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The Crawford Legacy

By Andrew Rothery

As a history major at Bay Harbor College, Nicole Crawford was accustomed to long hours spent gathering and then synthesizing information. As daughter of Bay Harbor City Council president Carl Crawford, she was used to spending nights at home, alone while her father was at the office with what he liked to call “annoyingly important business.” The two coincided rarely, and whenever it did, she was more than willing to take advantage of the time. She sat at the desk in her father’s home office and looked over what she had to make. The basement was placed at the bottom of the stairs. Nicole opened the door and ran downstairs.

The basement was divided into two sections. The first was a spacious family room, complete with home entertainment system and comfortable chairs and couch. These loomed large in the murky darkness. Casting shadows created from the blue glow of the TV. It had been left on between channels, so that nothing came through except static. Nicole turned the lights off, returning the room to its usual coldness, to judge from the source of the purple light, to judge from the lights-on-in-the-other-room kind of glow. As she fell through the light, she was overcome with a variety of sensations. She was freezing, burning, everywhere, and nowhere. She was standing still, but falling, and falling fast. She opened her mouth to scream, and got all the air sucked out of her body. Then, as quickly as it had started, it finished. She slammed hard into a cold metal wall, which then slid to the side and allowed her to tumble through.

She landed unceremoniously onto a tightly-woven green carpet. She coughed several times, trying to catch her breath, then saw the dark red stain in the carpet. She followed it with her eyes, until she saw the man slumped against a bank of computers, his knee bleeding profusely. He was wearing a dark gray bodysuit, with black gloves, boots, belt, headpiece, and cape. His face was covered with a featureless gold mask.

“Who are you?” Nicole asked. “What happened?”

“No questions,” he snapped. “Help me into the healing chamber.”

“Are you?” Nicole asked. “What are you?”

“Green . . . button,” he said, wincing as he slumped against the back of the canister.

Nicole looked at the bank of computers. There were several monitors, but only one keyboard. There was a large green button where the numeric keypad would have gone. She pushed it.

The entire room began to hum, and the canister began to glow. The man grew healthier, and less injured, with every passing second. For several long moments she stood there, transfixed by the display. Finally, the man reached up and pushed something on the top of the canister. “It’s over,” he said, coming out of it and limping over to a chair beside the computers.

“What just happened?” Nicole asked.

“The machine did its job. The wound's
been healed, but the damage has been done. I cannot do this anymore."

"Do what?" Nicole asked, her fear and nervousness working to eliminate her patience. "Who are you? What just happened? Where are we?"

"Good questions, all of them. We're in a small, underground bunker outside of town. It has no real name, though I've taken to calling it the Windtunnel. Thanks to one punk kid with a gun, we've witnessed the end of at least one of my careers. I am, or was, Nightwind."

Nicole gasped. Everyone in Bay Harbor had heard the tales of their nocturnal protector, who appeared wherever injustice was and vanished into nothingness. Most people, and she had to include herself in this group, had written Nightwind off as nothing more than an urban legend, some sort of big-city Bigfoot. A few, mostly in the criminal element, thought of Nightwind as supernatural; one ever seriously thought that Nightwind could have been a man, but the evidence was below her.

"But I'm also your father."

Nightwind pulled off his mask, revealing the face of Carl Crawford. "Dad?" Nicole exclaimed. She stood there for a few moments, then said, "I have to sit down."

"Of course you do. I probably should have told you about this before now, to get you ready for when you would have to replace me."

"Replace you? I don't understand. Didn't the machine heal you?"

Carl shook his head. "Yes and no, unfortunately. It has its limits. The healing chamber is great at repairing injuries, but it can't replace what isn't there anymore. Like my kneecap. And you have to become Nightwind, the way I had to when my father retired, the way he did when his father was killed in that plane crash."

"Wait a minute, this is some sort of odd family thing?"

"It's not so odd when you think about it. Bay Harbor has got one of the lowest crime rates among cities this size."

"It's not so odd when you think about it. Bay Harbor has got one of the lowest crime rates among cities this size. Nightwind is the reason for that. There's never been a female Nightwind before, though. It's always been passed down through the first son, but your mother left before we could have one."

"I don't think I can blame her," Nicole said coldly.

"She never knew. But you're right. I don't think I would have blamed her, either. We have to get an outfit put together for you so you can finish tonight's patrol."

