



HIGHWAY TO HELL

ALEX LAYBOURNE

Highway to Hell

By Alex Laybourne

Published by Alex Laybourne

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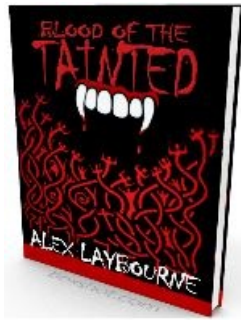
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YOUR FREE BOOK IS WAITING!

Six gruesome murders in two days,
a farm house burned to the floor,
and panic on the streets.

For Sheriff Ian Raskin, this is just the
start of a nightmare ride that will
take him to the edge of his own
abilities where a monster lies in wait.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first wrote Highway to Hell close to seven years ago. Since then it has gone through several editions, through publishers and self-published endeavours. Much like the characters that you will meet in the coming pages, this book will not quit. It will not lie down and roll over. So here it is again, ready for the world. This was the first book I ever wrote, it holds a special place in my heart, and I hope you all enjoy reading it.

DEDICATION

This is for my wife Patty, and our wonderful children; James, Logan, Ashleigh, Damon, and Riley

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PART I

DEATH

To sad humanity alone, (Creation's triumph ultimate). The grimness of the grave is known. The dusty destiny await...Oh bird and beast, with joy, elance effulgently your ingorance! Oh man, previsioning the hearse, with fortitude accept your curse!

Dark Truth by Robert Service

Chapter 1

Marcus (Plus One)

Marcus Fielding looked at his watch; he was halfway through his shift, the last one of his current rotation, not to mention the last shift before his three-week vacation. It was a sort of second honeymoon. He and his wife had been together twenty years the previous April, yet had never been away just the two of them. They had always had at least one kid tagging along; first it was the twins, Erica and Bryony, then Roger, and finally little Marcus Jr. Not that Marcus cared. His kids were his life, and he would do anything for them.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand before replacing his cap. It was the middle of July and the temperature had been stuck in the low thirties for over two weeks already. While the heat was welcome, the new bulletproof vests the force had just issued made the officers who wore them lose fluid quicker than they could consume it. All in the name of safety, the duty sergeant had said. “Easy for him to say”, Marcus had grumbled along with all the others in his section at the end of their first shift wearing the new vests. He remembered that there had been a queue of people by the toilets waiting to wring their shirts out before putting them in their bags.

“I’ll make one more round and then head back to the car. I’ll meet you there,” he spoke into his radio using another recent addition – the covert earpiece and microphone.

“Okay, I’m done up here anyway. There’s nobody...it’s too hot. Everybody’s down at the beach,” a young voice answered him; optimistic as ever, his love for the job still passionate and unbridled.

Simon Dillings had been on the force for three months and was the lucky protégé of Marcus. The only problem Marcus and every other officer he knew had with tutoring a rookie was the foot patrol. Although it did bump him up over quota, not to mention it was a tried and tested method of breaking in the new guys, showing them it’s not always gunfights and car chases like you see in the movies.

“Lucky them. Well we’ll head in for some grub and then you can impress me with your paperwork skills again. How’s that sound?” Marcus asked, grinning as he pictured Simon’s face drop, his glasses slip down his nose, and his mouth screw up, pursing his lips together in a way that made him look constipated. Marcus liked the kid. He was a good, honest guy, and he would go a long way.

“Boy, sounds like a party. You sure do know how to spoil a man,” the voice answered back, a little bit of attitude finally beginning to crack the ‘good-boy’ rookie shell.

The town center was quiet, with the age demographic definitely favoring the slow moving older citizens whose idea of causing trouble ended with whispering about someone at the local bingo hall or bridge club meeting. Deciding to cut his route short, Marcus turned left at the midway point of the high street and entered the covered shopping arcade. It had just been renovated a couple of weeks before, but the local youths had already managed to tag two walls with vibrant paint and even more colorful language. Truth be told, Marcus was surprised

it had taken them that long. The town wasn't known for being the most picturesque place in the country, and with an unemployment rate that never seemed get any lower, benefit claimants flocked to the town in droves; which in turn had led to council estates springing up wherever there had once been a bit of green ground where the kids could play.

Unlike Simon, Marcus had lived in the town his whole life and had watched as it made the transition from a small coastal English town to a place the size of a small city. Now it was on the cusp of linking up with the three surrounding towns, all of which were suffering the same fate. Marcus knew it would only be a matter of time before someone would raise the idea of combining them all.

Easterton had once been nothing more than a proud and well-respected fishing village which grew as the industry it housed did. Then, overnight, the fishing moved away...taking the majority of the jobs with it. Yet the people had stayed; they were settled, had families, and so the next generation of employment arrived. Factories rolled into town offering short-lived salvation to the locals. But the eternal quest for cheaper labor played its part and they all watched as, once again, their industry was taken away, this time to make room for the immigrants who were not only willing to work, but more than happy to do so for a much lower remuneration.

Marcus knew firsthand what a crappy place the world was, and that was in part why he decided to join the police. He wanted to be able to say the neighborhood that his kids would grow up in was safe. It was a losing battle, he knew that, but he had never been one to just cover up and take the abuse.

Marcus noticed that three shops had decided not to open at all today. Each had signs in their windows advising potential customers that the temporary closure was a result of the near unbearable hot weather. They were small, family run establishments. One dealt in leather bags, and another sold handmade cards for all occasions – or so the sign in the window claimed. The last was a craft shop, its window filled with knitting patterns; wool of every color imaginable lined the back wall as if it were where God had made his Technicolor Dreamcoat.

None of them would see the end of the year. It was a sad fact of small town life that no small business could compete with the bigger corporations, many of which were part of international consortiums and so not dependent on the locals to survive.

Stopping, Marcus bent down and grabbed an empty cola can and threw it in the bin that was about half a meter away. 'Preservation of Public Image' had been the session that asked every officer to stop and pick up litter while on duty. Marcus and his colleagues had another name for it, but complied nonetheless. He whistled to himself as he moved further along; not a song, but just a jaunty tune that seemed to grow in his head.

Marcus's stomach growled. He had skipped breakfast that morning, and now he would be made to be made to regret it. He patted his trousers and the pockets of his vest and then the pockets of his sweat-soaked shirt. Nothing. Then he saw it: his wallet, on the table beside the front door. Sitting, waiting for him to grab it – only he had gone out the back that morning.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath.

He looked at his watch, annoyed with himself. In truth it wasn't the fact that he forgot his wallet, or even his grumbling stomach that made Marcus frustrated. He had just learned over

the years that something always went wrong when he was unprepared.

Before joining the force, Marcus had been a boxer; a light heavyweight, and one with a lot of potential if the people back then were to be believed. He had a record of 21-0 with 18 knockouts when his manager Walter Whitney had first promised him a title fight. Walter had been a small, reptilian-looking man with the cold beady eyes of a shark and a temper to match. He had been Marcus's manager from the beginning, ever since he had first spotted him sparring at the local fitness center. He had been big and fast, and even as a youngster had had the power to stop most of the other fighters in his gym. He had been described as the perfect mix of George Foreman and Joe Frazier with his raw power yet graceful style.

But it had all begun to crumble around his ankles one afternoon, a matter of days after he had knocked out the number one contender for the WBO title at the start of the fifth.

He remembered it like it was yesterday, a fact helped by his regular repetition of the tale at the many gatherings he attended. It had become his trademark party tale, one that could be rehashed as often as required without getting stale. Of course his children had also loved it, still did – or at least so they told him.

He had only come into the gym to pick up his running shoes, but he had gotten to chatting with some of the other fighters who had been milling around waiting to start training. Big Joe – one of the trainers – had spotted him, and came across, telling him that Walter wanted to see him up in the office. He looked up and saw Walter's shadow looking down on them from behind the dirty glass. He wasn't alone; someone else was up there. Marcus had no idea who it was; his mind wasn't thinking about his next fight, let alone a shot at the champ, Virgil Hill.

Despite the strange feeling that rumbled in his gut, Marcus ran up the stairs, taking them two or three at a time. He buzzed past the dusty photos that lined every wall in the gym. They were nothing more than a random collection of old pictures and newspaper clippings of boxing events and fellow pugilists, going back to the days of bare knuckle fights held on the fishing docks. He had spent years staring at them, reading them all while he waited for his time in the ring or a spare heavy bag .

Marcus stopped himself just outside Walter's office, running his fingers through his then thick and bushy hair. He hadn't shaved for a week, and the coarse stubble threatened to become a beard. Bracing himself, Marcus rapped on the office door three times and then walked in without waiting for an invite.

Inside, Walter's office was as run down as the rest of the gym. The walls hadn't seen a lick of paint in years; not since before Walter had bought the place. The lone light, nothing more than a bare bulb, hung from the ceiling, its fixture long since vanished. A thick, gray-green cloud hung in the air from the constant stream of cheap cigars that Walter insisted on smoking. Lighting one was the first thing he did each morning, and the glowing ember never left his mouth until he went to sleep at night.

He had died of lung cancer at the age of sixty-three, an age that everybody who knew him was amazed he ever reached at all.

The eyes in the room turned to face Marcus, and the bad feeling (which, until his last days on earth, continued to creep over him every time a bad call came over the radio) rumbled his stomach again, louder this time. There were three men in the room, and none of them were on

Hill's payroll. Walter ushered him inside and offered him a seat. The three strangers all wore expensive suits which hugged their giant, steroid-enhanced muscular frames as if made of Spandex.

"Listen, kid, you fight well, but to get the champ, you gotta let him think he can win. D'ya understand?" Walter croaked. His voice was deep and scratchy from a lifetime of tobacco.

Marcus was young then, a real talent in the boxing world, but naïve to the workings of the real one. He had nodded; what he heard made sense. He just hadn't heard what they were asking of him. There and then plans were drawn up for him to fight Aleksander Papp, a young German fighter, who had a good reputation but who was not regarded as a title fighter because of his nationality and the fact his trainer was a Russian defector. Everything moved at lightning speed, and before Marcus knew it, his hand was clutched in the sweaty, powerful grip of all three strangers in turn. The fight had been arranged and dates confirmed. Many years later Marcus would realize that it had all been done before he had even arrived, and his presence was a matter of unimportant coincidence.

Tensions had begun to rise in Marcus's camp eight weeks out from the fight. He felt as though he wasn't being put through his paces enough. This had led to several heated arguments, and he started to work out himself in the garage of his flat. Walter kept telling him that the fight was more of an exhibition, just to get the champ's teeth chomping. Marcus, who was foolish and young, had believed him.

It wasn't until three days before the fight that Marcus began to get a feeling that something wasn't quite right. He cornered Big Joe one day after training. It was at the end of the day, and everybody had already gone home. Joe was about forty kilos overweight and would break into a sweat just climbing into the ring. Yet, despite his name and appearance, he was one of the kindest men Marcus had even known. He bred racing pigeons and enjoyed tending to his own allotment whenever he had the chance.

Joe had crumbled like a baby before Marcus had even started to ask him any real questions. He told him that he was being undertrained in order to make the fight harder for him; to make him have to work hard for the win. Joe had started to sob when he confessed to knowing what was happening, and between repeated apologies he said that they were trapped in something much bigger than they could understand. Some big time mobsters from London had already bribed the referee to make sure that the German won no matter what he had to do.

Marcus stopped in his tracks. His heart pounded as he looked around the shopping arcade. He could have sworn he heard something, but he still got worked up when he remembered that incident. It had robbed him of his future, and he would never forgive Walter, not even if that simple act was all that stood between him and the fires of Hell. It wasn't about being the champ, but that they were taking away from him the thing that he loved. Boxing made the world a simple place: you were given an opponent, you trained hard, looked after yourself and then you either won or lost. Or so Marcus had always thought.

Once Big Joe had finished apologizing and offering promises of redemption that included all the fresh vegetables he could eat, Marcus stormed straight into the local bar where he found Walter in the lap of some local woman for hire. Marcus ripped the fresh cigar from his manager's mouth and, after pulling him to his feet, struck him with a lightning fast jab/right

cross combination that sent Walter flying into the table behind him, snapping it in two and upsetting the two large tattooed men who had been the occupants.

Marcus had walked away and never spoken to Walter again. He had turned up to the fight, determined to do it on his own.

“Fuck the consequences,” he had told Big Joe in the dressing room.

Walter hadn't been foolish enough to show his face. His nose had been broken and a further slapping from the bikers he had upset put him under self-imposed house arrest for several weeks.

The fight began and Marcus knew from the first jab that his German opponent was clearly up to speed with what was planned, so Marcus just came out swinging.

Marcus survived the first few rounds with little damage. It was obvious to him that while his opponent was a good fighter, he wasn't a killer. He lacked the look in his eye and the ruthlessness in his gut to move in and pile on the hurt if his man refused to fall from the heavy blows.

Marcus's long-term girlfriend was ringside; he looked over to her for inspiration at the end of every round. It was the beginning of the seventh when the realization of where he had seen the two large, shaven-headed gentlemen (who now flanked his girlfriend) before. They had been present at the pre-fight weigh in, whispering with Papp's trainer and management team.

By the end of the eight round, Marcus saw the two men stand and walk away. His future wife was in tears, her caramel colored face had paled, and she looked like she was about to faint. Her lips had blended in shade and disappeared from her face, while her eyes were expressionless. He looked at her with his left eye beginning to swell shut from a well-placed series of blows, but she wouldn't look at him. She simply sat staring straight ahead; her expression one similar to the abused women Marcus would later take statements from on a regular basis. She cried; he had never seen her cry before, but she had tears welling up that just couldn't be held back any longer.

As he rose for the eighth round, Marcus knew what was happening, but he didn't know what to do. Marcus didn't know what to think as he walked out for what he knew would be the last few rounds of his career. He would go down swinging: win, lose or draw, the kraut would have to beat him. He told himself this and believed it at that moment. He believed it in the aftermath of it all, and deep down he believed it to his dying day.

His wife never told him what they had whispered to her. She simply said that he didn't need to know, he had retired and it was all in the past. They had planned on moving away, to start a new life together away from the corrupt nature of the sport that no matter what length of retirement was put in the middle, Marcus would continue to love and miss. None of them ever spoke about it, but both knew that had he been single, Marcus would have carried on fighting, not because it was manly or because he wanted the fame and fortune it offered, but simply because he loved it.

Marcy, whose real name was Michaela, had been the one who suggested to Marcus that he should try for the police. She was five years older than he was and had already been on the force for three years. Her father had been a cop, and she had always wanted to follow in his

footsteps – to make him proud of her. She had succeeded the moment she was accepted and he had told her exactly that every chance he got.

Marcus applied and was accepted before he had completed the application form. He passed the physical test with flying colors, breaking the course record in the sprint and number of pushups he completed in one minute. A 'staggering seventy', the instructor had dubbed it that night over drinks in the training center bar. The actual number had been closer to eighty, but the name sounded good and so stuck.

Marcus loved the force. Even on the hot summer days. Yet he could never fully forget the thrill of the fight either; it was part of him, and he knew it would haunt his dreams for the rest of his days.

For years Marcus was plagued by a recurring dream; he was back in the ring, back fighting Papp. The German's face was broken open and bleeding, his nose shattered, left cheek swollen so badly that his left eye looked as if it had simply been erased from his features. They were in the last round, and he was pummeling the German who would (always) raise his hands up to cover his face, leaving his body open. Marcus had him trapped in the ropes and he was about to fall. Marcus would glance over at the clock and see he still had just under a minute to knock the guy out. He knew he wouldn't get up, and so planned on taking his time. Then out of nowhere the bell began to sound: it rang and rang. Marcus stopped punching and looked around...and that was when the German unleashed his lucky shot. Just as the punch hit Marcus would wake, his heart racing. The ringside bell would melt away and become the howling impatient cry of a baby woken from sleep. His blood would be pumping, his whole body tense. He would jump out of bed in a state of confusion each time, his mind lost until it all slotted back into place one piece at a time.

He hadn't realized how deep he had been in the daydream, not until the ear-piercing cry of a young baby finally pushed its way through the image. It sounded like someone scraping their fingers down a blackboard it was so shrill.

Marcus turned around; a small crowd had gathered inside the covered promenade – predominantly elderly couples, sitting hand-in-hand on the various benches that were scattered at random intervals. He scanned the center, his brow once again plastered with sweat. His eyes stung, and he felt his pulse increase without warning. His stomach lightened, butterflies spread their wings inside his organs and began to take flight. He felt his stance change; he came up onto the balls of his feet, ready to move, ready to rumble. It was instinctive; he hadn't even thought about it. Marcus could sense it; his instincts as a fighter able to evolve from sensing where a punch was coming from into a danger detector that was more often than not correct.

Marcus reached for his radio to alert his protégé, but stopped his hand halfway. By the time Dillings got there, even with his rookie over-enthusiasm, Marcus would have taken care of it.

He looked around and saw the couple that were responsible for the scene he was about to join. A young woman, too skinny for her height...for any height. Marcus guessed from first glance that she was around 5'10", although she stood with her back to him. Her strawberry-blond hair fell greasily against her shoulders, and she wore a tank top that showed bony shoulders covered by a tribal tattoo that traced a spiral path down her left arm. Its design was somewhat distorted; an obvious side effect to the weight she had lost since its initial

application. Her outfit was completed by a denim skirt that was only just long enough to cover her hipless waist, revealing skinny legs that were bruised and covered with veins that, by the time she hit forty, would resemble a detailed road map of the British Isles. She tottered on a pair of high heels that made her even taller, and off to one side stood a rough looking pram, which rocked from side to side as the occupant continued to scream.

Marcus looked at the pram, wondering why neither the mother nor the person she was with was responding. Then he saw her head snap backwards, twisting to the left, and he understood it all. The woman fell backwards. She stumbled on her heels and fell to the floor, turning as she did. Marcus saw blood; her lips were broken, her left eye swollen shut. Yet the worst thing was the look on her face; it told him this was part of her everyday life.

Her skin looked dead, stretched taut over her rake-thin frame. Her large breasts swung unrestrained beneath her yellow summer-inspired tank top, and their size in relation to the rest of her frame and their lack of gravity defiance told Marcus two things: One, the baby in the pram was hungry; and two, it was young...a matter of weeks old. This thought was confirmed by the sagging post-labor stomach which took a while to recover, and on most women doesn't look unusual. However, on a frame as malnourished as hers, it shone out like a distress flare on a clear night at sea. The other clear giveaway with regards to the age of the child were the two large, wet stains on the point of each breast, where milk leaked from her nutritious teats.

"Hey!" Marcus heard himself shout, announcing his presence while letting others know that something had happened and that they should keep back. All thought of calling his partner was gone. He would never get there in time.

The lady – who Marcus saw when he was close to her, was younger than he had presumed; early twenties at best – was crying. She cradled her right arm on which she had fallen. The man backed up half a step when he saw Marcus stride towards him. His head immediately began to look around for an escape route. He was a large guy, about the same size as Marcus himself although less muscular and wirier. He had a lean, quick look about him, and was just as black. In fact, had he been in possession of a large afro, Marcus would have believed he was looking back through time at a younger version of himself. Or rather what he would have been had boxing not rescued him from the trouble-filled neighborhood and social circle that had taken so many of his childhood friends.

The one problem about growing up in a small fishing town was that there was remarkably little in the way of entertainment, and so Marcus had turned to the streets, hanging around with the kids from school. During his years on the force, he had busted a great number of them.

