

# Halcyon

## CATHERINE FITZSIMMONS

# SAMPLE

HE WAS DEAD by the time Zander arrived.

Zander had expected that. What he hadn't expected was the police investigation. Crouching at the living room window, peering in at the forensics team, he caught snippets of conversation and a time of death of 14:08. Not fifteen minutes before he had arrived. Many implants now sent out a lost connection signal when their power source suddenly went dead, but the potential for false alarms usually meant the paramedics didn't arrive right away and Zander had counted on being able to beat the authorities to the scene.

Worse, Carlisle was still there when the crime scene unit arrived. Only knowing the victim thirdhand, his story was sketchy at best. The cause of death was beyond question, the man's formatted electronics attested to that, but it was still police duty to do a search. They investigated these deaths more thoroughly than they probably should. They were desperate for answers.

Zander could understand.

He remained on edge as he watched the proceedings within. Carlisle had assured him that he received the data file while Zander was on his way to the victim's home. It was a major break in his own investigation, but only if the police didn't confiscate it first. Where could Carlisle hide the tiny data drive where the police wouldn't look?

Zander ducked away from the window as a head inside spun in his direction. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. The constant thrum of traffic roared around him over the fence surrounding the building floor. He crouched in a rare patch of bushes in the middle of the city, the earthy smell of real plants filling his nose. The buildings around him still towered into the air, but only one layer of road passed overhead and a greater amount of natural light reflected off the walls overhead to illuminate the complex's lawn than Zander normally saw. The victim must have been fairly well off to be living this close to sky level alone.

Shifting, Zander pulled out his cell phone and held it up to the corner of the window, using its camera to glimpse the inside of the apartment. The officers standing near the entrance to the unit with Carlisle shifted and prepared to leave. Carlisle was not in handcuffs. Zander hoped the police had not searched him. Pocketing the phone, he disentangled himself from the bushes and stood. He crept along the side of the building beneath the row of windows, making his way around the corner and past the side door toward the front entrance.

At the corner along the front wall of the complex, he paused and peered carefully around the wall to watch the main entrance. The police officers and Carlisle came out the front door shortly, still talking.

He knew he shouldn't be here and knew he was in dangerous territory hanging around this close to a crime scene. All it would take was one good look at him and his face could be in the memory banks of every cop in the city. However, when Carlisle messaged to tell him about the victim, he had to come himself. He hadn't expected a hit so soon.

Finally, the officers waved off Carlisle. With a nod, he turned and began walking through the grass toward Zander, hands buried in his jacket pockets. Zander stepped back, but not far enough for Carlisle to keep from nearly running into him as he turned the corner. Carlisle swallowed a yelp as he lurched back.

"Sorry," Zander said. "You got it?"

Carlisle ran a hand through his hair, glancing around. "Man, I haven't had to crank out that much bullshit since high school." Carefully, he lifted his shirt up to his ribs, and fiddling with a patch of skin beside his navel, a pocket twisted open like a car's ash tray. Zander smiled. Known on the streets as a stash hatch, it was a safer way to transport small goods than many other means, and Carlisle's was quality work. Constructed of ballistics-grade plastic to fool a metal detector, the hatch door was integrated seamlessly into his skin and had to have involved expensive and time-consuming surgery to implant it. It wouldn't pass thorough police inspection but most others would miss it.

Reaching into the hatch, Carlisle pulled out a data drive and handed it to Zander. Zander breathed a sigh of relief as he took the drive hardly larger than his small thumb joint.

He glanced up at Carlisle. "This is going to save all of us." Slipping the drive into a pocket, Zander pulled out a handful of bills, which he shoved into Carlisle's palm. "Thank you." The money meant little to Zander. The appreciation did. Carlisle seemed pleased enough to take the cash and slip it into the hatch.

"What are you doing there?" barked a voice nearby.

Swearing, Zander spun and fled, Carlisle following close behind as he jumped the fence at the edge of the property. The officers shouted commands into wrist-mounted radios as they ran after the two men.

*Damn it, Zander thought. I knew I should've just gone home and messaged him later.* Running from the cops was guaranteed to get him followed, but he didn't want to find out if any of his earlier activities had left any outstanding warrants for his arrest. If they confiscated the data drive, all was lost. Cursing himself, he raced down the sidewalk as the officer's voice trailed after him.

