

# MIDNIGHT FED

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EPISODE 5

ROAN PARRISH



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The app showed a map of a location a few blocks from where Nathan, Meiko, Helen, and I stood. The background was the color of old parchment, the font a scrolling cursive, but the spot I assumed was our destination pulsing an electric, modern green. Even on my crappy phone it looked pretty cool.

*In 1939, as the city marveled at the World's Fair, the Keynes brothers began construction on a hotel that they hoped would draw the elite and powerful, the text on the screen read as we began to walk. It would utilize all the modern developments in building materials and practices. It would be built over a private stop on the train line to ensure completely private arrivals and departures for its guests. And within eight months of breaking ground, all three brothers would be dead. Was the hotel cursed? Were the Keynes brothers cursed? Or was it all an unfortunate coincidence? Spoiler alert: there is no such thing as coincidence when In Profundis is involved.*

My foot caught the lip of a sewer and I stumbled, but Nathan caught my arm.

"It's dangerous to read and walk," he said with a wink. "Someone should tell the creators of this app to include a warning."

I held up my phone. “This is awesome. I can’t believe you and your sisters made this.”

Nathan’s smile made my heart beat faster and made me slightly concerned I was going to trip for a different reason this time.

“When I started grad school I really wasn’t sure it was a good idea. I’d always loved school, and I was super into the stuff I was studying. But I always loved history because it felt so alive to me. It felt like it trickled into the present. Like the more I learned about the way things were, the more I understood the way things are today. By learning what’s changed, and why, and how. And seeing the marks of history on modernity, seeing the ways we circle back around to the familiar even as we strive to push past it into something novel? That’s my favorite thing about living in the city.”

He looked up at the buildings blotting out the sun.

“And originally, I wanted to study the history of this city in school, too. I thought, what could be better than getting to spend years studying this thing I love so much.”

“So why did you change your mind?”

We walked close together and his shoulder bumped mine.

“After my first year, I realized that studying the thing I loved in such a formalized, exacting way took the life out of it. I’d always loved medieval history too, so I chose to make it my focus instead. And I started trying to find ways to reconnect with my love of the city’s history. It started as wandering around parts of the city I didn’t know as well and learning about them—a wide and shallow approach. Then I decided I wanted to try a narrow and deep approach, learning everything I could about one building or one subway stop.”

Meiko chimed in. “That was a great semester to be your friend. It gave me so much material to drop during visiting professor small talk.”

“And on dates,” Helen chimed in.

“Look, if you say you study history people automatically assume you know everything about wherever you’re standing at that moment. So, yes, it was nice to have factoids at my fingertips when the girl I was out with would be like, ‘Oh, wow, you study history? Cool! So what did that building use to be?’”

Nathan laughed.

“Better to be able to answer before dropping the fact that I study immigration history of the West Coast from the 1890s through the 1960s,” she grumbled.

“That seems interesting too?” I said, though I knew virtually nothing about it.

“It is! It’s fascinating! I’m awesome! But some people like polo shirts, so taste remains forever shrouded in mystery, ya know?”

“Okay, here,” Helen said, holding up a hand to stop us.

I’d gotten distracted from the app, but now I saw that it was prompting us.

*Find the Black Box to see how Bartholomew Keynes died and unlock the next location. Careful not to get cursed ...*

The glowing green dot was drawing nearer and Helen ducked into an alleyway. Meiko was right behind her, and as I started to follow them, Nathan grabbed my hand.

I thought he was going to say something about being careful since I’d just tripped over basically nothing, but he slid a hand to my cheek and kissed me softly instead.

I melted against him, my phone and the alley quickly forgotten as his lips pressed against mine. He stroked fingertips up the nape of my neck and I shuddered and blushed, pulling away as I felt myself start to get hard.

“Sorry,” Nathan said, stroking my cheek. I could feel my flush. “Your neck, I didn’t mean to.” But his pupils dilated and he looked like he very much wanted to now. He leaned in and whispered in my ear. “It’s so fucking hot how much that turns you on.”

I groaned and pressed my forehead to his neck, shaking my head.

“It is. Makes me want to feast on your neck until you come for me just from that,” he whispered.

I made a broken sound and took a deep breath. I was *not* about to go urban exploring with an erection.

We continued down the alley, hand-in hand, and found Helen and Meiko waiting at a turn-off into a lot that looked like the back of a building had burned down.

