

COSTUME CONUNDRUMS
A Bodies of Art Mysteries Halloween Short

By Ritter Ames

This story falls in the timeframe between *MARKED MASTERS* and *ABSTRACT ALIASES*

Halloween might be one of my favorite holidays of the year, but I wasn't having the best of days. Jack Hawkes was currently MIA while we were in the middle of trying to stop the art heist of the century. I'd counted on him being in London when I returned from Italy, and he knew it, which made his absence even more aggravating. Especially since my right-hand geek, Nico, currently sat in an Italian jail because he turned himself in for winging a man Jack shot. All to save our lives. Well...actually...it was more to save me since Tony B had me in his sights until Jack put a bullet in his shoulder. And don't even get me started talking about Simon.

Long story short, every male I'd counted on the last several months—oh, hell, most for the last half-dozen years—was currently either a fugitive, incarcerated in a foreign jail cell awaiting the foundation's lawyer to get him released, or AWOL. The one who was AWOL, and newest male on my list, currently irritated me the most for being gone.

But then, he irritated me when he was around, too. I think he worked at it.

All the bad guys we'd been chasing or looking for had disappeared, and every one of my sources came up *zip* when I tried to gain information.

Worst of all, in a weak moment when I'd only averaged about three hours sleep for at

least eight nights, I'd agreed to let my assistant, Cassie, plan my Halloween costume. She also planned our entertainment for the night—an evening at the theatre—but she refused to tell me where I was going and what I was going as. Talk about a Halloween trick.

Fortunately, I still had one ace up my sleeve. “We aren’t still going to the theatre and the party, Cassie. Scotland Yard warned us to avoid high risk venues until we know for sure who Tony B worked for when he kidnapped me. Something tells me Superintendent Whatley won’t agree that a Halloween costume is the best way to hide in plain sight.”

Cassie crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. “Trust me, Laurel. No one will recognize either of us in the costumes I picked. And mine coordinates with yours, so don’t think you can talk your way out of dressing up now.” She shuffled papers on her desk, a sure sign she was ticked off. She pulled the laptop closer and kept talking as she typed. I knew her methods of passive aggression, and prepared for a stern, Cassie-style lecture. “Just because you can’t locate Jack and you can’t spring Nico from the Italian jail any faster than Max’s lawyers, that doesn’t mean you can arbitrarily change your mind about something you promised to do weeks ago. You need fun, Laurel. People call here every day and your schedule is back-to-back assignments and rescues. Plus, we’re still working on getting ahead of where Moran and company will strike next.”

“Which is why I can’t take an evening out to play dress up,” I said. “With Nico and Jack both gone, our team is cut by half.

“You can take one night off,” she said. “Besides, Jack will be back soon. You know he’s committed to stopping the heist.”

If he’s so worried about the possible heist, why isn’t he here to help us do the necessary work?

However, I didn’t say it out loud, since Cassie was already mad at me and would likely take his side in an argument. And I was too tired and frustrated about the subject to debate it again.

“I also sent a text to Jack,” she said. “He didn’t reply, but I wanted him to be able to recognize us if he needs to find us tonight.”

“Jack isn’t even here and he knows what costume I’m wearing too? Come on, Cassie.” I fisted my hands on my hips. “I’d better not be the back half of something horrible, like Godzilla, that makes people scrunch their eyes closed.”

“Trust me. People are going to keep their eyes open wide.”

Great! We’d probably be dressed as hookers. “Okay, no promises, but I’ll go with you to Lila’s to check things out. If I’m sufficiently disguised, and if Superintendent Whatley agrees that it’s not a dangerous idea—or at least not too stupid—we’ll keep to the original plan.”

“Plus, if we are followed, it will tell us that my phone was hacked since you don’t even know Lila’s address or what performance we’re going to see tonight.”

“If you’re trying to reassure me, Cassie, you’re not succeeding.”

“Oh, forgot I was talking to the Queen of Control.”

I ignored the jibe, taking a seat in the visitor’s chair and asking, “Has Max said anything about Nico’s release?”