The man in question was bald, his head shaved unlike Marcus's own natural look. He wore a white tank top that showed his muscle covered body. His arms were decorated with all manner of tattoos, which wound from his wrists up to his shoulders, and, judging by the patterns, continued beneath his clothing onto his chest and neck. He had a flat face; his nose showed signs of being broken more times than was healthy, while his forehead had a long horizontal scar that, when it had first been inflicted, doubtlessly bled like a broken fire hydrant. His eyes were cold, emotionless – even in the bright light of day. They looked black, like a shark. His jaw was clenched, face painted with anger so thick it couldn't have simply been because this girl said something disagreeable.

Marcus bent down to the girl. The man stood far enough back to not pose an immediate threat, and his unclenched fists hung loose at his sides. Something about him still made Marcus feel uneasy, but it was too late to change his mind now. The course of fate had been set on its way and they were all but pawns caught in its undercurrent.

“Are you okay?” Marcus asked, reaching out to the young woman.

She trembled with a mixture of fear and withdrawal and had an odor about her that Marcus knew all too well; it was the stench of addiction. Her arms were filled with track marks and bruises from where she had taken several hits at the same time. Her nose, upon closer inspection, was red and sore, and her teeth were yellow and looked like they hadn't been cleaned in a long time.

She looked up at him, her eyes bloodshot with tears. Her face was desperate, and it physically pained Marcus to look at her. She nodded at him, a small movement, but she averted her eyes; she couldn't look at him, and he knew why. He looked over her outfit again and it all becomes clear to him. They weren't a young dysfunctional couple in love. Far from it: she was a young girl trapped in a mistake she had made and was unable to find her way back home.

“Hey, pig, get the fuck away from my girl, alright?” a powerful voice boomed from behind him.

Marcus rose and turned, ready to face the man, but was more than a little surprised when he saw how close they were. Standing nose-to-nose, the hot, acrid breath filled Marcus's face and made him want to gag. The man was high, Marcus could see that. His eyes were unfocused, moving from place to place as if only moments before each had been given a double espresso.

“Listen, I don't want any trouble, so please, take a step back and tell me what the problem is.” Marcus remained calm and looked the man in the eyes.

He tried to talk through the drugs, through the rage that brought the red curtain down on the show, trying to reach the person who was buried deep down inside somewhere. No matter who it was, or what they had done, conversing with a clean mind was easier than trying to reason with the unpredictable nature of a drugged one. Behind him, Marcus could see the girl trying to stand, reaching desperately for her baby.

“Yeah, well stay outta my face, leave the woman alone and get out 'fore you get into trouble, pig.” Anger flashed in the man's eyes. He gnashed his teeth and began to sway from side to side, shifting his weight from one to the other. Marcus took a step back. It was apparent the man would not be doing so.

The man moved, tracing Marcus's movements, and it was enough to put him on edge. He was nervous, but in too tight a spot to reach for his radio. He knew then that it would turn physical.

The man's eyes and face changed; the shark-like features were gone, and in their place was a twisted featured ghoul, the skin a pale green-gray. It looked waxy. The eyes were large round discs of black, its nose squashed flat against its face like a Persian cat, and the mouth was cocked in a wry smile that revealed black teeth and a rotten tongue that darted out to taste the air like a snake.

Marcus closed his eyes and shook his head like a fighter getting up from a sneaky knockdown and the image was gone. The man had advanced, his stance changed to a more bladed one, and his breathing had become much shallower. He found reassurance in all of the signs he was reading, because although the man was big, Marcus knew he could take him if it came to fisticuffs.

“Hey, bitch, I told you to stay on the fucking floor.” The man strode forward, no longer focused on Marcus, but rather, the girl. He struck fast, pushing the girl back to the floor and lashing out with a heavy work boot. Marcus jumped between them, manhandling the aggressor, pulling him away from the injured girl. The kick had split her lips, opening up a deep slice that sent rich, dark blood pouring onto the tiled floor.

“Right, you’re under arrest,” Marcus began, pushing the man back with enough force to give himself time and space to reach for his cuffs and whatever else he may need.

A small crowd had gathered now, mostly elderly people, although a few of the employees of the open shops in the arcade had come out to see what caused such a commotion. They positioned themselves far enough back so that they would not be looked upon to help, but close enough to not miss a beat.

Marcus moved with a speed that defied his age, grabbing the man and twisting his arm behind his back. “You don’t have to say anything, but anything you do say…” Marcus had the cuff wrapped around the muscular wrist and reached for the second when the man threw his head back. It didn’t catch Marcus fully because he wasn’t standing square on, but it gave the man an angle and he wrenched his arm free, and with one quick movement spun around and punched Marcus in the stomach. Marcus caught the shot right in the small area between the bottom of the safety vest and his belt, an area that was exposed by design so that mobility wasn’t an issue while wearing the bulky uniform. Marcus stumbled backwards, doubled over by the blow. It was the girl that screamed first, her voice becoming instantly hysterical, her cries nothing more than nonsensical babblings from a mind teetering on the edge of oblivion.

Marcus felt faint and nauseous, his stomach throbbed, and when he pulled his hands away to grab the man – who was also under arrest for assaulting a police officer – he saw why. Marcus wasn’t sure which he saw first: the red, dripping blade that the man held in a club-like grip, or the copious amounts of blood that covered his own hands and lower arms. *Where did he get that? He never had a knife,* Marcus asked himself. *It’s a flicker; look at the blade.*

As Marcus looked at the blade, he realized that it must have been hidden in the man’s belt. Damn. He exhaled. His mind began to leave the state of clear thinking, and as a deep-seated pulsing began in the center of his abdomen Marcus realized with a stark clarity what had happened.

“Y-you...s-s-s-son of a bitch,” Marcus said, his world getting hazy, his legs losing their strength just as if he had been stung on the jaw in the ring. He reached out to get something for support but found nothing. He fell backwards, tumbling to the floor while everybody looked on, mumbling and gossiping with each other, but not doing anything about it.

“Shoulda stayed out, pig. Fucking cops.” The man was bouncing around from foot to foot with a nervous energy. Beside him, Marcus heard the young woman scream.

“Please, don’t hurt my baby. I’ll do what you want. I’ll go back out there tonight. I’ll give you all of it, just please...don’t hurt my baby,” she pleaded and sniffled, choking on the words that spewed from her mouth in a constant stream.

“What, oh now you wanna work? Well who’s gonna want to fuck you now? You’re a bigger mess than usual, Becky. Jesus!” he snorted at her.

Marcus felt groggier by the second, his body numb now, the blood pooling around him like a warm bath – yet for the first time in several weeks, Marcus shivered with cold.

“No, I can work, I promise, I’ll give them all something special, get extra cash from ‘em, please, come on, baby, please.” The girl, Becky, was now on her knees, begging in the street like a woman who had run out of options; through it all, the baby continued to scream.

“You really care so much about this fucking brat. I mean, it does nothing but fucking scream and cry. I mean how often do you need to slap that thing on your tits every day? Just do it once and leave the fucker; maybe you’ll be looking normal again one day this century. I mean look at it. Have you ever looked at your kid?” he asked her with sudden seriousness.

“Yes, please don’t hurt my baby. Somebody, help...please,” she appealed to the audience who were – the younger ones at least – beginning to reach for their cell phones.

“Really, ‘cos I don’t think anyone could love a thing like this. Father’s looks and your brains or something, I mean.” He stopped then and began to reach into the pram. The baby cried harder instantly.

“Hey, you leave her alone!” a young male voice called out from the crowd. Marcus had no idea who it was, his eyes were closed – or at least he thought they were, because he could no longer see anything.

There were sounds of a struggle, grappling, followed by a clattering sound as the knife was dropped. Marcus tried to move; he had to try and stop the man. He was a cop after all. He dragged himself somehow, fumbling on the ground, but just couldn’t go any further. The newcomer cried out in pain. A hard thumping sound – no doubt a fist and some other body part colliding – followed this as the man fell to the floor.

While this skirmish went on Becky rose to her feet and made a beeline for her child. She grabbed at the pram and tried to run away.

“Where you going, baby? We ain’t finished talking here.” The black man reached out and grabbed hold of the fleeing Becky’s hair. It wasn’t a solid grip, but the swift tug he gave it still created enough backward momentum to pull her to the floor. The pram came rolling back, the child inside hysterical, as was its mother. “Shut that monster up, woman,” he snapped, losing control now.

His head was thumping, voices singing out to him in a chorus of song that had been driving him mad for years. He clamped his hands to the side of his head and began to claw at his ears, as if trying to pull out the noise. Becky rose to her feet once again, but she didn’t run away. She watched in dumbfounded horror as her pimp, DeeJay Afité, drew blood scratching away the inside of his ears and the side of his head where they were attached.

“Shut up. Shut the fuck up!” he called out, turning towards the pram, his eyes wide with rage.

In one strong movement he grabbed it by the base and threw it through the air, flipping it over, spilling the well-wrapped child onto the floor. DeeJay collapsed down onto his haunches as if trying to catch his breath. He clapped his hands against the side of his head and began to drive the fingernails of each digit into his skull, pushing and then scratching with all of his strength as the voices continued to scream inside him. Then, as always, they left just as sudden as they arrived, leaving DeeJay with a pounding head and a serious need for a fix.

Everybody gasped, and now people came running to help. Marcus heard it all, clearer and clearer as his heart began to slow, the heavy pulsating rhythm becoming irregular and weak.

Becky watched her child fall in slow motion; her own movements slowed from the years of mistreating her body, yet spurred on by the empowering forces of motherhood. She leapt for the baby, crawling over the floor to get to it.

“Leave it be, bitch. I want to see what the little fucker does,” the man snapped, but Becky ignored him; she kept crawling, or so Marcus pictured. He heard the man bark at her to get up, to save being on her hands and knees for later.

Marcus’s final credits began to roll, scored by the sound of the police sirens as they approached the shopping arcade. Marcus took his last deep breath and forced his mind back, away from the nightmare scene that had snuck up on him and pictured his wife and his kids. He pictured the holiday they had taken about seven years ago. They had gone to the beach for a day and had run around in the surf, played football and Frisbee and all manner of beach games. The day had ended with a barbecue in the sand before heading back to their small rented cottage just a couple of miles up the road. It was a sickeningly perfect day, one which had Marcus not been there to experience firsthand, he would have argued was only possible in movies.

By the time the police and resulting ambulance arrived, Afité had fled, although he was caught a few miles up the road, covered in blood, still brandishing the knife that he had remembered to pick up from the floor. He left behind him one dead police officer, a severely injured infant and a critically injured young woman who bled to death as soon as the ambulance crew rolled her onto the trolley. Her face had been trampled on and half crushed, along with her ribcage. The resulting post mortem showed investigators that she had died from massive internal bleeding, and the CCTV footage told the story sufficiently to sentence the killer even without the eyewitness reports that all confirmed how the young lady had begged for her life as DeeJay Afité stomped on her chest and head. Even in her dying moments she had begged him to leave her baby alone. She had shielded the infant with her body as best she could, but was unable to keep it safe from every steel toed blow that was rained down upon her.

The two bodies were stored together in the mortuary, the only occupants that day; they were buried on the same day, too; one drawing a big crowd, the other just a handful of mourners who turned up on call to see an unnamed woman committed to the earth. Nobody could even hope to understand why they had died, or what an impact it would have on everything.

Chapter 2

Richard

“Hi, Richard. I heard about you and Amanda. If you need to talk, well, I’ll be upstairs between your sheets,” a stunning, long-legged blond whispered in Richard Hamilton’s ear, running her finger along the contour of his jaw as she walked away.

He barely heard her above the music or through his alcohol-fueled high. He watched her walk away, nevertheless, seeing her make her way sultrily through the crowd, a short skirt barely clinging to the curve of her rear and revealing well-tanned flesh above the waistband until the thin material of her shirt began. She stopped and turned to look at him once more before the crowd swallowed her, enveloping her like the silk sheets in his bedroom. She smiled at him. Was there a wink there? Richard wasn’t sure, but he knew he would follow her in any case. He had dumped his long-term girlfriend of six weeks that morning, and since then he had been on the prowl. He was nineteen years old and richer than all the rest of the people at the party put together. There was no way that Richard would ever turn down a long legged twenty-two-year-old who was hornier than a nymphomaniac at a Sexaholics Anonymous session.

She wasn’t perfect, he would admit that. Compared to most of the women he had been with, she wasn’t much more than average, but she would do for the night. Besides, he knew damn well that there were others more attractive than him within his line of sight. Sure, he was a good looking guy, but he wasn’t buff. Toned maybe, but lingering scars from a bad case of acne in his early teens were still visible in the light of day. Thankfully he had found that money and intelligence was an effective combination when it came to getting laid.

He smiled to himself as his own arousal began to take control of him. He could feel it change him, like a beast. He could hear his heart pumping, the background noise dull, and soon all he could think about was the ways he would ravage her. Exploring every cleft of her naked body, massaging her breasts as his tongue lapped between her legs. He could feel the delicate sheets running over their naked flesh and it made him shiver.

“Who was that, man?” Damien Wilders asked him. Richard and Damien had been friends for years. They both came from rich families through unrelated endeavors and they had had the misfortune to be thrown into the same hellhole of a boarding school together. They had been the only two who, by the time they left school at seventeen, hadn’t been raped at one end or the other by the prefects who had governed their dorm rooms each night.

“I’ve got no idea, but I’ll tell you in the morning.” Richard smiled at his friend, the only real one he had, nudging him in the ribs with his elbow before downing his beer and heading towards the stairs. It was his party, his house—but then again, there was always a party at his house.

Nobody even noticed he was gone.

“Wake up... Hey, wake up,” Richard commanded, shaking the sleeping naked beauty that lay next to him.

She was a picture of perfection, her hair still immaculate even after the wild night of lovemaking they had shared; her face just as flawless without the make-up as it had been with it. Richard grabbed her bare shoulder. The warmth of her creamy skin felt silky against his hand. He let it linger; and then, after a slight pause, as if contemplating his impending action, he squeezed and shook her harder until her eyes fluttered open. They were light aquamarine and sparkled with or without the sunlight. She looked at him, her brain at first not registering where she was. She looked around without moving her head and realized immediately that she was not home: the bed covers were lighter and crisper than her own, plus the walls here were a deep blue and dotted with various posters, while her own room was a mix of cream and red. Also the window was on the wrong side of the room, which was twice the size of hers. Realising whose place it was always seemed important to her as it allowed her to decide whose responsibility it was to make the first move.

Turning her gaze back towards her Romeo, she smiled as her memories of the previous night came flooding back in the same way the pleasure had surged through her body, curling her toes in the most literal of ways.

“Good morning,” she said as if she had been with the man forever.

“Hi, listen, it’s getting late...you’ve gotta go.” Richard’s words were blunt and cold. He jumped out of the bed as he spoke, and she realized then that something was wrong; Richard had been laying on top of the bedcovers and was fully clothed.

“What?” she asked, sleep still fogging her mind.

“You gotta go. I’ve got things to do, and you can’t stay.”

Richard didn’t even look at her, but rather grabbed her discarded clothes and stuffed them into an expensive looking sports bag that he had found in his cupboard. He bent down, gathered the underwear, a silky red bra and delicate thong that he feigned to place in the bag but instead slipped into one of the knee level side pockets on his trousers. Another memento of a good night he couldn’t quite remember the finer points of, although he may well refresh his memory a little later on—if the camera had worked. He had been trying to get the angle right for months now but had not been able to find that perfect spot.

“You’re kicking me out? What about last night? What about the things we said?” she asked, completely shocked; not by the rejection from this rich playboy whose reputation she knew about, but simply from the blunt force of it and the suddenness with which it arose.

“Yeah, like I said, I’ve got stuff to do, places to go, people to see. You know how it is. So please, get out of my bed. I’ve laid out some clothes for you to get you home; something fresh that I had picked out for you.” Without saying another word he turned and left the room, leaving the door open as he went, walking down the long, rather gothic looking hallway without looking back or even slowing his gait to wait for her.

She threw the lavish sheets from the bed, not even feeling the cool morning air brush against her skin, ignoring the tingles of arousal as her nipples hardened in the cold light of day. Her thighs were still sticky with their lovemaking, but she pulled on the designer brand jeans and tailored shirt without even thinking about her underwear. Rage assumed control of her emotions. Shoes pulled onto bare feet she burst from the room onto the landing, which seemed neverending. The thick carpet was a burgundy color and caught her footsteps before

her full body weight was even applied. She ran down the hallway without even pausing to look or even consider what was behind the many doors that she saw, nor did she stop to glance at the artwork that adorned the walls of this once regal home that was now, after an unfortunate accident, completely at the mercy of the orphaned heir of an oil fortune built up through generations of hard work.

All of Richard's ancestors had worked to make their mark on the company. His great-grandfather had started it all, before handing it down to his eldest son. The following two generations produced only one child each, and so the company was passed down through the generations, but Richard had broken the mold.

He chose not to work for the company, not to begin at the bottom of the ladder and learn his craft and the science that was the oil business. Nor did he choose to go through life sitting in the boardroom. Instead he had been drawn by the silver screen: acting, directing, he wanted to do it all, and if some circles were to be believed, he had a talent that would have been near impossible to hold back had he been committed enough.

He had sold the company off not long after he received his inheritance and ensured that the Hamilton name would be taken care of long after he was dead and buried. Like most young children who come into great riches, the idea of Hollywood was put on the back burner, replaced by partying, celebrating, and witlessly throwing his money around without thought of the future—his own or that of his guests. *"Tomorrow was a lifetime away."* That was one of his favorite lines with the ladies. At least with the ones who weren't too drunk to forget it in the morning.

She found the stairs and ran down them in as controlled a manner as she could while all along rage bubbled away under her skin. It felt as if the speckling of necessary fat that covered her body was boiling, ready to split her skin open and spew forth, engulfing everything it touched with a hot, fiery anger that would destroy the entire household if it wasn't gotten under control.

"Just who do you think you are?" she screamed across the large hallway. Her voice echoed around the now empty space. Richard stood by the door, holding her coat draped over an extended arm, bent at the elbow like a butler awaiting further instruction.

"I *think* I'm a busy man, I told you that. Here is your coat. You've got your things. It was fun, but now, please...run along." Richard swept his arm through the open door as if showing her the way, his words void of feeling.

"You PIG!" she spat at him, the fire rising from her belly. "How dare you, just because you've got money—" she started.

"Hey, love, you wanted the goods last night and you got them. Believe me, I gave you the good stuff. Now be a good girl and don't cause a scene or embarrass yourself any further. What did you think would happen?" Richard choked back a laugh but couldn't stop a small cough-like sound from escaping.

The noise was small, but it was enough to push the girl over the edge. She may have only been seventeen and in high school herself, and yes, she had lied to him, but she was no joke, and he had no right to laugh at her. Her anger boiled over, and she lashed out. With fingers curled at the tips, she slapped him hard across his face. Her nails dug through the soft surface

of his well-cared-for skin, gouging deep tracts from his ear diagonally across his face to his mouth. She screamed at him, but all that came out was a random jumble of all the hateful words she knew.