"Stop right there or you're under arrest!"

Ignoring him, Zander darted across the street, dodging between traffic. It took little to escape the glimpse of greenery and as soon as his feet met pavement the city swallowed him up again. Buildings towered around him, the fenced-in lawn quickly forgotten in the maze of steel and concrete. The daylight bulbs attached to the underside of roads passing overhead shone down on the crowded streets.

Yelps and curses rang out as Zander darted between people on the sidewalk, the officer's voice yelling out warnings behind him. He had no idea where Carlisle was and couldn't spare the energy to find out. Zander felt guilty about getting him in trouble, since his interview at the victim's apartment meant he would undoubtedly be caught. Zander was hardly safe himself. Police officers were equipped with top-of-the-line machinery to enhance their speed and endurance, as advanced as his own, and escaping would not be easy.

He tore across an intersection just as the light turned red and cars rolled forward behind him, horns bleating. As he spun to cross the road the other way, a flat-bed truck conveying a forklift sped up alongside him. Grabbing the side of the truck, he swung up onto the bed, hoping the forklift would hide him from the driver's view. He grabbed one of the forks to steady himself as the intersection and the police officer diminished behind him. He panted, watching the road fly past as the truck gained speed.

Zander knew he wasn't clear yet. The officers at the scene knew he was there and they probably suspected he had something that had been taken from a suddenly deceased victim. He shook his head, touching the data drive in his pocket. He hadn't wanted to make an escape like that, but all it would take was one scan of the data for the police to take it and Zander couldn't afford that. Time was running out.

As the truck turned a corner several blocks away, Zander could see the officer in the distance finally giving up the chase. He knew that didn't mean he was free. They would put a tracer on the truck and more cops could be anywhere.

At the next red light Zander hopped off the truck. His phone rumbled in its clip on his belt as he jogged over to a nearby elevator. Snatching the phone out of its holster, he answered the call and opened a secure group connection. "Hey."

"Zander, what's going on? Where are you?" He recognized Ryn's voice and realized his follow-up call was late.

“Ran into some trouble.” He arrived at the elevator, but the one going down had just closed its doors and the next one going up was another minute away. “I got it, but...” He swore. A block and a half down the street, a police officer rounded the corner and raced toward him. Zander turned toward the platforms where a few people waited for the next elevators.

“Squirrel,” he said into the phone as he shoved through the crowd, “a quick exit would be appreciated.”

“On my way, chief,” another voice replied. Zander pocketed the phone and leaped off the platform into the open air beyond. Shouts and exclamations rang out behind him as he fell. Sliding his hands into his jacket sleeves, he grabbed the cable of the descending elevator. He slid a few feet down the cable before letting go, grunting as he hit the roof of the elevator. The elevator slowed to a stop as it reached the landing for the next layer of the city, and he glanced out at the streets before him. Through the crowds, he could see cops running toward the elevator from two different directions. People waiting for the elevator pointed and gave him strange looks. Zander jumped off and grabbed the counter cable for the up elevator, descending another layer as the shouted commands of the officers rang out above. The street below was noticeably quieter and darker. He was nearing ground level.

Reaching his legs out, he kicked off from the wall and let go, falling half a story before he hit the cracked road. He grunted as he rolled on landing, hitting his shoulder hard. Lunging to his feet, he continued running, knowing the police would be on the elevator on its way down.

He had descended to the first city level, only one layer of road and sidewalk above ground. The surrounding buildings looked seedy and run-down and the streetlamps were of poorer quality. The daylight bulbs were less illuminating, the light more artificial than on higher levels, and a haze of smog, smoke and dust filtering down from higher levels lingered in the air. Tattered bars with flickering neon logos and grocery stores with signs written in foreign languages stuck out between decrepit apartment buildings. Girders and support columns broke up the streets at regular intervals. None of the people occupying the streets seemed to notice him. A fleeting thought crossed Zander’s mind that once, long ago, this area had been the domain of the wealthy, before three more city levels were built on top of it. The roads and sidewalks were a patchwork of old and older pavement, the newer sections thrown up hastily to support the second city level when it was originally added. Now this level had nowhere to go but further down.

He turned a corner, hoping he could find some way to evade the police. It didn’t help that they would have put out an additional bulletin on him for catching a free elevator ride, unconventional though it was. Stairs between city levels were available but they were few and far between and only modestly maintained. The city liked the revenue from the elevator fares too much to make the stairs more prevalent. In any case, few people wanted to walk ten or more stories between city levels.