“Here’s where I stop being in the lead, since I know the story,” Helen said. “But we’re the first ones here, in case you’re feeling competitive.”

“How many people play this game? Or, do this activity,” I added quickly, in case calling it a game seemed dismissive.

“There are, what, like eighty users?” Nathan said.

“Yeah, something like that. There’ve been more requests and downloads, but a lot of people download it thinking it’s a game and once they realize they actually have to walk places with their legs they delete it.”

“Let’s go,” Meiko said.

We stepped into the lot and I saw that there was a cement lip and then a service door to the adjacent building with no knob. The dot on the app glowed in front of us. Meiko climbed over the lip and put her shoulder to the door. With a hard shove, it gave way. Helen gave her the thumbs up and we climbed in after her.

Inside was what looked like an abandoned shop, the windows that fronted on the side street whitewashed out. There were counters running along either side, like an old-fashioned candy store, and a jumble of broken chairs in between. The walls were bare except for peeling paint and a thick layer of dust covered everything.

I was already imagining how I’d draw it.

The angles and shapes looked threatening in the eerie dim light that was seeping through the whitewashed windows. Maybe I could have Malchi bring someone back to a place like this? Or find someone squatting in one. Or—

I jumped when Nathan's hands settled on my shoulders.

"Wanna see the Black Box?"

I nodded and turned to see Meiko crouched in front of one of the counters, pulling a box out from under a floorboard. The dot on my app got bigger as I walked over to it.

Meiko put it on the counter. It looked like a cigar box, painted black. When she opened it, there was one of those square codes pasted inside. Meiko tapped something on her screen, and a square appeared.

"Now I'll scan the QR code," she said, probably gleaned from the way I was leaning in and staring at everything that I didn't know what was going on.

She pointed her phone at the code and when it scanned, a new screen popped up.

It was a picture of a lead pipe.

*Congratulations, you shady snoop. You've found the pipe that bludgeoned Bartholomew Keynes in the head. Signs point to a foreman on the construction crew. The Keynes' might have had money, but they weren't famous for paying their workers well. Don't be like the Keyneses.*

Meiko laughed. "Nice."

Helen tipped an imaginary hat.

*Bartholomew was found by his brother, Alistair. Though the doctor was summoned right away, Bartholomew succumbed to his injuries. Keep the pipe—you'll need it to find out what happened to Alistair.*

"Here," Meiko indicated that I should scan the code and when I did, the same screen popped up on my phone. Nathan scanned it, then Helen. Nathan and Meiko huddled over their phones and pointed. I peered around the shop and saw a picture of a sunset hanging by one nail.

Maybe Malchi could come to a place like this because he sensed there was a portal back to his dimension here, only he'd come in and find someone who'd been squatting here since it was safe from the cold. Malachi could—

“You ready?” Nathan said beside me.

I nodded and followed him outside, a little reluctant to leave this place behind.

I trooped behind everyone down the street, but my mind was still on my comic. It was the light I couldn't get over—the way the whitewash on the windows had sucked out color and left the room a brownish-gray. Could I draw it like that? A place made dusk during the day? The contrast between the colorless space and Malchi's blue skin ... what *would* his skin look like in that light?

“You're so dreamy,” Nathan said softly. I blinked up at him.

“Huh?”

“You're off in your head.” He squeezed my shoulder. “What're you doing in there?”

My cheeks heated.

“I was thinking of drawing that room. All the color got sucked out of it so I wondered what Malchi would look like. If he's all ink and that place was like paper that absorbed all the color. I could do it as a wash. Or have him stay just as blue, like he's fundamentally unaffected by his environment. That'd mean something about his mythology ...”

“Hmm, yeah. If light makes color perceptible, what would it mean if something's perceptible even without light. Would it mean something about what he does to light, or about what he does to people's ability to see. Or are those the same thing with regard to color.”

A warm happiness washed over me like a spill of yellow and I reached for Nathan's hand.

“You know, we keep the places we go on In Profundis pretty chill because we're not trying to get anyone arrested. But if you want to see something ... I know a place that might make an amazing setting for you to draw. But it's a little, uh ...”

“Completely illegal and dangerous,” Helen said. “Tell me you do not sneak in there anymore, bro.”

She rounded on Nathan, stopping him on the sidewalk.

“No. Well. Just every once in a while. Not in a long time!” He insisted when Helen glared.

“Where?” I asked.