“You bitch!” Richard screamed, striking out with one hand, his intention not to hit, but rather to keep a distance between them while the other clamped against the burning, stinging flesh of his face. His strike caught her in the face, striking her square on as she lunged for him again. He felt her nose move, the cartilage cracking under the forceful impact of their opposing momentums. She cried out, blood immediately spurting from both nostrils. Her lips also absorbed some of the blow, but they remained unblemished. She fell backwards and tripped over the threshold. She wheeled her arms as she tumbled into the early morning air, trying to stay on her feet before tripping down the steps. She managed to keep her balance until the last moment, whereupon she fell into the graveled earth. Sobs sent tears streaming down her face to mix with the free flowing blood. They stung her face and burned in her nose. A few moments later, her bag landed in the gravel behind her, hurled from the doorway, not with anger, but with frustration. Richard stood staring down at her, his eyes wide with shock while his lips were thin and pulled back over his teeth in a snarl.

The door slammed shut behind her as she dragged herself back to her feet, and when she turned to look back up the steps, the house was once again quiet. It looked much colder in the light of day, without the noise of mingling guests, dance beats and free flowing liquor. Even in her pain, her instant resentment and hatred of the rich man that had given her so much pleasure only to take it away with so much pain was put to one side, and she considered how lonely Richard must be.

Once the door was closed, Richard stormed away, stomping up the stairs like a toddler having a tantrum, kicking anything that came within range, acting out of pure frustration. His face didn't hurt anymore, but he could feel it pounding away in rhythm with his heart and felt the skin tightening as it began to swell. He threw the door to the main bathroom open, denting the wall with the force of it.

“Fucking bitch!” he screamed at that room, hearing his rage echo around, bouncing off the pristine fixtures and fittings as he fumbled through one of the many fully stocked medicine cabinets in the house in desperate search for some iodine.

He found the bottle and grabbed a large wad of gauze, not bothering to separate the sheets from each other, choosing to tape whatever he had in his hand to his face. He placed the gauze on the sink and closed the cabinet doors. He jumped when he saw his reflection: the four gouges that ran down his face were deep, the groove in each one clearly visible. Blood began to bubble to the surface again, and wiping it away didn't serve much of a purpose. The rage was there, and it rattled the door of the cage in which Richard had it locked. Every day, it grew a bit harder to control, to keep hidden.

Richard fumbled with the cap of the iodine bottle, his face beginning to sting more and more with each ineffective rotation the cap made in his hands, before finally, in another fit of rage, he launched the bottle across the room. Throwing it full force like a baseball pitcher in the bottom of the ninth with two out and the bases loaded. It passed through the frosted glass door of the power shower, leaving a cartoon-style hole the exact shape of the bottle before the rest of the

glass crumbled away in a motion that was so slow it only added to the rage Richard felt. It seemed that time itself had started to mock him.

He taped nearly an inch-thick pad of gauze to his face and went back downstairs. It was only 10:45, but he went straight to the liquor cabinet and grabbed the first bottle he saw: vodka. Removing the cap, Richard drank directly from the bottle; he coughed and choked as his lungs burnt with a warming fire. He took a glass and filled it to the brim before he walked through to the kitchen. He had a cleaning lady and a cook who looked after him and the house; Lisa Atkins. She had been his nanny (for lack of a better word) since he was a young boy. She had become part of the family long before his parents died; but it was Sunday, and so Richard was left to fend for himself.

Despite knowing his way around the kitchen with a good degree of competency, Richard's breakfast consisted of vodka and little else. The left side of his face throbbed and burnt, keeping the rage he felt at the forefront of his mind with common sense and self-control locked away somewhere in the basement.

"Fucking cunt!" he snapped aloud, swallowing the last third of the glass in one cavernous gulp.

After leaving the kitchen, Richard wandered through the house holding the vodka bottle in one hand and the glass in another, taking alternate swigs from both. He moved across the large hallway. Now void of all furniture, it was used as the main party hall; it provided easy entrance and exit for the guests while also keeping them away from the areas of the house he preferred to keep private.

Richard stumbled across the hallway; already well on the way to lunchtime inebriation. There were two doors ahead of him, and although both gave access to individual sitting rooms, Richard always chose the one on the right, closest to the front door. It was well decorated with two plush lounge chairs that took center stage and faced a modest sized plasma TV against the left hand wall. The walls were a rich cream color while the floor was both heated and tiled. A large rug separated the TV from the chairs, and in days gone by (when there had been a sofa in the room) there had been a coffee table pinning the rug in place. There was a window on the wall opposite the door, although Richard had covered it with heavy drapes as he tried to eliminate the light in what he liked to think of as his movie room. Beside the window and spanning both the wall opposite the door and the one immediately to the right as you entered was a custom made L-shaped bookcase, only it was filled with DVDs rather than books.

Richard would sit for hours in this room. There was always a movie playing. Most of the time he didn't watch what he played, but he found it comforting. He enjoyed the classics, sci-fi, horror, comedy, and action. And while thrillers were his genre of choice, he had certainly been known (when he was certain that the house was empty) to watch the occasional romantic comedy.

Pacing the room like a fighter in the locker room, just waiting for his turn to be called through into the ring, Richard finally felt his rage begin to subside as alcohol took over his body. Richard soon grew bored. Even the idea of a movie didn't appeal to him that morning. He left the room and just stood in the entrance hall for a few minutes before heading up the main staircase to his right.

The second storey of the building was governed by a long hallway that spread out in both directions. At the top of the stairs was the library/study area where he had always been forced to sit and complete his homework. The room to the left was the family room, and was followed by one of the three bathrooms on the floor, and then Richard's room. His was the largest bedroom in the house, although originally it had been two separate rooms.

The hallway bent at ninety degrees at either end, and at the end of each 'wing' (Richard would often refer to his home in terms that were much grander than the reality suggested) was a guest bedroom, and a small bathroom where the broken shower door still hung and the shards of shattered glass glistened in the early morning sun like small diamonds.

A fresh wave of anger rolled through him; not at the girl, no, fuck her, the worthless whore that she was, she had cum before him on each occasion, and he didn't like that: she had been lazy. The rage was his own; it was deep seated and locked away with a key he could no longer find, and nor did he wish to, because the idea of letting it out scared him.

The alcohol surged through his system. The world had started to spin and his movements had the unmistakable clumsy flow to them that could only come from a drunk. He finished the vodka and let the bottle fall to the plush carpeted floor.

Richard turned and walked back in the direction of the stairs, towards the other side of the house. It was a side that he left alone. His parents' bedroom was at the end of the hall, opposite to his own, but theirs had an en-suite bathroom; and so, while being smaller than his by some considerable amount, it was still considered to be the master bedroom of the property. Further down the hall was the other spare bedroom, which his mother had claimed for herself, turning it into a painting studio. For all Richard knew, it was still filled with her half-finished canvases. His mother had been quite the amateur artist and had shown several of her pieces in galleries across the country. The only difference on that side of the house was that the corridor was a few meters longer; it had been extended to make space for the room Richard's father had used to conduct his business meetings in. It wasn't accessible through the house and so was invisible to anybody inside. They had had an extension built not long after moving in to accommodate Richard's father's business meetings and conference calls. It was a giant room by all accounts, but Richard had never been inside it while they were alive, and since their death, he had not even been able to bring himself to set foot in their side of the house.

His parents had died two years previously in a car accident as they drove home from a business meeting in Canada. They had taken the car and enjoyed a mini-vacation as they travelled home. Richard had still been in school and had been (despite his rather inflated ego), for the most part, just one of the kids in his class. His parents had decided before he was born that Richard was to attend public school as his father – a self-made man – had done. They did this under the belief that it built not only character, but a determination to succeed on merit rather than inheritance; a common issue prevalent in upper class preparatory schools.

The news of their death had been given to Richard by Lisa Atkins; she had sat him down in the kitchen and broken the news as gently as she knew how. After which, she held him for hours as he sobbed, working his way through things as best as any teenager can do.

The funeral was a busy affair – the church and the graveyard packed full with mourners, 'mourners' and television cameras to the point that it looked like a film set rather than a real

funeral. Yet, once the coffins had been lowered and the somber nature of the occasion concluded by the man in charge, Richard soon found himself standing alone. He looked around and saw that not one single person had remained any longer than was deemed appropriate, not even the many men who had worked with his father since he first started the company, men who were considered not just business associated...but friends. Men who had given Richard birthday and Christmas gifts through the years, men who had offered him advice when his father was unavailable, men he considered to be the uncles he never had.

Richard remained by the graves, oblivious to both the passage of time and the heavy, stormy atmosphere that had grown in the air. It was only when Lisa put her arm around him that he came back to himself and snapped out of the trance he had entered. Together they stood in silence until the cemetery employees – Richard couldn't bear to use the term 'grave diggers' – returned armed with shovels to complete the burial. Lisa Atkins took him home and sat with him the rest of the day, but as the sun disappeared, set no doubt, and the evening came, even she had to make her way home to her own family.

Now, stumbling along upper landing, needing to hold on to the banister to keep from falling over, with his vision double (triple in areas of poor light), Richard finally made his way over into the 'dark side' of the house. It felt colder, and he shuddered as he walked past the top of the stairs which for so long had been the marker for the divide he had created.

He stood and looked down at the entrance area from the upper right-hand side of the landing and it felt strange to him. He was sure it was just the drink, but it felt... creepy, as if his skin had been shrunk while his skeleton remained the same size. He itched all over, and his forehead was covered with sweat.

The house looked different from up here. He no longer saw the party arena, but the entrance foyer his parents had made so welcoming, the large antique table was back in the center of the room. A large fern-like flower in a giant, Oriental pot stood proudly on top of it. There was a writing bureau to the left, between the door to the sitting (movie) room and entrance to the parlour that his mother had used to entertain her lady friends when they came over for drinks in the summer.

He saw the large hat stand which housed his father's many long overcoats, hats, and umbrellas, not to mention his own *Power Rangers* rucksack. He hadn't seen it since he was a kid, but now it hung there right before his eyes.

He saw the doors to the main dining room, a large, permanently prepared room with a table that could host more than fifteen people; twenty if you were friendly and didn't mind a few elbows in your plate from time to time. Richard knew the door had been there, but he hadn't really seen it since the first day he came home to an empty house. Beside the dining room was the side hallway that led into the kitchen; a large busy room even now, despite its more infrequent usage. Coming off from the kitchen was the family dining room; a jovial, colorful place decorated with happy, smiling pictures of holidays past and events celebrated over the years.

For all Richard knew, the stereo was still running, playing his mother's Boyzone album on one continual repeat. He closed his eyes and he could hear their words drifting through the dead air. He closed his mind, wanting desperately to block out the scene, to hold back the tears, but they always managed to find an escape route. When Richard opened his eyes again they

were red and burning, not from the vodka, but from the salty tears he had never cried all of those years ago which had begun to leak through the dam he had built to hide them.

Richard let go of the banister and pushed himself backwards. His world seemed to darken, as if an early and unexpected dusk had fallen.

Richard groaned, his head thumped and his thirst re-surfaced. All he heard was the same static sound that lived in the radio waves between stations, or late at night once the pay-per-view channels he watched so often finished their broadcast. The house darkened with every step. The sound of thunder rumbled in the distance, and to Richard, it felt as though the house itself was scared, shaking down to its foundations.

Richard was transfixed on the front entrance. He felt along the wall behind him and when his hands found a door handle, he knew which room it would lead him into, but didn't care: it would get him away from the vision he was having, and he knew for a fact that there would be something to drink in one of the Edwardian bookcases that ringed the entire circumference of the room save for the door and large windows that were opposite the entrance.

The door opened and a rush of stale air spilled out. Richard cried out in shock: it burned his skin. Like traps within an Egyptian tomb, rigged to keep thieves – it wasn't stealing when it was your alcohol – at bay.

Richard walked into his father's study and reached the light switch. The walls felt rough to his touch, made his fingers burn as if being grated open by the abrasive surface. It was only when he found the switch and filled the room with a dull light, emitted from a dust-encrusted bulb, a single glowing sentry in a chandelier filled with dead colleagues, that Richard saw the tips of his fingers were bleeding, cut open as a result of his altercation with the bathroom mirror.

Now that he was away from the landing, the visions he had were gone, the house was empty again, and that room of all of them confirmed this. It was dusty and, well, empty. As it dawned on him that he had entered this room, out of all of the rooms in the house, he had broken his boundaries and chosen that one. Putting it out of his mind, Richard walked to the locked liquor cabinet, and without pausing to think, grabbed a thick book from the shelf and smashed the door's glass front. He put the book down, not even bothering to look at the cover – *Dante's Inferno* – he grabbed the first bottle he saw, his vision too blurred to read the label. With the bottle open, Richard took a long drink. The fine brandy hit the back of his throat like liquid gold and ran down into his stomach where it sat floating on a sea of nausea.

"That's just the kind of irresponsible bullshit I would expect from you," a voice boomed out of the darkness.

Richard jumped, screaming, half choking on a mouthful of brandy. He let the bottle fall from his grip as he spun around, searching the room for his unexpected guest. He saw nobody; the room was empty save for him.

He stood on the right-hand side of the office, facing the other wall; the door was to his left, and to his right was the desk and behind it the window. The decor was dark; the wood red in color and hard. Nothing could put a dent in his father's desk, and the Lord knew how hard Richard had tried when he was younger. He knew he had been drinking a while, but it couldn't have been much past noon, yet outside it looked like heavy dusk, the sky a vivid swirling orange. A

strong wind had whipped up out of nowhere, and the solid house seemed to creak and groan at every joint.

Behind him, the door to the office slammed shut. Richard spun around but saw nothing.

“You always were a loser, mooching from my fortune like you earned the right. Bet you’re happy now we’re gone, hey!” a voice said. It was alien...yet familiar. It spoke from over by the window. Richard turned back but once again he saw nothing.

When the large leather desk chair that had been facing the window spun around, Richard screamed, or tried to, at least – but his throat had swollen shut.

“W-wh-what?” Richard stammered. The advanced state of inebriation he had been in was gone, slapped out of him with the effectiveness of a cold shower.

“Get out of my study, get out of my house! I worked my fingers to the bone to support you. To give you the best chance at life, a head start, and all you do is sit in here and waste it. You disappoint me once again, Richard...well done,” the corpse of Richard’s father scolded him, the final words filled with sarcastic praise.

“No, you can’t be here. You di-died,” Richard said the words, and then, as if they opened up the old wounds he had kept sealed, he burst into tears.

His arms outstretched towards his father, who remained motionless, stoic. Completely unlike he had been in life, for Roger Hamilton had been a patient man, a loving, generous man. A man who had loved his son more than anything else in his life, a man who had cancelled numerous business meetings over the years should they run a risk of interfering with his son’s soccer games or other activities.

“You disgust me,” the corpse said again as Richard sank to his knees. “Look at me,” it demanded of him.

Richard raised his eyes from the floor, his body shaking. He spied the brandy bottle and reached for it with a trembling hand. He took a long, deep gulp; he drank until his eyes leaked and his throat burnt.

When he finally lowered the bottle, the image that was his father stood behind the desk chair. The clothes on the body were rotten tatters, long since victims to the natural process of decay. The blackened skin that still hung to the corpse peeled back like the skin of a roasted pepper, exposing yellow bone and sticky ligaments. The face was sunken and withered like that of an ancient Egyptian mummy, the lips rotten away to leave just the teeth in a wide, ghoulish smile. The nose hung to one side, the skin slipping from the cartilage base, making the corpse push it back up every few seconds like a pair of ill-fitting glasses.

Richards’s dad had been a large man, not obese, but large; “country strong” would have been a term used for him had he grown up or worked on a farm. But he hadn’t, and so large was the word most people chose. Even in death his frame was impressive: the muscle still clung to his bones, dried and shrivelled like jerky, but there nonetheless. His eyes were glassy, the color gone from them as if they had been whited out, and the entire eyeball was a milky white color that reminded Richard of the porridge he ate for breakfast most mornings. A retch rose in his stomach, and he tried his best to keep it hidden.

The figure moved, and before Richard realized, it stood in front of the desk only a few feet away from him.

“You grew up fast, boy. You changed indeed. Now you wet the bed with a different fluid altogether, but you’re still a nothing. Look at you, drunk. You don’t deserve to be here. Now get out!” the apparition of his father roared at Richard, who felt the house vibrate with anger.

Richard shook as his father’s rotting corpse walked towards him; and as he inched closer, his body making raw wet sounds as it moved, his eyes began to glow a strange green, vivid – yet dull at the same time. The corpse began to laugh; a booming, evil laugh taken straight out of the comic books Richard read as a child; a laugh he knew well as it had haunted his dreams both before and after his parents died.

Richard flinched, jumping backwards more from fright than self-preservation. He jumped over the threshold of the study and found himself back on the landing. While twilight still hung in the air outside, inside the study it was pitch black and quiet. Richard strained to try and see the movement he knew was there within the shroud. When it came, however, it was his father rather than his rotten corpse; his business suit was impeccable, his hair well styled, his skin on fire. Flames engulfed his body as he stood in the doorway. His face contorted in pain, and as Richard watched in stunned horror, blood began to spread over his chest until his torso was drenched in it. His father stood in the doorway, supporting himself with both arms; he looked exhausted but managed to raise his head.

“Richard,” it said, his father’s voice said, just before his eyeballs exploded. Richard felt the burning jelly splatter his face like the whiteheaded acne swellings of his youth against the bathroom mirror.

Richard’s drunken legs failed him and he collapsed. He tumbled all the way down the faux-marble stairs, landing in a heap on the cold floor of the empty entrance hall. His left leg was twisted and stuck beneath him and his chest felt as if someone had rested a heavy weight on it; he couldn’t breathe and strong, hot, metallic tasting fluid hit the back of his throat. Richard’s world faded and he felt a warm puddle spreading around his head and neck. Richard looked up and saw the doorway to his father’s study. It was open, and it was empty; daylight flooded the room, filled the entire house. The white walls of the hallway and the light colored floor reflected every beam.

Richard felt it rise from his stomach, but couldn’t bring himself to roll over: his body was simply no longer under his control, and for once it had nothing to do with the alcohol he had consumed. Richard vomited; hot acidic chunks spilled from his mouth. They covered his face and mixed with his blood on the floor. As his lungs filled, panic ravaged his body, for while his mind was clouded, the synapses inhibited by the excess alcohol, his survival instinct still attempted to prevail. His one good leg kicked and thrashed as his breaths began to shallow. His struggles eased as the color drained from his world...and finally from his dreams.

Richard wasn’t discovered until the following morning when Lisa Atkins arrived just as she always swore she would do. Richard lay on his back, staring up at the empty house, his eyes wide with terror. The semi-digested contents of his stomach had dried to his face like a bizarre spa treatment mask. Lisa Atkins called the police and washed the body once they were finished. She dressed him and kissed him goodbye before the coroner’s office took away the

body of the young man she thought of as a son. It was the last time she saw him. Lisa opted to keep the casket closed during Richard's funeral; she was, after all, the only one there.

Chapter 3

Helen

“You don’t take sugar do you, Marion?” Helen Atkinson asked her three o’clock appointment.

Thanks to the impending bank holiday weekend, Marion Dubois was scheduled be her last customer until Tuesday. Helen loved working in the beauty salon, but during the past few weeks her mind had been preoccupied with other things, and she had been looking forward to the four day break with the same enthusiasm of a kid in the last week of school before summer. She had found that her concentration had begun to wane just a little, and today it had just packed up and left for an even earlier start to the weekend.