Panting, Zander rounded another corner and glanced around as he continued jogging away. Spying the ancient remains of a warehouse nearby, he turned and headed for the entrance.

He paused as he shut the doors quickly but gently behind him, his eyes adjusting to the darkness inside. The floor of the warehouse was still littered with broken pallets and rusting machinery and every high window was shattered. Graffiti marked the walls, though he could barely make out the tags in the darkness. Peering through the broken windows in the metal entrance doors, he sighted the two remaining police officers a block away. They looked around and discussed something amongst themselves before they set out at a slower pace, splitting up as they turned down different streets. He groaned. He had hoped they would give up after this long, but clearly their suspicions of Carlisle had extended onto him. Of course, that was his own fault for running in the first place. He cursed himself again.

Ducking beneath the windows, he crept around the debris deeper into the warehouse. He slid his phone out of his pocket and dialed the last number. Even hushed, his voice rang through the empty building.

“Tell me you’re getting close, Squirrel.”

“I’ll just be another minute, boss,” the voice replied through a haze of static. “I’m having a hard time finding you.”

Zander ignored the title. “I’m not even sure where I am now. Follow my phone’s signal.”

“That’s—harder. I’m—a good signal. Are you—did you hear me?” The reception was getting worse as Zander moved deeper into the warehouse.

“Squirrel? Squirrel!”

“It’s the—did you—I ca—”

The phone cut out. Zander waved it around, but the display screen stubbornly flashed ‘No Signal.’ Transmitters were not common on the first level and the thousands of tons of concrete and steel above him often blocked out cellular signals. Grumbling, he slid the phone away, hurrying his pace as he continued through the building.

As he moved around the remains of a huge machine, a sharp intake of breath drew his attention to the corner of the decrepit machinery. He spun into a crouch, but as soon as he glimpsed the source of the sound, he paused. His eyes widened.

A woman kneeled in the corner of the machine, tensing as she gazed up at him. Zander blinked, unable to move as he tried to make out her features in the dim light trickling through the warehouse’s high windows. Most of her ghostly pale body was covered by a dirty overcoat and cracked leather boots. White-blond hair tumbled out from beneath an oversized flat cap. She was ragged and filthy but strikingly lovely.

“Sorry,” he said quickly, straightening. She said nothing, only stared at him. He squinted, trying to make out her face. “Do... do I know you?” She tilted her head, a flicker of uncertainty touching her eyes.

The doors to the warehouse opened. Zander ducked behind the machine near the woman, thinking that there was no way he would escape cops this determined. The officer's footsteps rang through the cavernous walls of the warehouse, the beam of his industrial flashlight swinging through the air. Zander frowned, feeling guilty about bringing his pursuers to the woman crouching a few paces away. She was clearly homeless and the officers likely wouldn't leave her alone if they found her.

"Sorry about this," he hissed to her. "But I think you'll need to clear out of here. I'll draw his attention, you can sneak out the back door." He nodded in the direction of the rear exit from the warehouse. She inclined her head in return, a tired look crossing her face, but she seemed unsurprised. Zander hesitated a moment as the footfalls came closer.

Nodding to her once more, he crept out from behind the machine, trying to stay out of the police officer's flashlight beam. He knew he had to be noticed to give the woman an opportunity to escape, but he had to avoid being caught as well.

Engrossed in thoughts about the strange pale woman and focused on the officer's movements, he didn't see the broken board lying in his path until he stumbled over it. Immediately, he was illuminated by the flashlight.

"Hold it right there!"

Swearing, Zander broke into a run, maneuvering around the litter covering the floor as he swerved toward an emergency exit on the side of the building. The officer's shouted commands echoed off the walls, sounding like five people at once chasing him. Zander's heart raced from the effort of running and his ears rang from the shouts all around him.

Finally, he reached the emergency exit and flung himself against the doors. The poorly imitated daylight blinded him as he wove between traffic across the street, continuing along the road and wondering how to escape the officer's pursuit.

Then, two more cops rounded the corner ahead of him, guns out and wrist-mounted recorders alight with activity. Zander threw himself to a stop and turned around. The other officer that had accompanied the one in the warehouse came down the sidewalk from the opposite direction. Panting, Zander glanced between the police officers as the one chasing him through the warehouse emerged, gun out. Bystanders on the sidewalk yelped and darted away as the police closed in on him.