Nathan’s eyes were shining as he turned to me.

“The old City Hall station. They closed it in the forties, but it’s gorgeous and you *can*—”

“You *can* get yourself run over by a train, arrested, attacked by rats, or with some strain of mega-tetanus,” Helen said.

“Okay, Czerniaks,” Meiko said. “Maybe we stick with the awesomeness of In Profundis for the moment, and if Nathan feels the need to show off for his boyfriend later it’s really no one’s business except his. Yeah?”

Helen huffed, but nodded and Nathan waved us on. But Meiko’s words echoed in my head. One word in particular: *boyfriend*. Was that what we were? Or on the way to being? Was that what Nathan wanted?

I imagined I was back at home, with Sketch, and pictured him trotting up to me and resting his chin on my knees. He’d look up at me and his ears would perk, as if to say: “Is that what *you* want, Archibald?”

I watched Nathan. The easy roll of his shoulders, the flex of his ass in his worn jeans, the casual hand he rested on his sister’s shoulder for a moment to telegraph that she didn’t have to worry about him.

Jesus, I should be so lucky as to have someone like Nathan as a boyfriend.

*He clearly likes you*, a voice in my head said. And it wasn’t Sketch, for once; it was my sister. Of course, Faye was an optimist and I was her little brother, so it was debatable whether I could take her opinion to the bank.

I tuned back into the conversation to realize I’d missed the discussion about where we were going and why. Wow, I was really not the best at this game. I opened my app again and saw

that we were on the trail of another dot, glowing blue this time, and it seemed to be only a couple of blocks away.

Screens of history that I'm sure really were interesting scrolled past, but I couldn't pay attention because my eyes kept darting to Nathan. Nathan as he ran a big hand over his shorn hair. Nathan as he laughed at something Meiko said. Nathan as he bounced up on his toes excitedly as we crossed the street and the blue dot glowed its proximity.

Nathan as he turned to me and grinned, his dimples devastating, that small space between his front teeth the perfect imperfection. He raised his eyebrows as if to ask, "Are we having fun yet?" and I smiled.

The bar we approached was called The Lead Pipe and Helen winked at me, clearly delighted with herself.

Inside it was dimly lit and no one was behind the bar. Meiko held her phone out in front of her and led us inside.

"Tell me you did not put this thing in the bathroom, Helen."

"No, I promised, remember? After the Steakhouse Incident."

Meiko looked mollified but I asked Nathan, "What was the Steakhouse Incident?"

He smirked. "Helen and Teagan thought they were so super clever because they did a story about how they used to ferry cattle across the Hudson River from Jersey, then herd them across 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue to slaughterhouses for butchers. But as the city grew, the traffic increased and all the cows would cause traffic jams with the carriages on 12<sup>th</sup> Ave, so they built these cow tunnels underground so they could still get cattle to the slaughterhouses and not block traffic."

"The existence of the tunnels has *not* been definitively proven," Helen added.

"Right. Anyway, Teagan and Helen thought it was really funny to end the story in a steakhouse so people would be forced to decide if they wanted to stay and eat what they'd just been reading about getting slaughtered. But they made the miscalcula-

tion of hiding the Black Box in the bathroom so it wouldn't get moved. It was ... unappetizing, to say the least."

Helen shook her head. "I'm sorry, a thousand times, I'm sorry."

"As god is my witness, I will never visit a steakhouse bathroom again," Meiko said. "If I hadn't already been a vegetarian, it would've made me one."

"Moving on," Nathan said, and held up his app. The blue dot glowed in a back booth, and we dug the Black Box out from under the bench. Meiko flipped open the lid to reveal the QR code and scanned it, holding up her phone.

*You must use the lead pipe to unlock the door,* the screen said.

"Ohhh, right, I forgot," Meiko said. She flipped to the screen with the picture of the lead pipe and tapped it. The screen shattered as if the pipe had hit the glass, then dissolved into a green checkmark. Meiko scanned the QR code again, and this time, a picture of a martini popped up.

*Greetings, tipplers. Even with Prohibition over, the evils of alcohol are myriad, as we can see from the death of Alistair Keynes. It wasn't the habit of the bottle that got Alistair, however. It was one of them on fire. Alistair Keynes perished in a fire begun when a man dropped a lit match into a bottle, causing the bottle to explode. The wooden structure that once existed on this site caught flames quickly, blocking the only exit. Alistair was one of seven who died in the fire.*

Flames consumed Meiko's screen and resolved into an image of the inside of a church.

