

FROZEN DREAMS

Moe Lane

CHAPTER ONE

Chapter 1

I woke up in the night, ripped from a dream of Jeannie - and it wasn't an easy wake-up. I went from sleepy time to crouched-by-the-bed, staring-out-at-the-darkness while still blinking dream-grit out of my eyes.

The darkness stared back at me for a while before it turned itself into my bedroom. Which was also my office, *abracadabra, alaka-zam!* I should take it on the New California vaudeville circuit.

I shook my head to clear it of the sleep-thinking and realized my left hand was full of gun. I must have grabbed my revolver from the shoulder holster (now carefully

draped over one chair, as per the Lore) while I was waking up. That made me shake my head, but in a different way. A Shamus wakes up with his gun in his hand: something's up and it's never gonna go down easy.

But there was nothing in the office. Or bedroom. Not even in the kitchen, which was barely able to be its own thing.

I tossed the revolver back on the bed in a way that would have made an Old American wince, but back then they had bullets that actually worked. Ours tend to explode whenever a mage sees them. Not that New California has any mages.

Well, one mage. But he didn't count. And he wasn't a New Californian, and would never be.

I fumbled with the string for the lightstone on the

ceiling; I was rewarded with a second or two of light, and then a flash and pop as the magic inside the artifact short-circuited. Guess I should have gotten a new one from the Adventurer's Guild after all.

Well, I preferred the light coming from the bay-facing window anyway. I opened the curtains to see if there was something going down on the street, but it was just Cin City out there, as quiet and drowsy as it ever gets. And above it, standing watch between us and what was now war-torn Sonora, was Mount Jeannie.

The magical stars hovering just above the iceberg's crest shone as brightly and reassuringly as they always did; and if the window was open I'd be able to feel the cool, wet *beso* breeze from Mount Jeannie that makes this town livable. Nothing was wrong, in other words. So why

did I wake up, with a gun in my hand?

I didn't know the answer yet. But I figured I would, pretty soon. And I didn't waste any time wondering whether I'd like it.

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It was a morning right out of the wizards of Central Casting when that old rat-a-tat-tat started vibrating my office door. Whoever was in charge of making the local weather today had earned their beans; we had sunny skies to go with the ice-kissed breeze coming off of Mt Jeannie, out of the east in the Gulf of California. The calendar said it was September 9th, 2534 AD: my eyes told me it was going to be a pretty day.

But it's always pretty. Everything in New California is pretty. Even the sins. If the sins were ugly,

there wouldn't be a need for Shamuses like me to rip off their masks.

All that banging on the door kept disturbing my morning litany. How's a Shamus supposed to do an internal monologue because somebody can't open a door? "Find the doorknob," I yelled. "You'll scuff the name on the glass!" It was in nice, big letters too: "Tom Bannion Vargas." With "Shamus" right beneath it. Just in case people were lost.

As the door finally opened, I recognized a Flatfoot from the Castle, still dressed in his ceremonial Old American uniform. I sighed. If a cop shows up at my door, then trouble's either on its way, or it had already showed up and was waiting to surprise me.

The Flatfoot awkwardly bowed to me, actually

clutching his police cap in both hands. “Shamus,” he stammered. “There’s been a murder.”

I shook my head sadly as I took my feet off the desk. “And here I thought that you were selling tickets to the Policeman’s Tourney, copper.” I reached for my jacket and hat, then looked at the Flatfoot. “Do I need a nichols for the horsecar, or did somebody kindly leave the body close enough for a walk?”

The Flatfoot shook his head nervously. “Neither, Shamus. It’s up at the Castle. The King bade me bring you. By automobile.”

I stopped, blinking. This was serious stuff. The King protected his automobiles like he’d protect the virtue of his children, if any of ‘em had any. He wanted me there fast.

Too fast. I looked at the Flatfoot. He was young, but that happens more often these days. The breastplate and badge still gleamed, and the kid didn't look like he'd taken too many hits to the soul yet, either. Not the kind of seen-it-all street monster you'd send if you were planning to entangle some poor old Shamus in the latest round of court shenanigans.