“No, thank you, dear, just a dash of milk,” Marion answered. She came to the salon regularly – at least once a fortnight, although if she had the time, Marion Dubious would have been there once a week. Her husband had died five years earlier of a heart attack at the age of fifty-seven. He had been an obese man who had treated her cruelly but at the same time given her everything she could ever ask. In return she had loved him, and even now part of her still did, but through his death she had discovered freedom and life to be a powerful tool in moving on both emotional and physical levels.

She was dating, not men her own age, but those somewhat younger. Her years in captivity – as she herself referred to them – had apparently kept her looking young, not to mention the home gym she had had built one summer many years ago when she first hit forty and wanted to get back into shape; it began as an attempt to entice her husband back into the same bed as her. Not for the sex, no – when it came to that she had a better time on her own anyway – but simply for the company, especially on those cold winter nights.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a second then, but you know the drill. Got a new magazine shipment in, second drawer down, same place as always,” Helen called as she walked into the small kitchen area.

She hurriedly grabbed two mugs from the cupboard and set them down on the counter, creating a clean spot between all the dirty mugs and plates. She made a mental note to have a word with Gwen, the young girl who helped them out in the afternoons after school. It was her job to keep the kitchen area clean, and recently she just seemed to have lost her motivation.

Helen scooped two teaspoons of instant coffee and levelled the scoop for Ms Dubois off with her fingertip – she knew Marion didn’t like her coffee too strong. She sneezed; a rather violent sneeze that caused her head to whiplash. Her brain hurtled forward and collided with the front of her skull as if she had slammed the brakes on without warning.

Rubbing at the sudden pain in her temples, massaging them both with her index fingers while the water boiled, Helen took the time to check the mirror. She gasped when she saw her face. Her skin, although usually rather pale, was now ashen. Her blue eyes had lost their normal sparkle and instead looked dusty as if she hadn’t used them in years. Crow’s feet seemed engraved into the skin around her eyes, and even her hair, a vibrant auburn, had a sad and

worn out look to it. *Good God, take a look at me*, she thought, opening her mouth and sticking out her tongue as far as it would go. She didn't know why she did this; it was a habit she had picked up in childhood and now, ten years out of high school, she still couldn't take a look at herself in the mirror without pulling a funny face.

Coffees in hand, Helen walked back into the salon with a smile spread across her face, her mind once again wandering from the task at hand, instead focusing on her big plans for the long weekend.

Helen sat down behind her station and waited for Marion to have a drink and replace her cup before she got down to business. Beside her she had a small gurney, which made it look as though she was about to perform surgery; only, in place of gleaming scalpels with blades of all sizes, Helen's was filled with nail files, lotions, varnishes, polishes of all colors, a drawer filled with all other manner of small vials filled with liquids she had learned to pronounce effortlessly over the years without ever understanding what they were.

She picked up Marion's left hand and moved it into position, leaving the elbow on the table. She pushed the headache out of her mind; it had subsided to nothing more than a dull thud anyway. It would pass in a few moments. With arms positioned as if they were about to wrestle, Helen slid a support underneath the raised arm and once Marion's arm was settled, she picked up the first file on the tray and began to work on the nails.

"I tell you, I just can't believe how free I feel, my life has completely changed since I started just having some fun. I mean, it took me a while to get used to living alone, of course, but then again you know that, I've said it often enough. But I mean, really, it's such an enlightening experience to find yourself single and with a city like this around you. Why anybody ever thinks of settling down is beyond me," Marion said, the words spewing out of her mouth as if a locomotive powered them from the tunnel that was her mouth.

Helen never said much. It was often hard to take a side because Marion simply ran on and on like a broken record, rehashing the same arguments time and time again, often within the same visit – and more often than not she would revisit a topic from the other viewpoint anyway.

"Well, I mean, don't get me wrong, I do miss having someone around, somebody to talk to whenever I want, or to keep me company in that house, but I think I'm going to sell it anyway. Move to a more popular area. The suburbs were good enough once upon a time, but now it's just too far to commute, and I don't drive. I think I'm going to learn, though," Marion continued, and at the same time she managed to continue reading the magazine she had picked out and also acknowledge Helen, on both personal terms by praising her workmanship.

Helen liked Marion Dubois, not only because she was always happy, bubbly, and full of stories that helped to pass the time, but because she did all the talking. Helen could just get on with her work, throwing in the occasional congratulatory phrase or non-committal thought on something, and that was it. Helen preferred it that way; she wasn't one to brag about things, or to go out and have crazy, alcohol-fueled adventures with the girls.

She preferred a simple life; working, going home to her wonderful husband, cooking dinner together, and then settling down on the sofa to watch a movie. It was a safe life, a simple one, but she enjoyed it.

Helen finished cleaning the first hand and then began the process all over again with the second, when out of nowhere a wave of nausea swept through her, followed by a dripping sensation in her nose. To her own surprise as much as Marion's, Helen noticed that her nose was bleeding. The blood was dark, as good as black, and poured from both nostrils at an alarming rate.

"Excuse me," she said, getting up from behind the table and half running back into the kitchen area, pinching her nose with one hand, using the other to keep stable as she tilted her head back.

Once out of sight, Helen was more panicked in her movements; she swept with her arms in desperate search of a cloth or piece of kitchen roll to help try and stem the bleeding. Once she had tissue stuffed up each nostril Helen slumped against the wall and rested with her hands on her knees. Her shirt was soaked through with blood, and she saw a puddle on the floor that covered enough of the linoleum to cause her speeding heart to skip more than a few beats in her chest. When Helen stood up, the bleeding had stopped. She stood braced against the countertop, waiting for the shaking to stop. Helen took the spare shirt she always had hanging on the coat stand and headed back out to Marion. She gave herself a cursory check in the mirror and wiped away the remaining blood, offered herself a half-hearted snarl; old habits really do die hard.

The salon was spread over two buildings, joined by a connecting door, one side dedicated to hairstyling and facials, while the other section (where Helen was and her colleagues Rosie Singh and Martina Petrova were all busy at work on their own final customers) was set up for manicures, pedicures. The waxing rooms were split two at the rear of each salon area. Martina and Rosie chatted to their clients as they worked and didn't even look up when Helen returned. Marion Dubois meanwhile had moved on to the matter of where she intended to spend her summer, and with which one of her suitors she was more likely to choose to take with her for company.

"I'll just go for the opaque this time I think, I've got a busy week planned," Marion said. The stride of her conversation wasn't even broken. Helen considered it a near certainty that Marion hadn't even stopped talking the entire time that she had been gone.

Helen heard her request, making a mental note on which of the many small colorful bottles she had lined up on the metal tray that she needed to use.

"So...Venice, I hear it's beautiful there. Mark and I looked at it for our honeymoon, but we couldn't afford it," Helen answered, feeling distant and generally strange.

She found out two weeks before that she was pregnant, she hadn't told anybody, not even Mark, her husband. He worked for a medium-sized insurance company in the city. It was a low pay job; but given the current climate, they were both just happy to still have work at all. She wanted to wait until the time was right before she broke the news to him, and she blamed that on her distracted mind and apparently rebelling body. She knew he would be happy, there was no question about his reaction, and they had spoken about having kids at some length already. Helen was just concerned that their financial situation wouldn't be able to support them. They still had to pay off Mark's student loan, their wedding, not to mention the mortgage on their recently purchased house. It all came down to the fact that they didn't have the stability that family life demanded. Helen was fairly sure that she could pick up some extra shifts in the

salon; one girl had just quit a few weeks before and had yet to be replaced, but that was only a temporary solution because, once she gave birth, she would be out of work for a while. That was when the extra costs would be noticed most.

“Yes, Venice is always lovely, I love it in February. I don’t know why, there is just something about it, and in the summer it’s just too hot. Anyway, are you sure you’re alright, dear? You don’t look at all well. Maybe you should have a lie down.” The concern in Marion Dubois’ voice was genuine. She hadn’t seen how bad the nosebleed had been, nor did she notice the change of clothing, yet the change in Helen’s appearance, her white face, cold hands and distant starry eyes was unmistakable.

Helen didn’t hear her, however...

All she heard was a deep guttural growl, not unlike that of a hungry stomach. Helen stopped working and looked up. She knew she was in the salon, she could see it, including the hideous piece of modern art that occupied the majority of the wall opposite both the main entrance and Helen’s regular workstation. However, Marion Dubois was gone. In her place was a shriveled elderly woman, someone she didn’t recognize but looked as though she belonged in a fairytale, possibly offering an apple. The hag looked at her, and Helen simply stared at her. She was a witch, complete with a large, hooked nose adorned by a large hair-sprouting wart. Her eyes were as black as coal and they held Helen’s gaze and she could feel her skin begin to burn and prickle with heat.

Helen began to sweat, her hands were clammy and her heart increased to such a tempo that it felt as though it was pumping in slow motion. Her mouth was dry and her tongue felt bloated and useless in her mouth. The witch’s hand, which she only then remembered she was holding, tightened around her own. The grip seared her flesh, while the long, gnarled nails – more like talons – sliced into the meat of her arm. Delicate tendrils of smoke rose from her arm, seeping between the witch’s fingers as the flesh continued to cook beneath her grip.

The witch continued to speak, her words – vile guttural sounds. Helen shook her head as the hot, sulphur-rich breath hit her.

“Helen... Are you sure everything’s okay, dear? You really don’t look very well,” Marion asked again, repeating the question that had, until that moment, gone unanswered.

Helen rose from the table without saying a word. The world around her started to burn. The walls of the salon caught fire and the floor melted away around her feet. The black and white vinyl floor tiles bubbled while the fixtures all sank into the floor, giving the entire place a strange, lopsided, Salvador Dali feel. Helen looked around. She saw the girls leaving their clients and rushing towards her. Only their faces had twisted into something inhuman, their eyes glowing like fire embers. Ms. Dubois was also there, standing, her arms still held out as if demanding Helen turn her attention back to the manicure. Her face was expressionless, her mouth continuing to open and close like a fish as she (or so Helen presumed) chatted away, oblivious to the world around her.

“The baby.” Helen dropped her hands to her stomach, clutching at the belly that was yet to swell as she said what would prove to be her final words before she collapsed. Her life was over before she hit the floor, her eyes glassed over as if intoxicated. With her last breath exhaled as she fell, her final words were destined to remain a mystery.

Chapter 4

Sammy

"I can't believe you, I really can't," Mandy Jenkins snapped, her temper flaring after an evening of drinks with her friends, most of them fellow students.

"I'm sorry, babe, I am, but you know I don't like it when people start talking about that sort of stuff. It annoys me," Sammy Westford answered, never taking his eyes from the road.

Mandy had woken him and begged Sammy pick her up from the bar she was in because she had drunk way too much to drive and didn't want to have to take a taxi back to her place because her roommate would get angry with her for coming home so late. Mandy had been unlucky enough to make friends with a devout Christian called Emma Wilkinson during her freshman year at university and had never been able to shake her off since. Although Mandy herself had been raised to be a rather devout Catholic, her parents to their credit understood her decision, or simply recognized her stubborn streak and allowed her to go her own way, find her own path.

That being said, Emma was a good friend, one of the best Mandy had ever had; even if her strong religious views and firm standpoint on sex before marriage had made for some rather interesting conversations when Sammy and Mandy had first started dating.

"I don't want to talk about it, Sammy. You fucking embarrassed me in there tonight. I mean, Jesus Christ, would it kill you to try and behave around my friends just once?" She gesticulated with her hands. Sammy didn't have to take his eyes from road to know that she was mad with him. She was drunk, and therefore, she was mad at him, although he would admit that on this occasion her anger, although a little excessive, was justified.

"I don't want to argue, Mand, you're a bit drunk, and those guys took the piss, and only because I don't have a college education or drive a fancy car. I work hard to make my way, and you above all people should know that I enjoy what I do. I'm proud of who I have turned myself into, so don't get angry with me or take their side...not tonight." Sammy wasn't angry with her. Mandy didn't go out often, and seldom did she get drunk, but whenever she did it was always the same routine. She would call him up, he would go get her, and then they would argue about how he was rude to her friends. It was a cycle that stemmed from the main difference between them; their backgrounds.

Sammy was a twenty-two-year-old construction worker; someone who came from a family of borderline degenerates, someone who was never given much of a chance in life. His two brothers were petty criminals, and his sister lived on benefits in a house provided for her and her four children while she chased child support payments from the four different fathers.

His parents divorced before he was even born. Sammy was the baby of the family, the youngest by quite some way, and it was his conception, in fact, which had placed the final lid in the coffin of their relationship, with his father questioning his mother's fidelity. The question was never answered; his father always preferred to pose such important questions with his fists or other handy appliances rather than with his tongue. Sammy called him his father, but in

truth he was only the father of Sammy's sister who was conceived while his mother was engaged to another man (who, for the sake of the record, was not the father of either of Sammy's brothers).

Sammy never knew his own father, and he in turn escaped his family as soon as he graduated high school. Although he had the brains for it, he knew with a strange levelheadedness at an early age that he wouldn't benefit from going to college. He liked the idea of working with his hands, and so he packed his bags at the first opportunity and moved to a different city – away from his family in Denver – and began a series of cross-country adventures before finally landing in Baltimore, where he had been ever since, living just outside of the main city in the suburb of Edmonson.

He had moved around a lot, living in rented accommodation, moving from city to city, working construction for whatever company was hiring, before he was finally offered regular work with Whiting-Turner Construction, whom had now been his employers for two-and-a-half years.

Mandy Jenkins couldn't have been more dissimilar to Sammy if she tried. Her family were rich; her father a doctor, head of cardio thoracic surgery at Johns Hopkins while her mother was a stay-at-home mom, dedicated to her children, never moaning, always willing to spend her time aiding them in whatever they needed, from conversations or advice through to simple transport, something that would have never crossed Sammy's mother's mind. She was too self-obsessed to even notice Sammy had moved out of the house until three weeks later. The first phone call to check on his whereabouts came three weeks after he had left home, just as he was about to pack up his bags and move for the second time.

Mandy had one brother who, while only in first in his year at Stanford, had already been headhunted by some of the largest law firms on both coasts, not to mention a few from abroad. Mandy herself had chosen to follow her father into the medical profession, choosing dentistry. It was in a bar near the University of Maryland where she just begun her second year that Mandy met Sammy.

Their meeting was unremarkable, although over the years, as their relationship developed, so did the embellishments they made to their tale. It went from a case of being squashed together at the bar trying desperately to order drinks, only for Sammy to turn around and sacrifice his turn so that Mandy could order, to them finding themselves trapped against the bar and unable to get back to their respective groups (which was as close to the truth as the tale ever got), to something far more interesting – versions of which included Sammy climbing onto the bar and walking across it, jumping to the floor only to sweep Mandy into his arms and walk out of the bar with her.

Their story became a game to them; they took it in turns to create the most embellished version possible just to see how many people believed it. The one constant was the mutual instant attraction.

Despite having next to nothing in common – different background and varied interests – they made it work. Sammy was a fan of action movies, particularly those from the 80s and early 90s, while Mandy was more interested in the old Hollywood pictures, and of course a good romantic movie. Sammy read sports magazines and the occasional comic book, while Mandy had developed a taste for the classic English authors such as Thomas Hardy and the entire

Brontë family. Yet, despite it all, something between them clicked. The only thing they shared was a mutual indifference to any one style of music.

They had been together just over a year now, and they had learned everything about each other. Sammy had been slow to open up, and still hadn't told Mandy everything about his past, or his family, but she knew that and was happy to wait. Mandy's parents had reserved their judgment of him, listening at first only to the background tales of his youth; however, after having met him a few times, they both admitted he was one of the good guys.

They argued, of course, but most of the time it was over silly things, as is the case in any relationship. Their current interaction wasn't so much of an argument as more of a drunken conversation after an incident between Sammy and Nathan Woodrow, a student friend of Mandy's who was infatuated with her and determined to try and score points against Sammy every time they met.

"Why not tonight, Sammy? What's the problem with having this conversation tonight? Do you think you can take me home and get some action from the drunk girl?" She slurred her words, slashing the air with her hands.

"Listen, Mand, I am sorry. That guy is a cock, and just the thought of him makes me want to slap him in the face with a brick. I'm sorry, but it's true. He baits me every time and I always fall for it, because he's an ass, and he wants you, to take you from me. I don't want to fight about this, so let's just go home and we can talk in the morning when your head has cleared a bit," he reasoned, staying calm as best he could. Sammy forced himself to keep his focus on the road, not even allowing himself the chance to throw her so much as a sly glance.

"That's just like you, Sammy...never talk it out, just let Mandy cool down and she'll give it up anyway. You never want to fight, you never argue back. Well this time I'm not letting it go," she snapped, and there was a tone of pure frustration in her voice that made him believe her.

"Come on, Mandy, I don't like fighting. You know what I saw my parents go through, not to mention the string of step-fathers I've had. I've seen what arguments turn into," he said, trying to steer the conversation in a new direction.

"Well you can't hide from everything, Sammy. You were happy enough to fight with Nate back there." She threw back the catalyst that had caused the fight in the first place, just in case he had forgotten.

"Drop it, Mand...Jesus, just pipe down and let me get you home alright?" Sammy found his patience slipping. His grip tightened on the steering wheel, and although he knew he would never hit a woman no matter what the circumstances, he could still feel rage building deep down inside him. He forced it down: an argument was the last thing he wanted, and he would avoid it at all costs.

"Why, are you gonna ignore me, sleep on the sofa, wait until morning, and hope it's all blown over?" She continued to push, somehow intent on making a big deal over a snide comment that Sammy made when he arrived – despite the fact that Nate had been throwing his own snide remarks around about Sammy the entire evening or close to it – and his refusal to sit down and have a drink.

“No, I was going to propose, you silly mare. I busted my balls getting everything set up the way I wanted before you came home,” Sammy blurted it out, unable to keep his mouth shut any longer.

He had been planning the best moment for several weeks, the ring purchased a few months before, just in case the opportune moment arrived early. He had spent the bonus he had been given by his boss on a bottle of expensive champagne and a punnet of strawberries, coupled with scented candles, and a plan for a hot bath scattered with rose petals. Only for Mandy to call and say she was going out for drinks instead.

“What?” Mandy’s mouth stopped after that one word, her mind all of a sudden sober, as if the previous sentence had blown all of the windows out of the car, letting the cool night air and steady rainfall wash the alcohol away.

“That’s right, I had this whole romantic evening planned, and everything was perfect until Nathan got in the way,” Sammy began, but stopped himself; he had finally turned the corner in their disagreement and didn’t want to go throwing any more fuel onto the fire.

“You were going to propose?” Mandy asked in a moment of clarity so stark and sudden that it slapped the remaining haze of her drunkenness and all thoughts of arguments out of her mind.

“Yeah,” Sammy answered her, not certain that an answer was needed.

“Were,” Mandy repeated.

“Am.” Sammy finally understood the previous sentence. He reached into the pocket of his overcoat and pulled out a small velvet box. “I had much bigger and better plans for this, you know,” he said, passing Mandy the box, which she took with hands that trembled from nerves.

“This is one hell of a way to win an argument, Sam,” Mandy answered, laughing. The smile that was stretched across her face, even in the darkness of the car, was answer enough.

“Well, think of all the fights we can have in the future,” Sammy joked.