*Arthur Keynes, the eldest of the three brothers, was a religious man, just like his friend and sometime investor John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Pay your respects in Washington Heights, and pay with the password.*

The screen was consumed by flames again, and then settled into flaming words—In Profundis—against the background of gothic arches.

"Did you really?" Nathan said, and Helen grinned and winked again.

“Dang, girl!” Meiko said, and high-fived her.

I had no idea what they were talking about, but they all seemed excited so I just scanned the QR code with my own phone and stared at it.

“The Cloisters?” I said, finally putting together the arches and Washington Heights.

“Yay! Yes,” Helen high-fived me too.

“I can’t believe you got Dave to—”

“Hush,” Helen said. “Don’t ruin it for Archie. It’s nice to have someone along who hasn’t forced me to give up all my secrets for once.”

She smiled at me and they scanned their phones and replaced the Black Box. Helen waved to the woman who now stood behind the bar as we left.

On the train ride uptown, Helen and Meiko talked about a mutual friend; Nathan and Meiko talked about a class they’d both taken; Nathan and Helen talked about some cousin who’d failed out of college. And my mind drifted.

It was turning the day into the panels of a comic. I pictured how I’d draw Meiko—the sleek black of her jeans and bright red of her sweatshirt; the gleam of silver in her ears and the half-smirk of her smile.

I hadn’t even realized my eyes had drifted shut until Nathan slid an arm around my waist.

“You falling asleep standing up, Archie?”

I nodded and leaned into him. He pulled me against his side like I belonged there. I’d wanted just a moment of closeness, but once his arm was around me I found myself turning into him, pressing my cheek against his shoulder. He squeezed me tight and we rode the last stop like that. When we got off at 190<sup>th</sup>, Nathan kissed the top of my head like he was sad the ride was over and I closed my eyes one last time so I could commit the moment to memory.

I’d been to the Cloisters a few times, but not for years. As we

walked up the cobblestone pathway, Nathan slid his hand in mine and squeezed, just like when we'd gone for coffee this morning.

Was this how it happened? Was this how one date became another, and dates became ... boyfriends? I didn't really know. All my previous attempts at dating had been disastrous.

I squeezed Nathan's hand back, like maybe if I held on tight enough and didn't do anything stupid, we could just continue on the way we had been. Well, the way we had been today, that is—not the way we had been when he found me passed out in a cemetery.

At the front desk, Nathan grinned, leaned in and said, "In profundis," to the man working. The man looked to be about forty, with thinning brown hair and freckles. His bright blue eyes lit up when Nathan said the password, and he flashed a boyish grin.

"Hey, Dave, how's it going?" Nathan said.

"Good! You guys are the first ones. I'm stoked." He glanced around to make sure no other visitors were in earshot. "So, you know where you're going, right?"

They all nodded as I scrambled to open the app again. This time, the glowing dot was red, and it was pulsing in the corner of my screen.

"Just step around the stanchion and go behind the screen. It's where we keep a few tools and things. Then you'll see it. Make *sure* you bring it out to look at it so people don't see you where they're not supposed to be, okay?"

"You got it, boss," Nathan said.

"You're a hero of the people," Helen added, saluting him as we walked past.

Dave flushed and stammered out a response to Helen, who just smiled.

I followed them inside, immediately getting distracted by all the gorgeous art and the structure of the building. It was breath-

taking, and the air inside had an almost otherworldly quiet that settled around me.

As I paused in front of a painting, Nathan squeezed my shoulders. “We can look around after, okay? I don’t want Dave to freak out.”

I nodded and we caught up to the others in a cathedral room that I recognized from the image in the app. In a recessed arched doorway off to the side, a velvet rope barred visitors from going through, and a screen stood behind it.

“I’ll go,” Meiko said.

We waited until there was no one else in the room, and then the rest of us stood in front of the archway as Meiko climbed over the rope, ducked behind the screen, banged into something, and swore.

“It’s fine, everything’s fine, I’ve got it,” she whispered, then emerged holding a Black Box.

We carried it outside, wandering casually through the arching stone arcades, and claiming a table in the courtyard.

“You do the honors, Archie,” Meiko said. “Since it’s your first time.”

