



**FIFTY
FEET**
of
TROUBLE

JUSTIN ROBINSON

TROUBLE IS PILING UP...

The door opened, and the rain grew even louder. Lightning flashed, silhouetting someone who didn't need that kind of theatricality to get her point across. It was Pilar O'Heaven, all fifty feet of her. She was dripping from the swim from Catalina Island to the mainland, her blonde hair hanging loose around her shoulders. She was in her famous leopard-print bikini, and I am a little ashamed to admit looking at her more closely than I might have otherwise. She was a well-built woman, with a body sculpted by her daily swim. As she pulled a giant towel from a hook in the foyer, she looked strangely vulnerable, not something I would have expected to see in a giantess.

I had to remind myself of a very simple fact: she was fifty feet tall. She came into the living room, wrapping her towel around herself to end the show, and looked down at me with a pair of brown eyes so warm I no longer needed that fire.

Yeah, I was in trouble all right...



PRAISE FOR FIFTY FEET OF TROUBLE

“Told with irresistible charm, *50 Feet of Trouble* blends a '50s monster-film setting with a Raymond Chandleresque sensibility to tell a noir tale, often with tongue firmly in cheek.”

—John F.D. Taff, Bram Stoker Award-nominated author
of *The End in All Beginnings* and *I Can Taste the Blood*

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**FIFTY FEET
OF
TROUBLE**

JUSTIN ROBINSON



Candlemark & Gleam

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For Lauri.

ONE

The pitcher was melting in the late August heat. Standing on the mound in the center of Gilmore Field, his right arm hung loosely just past his knobby knees, the ball imprisoned behind six-inch yellow claws. The bluish fur popping out of his collar and at his wrists was actually steaming. He mopped his brow with the back of his glove, a giant web of leather that looked like it could comfortably palm a bowling ball.

Wendigo were not built for the heat.

Even his name, Snow, written on the back of his jersey over a lucky seven, was a bad joke. I don't know what possessed him to come to Los Angeles—ghost, vampire hypnosis, or mummy's curse—but he was clearly regretting it now. Despite that, it was the top of the fourth and he had only given up one hit (and that on an ogre bunt no one could have seen coming), so maybe the big yellow California sun wasn't doing *that* much to slow him down.

The wendigo swept his fuzzy head to the left and I could just make out his beady amber eyes checking on the ogre at

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first. No way he was stealing second, not with that plodding run of his. Snow turned away, shook off a signal from the catcher's translucent pink pseudopod, shook off a second, then gave a grim nod at the third. He checked on the ogre again, found the monster industriously picking his nose, and wound up. Watching the wendigo gather up his spindly limbs, kick out the throw, and swing that catapult of an arm in a brutal arc was like watching a knot get yanked from a coil of rope. There was no whipcrack, though my mind supplied it, and the speed at which the ball hurtled toward the plate made me think that even if the batter made contact, his bat would just explode into wood shavings.

These things happen in the Monster League.

The batter, a beefy martian wearing a surgical mask over his lipless face, narrowed his goggle eyes, choked the bat with his tentacles, and swung.

The crack, now *that* was loud. And say what you will about life in America after the Night War, the crack of a bat against a ball hasn't changed. It's gotten a little louder, sure, depending on who's doing the throwing and who's doing the hitting, but that pop of leather off ash echoing through the stands on a summer day, that's the same as it ever was. Took me back to when I was little, watching these same Hollywood Stars—though back then they played at Wrigley Field in South LA and all of them had the normal amount of arms and legs—with my dad.

The ball miraculously stayed intact, and I pictured the stitches holding on for dear life as the ball streaked for the left field bleachers. The martian hit the jets. He ran with this slithering, hopping gait, his tentacles grabbing the earth and flinging him at first base. The ogre reacted several seconds later, thundering to second, leaving huge footprints the groundskeepers must have loved.