He took his eyes off the road and looked at her just for a second. He felt a sudden need to see the sparkle in her eyes, even if they were bloodshot from a night of drinking. She still made his heart skip a beat, the delicate outline of her features, the way she poked her tongue out between her teeth when she smiled – a real smile, that was – and the creases around her eyes when she laughed, her smooth skin, and full lips that gleamed in the halogen amber haze that was cast down by the streetlamps.

Mandy giggled at him, and turned her head as if embarrassed, then sensing the weight of his gaze she turned and looked at Sammy. Her face was youthful, and Sammy never stopped wondering how he had managed to keep someone who looked as amazing as Mandy and had the brains to match. She opened her mouth to speak, to answer his question at last; despite the certainty of its affirmation, a yes was still the necessary prerequisite for the occasion. However, what came out was a blood-curdling scream better placed in a scary movie.

“Sammy,” was the only discernable word that came out. Her face was frozen in a look that was somewhere between the height of orgasm and sheer horror, color drained from her face, as if the blood had packed up and left before whatever unspeakable event was about to unfold could occur.

Sammy turned to look and wasted half of his remaining time with Mandy wondering what the hell she saw. Part of him thought it was a meteorite, or for longer odds, a UFO. The night sky filled with bright orange sparks that flew across the horizon, tumbling without grace. It was only when impact was imminent that he realized what it was. A Mercedes, he wasn't sure of the model – not that it mattered when the car in question had become a fireball.

“Jesus Christ. Mandy, hold on!” he yelled, grabbing the steering wheel and trying to find the brakes with feet that felt as though they were glued to the floor. Sammy's leaden left foot rose and tried to find the brake that his right foot refused to touch, but it was too late. The noise was tremendous as the Mercedes, having lost control at a high speed, toppled head over tail towards them, somersaulting like an obese gymnast.

Instinctively, Sammy reached out trying to grab hold of Mandy's hand. All he could hear was his heart as it thundered in his chest while his brain failed to function on a clear or understandable level. Even Mandy's screams were a mere whisper, a distant murmur, as though she were trapped in another room or at the end of a long corridor.

The automotive torpedo impacted Sammy's car on the edge of the hood, causing minimal damage. It was the sudden change in momentum that caused the car to flip over.

“Shit!” Sammy cried out as he felt the car begin to tip forward.

Despite the speed with which it all occurred, everything felt as though it happened in slow motion. The change in the weight of the car, the crunching sound of the hood, engine and undercarriage being crushed, the strange, stomach-churning sensation as the car left the ground, flipping over like a disc in a game of Tiddlywinks. Beside him, Sammy heard Mandy scream, her seatbelt forgotten by her intoxicated mind. She fell forward as the car flipped and she fell into the windshield, her head hitting hard enough to crack the glass. As the car continued its first of many cartwheels Sammy saw a bloodied smear mark the glass as his girlfriend's head bounced free, her body falling against the roof as her head then made contact with the dashboard. Mandy's body followed a similar trajectory as the car, her legs crashing through the glass of the windscreen as the roof crumpled against the road surface. Sammy heard something snap; a burning pain thundered through his body. He didn't have any time to look – not that he could see anything anymore; every image had blended together, his world awash of darkness and fire.

The car flipped once more, the roof flattening even further, and Sammy's fastened seatbelt wasn't enough to stop his head from colliding with the driver's side window. His neck whiplashed with a loud crack and a burst of pain shot into the center of his brain. He tasted blood in his mouth and couldn't breathe; his chest was crushed, both lungs punctured. He also had a compound fracture in each leg, the femur protruding at about mid-thigh level. Finally, the car came to a stop, landing upside down in the middle of the road, the engine somehow still revving angrily, the rear wheels spinning, while the aroma of spilled fuel began to fill the car.

“Mandy,” Sammy coughed, blood spurting from his lips. Looking over to the passenger seat, pain surging through his body, Sammy tried to find the woman he loved. Sammy groped desperate to find Mandy, even as his wheezing breaths began to shallow. He sweated and shivered simultaneously, and the pain began to dull as Sammy's body shut down. He lost control of his bodily functions not long after the car began its second rotation.

The seat next to him was empty; Mandy had fallen out of the tumbling projectile in stages as it had flipped its way along the road. Her head had been the first to come away, cut through as the car descended from its second flip; she had already fallen halfway out of the window when the road came crashing down again, snapping her neck and sending the head rolling down the road like a gruesome bowling ball.

By the time the car came to a stop, several fingers and her left arm had been scattered along the road like the lost items that can be seen lying beside any highway; a shoe, a book, things you often wonder how is it possible to lose while within a car. By sheer chance, the rearview mirror was still in place, and although cracked and missing several large chunks, Sammy could make out what was left of Mandy's body further down the road, a fit of spasms racing through her dismembered torso as the rain pelted down, washing the blood from the road as if the world were wanted to hide it.

His head grew dizzy, the gargling sounds of his breathing lessened, and with it the depth of each inhalation became shallower. Yet Sammy refused to give up. "Mandy." He struggled to make any sound, and was surprised at how strong his voice sounded.

Sammy received no answer to his cries, the still night air broken only by the steady ticking sound of his car engine. The summer storm that had been threatening all day made its move, and the rumbles of thunder drowned out the emergency service sirens. Lightning cast a stark, brilliant flash on the horizon, highlighting the blood and oil covered road, glinting in the open eyes of the head that lay between the two lanes, boxed inside the dividing lines. The blond hair that crowned it was fanned out like a wedding train.

Sammy was long dead by the time anybody arrived at the scene, his face frozen in a twisted image, as if the last thing Sammy had seen had been was Death himself as he leaned in to claim him.

Chapter 5

Graham

“Who’s there?” Graham Williams sat up in bed – well, he raised his head as far as he could; his bed was already set in a semi-seated position; the best thing for his lungs, or so the doctors had said on their last visit. Personally, he thought it a pile of fresh bullshit, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. Not anymore.

No answer came back to him, only the echoing footsteps of the night porter walking the linoleum hallways, his mind not on the job but rather following Monday Night Football. The playoff positions were filling up fast, and his team needed just one victory to clinch their spot, and with it the chance to gain redemption for the painful defeat at the end of the previous season.

Despite the lack of an answer, Graham could hear the intruder, his lumbering footsteps heavy on the cheap carpet; he knew the sound of heavy boots when he heard them, unforgiving, uncomfortable. He had been trained to hear them as they snapped a twig or crunched on a pile of leaves. It was the smell he didn’t recognize; a sweet, meaty aroma, like a cheap butcher’s workroom in the heat of summer. He would have retched at the stench, but his stomach had long ago given up its uses, now nothing more than a shriveled bag inside his decaying body, possibly the only organ that the cancer hadn’t eaten away.

He hadn’t drunk anything since Sunday morning, not that anybody who ‘cared’ for him would have noticed. They had all written him off long ago. As soon as the illness entered what they call end-stage, he had been moved to a new room at the end of the terminal wing, where he was then as good as forgotten. Sure, they visited every now and then, but only to check his pulse. He hadn’t had a change of clothes for three days and, while he wasn’t certain, he thought that he had pissed himself at least once.

Graham opened his mouth to call out again, his throat dry and scratched raw, his lips paper-thin. He stuck out his tongue to wet them, but that too was dry, swollen, and heavy in his mouth. He heard his own breathing; slow rattling breaths as if his lungs had filled with water. Yet still he heard the approaching footsteps. It was as if death himself had come out tonight to claim him. Not that Graham cared: he was ready to go, had been ever since his wife died and the government shoved him into a nursing home. He had been more than capable of looking after himself, still would have been if not for the disease – he was only seventy-six, for God’s sake.

They wanted to sell his home and build some cheap houses to give to all the fucking foreigners. Graham had no living relatives and so was an easy target. Within seven months of entering the home he was confined to his 8x5 cell, or ‘room’ as they all called it. It was en suite, but they insisted on giving him a commode in the corner to use. He wasn’t allowed to walk anywhere, instead, they wheeled him to and from the dining room where frozen TV dinners were served lukewarm at best. To top it off, twice a day Graham was transported into the recreation room, which was a plain whitewashed room with large windows that overlooked a supposed garden and fish pond, but looked more like an overgrown wasteland with a large muddy puddle in the center. There were no fish in the pond, that was a certainty, and the only

thing that ever dared enter the garden was the occasional bird, but it wouldn't stay long. Nothing ever stayed in Golden Acres nursing home long.

There were a few bright pictures on the far wall, modern art they called it, but to Graham it looked more like the artist had farted while painting something else and that by-product of his misdirected bodily function had been the better piece. The other occupants of the recreational room were just as exciting, either parked in front of the television, which seemed to broadcast nothing but old black and white movies – as though people over a certain age watched nothing else. Graham couldn't remember the last time he had seen the news or read a newspaper.

It looked and felt, to him at least, not like a retirement home but a hideaway, a pre-burial storage compound. Food and water was given and they were just left to wait for their clock to run down.

Now, lying in the darkness, hearing the footsteps of an invisible enemy, Graham looked back on it all with no feelings other than a strange and consoling acceptance. A readiness, willingness to go with the strange visitor regardless of what it held in store for a man who had killed the Germans with a song in his heart, before teaching children for the majority of his life, including more than just a few of German descent. He wondered then, for the first time, if any of them still had their grandparents at that time, or had he taken them away from them? Then again, wasn't that why he became a teacher, to educate, to stop kids rushing off and joining the military simply because it was the easy option, the safe bet that if you failed in your studies you could still go away and be the best that you could be?

Something moved in the corner of the room, to the left of the door. It was his chariot; a worn out wheelchair. Its rusty wheels creaked, its carriage moved back and forth as if some hidden weight had taken a seat, testing it out for after he had passed.

"Who's there? I know your there?" he croaked, his body objecting by starting a chain reaction that began with a violent coughing fit and ended up with a mouthful of bloody phlegm being spat into a basin positioned on the floor beside the bed for that very purpose.

"It's me, Sarge. Edwards," a scared voice answered him. It wasn't a physical sound, but rather a whisper carried on a breath of wind. In fact Graham doubted he had heard anything at all, only it was that name... Edwards, why had he heard that name?

Graham couldn't speak further; he was too exhausted, and his body racked with pain. His every muscle ached as it fought just to take the next breath, to see a sunrise that he couldn't be bothered to see. Ever since his wife died, Graham had asked for death, begged for it, yet it was years before the cancer took hold of him, and now not even his own body listened to him: it just kept on fighting.

"I think we made it, Sarge. I've been hiding in the bushes, but I don't think the fuckers saw me. It's been so lonely, but now I've got you here... Hey, you want to play a few hands? I've got a deck in here somewhere. I traded them with a guy from the Airborne a while back." The voice set off alarm bells inside Graham's head. Triggering memories he had long since forgotten, or that had simply been deleted by the grey masses that had now spread through his body.

There was a small reading lamp on the table beside his bed – not that he read much anymore. Occasionally he could make it through a few lines before his eyes gave up; his glasses were

long lost. He fumbled with his trembling hand, his body covered with a cold sweat that had soaked his sheets.

Do I really want to turn it on? Graham thought, his hand recoiling as it reached the switch.

He looked around once more in the darkness, a comforting place, one that erased the confines of his room, the lack of decorations; other than the picture of his wife on the table beside him, the lamp and ceiling light, there was little in the room. There was a rickety closet that housed his few meager possessions, a wheelchair and a cord that could be pulled in emergencies to call the nurses. Other than that, the room was bare. His bed was located in the center, in front of the small, barred window that offered him a view of either blue sky or cloud. Every now and then an airplane would move through his view, giving him something real to look at; but all too soon, it disappeared from his life the way everything always seemed to do.

Graham closed his eyes, trying hard to block out the footsteps that he could hear approach his bed. The room grew cold. He clamped his eyes shut and focused. He saw his wife. She was young back then. It was the day of their wedding, the war was long since won. They were in love, inseparable. Graham never understood why she stayed with him. His impotency, brought on by the war – although, despite it all, they had certainly enjoyed several passionate moments together – would have pushed many women away into the arms of another. Not his Marjorie; no, she stuck by him, through the barren years, though his nightmares, the childless decades after which old age approached fast and with it the knowledge that a lonely and bleak future lay in wait for whoever was the last one to go.

The image began to flicker. Something somewhere was hurting. The pain came in waves, distorting the image like a satellite broadcast being interrupted by some foreign transmissions, and Graham could make out the hint of an image underneath but not clear enough to tell what it was.

He focused harder. Marjorie stood in her wedding dress, not in the chapel, but outside in the cemetery. They were in the cemetery of the small, rural church where they had gotten married. It was a beautiful day, the odd wisp of cloud in an otherwise deep blue ocean above their heads. A cool breeze blew, but not hard enough for them or their small wedding party to feel the need to reach for their jackets.

Something was wrong with the scene, however. A muffled sound came from inside the church; a strangled yet delicate sound. It took several moments for Graham's cancer-ravaged brain to realize it was song; the wedding party were already inside.

*Praise, my soul the King of Heaven,
To his feet thy tribute bring,
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven
Who like me his praise should sing.*

It was a hymn that Graham knew well: it had also been the final hymn sung at his wife's funeral. She requested it just before she died; she said that it reminded her of the best day of her life. They had been close to her final words, and when the song began during the service Graham had broken down in uncontrollable sorrow.

“We should go inside, love, we don’t want to miss it,” he said; his voice was youthful, deep and commanding. Both were qualities that it had long since lost. She didn’t answer him; the words never reached her ears, rather they fell dead into the grass as if the cancer had eaten them the way it had eaten Graham.

They had never stood outside on their wedding day, not before the service. It was bad luck to see the bride, and after they had posed for some photographs in the back of the church, they left relatively soon after.

Marjorie turned towards him, her face streaked with tears. They reflected the sun, which made the salty liquid sparkle like the diamond bracelet she had worn to both her wedding and funeral. It had been a gift from her mother, which in turn had belonged to her mother and so forth back through the generations. How it came into her family’s possession was shrouded in both mystery and scandal, the most plausible explanation being that it had been a gift bestowed upon her great-great-grandmother by a married dignitary who had taken a shine to her. The bracelet had been a gift meant to initiate an affair. Nobody knew what happened thereafter, but the lack of further jewels in the family line gave way to a rather uninteresting outcome.

Graham saw then that Marjorie stood before a fresh covered grave, the earth still wet and dark from its churning. Graham looked down. The tombstone was a simple wooden cross – handmade and held together by what on first inspection looked like shoelaces. It was exactly the sort of grave marker seen in any half decent western. A name had been carved into the horizontal bar, the penmanship shaky. Another series of cold-sweat shakes racked Graham as he squinted hard, trying to make out the name, his eyes failing him. It grew warmer, or so it felt. The sun burned low in the sky; it was as if it, too, strained to read the words carved into the wooden marker.

The name on the tombstone was clear enough to Graham and it made him stumble backwards. He reached for Marjorie’s hand, a loving gentle hand that had helped him through many bad days and nights during the years, but it wasn’t there. It wasn’t being offered at least, for Marjorie had turned to face him, her hands on her hips, her head thrown back in a fit of violent laughter. Her skin was pale. The veins that ran beneath the surface shone a bright blue as if injected with phosphorous.

GRAHAM WILLIAMS
R.I.P.

“No,” Graham said in an uncertain voice. Not because of the tombstone, or the old-fashioned, uncared for approach that had been behind its creation, but more because he had long ago arranged to be buried in a shared grave with his wife.

“We should be together, Marjorie.” His throat hurt to speak, as if the words were wrapped in barbed wire, and each uttered syllable carved deeper chunks of wet flesh from his mouth.

Marjorie stopped laughing and stared at Graham. Her eyes were rattled in the sockets, withered like prunes. Her skin was pulled tight against her face. The wrinkles of age were gone, replaced by the shriveled onset of decay, wet rot hard at work peeling the flesh from her body in putrescent strips. Marjorie opened her mouth, and a groaning, screeching sound

erupted from within her bowels. Her skin began to bulge; it stretched thinner and thinner as if something was trapped inside, desperate to escape.

Graham watched in stunned silence as his beloved wife split open, her skin simply pulling apart like a piece of rotted fruit. A strange black liquid spilled from the slit that ran vertically down her body – a thin watery substance blacker than the night. The screeching sound grew louder and louder – and was joined by a strange rustling, like feathers beating against themselves. Graham had been to his uncle's chicken farm more than once in his younger days, helping out around the farm for some extra cash, and what he then heard coming from within Marjorie's decayed body made him think of just that place where the birds were cramped together in pens, separated and ready for the slaughter.

Then it stopped, and Marjorie simply exploded. Her skin tore open with a dry dripping sound. A deep vertical gash appeared on her, splitting the wedding dress she was wearing. A rush of stale, putrescent air came first, hitting Graham and making his head spin.

Then, out of nowhere, with the same sound of rustling wings, the frantic scratching of the stiff legs and the squawking of long silenced beaks, a swarm of blackbirds exploded from within Marjorie's body. The birds' wings were wet with blood; thick clots fell to the ground as the birds began to spread their wings and fly away. Thousands of them erupted from her body, and when it was all over her skin lay in two even piles on the ground. The birds continued to climb into the air until the sun was hidden by them; they moved en-mass. They flew towards it and covered its light, creating an artificial dusk. Graham watched helplessly; he watched as the birds ascended into the heavens and on towards the sun. He could hear their cries as their bodies began to burn and singed feathers fell down around them like a charcoal snow.

Graham fell to the floor, coughing and rasping. A large ball of dark red, congealed blood hung from the left arm of the cross like a tear. When he opened his eyes he was back in his small cell, the ball of blood on the floor beside the bed. He stared at it as it beat like the aborted heart of a fetus making its first and last attempt at creating life. His sheets were soaked with strong smelling urine that burned on bed sores.

His heart was pounding, or at least going at a normal healthy speed, which given his condition was a bad sign. Graham lay still. He swore he could feel the cancer eating its way deeper and deeper into his body. A tear built in his eye. Only one; he didn't have enough fluid left in his body to produce more, and even this wasn't exactly a tear, but rather a thick excretion that had simply found yet another way out of his body.

"Marjorie," Graham whispered under his breath. The name was heavy on his lips. He looked around, and things began to clear; the light on the bedside table was on.

Did I do that? he thought. *No, I couldn't have. Then who?* Graham asked himself, unsure of what had happened.

He was cold, that was all he really understood. The pain, the passage of time, from day to night, from Monday to Tuesday, had become a blur to him. The pain medication they kept him on ensured that he was only lucid for a few pain filled moments each day.

"Sarge, you alright? I don't think Hendricks made it, Herman either – Jesus Christ, Sarge. They're fucking everywhere," the same voice – scared now – echoed in his ears.

Graham turned his head, ignoring both the burning cough that sat on his lungs and the exploding fireworks factory that had set up shop inside his skull over the last few weeks. He wanted to cry, to be startled, but it wasn't possible: he had progressed beyond that stage now, and he knew it. The realization of his impending death didn't scare him as much as he had feared it would, and that in itself terrified him.

He wasn't alone in the room; he was, however, the only living person there. His visitor stood no more than a few feet away from him, and wore an old, dust covered – no not dust, but debris, crushed bricks and cement, not to mention a few fellow soldiers – army uniform. He had been dead over sixty years; ever since September 21, 1944. He had died in Holland, part of the group of men going a bridge too far on the march to Arnhem. The majority of the people Graham knew had died that day, men he loved like friends, like brothers.