"Freeze! Put your hands on your head now!"

Zander continued scanning the area, hoping to find something to use to his advantage. Standing by the railing on the road with no entrances to other buildings near him, he was trapped. His only way out was down to ground level, not nearly as far a fall as from the upper levels but still farther than he wanted to jump. And on ground level, little machinery still worked and the officers could still chase him longer than he could run. If he didn't get away fast, though, they would get a good picture of his face that they could use to

find him later.

“Put your hands up now! This is your last warning!”

Zander swallowed uneasily. The traffic on the street slowed to a crawl as the officer from the warehouse slowly crossed to him, and the people on the sidewalk lingered beyond the other cops, watching the scene with a mixture of curiosity and uneasiness.

Zander’s phone suddenly rumbled twice in its holster. He fought to suppress a grin. Inhaling deeply, he lifted his arms, holding his palms out as he faced the officer that had chased him through the warehouse. The officers approached him on all sides, guns and handcuffs held out.

He let his grin show. Moving a hand to his head, he saluted the officers, then jumped off the road.

Grabbing the railing, he swung around beneath the road and dropped down onto the roof of a dark blue van idling directly beneath. The roof of the van bent down as he landed on it, feet and knees stinging from the impact. He slid off the edge of the van, swinging through the open cargo door and collapsing inside.

“Go!” he snapped as soon as he hit the floor of the van. He braced himself as the van lurched forward and sped down the street, bullets following after it. Moving to his knees, Zander grabbed the handle to the cargo door and slid it shut, then crawled forward into the passenger seat.

“Squirrel, your timing is impeccable as always.”

The driver grinned without looking away from the road ahead. “Just doing my job, boss.”

Zander turned his head to smirk at Squirrel, a wiry and curly-haired man who reached only to eye level on Zander. “How many times have I told you not to call me that?”

Squirrel’s smile never wavered. “More than I can count, boss.” Zander chuckled as he settled in to the seat and buckled his seat belt. The radar warning of nearby police officers on the van’s dashboard went silent and Zander knew that they would not be tracked now. The van rocked as it weaved between the maze of enormous steel girders supporting the higher levels, the buildings and cracked road around them deserted. The haze was so thick, overlaying the air like a yellowish fog, that he couldn’t see more than a quarter mile ahead.

As soon as he was comfortable, his phone came to life with noise, Ryn’s voice growing frantic. “Zander, are you there? What happened?”

He grabbed the phone and opened the group connection. “I’m fine, Squirrel got me. And better yet, I got it.” His hand dropped to the small bulge of the data drive in his pocket.

“Thank God. We’ll see you back at your place, then?”

“Half an hour with Squirrel behind the wheel.”

“Alright, see you then.”

Suddenly, as Squirrel turned a corner, Zander saw the pale woman from

the warehouse, running across the street half a block ahead of them. He gazed at her in surprise, not expecting to see her again after she left in a different direction from the warehouse. She panted, her hair bouncing limply with her gait.

Even as he watched her running, the roar of a speeding motorcycle preceded its turn around a corner a block ahead, following after the woman. Driving it was a tall, well-built man with short, dirty blonde hair. A familiar figure. Zander swore loudly and Squirrel slammed on the brakes, turning sharply down the next side street and revving the engine.

“Oh my God,” Zander uttered. He glanced out the rear-view mirrors on the van at the woman being chased by the man on the motorcycle. “It’s her.”

“Zander?” Squirrel asked.

“Turn around. We’ve got to follow him.”

“Aye aye, sir.” There was no question in the driver’s voice. Zander braced himself against the door as Squirrel spun the van around and drove back down the street after the woman. Remembering the phone in his hand, Zander quickly raised the microphone to his mouth.

“Ryn, you guys head back home, we’ll catch up with you later.”

Ryn’s voice came back swiftly, full of worry. “What? What happened? Do you need our help?”

“We can handle it. Something just came up. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Zander!” cried another voice over the phone before he could disconnect. “You’re not coming back? What’s going on?”

“It’s alright, Chen.” A smile spread across Zander’s face as Squirrel turned the corner. The motorcycle rounded another corner a few blocks ahead.

“We found Elya.”

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