I put on my hat, and peered at the Flatfoot. "Well," I said. "Let's not take the scenic route, then."

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So you're wondering who the Hell I am, and why I have an office. Well, the name's on the door: Tom Bannion Vargas. Half of my ancestors were here in Cin City a few centuries ago when the other half came down from Old California to carve out a new kingdom, and after

the dust cleared and the blood got wiped up, the survivors all made the best of it. New California's got a nice thing going, down here in what they used to call Baja.

But sometimes things still get messy. Not the regular kind of messy, where it's damned clear from the start who killed who in the room with which weapon; from time to time you get Cases. When that happens, you call in a Shamus. We clear the Cases, usually getting slapped around a lot in the process. Not many people love us, but they know they need us around.

And we don't stop working the Case until it clears. Ever. You can kind of say that's our calling.

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When we got to the street, the sun was busily rising above Mount Jeannie as if it couldn't wait to get

away. I don't blame it. The higher you go in Cin City, the rougher the people play. There are days I think I wouldn't stay, if it weren't for the Mount.

And there are days I think that I still would. Cin City: Cinderella, jewel of the crown of the Kingdom of New California. 'Course, the jewel is plastic and the crown is tinsel, but when was the last time anybody made either of those, anyway? There's a half million souls here, where the desert shoves at the sea, and we're all caught up together in something bigger than us. Some people call it a dream, other people call it a pack of lies, and neither know what the hell they're talking about.

I whistled as I saw the car waiting for me, which pleased both the Flatfoot walking with me and the one waiting behind the wheel. This was one of the Castle's

joyrides, and no mistake: the Old Americans called it a ‘Jaguar,’ and if it was a horse I’d have said somebody had the job of brushing its mane with ten thousand strokes every night. But no horse ever smelled like the fry vats at the local greasy spoon, which reminded me: I hadn’t eaten breakfast. I hadn’t even drank it. There had better be a feed on at the Castle.

Cinderella didn’t look much different in the back of a lovingly preserved four-door sedan than it did by horsecar or just plain horse or even the carpets or broomsticks the wilder kids were night-racing now (though you’d never get me on one of those things, even if they suddenly became legal). It was the same old Cin City out there, just whizzing by faster. Bumpier than I expected, too; the wheels found every rough spot on the road when

you traveled at - I snuck a look, and was impressed despite myself - fifteen miles an hour.

The Lore suggests I'm supposed to wise off in a situation like this, but I stopped before I started. The Flatfoots were both kids, and they were having too great a day. Here they were, driving a car on a mission for the King. Just like in the Lore! Yeah, this was what they had signed up for. Seemed hardly fair to spoil their fun by pointing out the shudders from all the cobblestones.

Besides, there were plenty of locals there to gawk at the Royal automobile. It was mid-morning, and they didn't see cars every day. You could tell who was who by the way they looked. The ex-peasants, newly in from the south and still learning the ropes, they just thought it all was a spectacle and a half. Their more jaded

cousins, the ones who'd been in Cin City long enough to for the aw-shucks to get ground away a little; they respected the car, but resented that it was in their way. They weren't shy about telling the Flatfoots that, either - and the Flatfoots gave as good as they got, with big grins. That was also part of the Lore.

There were also plenty of foreigners. Half-dressed ken mercenaries from the barbie kingdoms of Old California jostled Sonoran traders looking anxiously at the latest broadsheet about the war east across the Gulf, between Sonora and the orcs, and Grand Panameno traders just looking smug for mostly the same reason. Every corner had Deseret cart vendors selling food. We weren't that close to the docks, but there was still a sailor off of one of the Dwarvenwood ships, clearly lost and

getting inexorably pulled into a modeling agency. He'd be fine, though. The working girls would send him back to his ship. Eventually.