“It’s supposed to be in the works, but he probably won’t be here for a few more days. Max thinks maybe almost a week, and that’s only if New York doesn’t call him into the office first so the legal team can debrief him. I reminded Max that we could really use Nico here in London, but I didn’t say it was because we need him to do some hacking to get us some intel. To be truthful, it’s been too quiet since...well...”

“You can say it—since Jack left us in the lurch.” I jumped up to pace the room. “I can’t believe he just vanished. This was his big priority. He used my team from fear of a mole that we now have no doubt about, mind you, and he’s the one who’s disappeared.”

The phone rang and Cassie checked Caller ID. “It says Scotland Yard, so it’s probably the superintendent calling you back.” She answered on speakerphone. “Hello, sir. Laurel is right here.”

I leaned on her desk. “Hello, Superintendent Whatley, thank you for returning my call.”

“Happy Halloween,” he answered.

“Oh, yeah, to you too,” I replied. “In fact, the holiday is what I wanted to talk to you about. My assistant booked us for some kind of Halloween show tonight, and we’re set to go in costume. Cassie promises we’ll be disguised so well we won’t even recognize ourselves in the mirror. But if you’d rather we—”

“Who knows your itinerary?” he asked.

“Just the makeup artist who’s going to work on both of us,” Cassie jumped in. “She got us the tickets. Would you like to meet us there and meet her? She works out of a private home on the West End. And we’ll be completely disguised, I assure you.”

“I’ll likely be in that area of London this evening,” he said. “So I can be handy if I’m needed.”

“We’re scheduled to be there by five. We’ll make sure we’re on time, and warn the makeup artist you may be arriving. Cass can give you the address.” I said.

Cassie pulled at the pink spikey tips of her blonde hair. “How about I text you the address, Superintendent? And I’ll describe our costumes in the text too.”

“Very good,” he said. “If there are any problems or I hear anything you need to be aware of, I’ll call your mobiles.”

We left that evening and took the Tube. Cassie had finally revealed we were heading to a Notting Hill Gate address, but nothing more.

Several throngs of costumed riders waited on the crowded platform with us, the majority falling into the population for the current zombie craze. My phone gave an anemic ring.

“I need more bars, Cass,” I said. “Be right back. I’ll stay in sight.”

She started to protest. I was already hurrying away but kept in the safety of the crowds. I went up the stairs to the crossover bridge that took riders from track to track, and my mobile range immediately improved. I stood at the railing and waved down at Cassie, about to check my call list when my phone rang again. It was Jack.

I stared at the Caller ID, letting my finger hover over the buttons to tap either Accept or Decline, not sure what I wanted to do. Finally, I tapped to accept the call, but there was only a dial tone. I’d waited too long. He didn’t leave a message.

No way I was calling him back. At least that was my first thought. My second was to shove the phone into my pocket before I pulled up the directory. Instead, I squeezed the phone in my right hand and turned. Plowing directly into a member of the walking dead.

“I’m so sorry,” I apologized to the zombie.

My answer was a something growled that sounded like “It’s okay.” But then the man used his zombie decaying hands to grab me at the waist to steady me on my heels, and I knew this was no ordinary mindless half-being. I raised my gaze to his and said, “Even with brown contacts, I know it’s you, Jack.”

“Superintendent Whatley sends his regards,” he said.

We rejoined Cassie just as the train pulled up to the platform. She hugged him and seemed overjoyed at his appearance. The traitor. I shoved my Fendi's strap higher on my shoulder and hugged the bag as we boarded the subway car.

The two of them finagled things so Jack stood beside me on the train, with us both holding onto the same pole, and Cassie seated across the car.

"I know you're angry with me—" he stopped when I shrugged and turned my back on him.

"I've kept an eye on you," he continued.

"In person or on CCTV?" I snapped, speaking over my shoulder.

"A little of both."

I stared through the windows at the dark tunnel walls racing by. "You should have stepped out and said hello once a week at least."

For an answer, he changed the subject. Sort of. "You've kept your mobile on much more than usual. Almost like you wanted me to track you."

I turned back around to face him. "Don't flatter yourself. I kept my cell on because I wanted you to call and tell me why you disappeared an hour before I hit British soil after returning from Florence."