“Hi, Bobby. How you doin', kid?” Graham choked. The words felt as sharp as razor blades in his mouth.

“They're all dead, Sarge...everybody. It's a mess here. You were lucky to get out,” Bobby Edwards stuttered, a habit he had when nervous. He was only seventeen, hadn't even finished high school, but his father pushed him into the army the first time a shout went around about the war effort. Graham had liked the boy; he himself had only been twenty-one, but he had a wise head, even back then, and saw a lot of himself in the boy.

Hawkins, Miller and Pearson – Graham could remember all of their names, see their faces as clearly as though they had all played poker together the night before, even in his current state – yet it had been Bobby Edwards, the youngest of the group, that he had considered his truest friend. None of them survived the war. Pearson had been the closest; he had taken a bullet to the leg and was shipped home minus that one limb, only to have his boat sink with American soil in sight. Still, he had been buried in his home town; a real grave that Graham had been able to visit, unlike the others, all of them cut down in a strange place with nothing to mark their passing other than a distant memory in a cancer riddled brain.

“I know, kid,” Graham said bitterly, as if he resented the fact that he had gotten home.

Of course, part of him had died in the war, and the parts that came home were covered in bits of those that hadn't made it. Marjorie had been the one who had kept him going.

Graham wasn't surprised that it was Bobby or one of the others in his platoon who came to take him. After Marjorie died he had broken down, been plagued by nightmares and hallucinations of them all, and now he understood. They had been calling to him, beckoning him home.

The young man took a step back from the bed. “It's not like that, Sarge.” He was near tears as he tried to speak. “They asked me to come and get you...the boys. They want me to bring you back; we're all still here, and maybe we can win this time,” he said with hopeful tones, although his eyes were dead and motionless, his skin pale.

Graham watched as Bobby raised his arms as if meaning to lift him from the bed – an easy enough task given Graham's current weight. Graham looked at him, his vision blurred, colors running from his world as if his eyes had just been exposed to too much light during his years.

“Did it hurt?” he asked Bobby with a sudden burning curiosity.

“You mean getting shot? Yeah it killed, no pun intended.” The answer was short, definitive, yet Graham looked into the kid’s eyes as he spoke, and they said volumes.

A bout of coughing stopped the conversation. Graham struggled for breath. His lungs gargled and crackled like a radio trying to find a signal, and a wheezing sound escaped his lips. Bobby didn’t move: he just stood there, the dull buttons on his jacket reflecting a dirty light into the room.

Every time Graham blinked, in that fraction of a second where your vision is distorted, the calm and steady face of his old friend disappeared, to be replaced by a rotting skull. Hair hung in bloodied clumps to strips of scalp that pulled away from the bone like a peeled banana. The eyes had disappeared, and maggots filled the empty sockets; their tiny bodies writhed and ground against each other in an endless orgy of decay. They had eaten their way under the skin. Graham could see numerous bulges under the flesh. One in the center of the forehead drew particular attention; it bubbled and waved as the beasts gorged themselves full as they feasted and partied beneath the cold exterior, gorging their bodies on the sweet flesh of the dead. While above the shoulders Bobby still looked every bit the soldier, below them he looked, simply put, a mess. His jacket was open, the shirt torn, pierced first by the snipers bullet that had ripped through his sternum and out of his spine. He had collapsed instantly, as good as dead.

They grabbed him anyway, pulling him into cover, but not before another bullet had blown his gut open.

Now here he stood, the gaping holes in his skin present for all the (under)world to see. His skin was black, burnt, and putrid around the entry points, curling backwards like a flower. The wound in his chest was clean. His heart – now long since liquefied – had been cut in half by the first bullet: the kill shot. It was the second shot that had been the mess maker. It had come from a much higher angle, and had blasted Bobby’s malnourished body open, spilling his insides onto the debris-covered ground.

His dying moments had been spent holding his intestines and various other unidentifiable organs in his arms, cradling them like a father holding a newborn child. He had tried vainly to push them all back inside, as if that would somehow take care of the problem. Now, over half a century later, they still hung from the open wound. They dropped out of the festering hole in shriveled strands, black and wet with rot. They had a putrescent odor emanating from within the black, decayed gash in the young man’s body.

Graham watched as a sea of maggots began to spew from the wound, flowing out on an ocean of pus; an abscess beneath the surface had swelled and ruptured, and now it boiled over, looking a lot like oatmeal. The beasts clung to the dead meat, desperate not to surrender their bounty, yet many fell to the floor where they lay blind; some found their way back home, crawling up the booted feet, beginning their ascent towards their own decaying paradise. Bobby didn’t seem to notice.

When Graham’s body settled, leaving his throat raw and blood staining his teeth, Graham continued. “No, not getting shot, but dying. Did it hurt?” Graham asked again.

It was a question he had been wondering about ever since they told him the cancer had spread and that the best they could do now was manage the pain. He had assumed that it

would, simply because living hadn't exactly been pain free for him. He had cursed God every night since his beloved Marjorie had died. He would close his eyes, clench his hands and lower his head. "Dear God," he would begin. "Thank you for making me suffer so. Thank you for leaving me alone. Now it's your turn, so just fuck off and leave me be. Amen." These would be his favorite words; short and sweet, the use of any more would—or so he felt—make the gesture seem empty, lacking a little bit of substance.

"No, it doesn't hurt, Sarge. You need to come with me. You won't make it to her..."

Graham's eyes sprang open.

"Marjorie, you won't make it to her. There's something coming. You need to come with me, the boys are waiting for you, Sarge."

"What...how do you know? No, I can't, Bobby. I've got to find her. She's waiting for me, I know she is," Graham said, his voice wavering. He could sense how close he was to the end.

"She is," Bobby answered him. "But you can't get to her. The roads are blocked, Sarge. There's no way anyone can get through." He said each word carefully, as if there were some important message behind them.

"It's so cold, Bobby," he stammered at the end. Graham looked at it hands; his fingers had turned blue, as if he had been out walking in winter without gloves. He watched as the delicate shade spread onto the palm of his hand.

He looked up at Bobby. "Do you have a smoke for a dying man?" he asked.

"Sure thing, Sarge." Bobby didn't move, yet before Graham could realize it, Bobby stood beside the bed holding a lit match to his mouth. A cigarette rested between his lips.

Graham took a drag; a long, sweet, choking drag. The taste he recognized well. It was, in fact, unforgettable... Chesterfields: the cigarettes that started his lifelong love affair. He hadn't smoked until he got to Europe, but after a few days of just being close to the war, he had started puffing like a locomotive and never stopped. Cut down, sure, but never stopped.

Chesterfields had been his favorite, although as is the case with war, trades were needed in order to keep your morale up, and so he had smoked Capstan Full Strength on the odd occasion. That was a real party; his head would swoon for hours after a single one of those. *How ironic*, he thought, *that the brand of smokes that had started it all would also be the brand of smokes that would end it.* Yet despite his long time love affair with smokes and strong spirits, it was neither the drink nor the smokes that had caused the cancer.

"These really were something, hey?" Graham smiled as best he could; his body had begun to slip away from him. His hands were completely blue. He looked like a Smurf.

"Yeah, they won't hurt your throat," Bobby offered, deadpan as ever. "Or something like that anyway. There were so many taglines around I get 'em all confused."

Graham took another drag. "What's it like, Bobby?" he asked after a while.

The kid looked at him, his eyes showing a glisten of emotion – or was it just moisture from the decay that had spread through his body? "I don't know, Sarge. We're all still there. None of us came home. We're all still here, standing around this fucking church. It just never comes to an

end, Sarge. I don't think any of us knew why until recently. It's you; until you come back then it can never end...we hope." The last sentence was whispered, near inaudible.

"They call these cancer sticks, did you know that?" Graham chuckled to himself, offering a bit of modern wisdom to the kid.

"Cancer, these things gave you that?" Bobby asked in disbelief.

"No, that's the funny thing, kid. I smoked my whole life, drank whiskey straight up, nothing more than a lump of ice to help guide it down – and yet my lungs and liver are the two bits of me that ain't completely dead with it." He gasped as he spoke, a gargled rattling sound. The room began to spin, his head felt light, as if he had been strapped to a wheel and left to spin for a few hours before being cut loose. It wasn't the Chesterfield, but something much more permanent.

"Come with me, Sarge, please. Something is coming, don't you hear it?" Bobby asked. Once again his dead eyes gazed at Graham, and now appeared to be pleading to him.

Graham was about to say no, when outside of his window the world lit up: an explosion ripped through everything. Brick and mortar dust fell from the walls, filling the room with a thick grey cloud.

"We're all here for you, Sarge. Just come with us. Can't you feel it? There's something coming," Bobby pleaded above the din. In the background came the rattle of automatic gunfire. Graham looked through the dust and saw a large hole in the wall, and on the other side a tank – or rather the barrel of one peering through the building's gash like one of the Tripod eyes in War of the Worlds. Graham didn't need to see any more to know who it was behind the controls. Besides, he could hear them all calling him, beckoning him and cheering him on like friends and family waiting at the finishing line of a marathon.

"You coming, Sarge?" Bobby asked, and as Graham looked over at him he saw Bobby as more of a ghost than a figure; he could make out the shadow of the door through him

"No, kid, I'm heading home to my wife," he answered.

It was the same answer he had given all those years ago when the war ended. He had done well in the forces and they had been all too keen to have him stay on, as an officer on the path to greatness, one rather poetic soldier said from his risky position behind a desk back home in the United States. Again, just as the last time he had used the line, Graham knew that his wife would be waiting to take him someplace else, or at least he hoped, his resolve in the final minutes seeming to weaken.

"Good luck, sir," Bobby answered, his shadow disappearing just as the familiar buzzing sound of an incoming air attack began to shake Graham's bones. Bobby was gone in an instant, leaving Graham once again alone in the small cell that had been his world for far too long.

"Come on, you son of a bitch. Come and get me," he called aloud to the room, challenging God to come and claim him with the same finality that he had used on all of Graham's friends and loved ones over the years.

It started; he could feel it. The pain was gone; not just numbed or forced into temporary hiding from the chemical concoction of pills he had had to swallow several times a day, but completely

gone. For the first time he could remember, Graham was pain free. It started in his feet. It felt like smoke snaking its way through his body. He breathed a heavy sigh, for death had arrived to take him home, to those he cared for, and oh how he planned to have a few choice words with the man upstairs if ever he got the chance. He raised his head and looked down at his feet. They were completely numb, and to his eyes they were gone: everything below his knees had just been erased.

As a final thought, before he turned his attention to his wife, two words formed on his lips. "Forgive me," Graham whispered to the room, talking to Bobby, his men still out there, somewhere, to the Germans he had killed or helped to kill, to his wife, to God—just in case. He wasn't sure why he said it, but with nobody around to hear any real final words, he figured they would have to do.

Death finally took him. Graham's heart stopped beating, an instant moment, no wearing down as often described in old age: it simply ceased. Calm washed over him. His lungs cramped, his brain drained itself of information, and as a smile passed over his face, Graham closed his eyes and let the darkness envelop him.

As he slipped away, all thoughts of the war were gone, eradicated. He was in his own garden, standing...looking at the house that he and his wife had purchased not long after he came back from Europe. A new career, a new house, new state...a new start. They had lived in the house until the end, tended its two gardens for as long as was possible, planting flowers each season to keep it cared for, but now Graham stood out back, knee deep in weeds, the only flowers were the dandelions and thistles that seemed to rule the roost. The house was dark; several windows were broken.

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."

John Milton
Paradise Lost

Chapter 6

Marcus: An Old Friend Returns

Marcus woke with a jolt. He was surrounded by darkness, shrouded in it. He tried to move but couldn't. He was restrained.

"Hello?" he called out, his voice strained and distant; sounding like the final repetition of an echo before it fades away.

His mind was blank; he couldn't remember anything. A few images fluttered in his mind; a woman holding a baby—his wife? The idea sprang into his mind and connected with the picture. The baby was his first daughter. Marcus remembered the day; the entire labor had taken five hours, which everybody told them was incredible for a first baby. Then, like the memories of a drunken night out, various events that surrounded his demise filtered back into his conscious mind. He remembered the shopping arcade. The woman and the man; it was still hazy. He couldn't remember what had happened. Only that he had fallen –tripped? Marcus didn't think so. He could hear a baby crying; constant, and at a tone which suggested more than a simply case of hunger or a dirty nappy.

Marcus was hot. Sweat covered his body and soaked his clothes. He tried to move, but only managed to pull his bonds tighter, forcing his body against the wall behind him. It felt like rock – sharp and unforgiving. Marcus steadied himself and managed to work his bonds a little looser when a cramp hit his left leg. Just behind the knee, a knot of pain exploded. It felt as though his knee was going to twist right off. The lack of visual stimuli coupled with the solitude of his dark world made it seem worse than it was, or so Marcus told himself over and over, repeating it like a mantra. He tried to focus his attention to the external situation instead. Something had been placed over his head. It wasn't dark: his face was simply covered.

Have they taken me somewhere?

"What happened?" Marcus asked aloud. His thoughts stumbled around like a drunk on Friday night.

His body ached. That dull rusty ache you get while fighting off the flu. His joints swollen with fluid, the skin stretched taut over them.

Marcus heard something moving. He felt it, no...not *it*, but *them*. Something crawled over the exposed skin of his forearms. Something tickled his scalp beneath the mask. Marcus threw his head around as panic started to tighten its grip on him.

"Get off me!" Marcus called out. The light-cancelling cloth that covered his head stuck to his mouth like surround wrap clinging to warm leftovers before you put them in the fridge.

He felt a breeze against his chest, and Marcus became startingly aware of his nudity. Something slid down his chest, descending like a lover's kiss, caressing his skin to just below his navel.

Marcus's stomach felt as if it were on fire.

That was when it came back to him. The darkness lit up and Marcus was back in the shopping arcade. A small crowd of elderly people and a handful of store employees had gathered. Marcus looked at them, their faces pale, mouths motionless circles, like unwanted fish left on a boat's deck to rot in the sun.

The scene changed again, another flash of light; Marcus was on the floor; his hands were raised before his eyes. They were covered in blood. Another snapshot. Standing again, he saw a man and a woman – *God, she looks like a whore*, – arguing. The scene changed again. Marcus now looked down on it. He saw his own body surrounded by a pool of blood. Not far away lay a woman – *My God, she looks like a whore*. She was bleeding. Her face was also missing: someone had crushed it. What remained was a bubbling bloody mess. Her body twitched, and beneath her was a child. Marcus could see its arms flying around in blind, panicked movements. He also saw bloody footprints leading away from them all, the stride getting longer with each print as whoever it was picked up the pace of their escape. Another flash, this one followed by darkness.

“Get this off!” Marcus roared, not in fear or panic, but in anger.

“Now, now, baby. Play nice,” a voice said. It cut through the silence, bringing sounds of life and hope into his world of endless night. It was a slimy voice; the vocal chords sounded as though they were drowning – yet there was something familiar about it.

“Who’s there? Who said that?” Marcus called, trying to get a bearing on the sound. It wasn’t in front of him, no, off the side, his left.

“Just an old friend.”

Marcus moved his head so that he faced the direction from which he was sure the voice came.

“You’re no friend of mine. Take this thing off now. Let me see who you are,” he said with confidence, defiant to the end. The simple knowledge that there was someone there, good intentions or bad, gave him a focus and grounding point for his anger.

“I don’t think you’re ready for that yet,” the voice laughed.

“Take this off now. I’m a police officer. There will be people looking for me. Trust me. We look after our own, with an old-fashioned view on justice,” Marcus threatened, hoping the slight wobble in his voice wouldn’t give him away. His stomach throbbed, but he felt calm.

“Poor baby, you still don’t have any idea, do you?” the voice said with kindness. “You adulterous cock whore, you’ll get what you deserve down here. Oh yes,” it snapped, spitting venom-filled words that burnt Marcus’ chest.

His skin was on fire. Drops of something seared his flesh, something other than words. Marcus winced in pain but couldn’t move more than a few inches at most. “What the hell is going on?” Marcus called out to the darkness, when, without warning, the cloth was pulled from his face. It didn’t take long for Marcus’ eyes to adjust as the darkness was more dusk than midnight.

The first thing Marcus noticed was the discarded sack that had covered his face wasn’t a mere hemp sack, but rather a sack of a different nature. Scrotums. They had been split open then sewed together, creating what looked like a magnified version of what they were.

Unsure of how long his captors would give him before plunging his world back into darkness, Marcus looked around trying to gauge his location, absorbing as much information about his whereabouts as he could. He was in a small windowless room. Despite the lack of illumination, the dusk never threatened to darken further. It was the walls; they seemed to cast such an eerie glow. They were red; a shade so deep that in places it looked black. Their surface seemed to be moving... flowing. The ground and roof were separated by a gap of about three meters, the latter of which had the same flowing appearance as the wall. The way they swirled was hypnotic, and after a while Marcus began to feel nauseous.

I'm in a cave, Marcus thought deductively. The way out would be up.

"No you're not, lover boy." The voice read his thoughts. It sent chill up Marcus' spine; an avalanche in reverse. With it came a dawn of realization. The final pieces of the memory puzzle he had been working on during his time in the dark fell into place.

"I'm not dead," he said under his breath – although, as he spoke, his mind showed him everything he needed to see. The churchyard, the mourners dressed in either black or formal police dress. He saw his wife and kids standing on the edge of the grave. He saw a coffin...*his* coffin...being lowered into the ground. He saw his wife sink to her knees, where she remained until his son picked her up and held her.

"Oh, poor baby. So confused. Sure, it may end with a box buried in the ground, a quiet neighborhood, too, no troublemakers, no noise." The voice paused.

Marcus had been looking at the floor in a trance of disbelief, struggling to make his way over to acceptance. As his captor talked, Marcus raised his head, determined to look them in the eye, whoever they were. He saw nothing: the cave (or whatever it was) was empty.

"That is merely the physical world," the voice continued. "That body you had was little more than a transportation system. A shell – some outer husk you call a body. But, dear...dear, dear, dear, your soul, the life that filled that festering pile of cells you called your home for over forty years, *that* will live on forever." The voice trailed off, but Marcus knew the owner was close. His captor was there with him, hiding.

"Who are you?" he asked. A standard question made even more pertinent given his recognition of the voice.

"Kiss me, my knight and I will be yours forever," the voice answered, and the small chamber was filled with wind, a hot acrid wind that felt abrasive against Marcus's skin. With it came a wet, damp odor like a rotten log in the middle of the forest. As if appearing out of thin air (which it did) a figure appeared. Nothing but a shadow at first, it was large; that was all Marcus could fathom. It was at least nine feet tall, wider than a normal man and straight, no clear widening for appendages like arms or legs. It looked, for all intents and purposes, like a...

It's a giant talking shit, Marcus thought, his mind conjuring up an image of a large brown turd holding a cane, top hat perched on its head and a monocle against one dark brown eye with long, feminine eyelashes.

Slowly, the thing revealed itself. It was covered by wet, glistening skin. No, not skin, but a shell.

It's a roach. The answer dawned in Marcus's mind long before the creature had fully appeared.

The creature had its back to him, and Marcus noticed that the walls around him were no longer wet but had become tacky. He turned around to look and saw the walls were bleeding. He could taste it: a heavy coppery flavor like a mouthful of old pennies. Marcus gagged, yet at the same time it brought along a sweet undertone which made him want to swallow.