And then there were the smart ones in the crowd, both domestic and foreign. They were the ones who used Court English as much as they did Spanglish. They saw the car, and they saw me, and they wondered what message the Castle was sending. And, you know, so did I. But if I'm so smart, why was I working out of an office downtown when I could be up here in the Castle district, smelling of vegetable oil?

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The Castle dominates the skyline; you're not really in Cin City if you can't see at least the spires. They say that the first kings built it just like the holiest of the Old

California shrines up in the north, but I don't believe it.

The Old Americans had to've had better taste than that, although some of the Lore I've seen argues against it.

The Castle's still the beating heart of the Kingdom, all done up in carefully salvaged glitter and sequins and schmaltz.

It takes people a while to realize how the walls are *really* thick, and the battlements are fully manned. When half my ancestors came down here a few centuries ago, the other half weren't real happy to see them. To this day, no matter where you go in the Castle there's a guy or gal slouched at attention against the wall, sporting brightly-colored but very serious arms and armor. A few of them tensed when they heard the car arriving, and didn't relax when the it parked in the courtyard. If anything, they

got stiffer. Something was, as they say, up.

The staff got me out of the car nice and smooth, I'll say that for them. I was halfway across the courtyard and up the steps before I realized that the breeze I felt was somebody brushing my suit down with a little poofy brush. That seemed harmless enough, but I glared down the courtier with the spray bottle of cologne until he went somewhere else. A Shamus smells how he smells. If a court flunky just starting out didn't know that, it was high time he learned.

I've been to the Castle before. Shamuses had a habit of visiting places of power, usually at inconvenient times. It always paid well, but there were just too many people lying to each other with not enough elbow room to keep it down to a dull roar. Usually I worked the lower to

mid levels of the court, which had to jump when the higher-ups yelled '*Rana.*' Now I was going to where the upper kept its crusts, to quote the sage, and I had a treacherous hope that the air would be cleaner. Or that at least the lies would be more interesting.

The air may have been cleaner, but there was still a whiff of something underneath. There was definitely a Case starting up, and I could feel my head starting to shift gears like a Dwarvenwood sasquatch clock.

Something serious was going down. Not that my future employers were ready to tell me what it was right away.

And when they eventually did, they'd just lie. Everybody tries to lie to a Shamus, even though it never helps. You get used to it.

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But at least I was being given the heady privilege of being first lied to by the Court Producer herself. Dorothea Fleming Toro wasn't immediately on hand for my arrival, but I didn't have to wait long before she descended upon me with a flurry of grips and fitters in tow. We've butted heads in the past, but usually to a mutually satisfactory result. And were we anything else? Well, a gentleman never tells.

Her cigarette holder was conspicuously unlit, so I leaned in and obliged. "Let me get that for you, dollface. You look good." *That* was no lie. Dory stood out in a too-pretty court by choosing to age with dignity. More than one idiot had decided that was weakness, only to find out that Dory knew where all the bodies were buried -- and the best way to swing a shovel.

But the strain was showing along with those fine bones of hers as Dory inhaled smoke. “Flatterer,” she said. We were speaking Court English, naturally. We also pretended that this meant we had privacy. “You at least haven’t changed at all.”

“If I had known I was coming...”

“You’d have baked a cake?” She smiled, gamely. “I thought I’d spare us both that.”

“Ouch,” I said. “I’ve cooked for you before.”

“Oh, yes, you have. It was... memorable.”

“That bad or good?”

“I’ll let you guess.”

I did not like the sound of that. She looked tired, and not just from whatever happened last night. And her patter was dull; I remembered Dory as quicker on her feet

than this when it came to banter. So maybe it was time to switch gears. “So, where’s the corpse?”

That got a flash of -- maybe relief? -- from Dory, which was definitely *not* what I was expecting. “You’ll see the girl in a moment, Shamus,” she responded, and now it sure looked like we were being going to be formal about the whole thing. “The scene been kept safe for your examination. But first I must impress upon you the need for discretion.”