"I can't make that decision tonight! You can't do this to me! I mean, I'm only twenty years old!"

"I was eighteen, and I didn't like it either. I got used to it, and so will you. But you're right. The city can probably take care of itself for awhile."

"How are you going to explain how you got here?"

"How are you going to explain how you got hurt?"

"Detective skills are often important in this line of work."

Carl smiled. "That's easy. I'll call it a freak home improvement accident. Bay Harbor is my home, and I was trying to improve it."

He stood, and used his chair to support him as he crossed over to a bookshelf. He pulled an old, leatherbound book off the top shelf and handed it to Nicole. "You're going to have to read this. It's the history of Bay Harbor through Nightwind's eyes."

Over the next several weeks, Nicole found herself busier than she had ever been, balancing classes and her social life with Carl's personal "How to be a Nightwind" class, as he called it, despite the fact that she still had her doubts. She had always been active in sports, especially gymnastics, so physically she would have no problems with the role. She was skilled in self-defense, and couple of pointers from Carl helped turn her strong defense into an excellent offense.

Her biggest problem came in understanding the Windtunnel. There were actually two separate Windtunnels. One, of course, was the Cold War-era fallout shelter. The other was an experimental transport technology. It was used for getting to and from the physical Windtunnel, and for getting around town quickly, thanks to a remote control device included in the costume.

"I am never going to figure this out," Nicole complained, taking off the cape and gloves.

"Yes you will, it just takes practice."

Carl put the cape and gloves on. He touched a spot on the glove, then stepped back into the cape. Disappeared into it, and came out three feet from his original position. "Your problem is that you're actually trying to go through the cape. Don't. Just go toward it, and let the Windtunnel do the rest. Try it again."

She did, and reentered reality outside the BHC library. A quick step back into the cape, and she was back in the physical Windtunnel. "I think I finally get it," she said. "But I'm still not ready to go out. By the way, there's something I've been wondering; where did all of this come from?"

"I found it while I was fighting this clown calling himself Mr. Exit. You're not going to get very many real 'super-villains.'"

"I didn't know it at the time, but he was a former employee of Austin Technologies who had recently disappeared with some valuable tech. All I knew was that I had a chance to regain the ability to teleport that Grandpa took to his premature grave. I had already beat him up pretty good, so I gave him a choice: he could either show me how it worked, or I could beat him up some more. He showed me how it worked. Then, since he had kept all his loot in here, I took him and the evidence to the police, dropped them off, and made this my 'secret headquarters.'"

Carl also showed Nicole many of the possible nighttime patrol routes she could go on. Bay Harbor was a relatively peaceful city, but it still had its share of neighborhoods where one would not want to be caught after dark; most routes went through at least one of them. In fact, Carl had been shot in one of those.

That led to another problem for Nicole. Carl's Nightwind costume had been a spin-dex bodysuit over a bulletproof vest. It hadn't been enough, and Nicole was worried that it would not be enough for her, either.

The day after she voiced her concerns, Carl
had a surprise for her.
“It’s body armor made out of Kevlar: enough to protect your entire body, complete with bulletproof headgear, and light enough to move around in.”
“Nice,” Nicole said as she put it on. “Why didn’t you ever use anything like this?”
“Overconfidence, mostly. But I did have a bulletproof vest, so you can’t say I didn’t try.
She was beginning to warm up to the idea of becoming Nightwind, but then, nearly a month and a half after the night Carl retired, it all fell apart.
“What is this?” Nicole demanded as she stormed into the physical Windtunnel after her last class of the day. She did not notice that she was not disoriented by the transport anymore, but at the moment, she did not really care, either.
“What’s what?” Carl asked. He was busy installing a new operating system into the computers.
“This,” she said, showing a small magazine with the title “Windtunnel.” The cover featured a comic of a woman with red hair and tribal clothing to hide his identity.
“Oh, that?” Carl said. “This great family heritage of ours is a comic book and you pass it off with ‘oh, that’? I refuse to be a part of this anymore!”
“Nicole, wait. Believe it or not, that comic is an important part of what we do. Since it’s a comic, people won’t think about the possibility of a real Nightwind until he—or she—is right behind them, breathing down their necks.”

What made you think that was a good idea?
“It wasn’t my idea. A comic book gets published once a month, and I was Nightwind for twenty-five years. What you have is issue 326. Do the math.”