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The hit was a line drive between second and third and I already knew it didn't have a prayer. That's because of the large gray wolf that had been prowling the infield the whole game. He didn't wear a cap, mostly because no one knew how to keep it on his head, and instead of a jersey, he had a blue kerchief knotted around his neck with LUPUS and the number 4 in red. Lupus dug into the turf, took a few quick strides, and was airborne, snatching the ball right out of the air with his teeth. He was already changing, and I swear the ball left his hand before he was totally human, right into the mitt of the second baseman.

Double play.

Lupus was a wolf again by the time he hit the ground. The crowd popped up, even us humans way out in the right field bleachers. "Yeah, Looper!" Gary Hammond called out, his little voice swallowed up in the roar. Lupus tilted his head up skyward and let them have a howl, and the crowd howled it right back at him. Even, I saw with some dismay, little Gary and Phil.

I sat back down while the Stars headed into the dugout and the Haunts took the field.

"That Lupus," Will Hammond said, shaking his head. "When he hits the majors, it's a Gold Glove for him for sure."

"Doesn't wear a glove. Think they'll call it a Gold Mouth?"

Will stifled a laugh as he looked around. No monsters in the right field bleachers, most of the time, but there might be a couple zombies who couldn't afford any better. This was the human section of Gilmore Field, and from the way the seats were in danger of falling apart, you could tell maybe the team wasn't too fond of their human patrons.

It's not like we were really fans. The Hollywood Stars were a Minor League club in the Pacific Coast League, farming out their best players to the majors. Not "our" players. The Stars

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were under the larger umbrella of the Monster League, and I was still enough of a loyalist that the Human League Angels were my team. We were there because Will's boys wanted to see a Stars game, and it was Sunday afternoon and no amount of species pride was going to keep me from a day knocking back some suds with my friend and taking in a game.

Gary, the elder of the boys, was sucking down his second Bebob cola, and Phil was on his third. The stuff was bright pink and powder blue in swirls that never mixed, and supposedly tasted like cotton candy. I tried a sip of Gary's and it tasted like a rocket of pure sugar trying to blow my brains out of the back of my head. It was made for clowns and gremlins, but human kids loved it too, proving there wasn't much difference. I used to like Coca-Cola in the old days, but there was scarcely a market for it anymore. I didn't envy how crazy the boys would be later when all that sugar hit them, but they were Will's problem. Besides, it was nice having them around. They took my mind off the last time I had been to Gilmore Field.

The Haunts threw the ball around as the Stars' organist played a happy little tune. It almost immediately turned into something dark and gothic, the notes giving the impression of surrounding all of us very closely, ready to carry us off at the slightest provocation. It drifted off into solo after solo—impressive that the organist could even convey the sense of playing a purposeful solo when she was the only one playing the whole time anyway, but she did. The song seemed passionate and angry, the kind of song that might follow you home and furiously demand why you hadn't returned its call.

Such were the dangers of hiring a phantom organist. That, and developing unhealthy fixations on random players and fans.

The bottom of the fourth kicked in, and since the Stars were already up two runs to none, I leaned back. Across the park,

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beyond the first baseline on an advertisement, Miss Hollywood Star offered a wink and a come-hither look, inviting all of us to SEE THE STARS IN HOLLYWOOD! She was Jayne Doe, a doppelganger who'd earned her fame as the in-house model at *Twilight Visitor* magazine. It was a little unseemly if you ask me, even if she was dressed like a normal, albeit shapely, housewife. That wasn't the kind of magazine you wanted to show kids—but then, most of my dislike was because it was a monster magazine. If it were just something wholesome like half-naked women, I'd have a lot less of a problem.

I watched a killer clown hit a double and zoom through the bases, his shoes honking. He slipped on a banana peel and slid into second. I couldn't help but wonder if he would have made it to third if he didn't have the urge to make everything funny.

I laughed.

"What?" Will asked. "Never met a man who thought clowns were funny."

"No, it's not that. I was just thinking. How much has changed, you know. Time was, we'd be watching men play this game."

"White men," Will said.

"Well, yeah."