"I had things to do." He took a deep breath, and I remembered the last time I saw him. When he was doubled over with a couple of broken ribs. "I had concerns," he added.

"You made a promise to be here."

"I said I would try."

This anger thing was zapping my energy. I leaned in and whispered, "We've been out of our league with Nico and you both not here to help. So, are you back? Or is this just a Halloween trick?"

"I'm here for tonight. Possibly tomorrow. Whatley didn't want you in costumed crowds alone, and I managed to pull some strings to get out the work I was in the middle of. At least short term."

"Something as important as what we've been working on?" I asked.

"Something that could be tied to it, but may be even more dangerous." He raised an eyebrow.

I shrugged. "So, is this where I'm supposed to squeal and say, thank you for your service,

James Bond?”

He laughed. “Yeah, and I can’t wait to hear that squeal.”

A lot of the tension between us lessened after our whispered exchange on the train. But as we strolled the darkened sidewalks around Notting Hill Cassie stayed close by us, as if ready to intercede if we needed a buffer. Our destination was a declining Victorian styled two-story, where the makeup artist, Lila, lived and worked. At our knock, Lila threw open the door with dramatic flourish and a symphony of clacking bracelets. Cassie already told me she was, “a frustrated actress who can no longer get parts because everyone in London knows she overacts and tends to break things.” When Lila started talking, I understood the second half of that statement.

“Come in, come in.” Lila threw open the door, letting it crash against the wall, as she waved her arms and directed us to her work area like ground crew directing the landing of a 747. Cassie made the introductions.

Lila’s own makeup was diva caliber, and I prayed she’d dial down her efforts on mine to “afternoon matinee” instead of “eight o’clock curtain.”

“Put your bag over there,” she told me, waving her left hand toward a chair in the corner and setting free a cascade of about two dozen metal and Bakelite bracelets in every color and metallic option.

She tossed each of us a makeup cape. Jack tossed his back. “I’m good,” he said.

“Oh, yes, you are.” She tittered. I wondered if that counted as a squeal in his book? She wagged a finger at Cass and me. “Put those capes on so your clothes won’t get ruined.”

“Speaking of clothes, are our costumes here?” I asked, sweeping a glance across the multi-mirrored space. I was more than a little concerned by this point. If we were set to join the new zombie Brit nation like Jack, I planned to cut and run before my face got caked with fake decay.

Lila laughed and pointed to a couple of black clothing bags hanging from a hook on the door. “Everything is covered, love. Why don’t you get in the chair and we’ll start on yours first?”

Drat. Not really my plan, since I’d hoped to watch how Cassie was transformed and make my own final plans that way. But the two of them man-handled me into the chair, while the zombie man in the room leaned against the wall and chuckled.

I might need to kill me a zombie later.

Cassie kept a hand on my shoulder as she tried to lighten the mood by discussing all the costume ideas she'd considered and discarded before finally settling on what was in the black bags. Lila smiled, nodded, and got to work slapping very white pancake foundation all over my face.

And I do mean *all over* my face. My eyebrows and lips completely disappeared.

I was starting to worry more than before.

"You're not making me a mime or a clown, are you? Because, I promise—"

"Don't worry." Cassie patted my shoulder and looked at me in the mirror as she spoke, "I know your fierce allergy to clowns and your impatience with mimes. Neither option is your disguise of the evening. Though talking should probably be avoid if at all possible.

"Though you could growl." Lila looked up and over my head to Cassie, whose reflection I watched nod in the mirror.

"But the growls only come at the instant of making a move," Cassie said, cryptically. "So staying completely mute is probably for the best."

By the time she finished, caking my hands in the stuff as well, I had the look of a statue.

Jack quipped, "I was worried until you did her hands that you were going for a Venus de Milo. Didn't know how she'd fake that no arms look."

I would have glared at him except the same thought had crossed my mind.

"Actually, I considered Birth of Venus, but I couldn't figure out how we'd do the clam shell," Cassie said.

"And the fact that I'd be nude on the streets of London with just my hair to cover strategic portions of my body." I was surprised talking wasn't difficult, but assumed this could all change as the makeup became more dry.

"Oh, I don't know," Jack said. "You'd get plenty of attention that way, and all those eyes on you would be the best kind of protection."