The giant body oozed a thick opaque slime, which fell to the floor and congealed instantly. The creature was shuddering, quivering, with a respiration rate faster than a dog in the heat of summer. The brown, scaled body was bald save for a thatch of thick, wavy, black hair, which flowed from what Marcus hoped was the creature's head.

"What...what the f-fuck," Marcus stammered as his brain tried to get a grip on everything that had happened. "Let me go." The simplicity and the meek sound of the request made him feel ashamed.

"I will, don't worry, my dark champion. It's no fun without the chase," the voice said.

"Listen, I don't know who you are, but if you think I'm gonna crack, you're wrong. I don't know what you want and I wouldn't tell you if I did so just get it over with." Marcus's voice was strong and defiant.

The creature laughed at him; a mocking, belittling laugh that made Marcus angry. The same sort of laugh generated in a classroom when a student stands up and says something he doesn't mean. Marcus remembered a moment from his childhood where he stood up in a biology lesson to give a presentation and kept saying orgasm instead of organism. The reddening wave of heat that had washed over him then stroked his cheeks once more.

"You're dead, Marcus, and I'm your judge, jury and executioner. It doesn't matter what you say. None of it matters. Not down here." The beast turned, revealing itself to Marcus, who felt his skin tighten as if it had shrunk two sizes.

When Marcus was twelve years old, his family had rented a cottage in the middle of the woods. They spent the vacation hiking, cycling, swimming and kayaking from sunrise until sunset, and had slept long and hard each night. However, one night towards the end, something wrenched Marcus from his sleep. A strange scuttling sound, as something scurried over the wooden floor. Marcus had ignored it as best he could; telling himself that, *bugs are a part of nature, and the strange itching feeling on my legs comes from the cheap blankets*, and the buzzing in his ears nothing more than the sound of mosquitoes, awake and thirsty for blood. The excuses kept him in a quasi-sleep for a while, but the excuses ran out around the time something crawled over his closed eyelids. They moved fast, like a sudden chill on a warm night. Something forced its way through Marcus's semi-parted lips. It choked him. Legs probed his tongue, and antennae brushed the roof of his mouth, while a hard shell clacked against his teeth. Marcus sat upright, choked and unable to breathe. He tried to call out. To scream for his parents, his sister, anybody, it didn't matter. Marcus threw back the bed covers and that was when they descended on him.

Marcus retched from the memory, while the sight of the thousands of pairs of tiny legs that jutted from creature's black pulsating underbelly was too much for him, and he vomited. The

roach's legs seemed to wave at him; they beckoned him towards them... *hug me*, they screamed.

Young Marcus felt the bug trying to crawl down his throat: his mouth was closed, so there was no other way for the creature to go. Coughing and spitting, Marcus tried to empty his mouth, but the roach held firm. Marcus threw the bedcovers aside. The bed was infested with roaches, ranging in size from that of a ladybug to the size of a grown man's fist. They charged towards him like a flood, covering Marcus's legs in a rolling sea of hazel brown bodies and black antennae. He thrashed with his legs, and while bugs fell to the floor, the covering never seemed to lessen; it was as though his lower body was in fact comprised of them. He began to hyperventilate, and in doing so he managed to suck four or five – he wasn't sure of the exact number – roaches into his mouth before they were subsequently swallowed. Marcus had heard the stories of cockroaches being able to survive a nuclear blast, and for months afterwards he couldn't help but wonder: had they died or merely found a warm place to sleep?

His screams had woken his parents, and they came running. His mother had fainted when she caught sight of all the bugs, while his father, ever the calm and deliberate man, had swept Marcus up and charged out of the house with him. They drove home that night and never went back to those woods again. The nightmares haunted Marcus the rest of his life. At least once a month he would wake up, his skin soaked with sweat, his legs and mouth itching from the delicate patter of their feet, acid burning in the pit of his stomach. A small part of him always believed those swallowed beasts had survived.

Marcus looked around, desperate to avoid any eye contact with the large cockroach beast, yet he was drawn to it like a moth to the flame. The beast seemed to recognize this and stood still. Even its legs seeming to have frozen, allowing Marcus to get a good look.

"Are you ready to be judged, maggot?" the creature asked. All the previous niceties – and it was a stretch to call the previous voice that – were gone.

Marcus's eyes reached the head and he shut them just before the image hit his brain. When he opened them, he didn't see a hideous half-insect creature like something out of a David Cronenberg movie, but something much worse. The image developed like a Polaroid picture: it took a few seconds for Marcus's brain to assemble everything to create the image. It wasn't a bug's face, but a human's. A woman's, with creamy white skin and long black hair, and eyes a sparkling emerald green, shielded by long eyelashes, with a delicate nose, albeit one refined by a surgeon's hand rather than that of God.

"Melanie," Marcus croaked, his voice a broken whisper.

"Oh, how sweet, you remember me. How are you, Marcus? It's been a while," the once athletic-bodied college student said.

"What are you doing? Just let me go," Marcus demanded, seeming to find his strength now that he knew his captor.

"You still don't get it, do you? Still the same stubborn old Marcus. You're dead, champ. Died on the streets, don't you remember? You couldn't save the girl either. Such a shame." The roach creature shook its human head. With every flicked lock there was a whip-like crack followed by a bright orange flame which erupted from the tip.

Marcus looked down and saw blood flowing from his stomach. A wound glowed a bright orange like the embers of a dying fire. Everything then fell into place. The events appeared before his eyes, playing out in his head like a silent movie, only every line of text that came onto the screen was the same phonetically spelt cry. The words (Young Infant) in brackets each time told Marcus all he needed to know.

“So once again you are the Devil that comes into my life, hey, Mel?” He looked at the beast puzzlingly, eyes searching for something. He fought the rather absurd notion to smile and won.

“Don’t be foolish. I’m no Devil. I am what you want to see, what your soul has deemed to be your punisher. In actuality I am just a humble chamber guardian here to ensure that you see your past and are ready for judgment.”

The creature took a scuttling step to one side.

A hole appeared in the solid rock. Blood swirled in the opening. A whirling crimson vortex, suspended as if awaiting a command to move. It began to separate, beginning with a small circle in the center, which expanded, the blood not falling away or lessening, but merely pulling back like a curtain to reveal a play already in motion.

“You have sinned, my shadow warrior. You have known the carnal pleasures of a woman outside of your matrimonial bed. Sinners must face their punishment. Stand up for their crimes, face their victims, and let them know the truth. Let them know exactly what has happened. Only then can you hope to avoid punishment.” The voice grew in volume and lowered in pitch until every trace of femininity was gone.

“I don’t understand,” Marcus said, his head beginning to spin. He felt woozy, as if someone had spiked his drink. His eyes were drawn to the opening; it held him in a trance with a silent promise of knowledge, of answers.

The roach continued to speak as if it hadn’t heard him. “Sinners will be punished, not before God, but before the Justice Courts of the Netherworld. The kings will decide your fate. So look upon your carnage. Look as the damage your loins have caused is brought forth. Your time is at hand. How much blood do you wish to shed to hide who you are?”

Beyond the creature, the doorway or portal, for that was how Marcus saw it, had opened completely. He looked through and into another time, another place, but one he remembered as if it was only yesterday. He had just finished training, a particularly grueling session that had seen him knock out two sparring partners in successive rounds.

On the other side of the blood window Marcus was busy training for the Whitmore fight, a seasoned fighter who had only ever been beaten once, early on in his career when, much like Marcus, he had been bullheaded and cocksure. It was the fight that was to put Marcus’s name on the map. He was still somewhat of an unknown, and in the eyes of the Whitmore camp Marcus was nothing but a moving target for their man.

Marcus had had other ideas.

He had trained harder for that fight than he did for any other fight. Brutal training sessions, late night runs; midnight runs and protein shakes, early morning runs and full-time training sessions on top of that. It was all back in the days before sports nutrition became a topic

studied by the masses. He had won the fight inside of three rounds, knocking his opponent out with a series of powerful body shots followed by a big right hook to an unguarded chin. By current standards the fight would have been stopped in the second round after Marcus split open Whitmore's left eyebrow.

Silence filled both worlds. Marcus watched on, his emotions drained because he knew what came next. He realized then what he was meant to see. It was her: the woman whose head was now stuck on the body of a cockroach.

Marcus looked around. The referee stood between him and his slain opponent. The crowd was on their feet. All of them roaring for the upset that none had even contemplated. All around them flashbulbs exploded in dizzying stars of bright white light, forever capturing a piece of sporting history no matter how trivial in the grand history of the chosen sport. The sound came back to his world and with it so she entered. Rising into the ring as if summoned, called out as an offering to him, the barbarian warrior – as became his boxing name.

"Melanie," Marcus said from within the chamber, and was rewarded with a blow across the back which felt as though it had been delivered by a baseball bat. Marcus grunted. His mouth clamped shut to hold back the scream.

Meanwhile, the picture played on. Marcus saw his hand raised in victory. And there it was: the moment that began it all. Melanie, who at the time had been a college student who looked to earn some extra cash being a ring girl at any local fight, held his other hand aloft and whispered in his ear, "Congratulations. I wonder, do you fuck as hard as you fight?" The words had been coarse and raw, unexpected given her sweet face. Melanie had had the kind of face a thousand men had fallen in love with at first glance. She was tall, her skin was tanned, and she couldn't have been more than twenty; the same age as Marcus, who even then looked older than he was.

Marcus turned his head to look at her. She wore a pink bikini, the top of which pushed up her chest, maximizing her cleavage, and her nipples were a teasing swell beneath the fabric, while the bottoms showed her natural curves and smooth skin. Yet above it all, her emerald green eyes were what held Marcus captive.

"Why are you showing me this? It was a long time ago, come on Mela- whoever you are."

Marcus was ashamed of his past, but then again he didn't know anybody who wasn't ashamed of something. Everybody has a skeleton hanging in their closet somewhere.

"Where were your wife and kids here?" the voice asked. "Where were they and what did you tell me?" the Melanie-roach asked, ignoring Marcus's query.

"I wasn't married back then. If you were Melanie you would have known that." He paused.

"Where was your soon-to-be wife? Where was she that night? What was so important that she couldn't come to your fight?" the beast asked. Marcus knew that it already knew the answer as well as he knew it himself and so he answered, refusing to get drawn into mind games.

"She was at home, pregnant with..." He paused, unable to find the right words. His breath caught in his chest.

“With your son,” it answered for him, completing the sentence Marcus took too long to answer. “It was a boy, right? That baby, the one she lost, the one that drove you to my bed night after night?” The roach smiled.

“Yeah.” Marcus looked at the floor. A sudden pain caused his chest to tighten.

The image cleared. They were in the cheap bedroom of the motel than they had driven to straight from the fight. Their passion erupted as they drove: Melanie had straddled Marcus as he drove, forcing him to make the last few turns blind. Her breasts filled his mouth, her skin pressed hard against his face as he devoured her.

“Stop,” Marcus called out. He wanted to look away, willed it with every inch of his being but just couldn’t. He turned his head as far as the bonds would allow, but the scene moved with him, as if he himself was the projector.

“What did you tell me? Where were they when you fucked me that night and the nights after that?” the Melanie in the image screamed out the questions. Digging her nails into Marcus’s back, drawing blood as she scraped deep gouges down his spine. In the chamber Marcus winced, as he felt his blood begin to flow.

“Enough, I made a mistake, I offered my penance!” he shouted, noticing then that the chamber had gotten hotter.

“No, I don’t think that was what you said. Tell me. Confess your sins, you beggaring maggot,” the voice boomed. The Melanie in the motel room slapped Marcus across the face with the back of her hand, and the real Marcus felt his cheek begin to burn.

“I told you...” He hesitated. He remembered as clear as spring water what he had told her. “That I didn’t have a woman in my life.” He stopped, raising tear reddened eyes towards the Melanie-roach. “I told you that I was single, and that if you were looking for a good time, I could give it to you.”

“Go on, maggot, redeem yourself,” it screamed at him. The multitude of legs rubbed together in sweet anticipation.

Marcus felt the tears sting his cheeks; he could feel the throbbing from the slap his other self had just been dealt. He looked back at the image, wanting to see. Melanie was on all fours, and Marcus had his face buried between her buttocks, and only then did he realize how strange sex looks when you see yourself doing it. Melanie moaned, her questions replaced by the more expected elicitation of pleasure.

As the sweat gathered on his brow, the real Marcus felt the excitement swell from within the confines of his trousers. He saw the gaze of the Melanie-roach drop to his crotch; he didn’t care. His head spun with ideas and voices; crossover exchanges copied and pasted like the adverts on TV, where different shows were taken to create one fluid dialogue.

Marcus had offered penance for his affair, he had atoned for his actions as best he could – everything other than confess to his wife. And deep down inside he knew that she knew. She had always known. Whenever they talked about that first pregnancy, she would make small comments. They sounded innocent, and would be delivered in a light-hearted manner, but

there was a look in her eyes that told a different story. Most of the time she kept it hidden, but sometimes, just every now and then, it would come to the surface.

“When I asked you who the pregnant person your manager asked you about was, what did you tell me? What!” the Melanie on the bed quizzed. She bounced and slid further across the mattress with each powerful thrust. She screamed as her hand slipped between her legs, where it began to move with fervor.

“I said it was my sister who was pregnant – my sister. God damn you!” Marcus yelled as tears stung his eyes.

“Why, why did you lie?” Melanie asked as she arched her back. The words came out in a purr of ecstasy.

“Because...” Marcus began. His own breaths came short and shorter as the scene continued to play out.

“Give it to me. Give it to me now. The truth.” Melanie writhed and snaked with her hips. The bed squeaked and the headboard thumped against the wall.

“Because I wanted to fuck you. You pranced around in your bikini, winking at me, flashing me whatever you thought you could get away with, and I wanted to see what you had, to taste you. I wanted to fuck you every way I knew how and then do it all over again. Are you happy? Hey!” Marcus bellowed, as the floodgates in his mind, those erected many years ago, came tumbling down, releasing everything that he had pent up inside himself

“Yes, yes!” Melanie screamed, collapsing onto the bed, and Marcus fell on top of her – while the real Marcus collapsed into his restraints. His penis twitched in his trousers. “Finally we have the truth,” Melanie panted. Her hair was wet and stuck to her flushed face. She rose from the bed and looked directly through the portal; she looked at Marcus. She smiled. “You have been observed and judged, my barbarian lover.” She blew him a kiss and the portal closed. The blood wall reformed before bursting like a blister, showering Marcus with a warm blood mist.

“I never loved you,” he said to the room, to himself. Needing to hear the words. It was true. Maybe at the beginning he thought he did, but at the end he knew better. Melanie was a slut, plain and simple. Melanie had been relentless, an animal in bed, unable to get enough satisfaction, and it had been that craving within her that had grabbed Marcus’s attention. When he called it off, sweat drenching his clothes in fear of her reaction and the consequences it could bring, Melanie had merely stood up, and taken it – as she did other things – like a man. They hugged, she kissed him on the cheek, and left. That had been the last time Marcus had ever seen her.

“It makes no difference, maggot. Besides, the time for apologies has passed. You have been judged, your crimes presented before the Kings. Now you must suffer the fate of all such sinners. The Chamber of Oil Cauldrons awaits you. Now go; get out of my sight!” the Melanie-roach screamed, the words uttered as the mask was dropped and the creature’s true face was revealed.

Marcus looked but could not begin to comprehend what he saw; wet flesh, holes bored through it by maggots or some other kind of carrion-eating parasite. Yet it was not the

appearance, but rather the feeling that came with it that grabbed him. A depression thicker than anything he had ever known, an air of complete desolation washed over him, embracing him in a way that any powerful characteristic can do, and it risked swallowing him whole. He shook his head: it was in the past, and he had changed and would not let himself be pulled down because of a stupid mistake he made when he was young.

“What –” Marcus began, but with no forewarning, the walls around him disintegrated and a wave of blood cascaded towards him as if he were trapped in the Overlook Hotel. The blood swept towards him like a scarlet tsunami. His bonds held him down, while the floor crumbled in a similar but slower fashion to the walls. Marcus fell. He sank deeper and deeper until the red became black.

Marcus began to fall.

A deafening roar hit his ears and the closer the ground spiraled the clearer he could hear it. Not noise but screaming; the sound of a thousand agonies all being expressed simultaneously. It was underscored by a searing sound, like raw meat on a hot grill. Bright fires burned on the ground, while to Marcus they looked like orange rings, not dissimilar to the hobs on the electric cooker he had had in his first flat after moving out of home at the tender age of seventeen. There were walls all around him. Only, they weren't walls of cement or brick, but of people. Human bodies bound and bonded to each other like the strange folk from in the hills, the cities. Their skin was blistered and rotted, their eyes had burst and liquefied by intense heat. Yet they were not dead. They lived on in an agony that could not be explained or even contemplated.

A monstrous roar shook the air and silenced their screams for just a moment; and soon, several dark shapes seemed to rise from the floor towards Marcus. The creatures were beasts straight from a nightmare, their bodies large, limbs gnarled and twisted. Stiff black wings sprouted from their backs. Their heads were long, eyes a burning red. They gazed at him, surveyed him like guards of Azkaban. Happy with his presence, they descended once more, eliciting a screeching, high-pitched wail. A message to whatever waited below, confirming their guest and granting him full admittance.

Alone again, Marcus could hear the groans of the bodies... souls. They were suspended against the walls. As Marcus descended, he left behind older, rotted bodies, and reached those that were submerged in large vats of boiling oil. Cauldrons like the stereotypical witch's pot, with bodies clawing at the edges to keep their heads above the boiling liquid, a pink, bloody froth at their lips. Others were large glass boxes, the liquid inside a pale yellow. It bubbled and cooked, the bodies stripped to bone in many places. Burnt skin peeled away from the flesh like the skin of a roasted pepper. Marcus realized then that it wasn't just oil that the bodies were being drowned and roasted in, but bubbling, scalding human body fat, lanced over countless generations. It flowed from one layer to another like a hellish champagne fountain.

Marcus looked down, and saw the large hell beasts – demons – that worked this particular chamber. They walked around, covered with muscular decay. Each held a large, long whip that would cleave even untouched flesh straight from the bone. Marcus saw the place where he would be introduced to the unspeakable abuse that would be dealt to him and those that followed by the guardian demons, the lowest of all demonkind. Subservient beasts, novices

yet to earn their way up the ranks, left to take their frustrations out on those unlucky enough to be sent their way. All harbored the desire to leave the base level chambers and actually serve in the deeper pits of Hell.

Marcus tried to close his eyes as he braced for impact, but his eyelids had already melted and hung from his face like wet scabs.

A light flashed, brilliant and white. The contrasting and powerful brilliance of it made the walls glow. Even the air itself seemed to have a red tinge to it, a fine red mist; microscopic blood droplets shed hundred if not thousands of years before. There was a sudden pressure on Marcus's shoulder, a burning sensation. Marcus tried to turn, the air resistance making it a struggle. The human walls began to fade. The light encompassed him. Marcus closed his eyes, anticipating the worst.

He landed on a hard floor. It was solid and rough against his skin, like sandpaper or cheap carpet. The screaming was gone, so too the smell of oil and burning flesh. Marcus was surrounded by a fine mist, yet he was inside and as far as he could tell...he was alone.

Chapter 7

Becky Relives her Highs and Lows

“Do you wanna take a hit?” a smooth sounding voice asked.