"Not *that* much has changed, Nick." He surveyed the players. Will and I were friends, but the truth of the matter is, before the Night War, I would never have met the man. Or if I had, I probably wouldn't have paid him no never mind. I certainly never would have gone to a baseball game with him and his kids. "Look out, boys. Lupus is up."

The werewolf approached home plate. He was almost naked, except for a blue loincloth and the kerchief on his neck. He was a big fella, hairy and strapping like most werewolves. When he got the hit—and he *would* get the hit—the loincloth would explode off of him and he'd run the bases like furry

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gray lightning. The crowd was already cheering, clapping in a rhythmic thump as flesh, tentacle, metal, chitin all slammed together for the Looper. When I heard the crack, I thought for sure he'd skinned the ball. Then I saw the catcher lob it back to the pitcher. It wasn't the crack of a bat.

I'd never seen clouds move so fast. Big, glowering ones coming in from the west, flashing and growling. The thunder was so close, it was starting to sound like artillery and I flinched a little. The rushing sound, almost like applause, was the rain, getting closer and closer until it dumped out over Gilmore Field in a deluge that was so biblical I expected an ark to float through the outfield.

It happened in a matter of seconds. The crowd and the players were so stunned we all just looked upward into the rain like turkeys, like maybe our collective confusion would get the greasy black clouds to boom, "Oops! Sorry about that. We were looking for monsoon season and took a wrong turn."

The rain, of course, did not give a lick that it had just spoiled a perfect day at the park. It came down in fat stinging drops that felt like getting slapped by a drunken leprechaun. The crowd finally responded with a groan and the P.A. crackled, barely audible over the rattle of the rain, that the game was called.

"For what?" some wit a couple rows back demanded, but no one took the bait. We were already getting up, our programs or newspapers held up over our heads because no one thought to wear rain gear on a clear August day in Los Angeles, and heading for the exit.

"What's gonna happen?" Phil asked. "What's gonna happen?"

"They reschedule the game," his father said. "That's why I told you to hold onto your ticket stub. We can trade it for another game."

"But I want *this* game. Looper was gonna homer. You just know it!"

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I smirked. “Looper’s gonna go find a young human woman to...” I noticed Will was giving me the stink eye. “... share a soda with! At the, uh, at the fountain.”

We filed out, and my program wasn’t doing much more than turning into mush in my hands while the raindrops took turns kicking me in the eye. We were all soaked to the skin, and against all odds, I was actually shivering. I didn’t even know it was possible to be cold at this time of year. The wendigo was probably loving it.

I looked up. The sky had totally closed in. Might as well be night for the amount of sun that was around; those big blue-black clouds blotted out everything. I wondered if the monsters realized it only *looked* like night and the Fair Game Law was still in effect. Not that that sort of thing stopped them all the time.

Can’t even go to a baseball game in the goddamn City of Devils.

We piled into Will Hammond’s Packard and drove away from the park. At the corner of Beverly and Fairfax, it was right on the edge of Hollywood and technically not part of Los Angeles. I’d had a little trouble with the Hollywood Sheriff’s Department about two months back, and though I hadn’t been linked to any crimes, I wasn’t keen on another run-in with them. I felt a little better when we rolled into Watts, and then better still when we arrived on Juniper Street, where both Will and I lived.

The monsters were only just beginning to arrive, in lumbering Studebakers and sparking carts and in one case, a tripod striding from street to street. They had been caught just as unawares by the sudden storm as we had and were making certain they wouldn’t miss nightfall. Will pulled into the driveway of his one-story house and we all got out.

“Place is going to be crazy tonight,” Will said, looking up

as the tripod walked over us, momentarily sheltering us from the rain.

“You can say that again.” Tomorrow was Monday, and chances are, I would get hired in the morning to find someone who would disappear tonight. I sighed. “See you later, boys.”

They stopped shoving each other long enough to say, “Goodnight, Mr. Moss!”

I shrugged at Will. “In the grips of the Bebop.”