She smiled at me—a real smile, not her usual smirk—and I felt a jolt of gratitude to her. For how easily she’d welcomed me into her friendship with Nathan, how excited she’d clearly been that he brought me, which meant she cared about him. I smiled back, hoping she could see I appreciated it.

I flipped the lid open, and scanned the QR code. A photo loaded of the very arcade we’d just walked through, with the caption, “Cuxa Cloister, 1938.” Then it faded to show more of the story.

*Just thirteen months after The Cloisters opened, Arthur Keynes was found dead after a private party. With no visible injury, and no witnesses, it was initially suggested that he died of a heart attack. But Arthur was only thirty-nine years old, and rumors quickly spread that the cause of death was poison. Come to the herb garden to learn more.*

The screen flashed and I tapped it experimentally. The words were replaced by another map and a new glowing red dot. Meiko grabbed the box and we followed my phone over to the herb garden. When we'd caught up with the dot, I tapped the screen again.

*It wasn't possible to populate the garden with strictly historically accurate plants, as many that would have grown in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries no longer thrived. But rumors of Arthur Keynes' poisoning came on the back of another accusation of poisoning: that of Lady Granville de Witt Morgan, a prominent society figure, and the unlucky widow of three husbands.*

"Whoa cool, black widow, awesome," Meiko exclaimed.

*Lady Morgan attended the party at the Cloisters, and had attended events there prior to that night as well. Some suggest that she planted poisonous botanicals during an earlier visit so that they were always here, waiting for her should she need them. This seems an overly risky proposition, when she could just as easily have grown them at home, but the story persists. Lady Morgan and Arthur Keynes were seen having words that evening, and the two had a tempestuous history with regard to one of Lady Morgan's late husbands.*

*No one saw the unfortunate Arthur leave the party that night, all assuming he'd slipped out quietly—possibly with a lady who wasn't his wife, for his reputation preceded him. By the time he was found in the garden the next morning, his body was cold.*

*With the last of the Keynes brothers deceased, construction on their hotel was halted permanently. Some say his ghost still wanders the Cloisters at night, searching for the one who killed him.*

"Whoa," I said, and we all leaned in to look at the phone when the words began to shiver and fade. They coalesced into the form of a ghostly figure. Then, without warning, the figure burst toward us, as if it would come right out of the screen.

I dropped the phone, my heart slamming against my ribs, my breath too caught to gasp or make a sound. Everyone jerked

backward, except for Helen, who rubbed her palms together in glee like a Bond villain, clearly too excited to play it cool.

“Yes, yes, yes, it worked, it looked so awesome, oh my god, your *faces!*”

I felt myself blush furiously and picked my phone up. It wasn’t broken, by some miracle.

“Number one, that was awesome,” Meiko said. “Number two, you’re gonna break a lot of people’s phones and they’re gonna be pissed, just saying.”

“Uh, yeah, sorry about that. Didn’t think it’d have quite such an affect.”

I shook my head, embarrassed it had startled me as badly as it had. For a moment—just a moment—it had been like one of the inhuman things from my dreams had fought its way toward reality and found a way out. My heart was still racing and I forced myself to breathe in slowly through my nose.

“Hey, are you okay?” Nathan whispered under the guise of kissing my cheek. I nodded, but grabbed his hand, wanted an anchor to the real.

“Oh, look again, Archie, would you? Make sure the note pops up?”

I didn’t want to look at my phone again and I could feel my hands shaking with adrenaline. I pulled it out of my pocket and handed it to Nathan instead. The note was there: *Please replace the Black Box where you found it. Tell no one of this (except Dave—tell Dave (the dude at the front desk) that everything’s fine or he’ll freak out! Thank you!)*

“Phew,” Helen said.

We didn’t have much time until the Cloisters closed, but we spent it looking around. Nathan, as if he sensed that the startle in the herb garden had gotten to me more than I’d said, stayed with me, and held my hand the whole time.

I loved the ornate triptychs with their somber expressions,

bright colors, and liberal use of gold, and I led Nathan over to one.

“It’s your colors, huh?” Nathan asked, pointing at the scene with deep blues and reds.

I nodded.

“Oh, it’s your period!” I realized, looking around at the medieval splendor that surrounded us.

“Yup,” he said. “I come here kind of a lot.”

“Do you know much about these?” I pointed to the paintings.

