

“New Blood” Act 1: Bitten

Part 2

by K9Lupus

Buried behind scraps of a dilapidated wholesale store at the far end of town, the Hanover Club was a hub of ill-gained and discrete information available to all who dared seek it, or otherwise had the coin to navigate its convoluted systems of carnal delights. The club appeared to absorb whatever life was left in the adjacent building for itself, fueling a ghastly set of hanging lights illuminating a pale glow into the neighboring alleyway. A large, brutish hulk of a man, one who could have easily forced the starvation of his other siblings through his mighty needs, stood looming over the red, steel-studded entranceway. Clay shifted the car into park, adjusted the open-buttoned, pressed collar of his midnight-blue coat flat, then stepped outside. I quickly followed, my hand running back along my thigh to double-check my gun was still there. Laughter, an unfamiliar sound from Clay, shook me back to my senses.

“If either of us end up needing that tonight, we’ve done even more than our fair share of pissing off the riff-raff. Remember, words can be just as effective too. Sometimes even better – they don’t run out when you need them most.”

I eased my hand back up from my hip and regarded Clay with ambivalence. In moments like these, I had a glimpse of understanding why the others at the station put up with his aloof, self-assured nonsense – he got the job done, and he got it done well. Clay was someone who knew the demands effective law enforcement required and navigated its sometimes amorphous boundaries without letting emotion get in the way of what was needed. Still, I couldn’t help but feel this situation we were running into would require a different set of skills. People dying at the hands of other people unfortunately was a grim reality of life. Having animals involved however, creatures who tore savagely at human flesh with no potential remorse or regard for the human spirit was a whole new matter entirely. Driven on by some twisted blend of instinct and training, these creatures and their master we now tracked went well beyond the scope of simply cuffing the bad guy and calling it a day. For as little as a hardened vagrant cared for the constructs and limitations of authority, those who called the wild their home cared even less so, and it was these thoughts of running into an enemy with no hope of negotiation that kept me up at night.

“Is this really the kind of place we should be sticking around to check out? Wouldn’t we be better off combing over what we’ve gathered back at the station to see if there’s something we missed from the public records?” I offered. The past few days of compiling info had revealed few concrete leads for Cadel Louvel’s potential whereabouts, and the sinking feeling building in my heart for us to receive another call out to an incident site only compounded my frustrations.

“You have a lot to learn still Ms.Mendez. Those wacks at officer training didn’t do you any favors by not showing you how it really is out here at the edge of the world. Trust me. We’ll get what we need one way or the other. Now please don’t question my methods again.”

Without another word, he was already headed to the club entrance before I fully processed whether to

take his statement as a threat or not. I hurried along behind him, moving past the adjacent alley bisecting a run-of-the-mill, mom-and-pop bistro. The bouncer looked even bigger up close. He greeted us with a grunt; his eyes were concealed behind dark, shaded glasses.

“Sorry, but club’s full tonight. Tickets sold out about an hour ago. You’ll have to try again tomorrow.”

Classic.

“Hayden Falls Department of Investigations. We'd like to have a word with Mr. Joey Algeron, owner of this..fine establishment.” I stated, flashing my badge so the entrance lights reflected off its sheen. “We shouldn’t take more than a few minutes to ask what we need, and then we’ll be on our way.”

The bouncer’s nostrils flared hard like a perturbed stallion’s. He didn’t budge an inch or look the least bit fazed by my grandstanding. Then came the booming rumble of his voice, softened in tone only by need, but not by wanting. As he addressed me, he craned his head over mine and draped me fully in self-wrought shadow.

“Mr. Algeron’s a busy man. And I’m well aware of the needs of the Investigations Department young lady.” A beat of silence hung between us, such that only the dim hum of the entrance lights nearby could be heard. “We have needs too. I won’t repeat myself again; the club is full right now. I’ve been told to not allow anyone into the building, and I intend to carry out my duties just as you carry out yours. Tomorrow can be your day to do whatever you need, so make it easy for yourself right now and go.”

My face flushed hot and red. How dare this man obstruct justice of the law? Right as my lips puckered to form a response to the bouncer’s blatant rudeness, Clay simply waved me aside and took my place, standing between me and the bouncer. Then he reached toward his back pocket. My eyes got huge, imagining the gun pointed at the man with as much cold certainty as his speech. Instead, there was a smile on his face as he held Clay’s wallet closer, followed by a roaring outcry of laughter.