“You have no idea.”

I jogged across the street, ignoring a vampire brooding under his blackout umbrella. I’d seen the ads for that. There was a big billboard on Flower, up the street from my office. Para-Sol, some new kind of thing to block the sun for those monsters who preferred the dark. Down the street, Sam Haine, a pumpkinhead who used to harass me nightly, was pointedly ignoring me, camped out instead on Mrs. O’Herlihy’s lawn. Sam looked like a skinny, dapper man with a jack-o-lantern for a head. He probably heard about Mrs. O’Herlihy’s award-winning rhubarb pie, figured that translated into a working knowledge of jams and jellies, and thought he could just teach her the whole “vengeance” part of being a pumpkinhead. Still, his heart didn’t seem to be in it. I might have cared had he not spent the previous several months trying to replace my head with a pumpkin.

I let myself into my house. My cat glared at me sullenly from the couch and went back to sleep. It seemed to be implying that if I disturbed it again, I would be hunted for sport. I grabbed a few things off my spice rack and checked outside. All the wards—the evil eye charms, the feathers, the crosses, the wind chimes, and so on—those were just fine. But the powdered deterrents, the sand, the salt, the allward, they were washing away into the gutter. I swore, since that stuff was

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more expensive than I'd like, and wondered what I was going to do. I felt the hungry gaze of several monsters waiting for the moment they could call it night and descend on the lot of us.

I sprinkled the allward on my windowsills and hoped that would be enough. If they broke down a wall, I had bigger problems anyway. I cursed the amount of windows I had in the place: the big one in front, the one in my bedroom, the two in the kitchen, and even a small one in the bathroom. At least it was only a four-room house. As I finished up at the kitchen window, a nosferatu hopped up on the fence separating my house from the alley behind it and squeaked.

"It's four o'clock," I called out to him through the closed window. With those ears, he could hear me just fine. "And if you try anything, I have a cross in my jacket and more bat guano than I know what to do with."

He hissed and dropped back into the alley.

"Like I know what to do with bat guano otherwise."

I watched the fence, waiting for him to bob back up, but he must have taken my warning to heart. Good. I moved along, sprinkling a bit of the stuff along the gap below the window on the door and hoping enough clung on. Then I put a little on the threadbare rug at the doorway to my bedroom for all the good it would do. With everything as secure as I could make it, I locked up tight and settled in with a paperback.

About an hour later, things started up. The sun wasn't down. I knew it and they knew it. But with the sun completely blocked, no one would stop them. After dark, all humans were Fair Game as per the law, and the monsters weren't going to let a little something like it not being night-based darkness stop them.

Around six, I started to make myself a sad bachelor dinner. Outside, a crawling eye slithered over my fence. No way he was

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getting past the lines of sand, even in the rain, and good thing, too. The same time I had trouble with the Hollywood Sheriff, I had tangled with a crawling eye, and once was enough for a lifetime. I settled into the living room with my bologna sandwich and my potato chips and listened to the sounds on Juniper Street, wondering if she was going to come.

Of course she was going to come. Never the right *she*, either.

In fact, I was three bites in when the knock came, barely audible over the hammering rain, booming thunder, and the cacophony of monsters outside.

Cacophony. Hate that word.

I set aside my food and went to the peephole, even though I didn't need to. I knew who it was, though I wondered what she'd look like this time. I was annoyed to find out she'd decided to look like Imogen Verity, the star of the silver screen and an incomparable beauty—when she had her face on—and my former client. Six feet of ice queen, platinum blonde hair, and eyes blue enough to have been yanked out of a mine in the Orient. Not to mention a face so perfect and curves so elegant, she was almost too pretty to look at. You'd probably need special gloves if you ever tried to handle her.

"Hello, Mira," I said through the door.

Because it wasn't Imogen Verity, it was another doppelganger entirely. Mira Mirra, a bit player with a contract over at RKO, who I had met a couple months earlier under embarrassing circumstances.

"Hey, Nick. Whaddya know?"