I rolled my eyes. “Because this happened at the Castle and the King is *very concerned* and things need to be handled quietly. I’ve heard it all before, milady.”

“Not like this, Shamus” (I noted the lack of “Tommy”). “This one is serious. Serious enough that a Shamus had to be called in.” Dory looked at me very

directly. “And we need you focused. The Crown needs you fully engaged in this. Do you understand?”

I opened my mouth, closed it. “Yeah, I understand. I should clear my calendar. Or just throw it out. So go ahead and check telling me off your little list.”

Dory smiled, briefly. “Excellent, Shamus. If you will wait here, someone will come shortly to show you to the death scene.”

“You’re not coming?” Which surprised me. Dory’s no ghoul, but she’s got a real bad case of work ethic.

“Not coming? Shamus, I am not even here.” And Dory was off, without even once trying to haggle over my fee. Which was downright unnatural; haggling and grumbling over a Shamus’s daily rate, plus expenses has

been part of the Lore since the very beginning. If she wasn't even trying, something was wrong.

That's when I realized what that smell was. Politics. On the whole, I'd rather it was necromancy.

CHAPTER TWO

C2 FD

There are a lot of things that I *have* to do as part of *what* I do. Closing the Case is a big one, obviously. So is putting my nose into places where they don't like seeing noses, or the snoopy people wearing them. But I hate seeing the body for the first time - because I also love it. I love puzzles. I love solving them. But the human ones, when you put them back into the box, they never get to come out again.

The victim was just a kid, but everybody looks like a kid at my age. Maybe in her mid twenties. Dark hair, dark eyes, and if she wasn't dead, I'd have said her complexion

was someone who hadn't gone out much in the Baja sun lately. She was dressed respectably in a long skirt, plain shirt, and heelless shoes; this wasn't a refugee from the Hawaii slums up north. Not nobility, though. Her hands weren't roughened, but there were more calluses on them than just from a fountain pen.

The girl was settled down on the floor, like she'd gotten lost in the woods on her way to her grandmother and was just taking a little nap. Only the Big Bad Wolf had shown up, and the kindly woodcutter hadn't; she was cloaked in her own clotted blood, in a way that made you wonder whether the Old American fairy tale had been cleaned up for the kiddies. The murderer had arranged her corpse neatly, with her hands in her lap, her long skirt smoothed over her legs, and - this made me grimace - a

pillow for her head. It was going to be one of **those** kinds of murders, then. No ring was visible on her fingers, so I was assuming unmarried unless I discovered otherwise.

At first glance, the murder weapon was a knife.

Judging from the stains, it had been wiped and left on another pillow that had been carefully set to the side of the victim. It was the kind of knife everybody pretends not to recognize in New California, because pretending keeps us out of trouble and war. But if I *did* have unlawful thaumaturgical knowledge of wizardly tools, then I would've said that the blade was a mage's athame - and that it probably belonged to the corpse. There was an empty sheath inside one boot, at least, and the athame was about the right size to fit.

The doc finally straightened up from her preliminary

look at things. I've worked with Remy before; she's all right, if you don't mind them morbid. True to form, her first response was sardonic, even for a Cin City medical examiner: "Well, she's dead."

"Thanks for the expert opinion, Doc."

"That's why I make the big simoleons. The cause of death," Remy visibly decided to dumb it down for the Shamus, "was getting stabbed in the heart from under the ribcage. I think the death itself was quick, at least.

There's nothing showing up right away on the hands or underneath the fingernails, but I'll look some more, back at the lab."

"Time of death?" That earned me a look from Remy.

"11:57 PM, September 8th, 2534 AD."

That was a lot more specific than the "sometime last

night” I’d was expecting. “For real, Doc?”

Exasperated sigh. “No, not for real, you lummoX. This isn’t the Lore. In real life, she died sometime last night; this room was being used yesterday evening, and the body was discovered by the morning staff. That’s as good as you’re going to get, Shamus.”