“Well, medieval art was all about color, really. Red and blue. Gold, of course. And white. White symbolized purity and innocence, and earthly light. Gold also symbolized light, but it was a divine, otherworldly light. Blue was the color of heaven, and spiritual contemplation. Red was the color of love—like Christ’s love for humanity or *agape*, unconditional love. It also represented the blood of martyrs and of redemption. Red was also worn to ward off evil, at this time, so it can represent protection.”

“We gotta go, bro,” Helen said, interrupting what seemed like it was going to be an epic explanation. “They’re closing up.”

I took one last look at the painting, thinking of it in the terms Nathan had just described, then followed him out.

“Dave, you angel,” Meiko said. “This place is amazing. I haven’t been since a middle school field trip. And I definitely forgot the herb garden even existed.”

Dave beamed as if he were personally responsible for it.

“Yeah, it’s pretty awesome. You know who I saw here once? Theo Decker from Riven!”

I didn’t know who that was, but everyone else hummed and nodded like they did, so I just shoved my hands in my pockets. We said our thanks and walked out, the air chillier as the sun began to set.

“So, listen,” Nathan said to me as Meiko and Helen looked at something on Helen’s phone. “This place I wanted to show you. If

you did want to see, it has to be late, when there aren't many people on the subway."

I narrowed my eyes at him. That was disturbingly vague.

Nathan dropped his eyes down and when he looked up again he seemed a little shy.

"But also, you're probably still really tired, even after a good night's sleep, and I know we've been hanging out for a while. So I totally get if you wanna take off."

The words *take off* landed in my stomach like a rock, and I realized that I absolutely didn't want to take off. I didn't want to stop spending time with Nathan, and I didn't care what we did.

"Okay, let's do it," I said.

"Yeah?" Nathan's face lit up and I realized he'd expected me to leave.

I nodded.

"Amazing," he said. "We've got a while, then. We could walk back downtown for a bit, if you want. Grab some food maybe?"

"Sure."

"Great, I'm starving." He squeezed my hand again, then paused. "You sure you're into this? I should ask, I guess—are you afraid of the dark?"

"Uh ..." *Only when I'm home alone and I can't tell what's real and what's a dream.* "Not really."

"Because we don't have to do this."

I looked up at him. He was so handsome, and so cool. I couldn't believe he was here with me right now.

"I want to," I said. "I want ..."

"What?" he murmured, leaning in.

"I just want to stay with you longer."

I felt myself flush deeply at the words. They had come out so much rawer than they'd sounded in my head. So much like a little kid.

But Nathan didn't laugh. His eyes burned into mine and he nodded.

“Me too, Archie,” he said. And it felt like we understood each other. That we might not know what this was between us, or why, but we both felt it. The attraction. The pull. The need to see more, learn more, uncover more.

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Hours later, we’d had dinner, stopped for a coffee because I was falling asleep at dinner, detoured to see a movie because even after I perked up we realized we had a lot of time before the crowds on the subway would thin out, and walked around a lot. Nathan had asked me roughly a hundred times if I’d rather go home and do this another night. I was exhausted, so I wasn’t exactly sure why I insisted on it being tonight. But now that it was getting really late, I got a second wind. Well, maybe a third wind.

Something else had happened, somewhere between the end of the movie and getting another cup of coffee. I’d relaxed. Some early warning sign that usually kicked my nervous system into high alert whenever I was around new people seemed to have powered down. As if constant exposure to Nathan over so many consecutive hours had soothed it into sleep mode.

Now I felt a bit of a rush at being on this adventure with him. I felt excited. I felt a little bit reckless.

Reckless enough that when he tipped his chin down to check the time on his phone, I slid close and kissed him.

“Hi,” he said, caught off guard, but he put a hand on my hip to hold me near.

“Hi.” I smiled at him. “I’m excited now.”

He raised an eyebrow and tugged me a little closer.

“You don’t say.”

He kissed me again, lingering this time, and when he let me go I felt the heat buzz between us. I was cold, tired, perhaps a bit slap-happy, and had no idea what I was in for. But standing on

the sidewalk, kissing Nathan in the middle of the night, I didn't care about any of it.

Someone whistled as they walked past and we broke apart. Nathan winked at me and checked his phone one more time.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go down to the platform."

We descended the staircase and stood on the platform for a while, waiting to see how many people were around. After ten or fifteen minutes, Nathan squeezed my shoulder.

"All right, after the next train. We'll go down here." He pointed. "Walk where I walk, okay? The third rail switches sides at one point, so let me go first and don't go ahead of me. I'll tell you when it changes."