“Man! I cannot believe you kept this old thing. Brings back all the memories. Didn’t recognize you in the new duds. You’re usually wearing that ratty throw rug of a jacket.”

Then they leaned in for a back-patting embrace like they were old buddies. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw what looked to be a police graduation line-up. Sure enough, the unmistakably broad shoulders of the man before me were there fully outfitted in officer regalia with Clay standing several people over from him.

“Chief’s been cracking down on any casual wear, even with this crud weather passing through. Sorry for my partner. She’s new around town. Jimena, this is Terry Langley, known as Big T back in the early years.”

“I’m still Big T now. The more things change, the more they stay the same,” he affirmed with another booming, genuine roll of laughter as he patted his muscled gut.

“You mean you were a cop?” The incredulous tone of my voice wasn’t lost on Terry, who scrutinized me with a quirk of his brow, but he shrugged it off and eased back, lowering his folded hands back to his sides.

“You should know by now that here in Hayden Falls the law takes all kinds of shapes and forms.

Working gigs like this is better for me anyhow. A good night's sleep comes a lot easier now than in those yesteryears surprisingly enough."

Clay stashed his wallet back into his pocket. "I know you're doing your thing here Terry, but it's real important that we both get to talk to Algeron – tonight. What we have to say will be to his benefit too, don't you worry. He's not the kind to be caught uninformed with anything on his watch."

"Ain't that the truth. I don't need to know the details of what's going down between you and ol' Alge. Better for me that way. Still, you know I spit it straight. If somehow this ends up coming back to me, you both are a distant memory.

"Fair enough," Clay agreed, then stepped past Terry toward the door. He wasn't stopped. Clay beckoned me with a wave, and I could already hear the blare of the club's music from further inside as he opened the door further.

"Hurry along, Ms. Officer. Remember, time's tickin' once you set foot in there."

Clay and I descended down a short, concrete staircase to the club proper. The inside was surprisingly lively for such a small-town setting, an odd sight compounded by the lack of vehicles parked outside. Patrons were dressed in all manner of garb stretching across the full range of social strata. Many faces I didn't recognize; efforts to do so were undermined by their bodies already lost to the sway of dance or drink. We weren't inside for longer than a minute before a petite hostess dressed in a flowing red dress, the same bold color as the entranceway attended to us.

"Mr. Algeron would like to speak with both of you. Please follow me."

She guided us through a partitioned set of stairs rising up from within the dark belly of the club to a large, hardwood door laced with gold trim. The hostess opened the door, stepping aside with lowered eyes. The hidden penthouse before us was lavish and grand, filled with all the hoarded surplus and fineries tucked away from the watchful eye of the public.

Seated behind a spacious desk of polished wood, and dressed in a jet-black suit, immaculate and crisp in every tailored fold, the man I took to be Joey Algeron looked at us with worn, heavy-set eyes. His piercing red tie, like the flicked-out tongue of an inquiring dragon split the white, ruffled tufts of his dress shirt beneath. His balding head was shielded by a bowler hat with a tied bundle of small feathers to one side. A broad grin, partly obscured by the man's bushy mustache gave him an uncannily Chesire visage.

"And to what do I owe the distinct pleasure of your company tonight Officer Kaine? I trusted that our previous arrangement had been most satisfactory, but yet here you are again at my doorstep. Are you here for business, or am I to believe you've changed your mind about partaking in the company of my fine attendants?"

"We're looking for information regarding a Cadel Louvel, whom we believe targeted one of your informants just over three weeks ago. The fact that there's been another victim since means you haven't gotten to him yet, so we want to lend you a helping hand. But for that to happen, we need to know what you know."

Algeron shot Clay an almost fatherly expression of disappointment. “Always so drab. You never did have much spice to you. That’s always been your problem. Now, your lady friend here on the other hand,” Algeron said, pointing a curled finger in my direction, “I can tell she’s not one to settle for mundane matters.” My skin crawled. He continued.

“But to answer your question, word’s been coming in that movement’s been restricted within the lower dealings, and as you know, affairs shutting down is just as informative as activity picking back up. There’s fear in the air here in Hayden Springs.” He paused to take a long sip of golden contents held within a sparkling, crystalline glass.