I looked at him through the mirror. "Please don't help me, Jack."

He laughed.

Trust me. There's something even more frightening when a zombie laughs than when it just shuffles toward you.

"We're not quite done, love," Lila said, using a soft brush to add gray streaks to my

marbled-like face and hands. She deepened the shadows in my stiffening curls, too, making my entire head look like a weathered bust.

Once my makeup was complete, I made way for Cassie to take my place in the chair and moved like a magnet toward the long black bags. My curiosity was off the charts by this point.

“Hey, stop right there!” Cassie warned, pointing at me in the mirror. “You’re going to need help with your costume, so just wait until Lila is finished with me.”

I turned to look at her, a hand on my hip. “Getting a little bossy there, *assistant*.”

“I learned everything from the master,” she returned, smiling.

Finally, it was time. Jack was shown to the kitchen, with Lila adding, “There’s scotch on the table. Help yourself.” Then she turned back to us.

As I pulled down one bag’s zipper I found a heavyweight white dress, stiff and formed with a kind of starch treatment, shaded to resemble the same kind of stony look my head and hands had received from Lila’s talents. I looked at stone-faced Cassie and asked, “Can we bend the material to get into these dresses?”

“That’s why I said you’d needed help.”

Lila had a hanger contraption that suspended my dress from the ceiling. Then she added a stepstool beneath and said, “Duck and go under, careful of your makeup. Cassie and I will hold the skirt out so you have more room to tunnel inside. Once you’re in, use the stepstool to get your arms through the sleeves and your neck through the opening.”

There wasn’t any zipper or buttons. When I got into the costume and unclipped myself from the hanging apparatus, Lila and Cassie each took a hand to walk me down, and then they scrunched the dress along my waist to engage what appeared to be Velcro to shape the garment from the inside.

“The costumer suggested roller skates to give the perfect gliding movement effect, but I didn’t think we wanted to try that option since we’d have steps at the theatre.”

I stared at myself in the mirror as Lila took a moment to dab a little more white makeup along the neckline. “Am I one of the cemetery angels from Doctor Who?”

“Got it in one,” Cassie answered, grinning.

“You do realize they always appear on the Christmas shows.”

“Don’t get picky,” she replied. “It’s the perfect disguise.”

“Tell everyone not to blink, love,” Lila added.

It was an amazing effect. Even without the skates, the dress tended to make me seem to float when I moved. “But can we sit in these?”

“Absolutely,” Cassie said. “Though we’ll likely have most of the skirt piled onto our laps.”

Oh, boy.

“Too bad you didn’t talk to Jack earlier. He could have gone as the Tenth Doctor,” I said.

Lila smiled. “I probably have some things we could use—”

“I’m staying a zombie,” Jack called out from the kitchen.

“Drink your scotch,” I shouted back.

A few careful minutes later, Cassie duplicated my efforts and we were twin stone angels, except for wings. Lila pulled the Styrofoam flying facsimiles from the bag. “Hold still so I can make sure the Velcro matches up.”

The wings made for amazing effect. When she finished, we called Jack in to deliver his verdict.

“Bravo,” he said, clapping.

“Think we’re disguised enough to keep anyone from recognizing Laurel?” Cassie asked, chewing the corner of her lip until Lila told her to stop.

Jack squinted a little and took a long look as he circled the room, keeping us in sight the entire time. “In a sea of disguises tonight, this will likely be one of the best. All depends on who’s looking for you.”

In other words, we wouldn’t fool him. But this didn’t surprise me. I’d seen his superpower in action.

We left soon after, again entering the Tube as we might all be a tight squeeze in a cab.

“We have an hour until the doors open for our performance,” Cassie said. “Anyone hungry?”

Jack laughed and looked at me when he said, “We all know the answer to that question.”

“Be a nice zombie,” I said. “The scotch was supposed to make you mellow.”

While I still hadn’t forgiven him for being gone the past couple of weeks, I really was thankful Jack turned up for the night. I gave him a smile, and he said, “You look like you’re grimacing.”

“She’s supposed to look frightening, not happy,” Cassie said.

Suddenly, my heartbeat sped up. I shook my head and turned face forward to say quietly, “Werewolf at eight o’clock.”