I nodded, suddenly nervous, and bounced on my toes.

"You okay? Still wanna do this? We don't have to." He said it almost fiercely, like he wanted to make sure to protect me from myself if I was conflicted.

"I'm good," I said. "I want to."

Nathan laid a kiss on me, then grinned and grabbed my hand.

"Okay. Be very careful. Remember, walk where I walk."

When the next train came and the last people on the opposite platform left, the station was empty.

"Now."

Nathan moved fluidly, like he'd done this a hundred times. And hell, maybe he had. Down the ladder and onto the tracks, he waited for me. He pointed at the third rail to reinforce his point and I nodded.

Then I followed him into the dark.

*In profundis*, indeed.

My heart was pounding with a mixture of excitement and fear. I took care to walk where Nathan walked and used my phone as a flashlight the way he was. It illuminated the tracks and the tunnel in jagged swatches, and made the dark around us seem darker if I didn't look up often.

At the sound of a train, my heart gave a jolt and Nathan tugged me down to crouch.

"It's on the other track," he said, pointing over the concrete divider.

"How do you know?" I asked, and I could hear my voice shaking even with the rumble of the oncoming train.

He leaned close to me and stroked my cheek.

"I used to do this a lot. A *lot*. I promise, we're okay. How are you doing?"

I nodded, but my heart was pounding.

"It's okay, really." He had to almost shout to be heard and I felt myself start trembling. Nathan leaned in and kissed me, holding me steady with his hands on my shoulders. He kissed me as the train blasted past us on the other track, the whole tunnel rumbling, the rails shaking beneath my feet. He kissed me as I shook, kissed me until the train had passed.

"Jesus," I breathed, the relief making my thighs tremble.

"You're brave," he said, helping me up. "That's so hot."

That startled a laugh out of me, and Nathan winked.

"Okay, let's go."

As we walked, I felt my mind begin to shift the scene in front of me into panels. I imagined how I could evoke the simultaneous sense of enormity and claustrophobia that attended the track stretching endlessly ahead and the dark encroaching from behind. Malchi could see in the dark, so he wouldn't need a light source, but in order to render anything but a spill of dark ink on the page, I'd need to introduce one.

"Here," Nathan said, holding out a hand to stop me. "The rail switches sides. Step over. Carefully."

I stepped exactly where he stepped, and we kept walking. It seemed like the tunnel went on forever, but I realized it could only have been a couple of minutes since we switched sides.

Nathan froze and I almost bumped into him. He stood still, listening. I heard it too: an eerie whooshing sound, like the flutter

of enormous wings, or the slither of something dry and ancient. My heart raced and my palms sweat, and then Nathan's shoulders relaxed. It was gone.

"Jesus," I breathed.

He motioned me forward but I noticed he was walking faster now.

"Almost there," he said without turning around. I thought I could see light bleeding from around the corner. Just the tiniest lifting of the darkness. Then the track began to curve and I heard Nathan let out a sound of excitement. There were lights now and I felt my stomach unclench.

A minute later we were there. Nathan sprung up onto the platform and I followed him, if with slightly less grace.

Vaulted ceilings arched over the track and the platform, tiled in shades of green and white. A plaque announced we were in City Hall station, and it was stunning, even in the dim light.

"Do *not* tell my sister we came here. Either of them. Any of them. Jesus, I forgot how nerve-wracking that walk is. You okay?"

I nodded and Nathan grinned.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

He spread his arms wide like he could hug the whole platform. He looked so damned happy I couldn't help but feel happy too.

"Why'd they close it when they clearly spent so much time and money on it?"

"See this curve?" He pointed at the elegant arc of the track. "It's so tight that as trains got longer, they had trouble going around it with any speed. It made a horrible screaming sound. And from this line people would have to go upstairs and then down to the other side of the platform to transfer, which was a pain. So, with the Brooklyn Bridge station so close, people started just using that station instead. This one got so little use finally that they closed it in the forties.

“What a shame.”

“Yeah. It really is.”

To stand there, where people didn't stand anymore, looking at something so beautiful that no one got to see anymore made me the same mix of happy and sad that I often felt while drawing. Dragging to life a thing that wasn't real. The competing exhilaration and regret that it existed only on the page.

“Come look at the skylight,” Nathan said.