Thirty years ago? So Grandpa did it instead of you. What difference does that make?
“Maybe it doesn’t. But listen, the City Council owns the Nightwind trademark. We then license the character to Venture Comics. The city uses the licensing fees it gets to help pay for really low taxes. I’m on the Council to make sure they don’t screw the character up, and to deflect any suspicion as to the identity of the real Nightwind.”

Let me guess, I’m going to have to get elected to City Council after you retire from that, too? Our name is Crawford, not Kennedy!” She threw the comic to the floor and turned to leave.
Carl grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him. “Listen, if you feel that strongly about it, I can get the city to pull the plug in six months when the contract comes up for renewal. Before you decide anything, have you read that book yet?”

Parts of it, the Nightwind who helped protect the Underground Railroad, and the one who fought bootleggers during Prohibition and Nazis during World War II.
“Finish it, from the beginning.”
The first white people came to what would become Bay Harbor in the first half of the eighteenth century. There they found a peaceful people, easily exploited, then horribly mistreated. When the first rumblings of revolution began to be heard, the American colonists in the area decided where their loyalties lay and went back to England.
Sixty years later, Americans returned to Bay Harbor. The years had not been kind to the tribe, whose name has unfortunately been lost to the ravages of history, and they were bitter about it. The first wave of settlers was wiped out, with the exception of Zechariah Crawford. The fact he survived led many, though not all, in the tribe to believe he was the Rider of the Winds at Night, a protector who, the legends said, would come at the time of greatest need. He accepted the role, albeit somewhat reluctantly, though there was not much for him to do until the next settlers arrived. In the meantime, he learned how to use the night to move from place to place quickly and silently. When they did arrive, he began to harass them, using what he had learned to sow fear and confusion, and tribal clothing to hide his identity.
His goal was to convince the small town, of which he was a part, during the day, to stay out of the Indian’s village. It was selfless, it was noble, it was brave, and it was, in the end, futile. The town one night decided they had had enough, and set out with the goal of wiping the village from the face of the earth.

Zechariah was with the chief as the village burned to the ground. “Rider,” the chief said, dying from musket ball in his stomach, “our time here is through, we must now depart for the Great Beyond. But not you. The legends say that you have come to protect the land in a time of transition. That time is now, for this land is now theirs, now ours. The Rider of the Winds at Night must protect those who live here. . . . Avenge us . . . then . . . keep them safe. . . . always.”
“I will, Zechariah said. The wind howled through the village’s remains. “The night wind comes . . . to carry us home. . . .” With these words, the chief died. Zechariah then went back to the town, carrying a torch lit from a fire the whites had set. He used it to burn much of the town, but when the sun rose the next day, he was first in line to help rebuild. He kept his promise to the chief, and remained Rider of the Winds at Night, though the name would later be shortened to Nightwind by a lazy newspaper editor.

Nicole closed the old journal and shook her head slowly. Aside from a few small artifacts, there was no evidence that an Indian tribe had ever lived there. Nothing in any of the books she had used in her paper. But it was true, she held the evidence in her hands. The family had always kept the promise; who was she to break it now?
“I’ll do it,” Nicole said, returning to the physical Windtunnel.
Three weeks later, she stood at the edge of the roof of one of Bay Harbor’s taller buildings, a combination of fear and excitement working their way through her. A slight, cool breeze came at her from behind, prodding, urging her forward. She peered down, the night vision lenses in the mask showing her everything in a bright, green-tinted light. She took another deep breath to calm herself, then jumped. She spread her arms and legs out, letting feeling the wind rush past her as she fell. She tucked herself into a ball and turned a somersault, letting her cape catch up with her. Almost unconsciously, she teleported, skipping the rest of
The distance between the roof and the sidewalk below, where she landed, catlike. In, and out, she tucked, looking for the slightest signs of trouble.

She found what she was looking for on her third stop. A group of heavily armed teens were about to attack an elderly man. She crossed the distance, silently hit one in the back of the head, knocking him out, then retreated a short distance. The rest of the thugs cursed violently. "What was that?" one of them asked. She teleported to them, hitting three as she came out of the cape. "I am Nightwind," she said. The small microphone in the mask did its job perfectly, lowering her voice two octaves. After disarming the rest, and helping the old man to safety, she laughed. She was Nightwind, and at night, that was enough.