“Fair enough.” I took a quick look-see of the room. It was just me, the victim, and the obligatory two guards keeping an eye on everything. Because it’s the Castle; they do that. No windows, a skylight that looked like it didn’t actually open, and only the one door. The whole place was set up as what the court primly calls a “conference room,” Sultan’s Seraglio edition: New Californian nobles have a real problem keeping track of where their own beds are, and sometimes in a crisis they

don't have time to remember. A look at the walls confirmed that none of the ah, *devices* on the walls were sharp, and the only decorations that looked like they could be removed from their settings were a set of flimsy-looking handcuffs. Excuse me: "manacles." I privately resolved not to actually touch anything. "What else you can give me, Doc?"

"Well, Shamus, the guy who did this was lucky." The doc gave me another look; the one that New Californians give when discussing magic in public. "Really lucky."

"How so?"

"I'll need to look at her on the slab to be sure, but the victim here didn't react to being stabbed. It's a clean puncture wound, all the way through. No signs of a struggle at all. Not even an attempt to strike back."

“What about drugs?” I asked.

“What *about* them?” replied Remy. “If there’s something out on the streets that can make somebody walk *and* not complain when you steal their own knife and stab them with it, I’d run across it every Saturday night. And I don’t believe in secret poisons. If they’re any good, they don’t stay secret for long.”

I frowned. “Fair enough. You said that she got stabbed in the heart, Doc?” Remy nodded. “There’s no blood spray, though.” It’s never as gory as the Lore suggests, but there’s usually some from a stabbing.

“I think the murderer covered the wound area with a cloth, and only took the knife out after she died. It’s consistent with the wound.”

“But how did she manage to arrange herself on the

floor like this?” Again, the blood evidence was strange. This was far too clean a scene for anything involving knives.

Another New Californian look. “Gee, Shamus, I’d hate to guess how she ended up on the floor, with her limbs arranged and her head raised, and the knife used to kill her gently dripping blood on a nylon pillow next to her body.”

“Real nylon? Damn. That’s going to piss off the cleaning ladies.” Enough that I was glad it wasn’t me. Nobody likes to annoy an old-school *bruja* by contaminating their work spaces with blood rituals. Not that *brujas* exist, either.

I went back to looking through the victim’s purse. It screamed ‘illegal mage,’ if you knew what you were

looking for. There was a small makeup bag, but the lipstick and eyeliner were both extra-wide enough to double as crayons, and the victim wasn't wearing either; and I was willing to bet that the powder in her puff wasn't for her face. Several keys on a chain, a couple of dull-looking library books about meteorology, a small coin-purse with some cash in it - mostly gippers and chaplins, with a monroe or two in there for swank - and a wallet with some identification cards.

Our victim's name was Elizabeth Gonzalez-Hernandez. I stopped for a moment, to fix the name in my head. Age 27. Graduated from UNC-Cinderella three years ago, but she still had a current library card. The street address listed on the card was back in the sort of okay part of Cin City, the place where you never saw

desperation but you could hear it partying down the road at night.

And then I stifled a groan at the other identification card. Elizabeth was a paid up member of the Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, otherwise known as “ATSE” - and never, ever called “The Mages’ Guild.” Great, they’d be invisibly breathing down my neck on this. It was already clear that the victim was one of the magic-users that we don’t have in New California, but her belonging to the group that officially and loudly denies that it represents magic workers? Made this scene even more serious than it already was.

None of this explained why the victim was *here*. The Castle was no stranger to illegal mages, but they’re usually of a certain kind. Elizabeth looked just a little too

straight-laced to be offering most of the services that the court might need done on-site. I looked again at the books again. Still boring, not really magical. Yeah, when the King decides he wants some variety in his sunsets he idly tells somebody, who then sends word. He doesn't bring in somebody to do that in person.