Cassie looked at the ad sheet in her hand. “I don’t remember a werewolf play. Which theatre?” She started looking down the street.

“Stop.” I put a hand on her arm, then I knocked into the zombie’s arm to alert our bodyguard. “Behind you at the eight o’clock position. It’s Werewolf. As in Weasel and Werewolf.”

Jack’s head jerked, but he didn’t try to look and tip off the criminal. “You mean Moran’s blokes? Marker and Firth?”

“Just Werewolf, whichever one he is.”

“Got it.” He pointed to a noisy bar ahead of us. “Let’s go in here and get a drink.”

Cassie moved closer. “Should we stop and let him pass so we can follow him instead? Or are you going to do it alone?”

“Who’s to say he’s going anywhere?” I whispered, I tucked my painted hand in the zombie’s ragged elbow, so I could pretend to “talk to my date” and sneak a look out of the side of my eye. “He seems to be comfortably keeping pace with us.”

“Hence my request to get us off the street to see,” Jack said. He turned toward us as he spoke, but his eyes used the reflective windows to our right to take stock of Werewolf’s position.

We stopped at the bar and he opened the door. We went from the street-lighted scene outside to the dimly lit one inside. Jack ushered us to a table in the back. I was glad to see most of the patrons dressed in costume.

We ringed the table, with Jack in position to watch both the front entrance and the doorway behind the bar. A second later, Werewolf appeared at the window but did not come inside. He looked around, then continued down the sidewalk.

“Aren’t you going to follow him?” Cassie asked.

“No, Jack.” I laid a hand on his. “That may be exactly what he wants.”

He nodded. “I agree. Divide us up so another person can make the move Moran hired done.”

“Oh, good point,” Cassie said.

I stared out the window. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t change the moves a little.”

Jack narrowed his eyes at me. “What do you have in mind?”

“We’re going to make him blink.”

Five minutes later, Cassie and I left the bar via the front. Seconds later, we’d picked up a werewolf tail.

At practically every turn, London has a healthy share of parks and pubs. We’d just left one of the latter, and it was time to utilize the former. A short way down the street, we made a quick turn and “chanced” upon a small green space covering the block. It had none of the size of Hyde Park or St. James, but there were walking paths, benches, a couple of nice statues, and just enough street lamps to create both light and shadowy areas.

Behind, I could hear Werewolf’s boots scrape the path as he followed us.

Our conversation was planned and predictable, and we giggled like we hadn’t a care in the world. But my muscles were as taut as my dress material, and above my smile was a pair of wary eyes. About halfway through the park, the path forked. Per our plan, Cassie and I said goodbye and split up. I headed left, toward Jack already hiding in the shadows.

I kept my pace steady. Until I realized I no longer heard any scraping sound behind me.

Whirling, I saw moonlight reflect off the knife blade in Werewolf’s hand. He was quietly following Cassie.

A real angel couldn’t have flown faster than I did. He had his hand out and reached for Cassie. I plowed into his back, my airborne tackle knocking us both to the ground. But he hung onto his knife, and now he had a handful of my dress, too.

I heard running. Strong hands pulled me away from Werewolf, but the knife sliced Jack’s hand in the process. Cassie hurried over, wide-eyed.

“What can we do?” she asked, holding out a hand to help me up.

Jack was on the ground, Werewolf’s knife close to his throat. I looked at Cassie. My eyes lit on her wing tips above her head.

“Turn around!”

The Velco was strong, but my fear was greater. I used the long thick wings to force a barrier between the two men. Jack could no longer see his assailant, but he knew where to kick. Cassie ripped off my wings and pummeled Werewolf from above.

Suddenly, the blessed sound of a London cop’s whistle pierced the air.

A Met police car arrived quickly to pick up the finally restrained Werewolf, and his knife was confiscated as well. Cassie, Jack, and I had given our statement and our Halloween trick became the best kind of treat to someone in our line of work.

And why did he go after Cassie instead of me? He mumbled the reason under his breath when we spoke and he realized his mistake.

“Bloody hell. Every angel looks the same.”

HAPPY HALLOWEEN, EVERYONE!

BOO!