"Does Miss Verity know you're wandering around with her face? Or is that even a concern with doppelgangers?"

"Why don't you let me in, Nick? We can talk all about this face if you want."

"Um... no. No, I don't think that's such a good idea."

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“Come on, don’t be like that. I just want to talk.”

“No, you want to turn me!”

“Don’t be rude,” she scolded.

I sighed. “Mira, look, I’m flattered and all, but I’m not interested. You’re not my type.”

“My mother used to say ‘How do you know you won’t like it unless you try it?’”

“You can spit out broccoli. You can’t spit out being a monster.”

“Nick! I expected better of you. Is it the face? Because I can change.”

And she did, right there, the flesh running off her skull like melting wax, reforming and moving around to give me a look at the options. The blue eyes turned green, then brown, then hazel, then some color I didn’t know the word for and hurt a little to look at, then back to blue. Her hair went through the paces, darkening to black, then bringing it back up through brown and red before completely going off into the woods with green and blue and gingham checks. Her cheeks got fuller, her body rounder, then slimmer and younger.

“The answer’s still no.”

“Now you’re just being mean,” she pouted. “I think I deserve an apology.”

“I’m sorry, Mira.”

She brightened. “How about a little kiss before I go?”

“Goodnight, Mira.”

She continued to wheedle, but I was past listening. I picked up the paperback, knowing good old Zane Grey wouldn’t hector me until I let him make me a cowboy, and went into my bedroom. When sleep came, I dreamed about the rain washing the monsters away.



Serendipity Sargasso

Two

Not a single monster was washed away, so at least the Almighty was keeping up His track record when it came to my prayers. I know no one actually expected that to be the case, but I thought I should mention it. So when I woke up—right before the sun, a habit ever since daylight had become precious—I checked out the front windows. Habit, you know. There were still a few monsters out front, notably a headless horseman urging a spectral Porsche Spyder up and down Juniper Street in a drag race against his own imagination.

Not only had it stopped raining sometime during the night, there was barely any evidence that it had rained at all. The sky was perfectly clear, steadily brightening to a clean, flat blue.

I went into the bathroom and cleaned up. I shaved, for all the good it would do; by the end of the day, I'd already have the beginnings of a beard. I always left a mustache, mostly because I went through a solid decade where shaving was unpleasant, rare, and difficult, and I still liked the novelty. It wasn't like I was going to make myself better looking. Back in the service

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they started calling me Weasel, and it's not like I didn't see the resemblance. By the end of the war it was Sergeant Weasel, so at least there was that. I got dressed in one of my cheap suits, tied on the matching bowtie, and checked the jacket.

Sewn into the lining were small pockets. Special job my dry cleaner did for me, but I hear a couple human clothiers will actually sell them this way now. In the pockets were the tools I needed to be the last human detective in a city of monsters. First were the vials arranged like cartridges in a bandolier: sand, salt, holy water, chicken blood, powdered potassium, among others. Then were the slightly larger objects, still within easy reach: a flashlight, a Spanish piece-of-eight, a jar of speckled mushrooms, a handkerchief I sneezed my last summer cold into, some makeup remover, a whistle, a cross, and so on. And then the holsters: one for a cold iron dagger and the other for my .32 revolver loaded with silver bullets. The revolver wasn't there.

I went into my closet and pulled out my footlocker. I'd bought it after the Night War, since in those days I never owned anything I couldn't carry on my back, but it felt like the one I'd had in Basic, back when the world made more sense and the monsters walked around looking like humans. Guess things got more honest since then. I opened it up and found my revolver waiting next to a box of silver bullets. I tended to put it into the footlocker whenever I was feeling maudlin. A sad way to try to reconnect with my days in the service, back before... well, now. I checked the load and holstered the weapon under my left armpit. I should have put the footlocker away, but I didn't.

Memories have a way of sneaking up on you, and the locker was where I kept mine. It was full of my old things, the trophies I'd taken from the two wars I'd fought back to back. The things I'd kept from my time in Europe, and the few mementos I'd dragged through the long night of the eight years that followed.