We walked farther and I looked up at what seemed like blue-black glass, but I realized was because there was no sunlight coming through it. To have traveled this far underground and still be able to look at the sky ... it took my breath away.

The sound of a train coming prompted Nathan to take my hand and lead me up into the stairwell. The whole thing was also tiled. The detail was staggering; I couldn't even imagine how long it must have taken.

We stayed quiet as the train went past, screeching around the curve as Nathan had said. By now, my heart had started pounding and slowed so many times, I felt flooded with adrenaline, my knees shaky and my head light. Nathan reached out and absently touched my shoulder, attention on the tracks below, and I pressed him against the wall and kissed him.

He made a sound of happy surprise and his arms came tight around me. I kissed him until the train was long gone and my lips were tingling. I kissed him stupid and then I kissed him some more. When I pressed tight against him, he groaned and grabbed my ass, shifting our erections together.

I threw my arms around his neck and panted into his mouth, my whole body as electrified as the third rail. We kept kissing, like it was all we could do, and Nathan groaned into my mouth, then shifted us, pressing me against the wall. He tipped my chin up and kissed down my jaw, then latched onto the side of my neck and sucked.

“Oh!” I cried out, shuddering as pleasure shot through me,

and my cry echoed through the empty station. I slammed one hand over my mouth and grabbed Nathan's shoulder with the other.

"Mmm," he cooed into my ear. "God, I love seeing you like this. Your flushed skin, the sounds you make." He groaned again and then palmed my ass as he kissed me. I melted against him, all sense of where we were pushed out of my mind as his strong hand squeezed my ass. I ground my hips against his, seeking friction, and breathing heavily.

"Nathan, Nathan." I was saying his name and I didn't know what I wanted.

"Archie." His voice was low and filthy and it promised everything. "I want you. Fuck, I want everything."

I whimpered as he ran a palm over my neck and squeezed slightly.

"But not here," he said.

My eyelashes fluttered open and I remembered that we were in an abandoned subway station where we weren't allowed. I huffed out a laugh, then Nathan kissed me, deep and hot, hand still at my throat.

"You wanna come like this, baby? My hand at your throat, in a place that no one else gets to see."

I nodded immediately. "You have—oh fuck—a history kink," I giggled while Nathan undid my jeans and slid a hand inside.

I'd meant it as a joke but his eyes met mine with a kind of wonder.

"I think I'm developing a hell of an Archie kink," he murmured.

My heart fluttered, but then he was kissing me again, one hand at my throat, the other working my straining erection with long, delicious pulls. Pleasure liquefied my knees and tipped my head back so I could get more air. Nathan's lips slid to my throat and I could feel my skin burning. I grabbed his shoulders as he delivered a delicate bite to my neck that made my hips jerk.

When he dug in and sucked where he bit, I was a shivering, moaning mess. He sucked harder and stroked the other side of my neck and I was gone. Back bowed, mouth open on an echoing moan, I came in his hand.

White-hot pleasure seared up my spine and pulsed through my cock as I shot, and Nathan slammed his mouth over mine as my moan became a scream.

My orgasm left me trembling and unsteady, and I reached for Nathan's fly to find it already open. I grabbed his hip and pushed his hand out of the way so I could stroke him off. He was close already, eyes blazing into mine, cheeks flushed. He leaned in and kissed me as my hand moved on him.

He was leaking and straining, his lips desperate on mine. I tightened my hand on him and felt his hips jerk. I did it again and tugged lightly on his balls and his mouth savaged me.

I jerked him tight and rough and he tore his mouth away and buried his face in my shoulder. With another hard stroke and a twist at the head, he froze and then came, moaning my name.

We both collapsed against each other, letting our breath even out. Finally, we dragged our pants up, smiling at each other even as we wiped our hands off on our jeans.

"Don't worry," Nathan said, running knuckles down my cheek. "The way out is a lot faster."

"I'm not worried," I said.

And it was true.

Standing underground, walking into the dark unknown—as long as I was with Nathan, I was right where I wanted to be.

To be continued ...



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roan Parrish lives in Philadelphia, where she is gradually attempting to write love stories in every genre.

When not writing, she can usually be found cutting her friends' hair, meandering through whatever city she's in while listening to torch songs and melodic death metal, or cooking overly elaborate meals. She loves bonfires, winter beaches, minor chord harmonies, and self-tattooing. One time she may or may not have baked a six-layer chocolate cake and then thrown it out the window in a fit of pique.

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