Obviously, I needed more to go on - and why hadn't I been briefed better, anyway? - so I glanced at the doc. While I was looking through the victim's belongings, Remy had been finishing up physically examining the victim herself. At my look, she shrugged, and answered the question I didn't want to ask. "No sign of any outrages done to her before or after, Shamus. This looks like it was just straight-up murder. Whatever her killer wanted, it wasn't that." She sniffed, a little. "There's a smell,

though.”

“That’s politics.”

“No, under that. You notice how it looks like she was that way? I think that her killer was, too.”

“A full-up you-know? Not just a *sicario* who found himself an” - I flicked a look at the guards - “edge?” We get those. Usually for not very long, though; the local bad boys either wise up real quick, or get grabbed by the cops, or just disappear one night after one too many flashy magical crimes. The powers-that-be want Cin City to be nice and quiet about magic. I’d be upset about that more if my own boss didn’t agree.

“Nah,” Remy replied. “You got a docile victim, a pristine crime scene, and an uninterrupted murder. And in the Castle, no less. You can get a black market gizmo for

any one of those, maybe. But if you have all three, suddenly you're one of those costumed guys from the Lore. And they didn't go around randomly murdering people."

"Could be just a regular murder," I said, but I couldn't make myself believe it. If it had been a regular murder, the Castle wouldn't have sent for me. And everybody was hinting that there was magic involved, although it would have been nice if they had come out and told me, instead. Even for New California, this kind of deniable talking around the subject was pretty strong.

I grimaced. Mages killing mages were the worst kind of case. Things could get out of hand, once somebody decided there was no percentage in keeping the spell-slinging private. I might have to have a chat with

somebody in the ATSE over that. If this was the first move in a mage-on-mage fight, it would need to be the last one before people started feeling that they'd have to actually notice things. Nobody wants that to happen, except our enemies.

I kept coming back to the mystery of what the victim was doing in the Castle, anyway. I had already decided that she wasn't here to professionally assist in any hanky-panky; and I was pretty sure that if the victim was on the staff Dory would have found some way to tell me. And Elizabeth would be wearing better boots.

I looked around at the room, which was admittedly tawdry with potential, and wondered if this was a clue. Had the murderer brought her in for something jaded and sweaty, my gut feeling to the contrary, and then something

went wrong? No, that didn't make any sense. This wasn't that kind of court. The New Californian nobility, starting with the King and working down the list, collectively had the morals of a jackalope, but they were damned careful of their playmates. And Remy had said that the corpse hadn't been messed with in that way. Besides, the Castle had gone and gotten a Shamus, which is the absolutely worst thing to do if you're actually trying to do a cover-up. It just didn't feel like a crime of passion.

Which is a shame; those kinds of Cases are usually easy to Clear. People in what the Lore calls "the throes of passion" get real dumb, real quick. I sighed at the thought of the coming legwork. "You got anything more for me, Doc?" I asked - and then managed not to start as another voice answered me, silkily arrogant.

“She doesn’t, but I do. The killer is five-nine, two hundred pounds, left-handed, black hair, red eyes, has a bloodline that puts all of you New Californian mongrels to shame, and is standing behind you.”

I turned. It was a fair-enough self-description of the man, although I would have added “goatee that didn’t quite work” and “no fashion sense.” And there he was, holding out his hands in mocking surrender, considering that eldritch serpents of green fire were writhing all over them. The flashy spellcraft alone would have told me that this *escoria* was a mage from the Universal Dominion; nobody local would have dared to be that blatant in public. And since the Universal Dominion ambassador was the only official mage in New California at all, I figured I knew who I was dealing with.

The guards certainly did; they tensed slightly, in that way that can suddenly turn into spiky death. The mage treated them like they weren't even there as he sneered at me.

I'll grant that he had a pretty good sneer, if nothing else. "I, Wolfstone Aconite of the Ninth Circle, Consul over your pathetic little kingdom, killed Elizabeth Gonzalez-Hernandez, for the crime of being an unregistered mage. As is my right. Arrest me, if you dare."

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