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I'd held onto my Purple Heart and my Bronze Star, a swatch of the chute I'd used in France, my jump wings, and of course, the pride and joy of the collection, my old Luger. I'd taken it off a Kraut officer and had been the envy of my unit for a while after that. Everyone wanted a Luger. The ironic thing was that gun had come home with me and ended up seeing more use in the Night War than it ever had in Europe. More than one werewolf had met his end thanks to that weapon.

The other stuff in that footlocker could have gotten me killed if anyone ever found it. I'd kept the glowing core of the tripod we'd taken down over Sepulveda. The thing was only fist-sized and looked something like an hourglass filled with glowing green goo. I'd kept the Egyptian scarab off a mummy who tried to punch my ticket on the old *Intolerance* set that was still rotting on Sunset. He was a bit surprised when I'd lit the end of one of his bandages, something that never would have happened if Pharaoh brand had existed back then—it was in all their commercials. I'd kept a tooth from the nosferatu we took out near the tar pits. He had learned firsthand the danger of making his home near a bunch of trees.

I had no contact with my friends from the Army, the real army, and no idea if they were still alive or even human. The chances of surviving both wars seemed like such a long shot to me, especially considering how many times I almost got bumped. They lived in my head now, where no one could touch them. My friends from the Night War? I still talked to them—the ones who stayed human, anyway. I haven't seen Mickey in years, but Izzy Rangel and I see each other once every few months and make the same promise to go fishing. Will and I are neighbors, and I still get my meat from Janina Rakoczy's shop.

I shut the footlocker and slid it back into the closet. With a final check, I saw that the sun was up, and even the horseman

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had gotten tired of his one-man race and was zooming from Juniper Street, his tires leaving streaks of fire that shortly guttered and died.

I locked up the house, got into my old Ford Coupe, and drove north to the office. It was garbage day in Watts, so a blob was coming up the street, dipping its translucent pink mass into the cans and eating what it found. Every so often it would swallow the can, too, which would then dissolve into nothing. A pair of zombies followed it, each with a backpack full of powdered potassium feeding down into a hose and a gun, almost like a flamethrower. Whenever the blob got too big, they'd hose its extremities down, which would hiss and evaporate into acrid smoke.

My office was over a dry cleaner, and an external staircase led up to the two small rooms that are home to Moss Investigations. I probably should have thought the name through a little more, since it sounded like I exclusively investigated swamp plants.

Maybe that's why I hadn't had a case in a week.

I parked on the street and went upstairs, hoping my secretary would tell me about a couple of new cases. Felt guilty about that for a moment, since a case for me usually means someone got turned into a monster, but a man has to eat. And pay his secretary.

Who had her head stuck in the aquarium she kept behind her desk.

"Oh, come on. We're open."

She pulled her head out of the tank and grinned sheepishly, which for her meant the baring of hundreds of needle-like teeth. "Sorry, Nick. I caught a nice-looking halibut this weekend and I couldn't stop thinking about it."

So the aquarium *was* filled with things she had pulled out of the Pacific. I'd always had my suspicions. "Cheating on your diet?"

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She pouted. "So you *do* think I need one."

"I never, ah... that is, I've always thought you were, you know. Just fine. The cat's meow. Or the fish's... whatever sound they make."

"It doesn't translate on land."

I shook my head, wondering what possessed me to hire a siren in the first place. Oh, that's right, because Ser was a hell of a deterrent against getting turned myself, and she worked for cheap so long as I gave her copious time off to be discovered. Ser, that was short for Serendipity Sargasso. She was what polite people called a siren and what rude people called a sea hag. Siren was a better word anyway, since even at her most frightening, Ser was no hag. Sure, she had blue skin with thick, wavy yellow stripes like a clownfish. Sure, she always smelled a little like the ocean, and her eyes looked ridiculous behind her goggles, and she was always getting saltwater everywhere. Sure, she had those teeth, and fins for eyebrows, and webbed fingers with little claws, and gills that frilled out like a bright red Elizabethan collar during her frequent moments of embarrassment. She was all these things, but she was also a loyal employee, and one of only a handful of monsters I could trust.