“As for that shady Louvel, all we operate from are rumors. Same as you. These so-called beasts he tags along with are nothing like my men have encountered before – truly Hell’s spawn run rampant. One who managed to return still screams of glowing eyes and a growl like mangled thunder. More have been lost to Louvel’s monstrosities than anything your department’s come up with, that’s for sure. “Now, I’ve been told there are recent rumblings going on near the abandoned warehouses past the edge of town. New folks moving in apparently. Real hush hush. Enough so to pique my interest. Officer Kaine, you’re a bit freer to move around than I, so I hope my intentions are amply clear. What’s most important to me is that him running around is bad for business. I don’t like loose ends as you know, and I trust this matter will be resolved quickly.”

Clay simply nodded, soaking in the club owner’s words. Then Algeron flicked his wrist, drink still in hand, causing a small splash across the table. If he cared for the spilled beverage, he didn’t show it. There was always more to be enjoyed after all.

“Now get out of here before I have to look at your sorry mug any longer,” he affirmed. The large, gold-framed door opened, the attendant ready to lead us out. Clay flashed a cursory wave, disappearing through the door.

“Thanks again,” Clay said as he descended down the first steps. Only a muttered grunt was heard in response, and I was quick to follow Clay back out of the club in silence. Once outside, his pace hastened, not even greeting Terry again on the way out; that single-minded focus I had seen from him back at the park toward the task at hand had returned once more.

“It’s going to be a late night,” Clay muttered as he pulled himself into the car.

“You mean we’re going right now? We don’t even know if half of what that sleeze said was true.”

“Despite his looks, Algeron’s good for it. If you’d still like to check things out back at the precinct, I can drop you off.”

I shook my head hard.

“No, I’m with you.”

“Then buckle up, and when we get there stay close.”

Night had fully settled in, and the glow of our flashlight beams encountered the rising mist of chilled

autumn between each cautious footstep. Algeron had been right about one thing – there were signs of busy work all about, disguised and obscured, but undoubtedly present. Not a living soul was in sight save for ourselves. We scouted out the area, and stumbled across a larger, central warehouse etched out by a corral of rusted cargo containers. A broad, steel door blocked our way to the main building.

Locked.

At Clay's signal, we rounded the corner to search for an alternative entrance inside. A shining glint in the distance by the trees caught the outer rim of my flashlight beam, and motivated by a growing sense of dread the longer I stayed here, I approached the calling beacon, ignoring Clay's grumbles to return. It was my chance to finally add something meaningful to this case.

A pale-red light dimmed in and out of existence on the far edge of one of the surrounding cargo containers, but this one, unlike its neighbors, was new. The metal was cold and sleek to the touch, and trailing around it was an odd, unrecognized symbol– two interlaced stands of trees with a voided-out spiral between them.

Before thoughts could shift to finding a tool capable of cracking the potential bounty within open, a low, rumbling growl, as if from the bowels of the earth itself, shivered the rickety walls of the warehouse and cargo containers. Apprehension gave way to rising panic.

“Clay, listen, I don't think what we're after is–” Massive jaws slammed tight across my shoulder, and the weight of a living freight train knocked me hard to the concrete floor surrounding the container.

Shots fired out.

There was a yelp of pain.

I dragged myself back by pure survival instinct, the tears through the upper portion of my shoulder searing in pain. There was a glimpse of a hulking shadow still looming over me as I scrambled for my light and my gun. Deep, glowing bestial eyes bore into my vision above a maw of jagged, slobbering fangs surrounded by a heavy coat of dark fur. Another shot, followed by another menacing cry of pain reverberated from the beast across our surroundings. A frantic, scraping slide of claws rang through my ears as the monumental creature leaped over me with a heavy *thud* as it landed on top of the metal cargo container behind me.

My memories of events past that point are shaky. I recall the sound of Clay's booming yell and the retreating wails of the beast further into the forest. I remember him trying to tell me something as he lifted me up off the ground, but at that point I already felt like I was underwater. My arm and back were damp and warm against the evening chill. I remember thinking at one point it wouldn't be so bad dying like this. Clay would be strong enough to see things the rest of the way through. Next I knew I was waking up in the hospital.

When I finally gathered up all my strength to be able to spin onto my side, there was a bag seated atop my bedside stand, placed on top of a small metal tray, undoubtedly by the attending nurse who wanted to minimize the impact of the bag's greasy contents within. Shaky fingers grasped the opening, and peering inside, I noticed a small card, delicately balanced over the contents below:

“For whenever you're feeling up for it. Don't worry. They put so much crap in this stuff I'm sure it'll

outlast any bed stay you'll need. Told the nurses not to throw it out or I'd give them hell. See you back at the precinct."

-Clay