arkham."