"Ser... I need to talk to you about... uh... "

"What?"

"Your roommate. Mira Mirra."

She rolled her eyes, which were huge behind her goggles, producing such a theatrical look of contempt I nearly laughed.

"What did she do now?"

"What does she always do?"

"It was only because she caught you watching those stag films in our apartment."

"They weren't... ! Well, they were, but they're not the kind

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of stag films I like... er, you know, if I had ever seen a stag film. Which I haven't."

"She won't stop talking about it. Acting horrified, but you know she's not."

"I know that because she's harassing me at home, which you told her how to get to."

"I thought she wanted to date you, and I figured since you liked doppelgangers, I don't know, it might work out."

"I don't like doppelgangers!" I paused. "Um, I mean... I don't like or dislike doppelgangers. Someone's status as a doppelganger does not make them a more or less attractive, um... you know."

"What about ghosts?"

"Stop trying to fix me up with your roommates."

"Suit yourself. You could use a woman around your place."

I sighed. "Any cases?"

"The phone hasn't rung all morning."

"All week."

"I got doughnuts," she said.

"Thanks, Ser. You're sticking around at least until lunch."

"At least," she said, this time smiling with just her lips as she picked up an issue of *Look*. I investigated the doughnuts, and was grateful her diet meant she hadn't picked up the ones they made for sirens and gill-men that were topped with bits of raw fish. Just good old-fashioned fried and frosted dough.

My office was a cramped little thing, and by nine I had to turn on the rickety fan, ineffectually blowing swampy air through the small room. I hung up my hat and jacket and plopped behind my overflowing desk, then spent most of my time staring out through my open blinds over Flower Street. The day looked like it would be a hot one, with no trace of the deluge from yesterday. Not a cloud in the sky and the kind of

FIFTY FEET OF TROUBLE

still, punishing air that made summer in Los Angeles a test of one's mettle. The rainstorm had probably been one of those freak showers that swept through the desert, dumped a year's rainfall in a couple hours, and moved inland, past the two mountain ranges hemming the city in.

It was getting on toward lunch and I was beginning to think I should just let Serendipity go for the day. She was still dead set on being in pictures, and I swear her autographed photo of Imogen Verity that hung on the wall behind her desk had become her equivalent of Mother Mary. Outside, a gargoyle flapped lazily in the direction of the taller buildings downtown, losing several feet of altitude between every clumsy beat of his wings. Probably off to his security job guarding a building that didn't need much guarding. *I know how you feel, pal.*

I straightened up, and even opened my mouth to tell Serendipity to go to the Brown Derby or wherever it was she had decided on this time, when I heard the creak of the door.

"Can I help you?" Serendipity asked.

There was a response, but it was too whisper-quiet to hear. Serendipity poked her head into my office a second later. "Mr. Moss? You have a walk-in." In front of clients, it was always Mr. Moss and Miss Sargasso.

"Send him in."

She nodded, and I couldn't miss the look of distress on her face.

A moment later, a slender silhouette eclipsed the frosted glass on my door, putting my name into shadow. The door swung open, hitting one of the chairs set out for clients, and I saw who it was.

Hexene Candlemas. Maiden in the Candlemas Coven, and one of the more powerful witches in the city. She was a hex-slinger and had helped out on my last big case. She was thin

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as always, wrapped up in a dress that looked like an old quilt.

I smiled as soon as I saw her. It had been two months, and she had been on my mind more and more lately, even though I understood how silly that really was. But that smile died soon after. Her skin was always pale, but now it was sickly. Her bright green eyes had dulled. Even her mass of wavy red hair hung lank around her shoulders.

I popped out of my chair. "Hexene? Are you all right?"

"No," she whispered. "You find people. Do you find toads too?"