Becky felt strange. She looked down at herself. Her arms were bare. The fine hairs stood erect on them. She had on a short skirt with knee high black boots and a tiny red top that showed more flesh than it covered. She felt exposed. She crossed her arms over her chest and uttered a dry sob. “What’s going on?” she asked herself under her breath.

“Well, I’m not into that sort of thing, but go on then; I’m a college girl now, gotta have a bit of fun.” Becky Ponting held out her hand and took the innocent looking cigarette. Then she – the daughter of two straight-laced, hardworking parents who had scrimped and saved to be able to pay her way through college – took a long, deep drag. Her lungs caught fire, and her entire chest began to itch, but she closed her watering eyes and held her breath. The sensation passed and she exhaled, enjoying the slow flooding sensation that washed over her like the waves of the ocean as they march their way up and down the shore. Each drag she took brought on a new series of orgasmic waves. Just as with the ocean, they came in a regular pattern, growing in strength. Just as one wave began to recede, a new one came and hit the shores of her senses. Becky felt her skin tighten. Her nipples hardened against her university branded shirt. She had only been on campus three weeks, and it had been her first real party.

Trapped inside of her own mind, Becky felt the drugs hit, too. Not in the same enveloping sense, but rather as a howling, screaming wind. Her world darkened, and a thick mist appeared. It enveloped her, wrapping her within its cool embrace. Then it began to squeeze. It tightened until her ribs hurt and her bones creaked like rusty hinges. She tried to cry out but all of the air had been forced from her lungs. She was held firm, and forced to witness moments of her past replayed with clarity that she had missed the first time.

“Not a good sight is it?” a voice said from the mist. Becky spun around; she saw nothing but grey.

“Who said that?” she called out, unafraid even though she knew it was not a friendly voice that had spoken to her.

“That is not important now. You must watch, see how it all began for you,” it hissed. “He seemed so innocent, didn’t he?” the voice whispered in her ear.

Becky knew who it meant before she even saw him enter the scene. He was the man that would change her life over the course of one bank holiday weekend.

He stood leaning against the wall, a roll-up cigarette hanging from his mouth even as he spoke. He stared at her. She flinched as he smiled as it felt as though he could see her. His face was cold, the features sunken, and his skin grey and sickly.

“Yes, now you can see him for what he was.”

Becky didn't speak; she just watched, her eyes tearing up as she remembered more and more about how the evening had played out. Memories which, until that moment, she hadn't realized had been locked away and erased for the main part. They were not memories at all – how could something be a memory if you don't remember it from the first time? No, these were the blanks of Becky's past coming back to haunt her.

Like a series of slides or an old stop-go animation, Becky saw herself walking the hallways and pathways of the campus. She saw the college lecture halls with her sitting at first in the front few rows – center stage – her hand raised regularly, her shy disposition forgotten in the name of education, by her quest for knowledge. She watched as she began to slip further towards the back of the class, her arm raised less. Her skin became paler and paler. Spots erupted over the once smooth flesh, while her eyes had sunk deeper into their sockets as if ashamed of what was happening. Her clothes became baggier, the sleeves always long, to cover up the bruises and the tract marks. Then she was back at the party again.

They carried on smoking and drinking for a while, the high never getting too strong, but simply giving them all a mellow blanket to help ease the pain that was the first few weeks of university. People came over took a few drags and left, yet Becky stayed. She smoked less than the others, and she had been holding the same glass of Bacardi and cola all evening. She could have left, but she didn't want to. She had the attention of a boy – man – and Becky could feel the cotton of her underwear cling to her moist folds in a way that it had never done before.

"Hey, beautiful, you know, if you don't want it to end, I've got some good times waiting back at my dorm." That had been his opening line. Becky had been won over by the way he held her gaze and held her hand, stroking the palm with his fingers as he drew it close to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

"Don't listen to him!" Becky screamed "Don't go, walk away." Becky turned and began to walk through the now green tinted cloud, her footsteps echoing as if wandering an empty warehouse. She fully expected her body to obey, yet when she looked around Becky was shocked to see her body move in the opposite direction. It was then that Becky truly realized where she was. The eyes she was looking through were but windows. She was trapped in her own mind. Through these windows her real self was nodding, the world rising and falling in short jutting movements. The man walked ahead of her and Becky followed, powerless to resist even now. Becky wasn't aware of it, but she had begun to weep.

"Your lust for carnal pleasure that night cost you everything. You were nothing but his whore after that," a high pitched voice seemed to come from within the cloud. It sounded like it came from a small being, something wrinkled and mean, with cold heartless eyes, razor sharp teeth that would grate together as it talked.

Becky spun around. "Who's there? Come out...let me see who you are. What have you done with me?" she called out, but she saw nothing and got even less as a reply.

"YOU'RE DEAD, BITCH! Rotting in the ground, and he has your baby," the voice spat.

They were in his flat. The man was making a drink, and, although the real Becky was already too high and drunk – she had always been a good girl until college, never drank, and that had only been her second joint – to pay any attention, the inner Becky watched on. She saw the

man open the wine, pour the glasses, and then...yes, there it was...a small packet of white powder was poured into one of the glasses. He walked back towards them, and once again Becky protested inside herself. "No, say no, get up and walk away; there's the door, just move."

"What's your name, beautiful?" the man asked.

"Becky Ponting," she replied, stuttering. The realization that this man couldn't possibly be a student began to dawn on her. He lived nowhere near the university, and the furnishings looked too expensive to be anything but those of a man with money sitting already earned in his bank account. She took the glass of wine and drank. It had a sweet taste, and she quickly finished the glass.

"It's nice to meet you. I think we are gonna have a lot of fun together," he said, although the words had all slurred together by the time they arrived at Becky's ears.

Becky's vision blurred and she realized then that something was wrong. The man moved in, his hands pawing at her breasts. Before she knew what had happened her shirt had been ripped open and her bra unclasped. The cool air hit her naked chest, stiffening her nipples, and when his mouth engulfed her she gasped.

The high continued to rage through her body until everything went black. She blinked – or so it felt – and found herself in a strange bed, with sheets that felt dirtier than they looked, and no recollection of how she had gotten there.

"Where am I?" she asked.

For the Becky trapped inside, however, the night hadn't gone so fast. She watched as the man stripped and abused her. She felt his every thrust, from the burning sensation as he entered her to the pulsating finale. Tears rolled down her cheeks, while another, saltier liquid fell from between her thighs, hitting the floor with a wet smack before being eaten by the mist.

As Becky watched, she saw everything begin to change. They were no longer in the bedroom. The floor was cold; there was a lot of noise, a baby crying and people staring. Blood, there was blood on her hands, she could feel it, hot and sticky. Becky also felt pain, a pain so sharp and severe it caused her legs to buckle, and she fell to her knees in the dark cloud that had now charged to the same deep purple color as rolling thunderheads. Becky fought for consciousness and lost. When she opened her eyes she was back in bed. He had turned her onto her stomach and a new burning sensation racked her delicate frame. She saw his face in the mirror, red and sweaty. His eyes rolled back into his head every now and then as he fought to control himself.

Becky saw in the mirror as his face turned into that of a bald, sweaty salesman. His face reddened from cholesterol, his wedding ring tight around his chubby finger. Becky recognized him. He was the trick she had pulled.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Becky asked. Acknowledging her death was easy; she had come close several times, either from a bad fix or an aggressive trick. Besides, while she had ended up as little more than a cheap crack whore, Rebecca Ponting was not stupid – easily led maybe, addictive personality definitely, but stupid...certainly not. She understood the

purpose of what she saw, it was to make her see, to remind of what she had done – but it didn't mean she wouldn't go down without a fight.

“You need to see the error of your ways before you can be judged,” a voice rang out, causing the cloud to grow thicker and thicker. Her world whited out save two round windows that forced her to look back into her old life where –

She now sat on a bed. A needle hung from her left arm, while a man's erect cock slid through her free hand. They were all images that Becky could partially remember, their clarity lost in the haze of the drugs. Becky had made her peace with death long ago, acknowledged that she would die a junkie, and she knew it would not be pleasant. The only thing she had ever hoped was that she would face it, look death in eye, and not hide away. Becky was relieved that death had brought nothing more than memories, and delighted that the cravings had not followed her into the grave.

The voice that surrounded her began to laugh; a lunatic laugh, the sort you would expect to hear walking past an asylum just before medication time. The laugh was cold and cut through to the bone. “You think that you accept death, but you still cannot bring yourself to embrace your mistakes. Look at you, just happy that your cravings have gone. Well I've got news for you. You are clear-headed here in the judgment chamber simply because of necessity. Only a clear mind can truly accept the consequences of its actions and be judged.” The words came quicker and quicker, like a gospel preacher building up to the big finish. “Make no mistake, you are trapped inside an addict's body, and once you get to your chamber you will feel it all. That is a promise I can make to you. Now watch and ask yourself this question, my brave little girl.”

Becky froze. That was what she used to call her daughter all the time, and she doubted that it was now said by pure coincidence.

“What you're seeing now...how can you be so sure that they are your old tricks?” The voice fell silent and was gone.

“Hey, what do you mean? No...no, please don't say that. She's my baby; she's just a baby, for fuck sake.” Becky felt her legs buckle and she fell to her knees. Her brave little girl was all alone in the world and the only person who knew she existed was him: DeeJay Afité. Her hands felt dry and rough as she rubbed her fingers over her palms.

“My parents will take her, someone will tell them what happened to me and they will take my daughter with them. I know they would, so don't lie to me.”

Becky was near tears. She knew who the liar was. She had been living under a false name for over a year; her parents hadn't seen or heard from her in going on three. They hadn't spoken to her since she ran away from college. The fact that she had been pregnant and given birth was a complete unknown to them. The chance of them ever actually discovering that she was dead was marginal, and so the notion that they would ride in and rescue her baby was nothing more than foolhardy.

Becky concentrated hard. The decoration was the same, the flat the same as it always was, the walls a pale and dirty cream, stained with years of smoke, drugs and all manner of bodily fluid. The same picture still hung on the wall exactly where she had hung it, but that didn't say anything. She looked around desperate for some clue when the voice returned.

“You look a little bit flushed. What’s the matter, honey, you don’t believe your daughter’s all growed up and fucking for herself? I know your type...don’t care about yourself, and think you’ve accepted it all. Well I’ve got news for you: everyone has a weakness.”

When Becky looked through the eyes (windows) again she saw the scene had changed. They stood in a bathroom; the tub was filled with what looked like a small chemical laboratory. Naked flames danced in the dark corners, casting an eerie orange glow, as if the fires of hell were trying to break through into the real world. Glass flasks and tubes twisted and turned in a meandering snakeway, creating a volatile maze. Even locked deep inside what she still considered to be herself, Becky could feel it: the air in the room was heavy and dead. It tasted stale like the air in the bar the next morning before the windows could be opened.

“You’re lying,” Becky coughed, holding back her tears.

“Why would I lie? The truth will hurt you much more than any future I could create. This is your hell. I am just here to see you judged.”

Becky thought it through and realized that, to a large degree, what the voice had said was true. It spoke with reason, like a school teacher, bordering on patronizing and always condescending.

“No, I won’t believe it,” Becky answered, welling up even further. Then, as if on cue, the body she inhabited looked up and into a dirty, cracked bathroom mirror.

Becky screamed. Her hands yanked at her hair, which came away in clumps. The face in the mirror was young, a teenager, and clearly not Becky. The skin was sallow, the face thin, clearly lacking in all forms of nutrition. The teeth were yellowed and hung crooked in her mouth. Large boils and spots had sprouted over her face. Yet the cool green color of her eyes made it impossible for Becky not to recognize who the girl was.

“My baby!” she shrieked. “No...no, I won’t let it. Send me back, please, just let me take her away,” Becky pleaded. Her breaths came short and sharp. She stared at the girl in the mirror, the reflection of her child, truly an image of her mother.

“Your time has come. You have seen your sin. Your addiction is hers, her sustenance a level on from your own. The pressures of a modern world call for modern relief.” There was a flash of light; an explosion. The sound of shattering glass was all she needed to hear.

Becky and her daughter both screamed, although the younger of the two was silenced not long after. Smoke and fire filled the portholes through which Becky observed, and when it cleared, her baby girl Alyssa once again looked back at her. Only her face had changed. The spots were gone, replaced by burns. The right half of her face was disfigured, scarred and lumpy, her eye but a milky white orb. Her ear was missing and all of her hair had been burnt away.

“Please, I’ll do anything you want,” Becky pleaded, her hands locked together in prayer, her eyes stinging with tears.

“Of course you will, you’ve said that often enough...you are a whore, after all. A worthless piece of filth that dredges along and clogs your world, a bottom feeder – yes, you would do anything. Isn’t that how you created your spawn in the first instance? A bit of extra cash for a

wet session. I have seen all you did. You forget, I have held you in the dark for many years, bitch. You are a liar. A cheat. You stole to feed your addiction. You stole from merchants, you stole from your 'Johns' – you stole a life away from your own child. You would have been better served to suck her from your broken cunt before she knew anything about the world!" the voice roared, and the ground trembled.

"No, please, not my baby girl – it's a lie, you're lying to me."

"You have been judged. I hope you find the Chamber of Flames a fitting place, for I see you being there for some time." As the voice spoke the cloud thickened. This time its choking presence was just too intense to be resisted. It filled Becky's lungs, pouring through her mouth and nose. She could even feel it seeping in through her pores. "Be gone from my court!" the voice bellowed. The smoke shot through her body, and Becky couldn't help but to scream.

When Becky came to, she was still screaming. The image of her daughter's burnt face was seared into her memory; every time she closed her eyes she saw her with stark brutality.

Becky was tied down. The surface beneath her was hard; a table. It was hot against her skin, like a leather chair in the middle of summer. She looked around, her head buzzing like a bad hangover-style headache; she was covered in sweat and yet shook with cold.

It was dark. A warm breeze brushed her skin, and so Becky turned her face towards it. Even her drug-fried brain understood that whatever it was, whatever caused it, it came from a point which granted it entry, and that meant an exit. She tried to move, but her restraints held her firm; her arms were pulled high above her head and her legs were pulled taut in the other direction. She remembered more now: the cop, the black cop who had been there. He had tried to help, or was he the cause of it all? She couldn't remember. She was so thirsty; her throat was dry and felt like it had been lined with sandpaper.

Becky tried to swallow, but her throat cramped shut. She turned her head out of the way of the wind, which had increased since she had woken. It had grown hotter, too. When she opened her mouth to call out, her lips split open as if they were made of crepe paper.

"Help me!" a tiny voice called out from the darkness.

Becky looked around, trying to make sense of things. Slowly everything came into focus. The first thing Becky noticed was that it wasn't black that shrouded them, but red: a deep and powerful red.

"Who's there?" she asked. "What's happening?" she added after a short pause.

"My name... Oh God, I don't know anymore –" the tiny voice began, but a second voice finished: "You're in Hell, rookie, and it's frying time, so get ready for a real baptism of fire!"

"What do you mean? I don't understand, I was just...?" Becky asked; her own voice breaking as she dry-spat every syllable.

"I ain't gonna spoil it for you, bitch, I been down 'ere for fuckin' years and I ain't been given no answer yet. Don't got no fucking clue what they want from me. So I ain't gonna waste my breaif on youse. Just save dem quistions 'til your one on one time. They can make you scream good whore. Maybe you'll even fuckin' like it," the second voice interrupted, and the echo that murmured around the room seemed to be one of equal hospitality.

Becky shrunk back, her skin sizzling as the burning metal rivets and the shackles around her wrists and ankles seared her flesh. Becky bit her lip. She wouldn't let herself cry. She had learned that from her pimp. An all-around education, he had called it. "Give them whatever hole they want, keep quiet, take your dough and come out again." He had spoken not out of love but from a business perspective. She was a financial investment for him, and nobody wanted to pay top rate for a cut up whore.

It was only small at first, so small in fact that for a while she just thought it was some trick of the dark, a fuzzy spot where the complete absence of light was broken. The tiny orange dot gave her a glimmer of hope.

"Here it comes, bitches!" that same alpha dog voice cried out, while others began to beg for mercy.

While many whimpered, Becky was fairly sure that majority stayed silent. She put herself in the latter group, or so she hoped. Even from such a great distance Becky could feel the heat radiating towards them. The only two sounds that could be heard was the distant rumble of whatever it was that was speeding towards them from the other end of the tunnel, and the maniacal cackling of that same boisterous voice. It was wild with excitement and yet Becky could tell its owner was terrified.

The heat increased, the temperature going up and the humidity going down. Becky's eyeballs itched, and when she blinked she could feel her skin scraping across the gelatinous surface, scratching like wipers on a dry windshield. Becky knew exactly what it was that hurtled towards them. She was determined not to scream. She failed.

It was fire, a burning ball of fire that shot towards them, incinerating anything that stood in its path.

The room was lit up, as if someone had changed the fuse and flipped the switch. Becky's reduced range of motion hampered her view, but she could see a few other tables on the same level as her. The bodies on them lay still, jaws clenched in anticipation.

Becky closed her eyes, when the wind stopped...no, it didn't stop, it reversed. The wind was sucked back on itself, pulled towards the burning ball of fire that continued to rocket towards them all. Becky realized then that there were more people than she could even begin to contemplate. All crammed in together like passengers on a Japanese express train in rush hour.

God, she wanted a fix, her whole body itched, wanting that sensation...that rush of peace.

All around her, Becky could hear people begin to beg. Screeching for clemency like a repentant man taking the walk to the gas chamber. She couldn't see them, but hundreds of thousands of bodies writhed on wooden slabs much like her own. They stretched out into the distance for miles and miles. The walls too were stacked high with tables, some flat, others ranging through various gradients all the way to completely erect, some people even inverted. While many were naked, the majority were clothed. Becky could see all manner of clothing, from business suits and swimming costumes to wedding dresses and fancy costumes. She saw men and women, boys and girls of all ages, each bound individually to their own table, custom made to their size.

“No, no more, please, please, I’m sorry...I’m sorry!” Becky heard a voice scream.

Becky looked and saw a young girl only a few years older than herself.

Becky vomited; choking and spluttering as she swallowed a great deal of it back down into her lungs.

The girl was black, her skin colored not by race but flame. Her entire body was chargrilled, the flesh peeling off in large, thick flakes, revealing the raw skin beneath. It glistened like dew on an early spring morning. Her hair was all but gone; just a few burnt locks remained clinging weakly to her scalp. Both of her eyes had burst, leaving two empty holes behind, yet they stared at Becky, pleaded with her as if she was the key to their release.

The rumbling of the flame grew louder, as did the gnawing need for a fix. Becky’s stomach was twisted into a large knot that wouldn’t move. Her throat burned from the vomit, while her head spun and sang out at the top of its voice. She could feel the hot air burn her skin, she could smell it cooking, the way she could smell her skin after a day in the sun. The fireball was closer now; she could hear the screams from the others as it hit them, roasting them but somehow keeping them all alive. Just before it hit them Becky heard the unmistakable sound of rain. The drops were intermittent at first, but soon they became a downpour. It didn’t take long for her to realize that it wasn’t rain that was falling, but the result of a multitude of bladders all releasing that the same time. A strong smell filled the air for those last few seconds. A golden shower fell, and soaked them all.

Only a hundred meters or so to go, Becky would have said. The burning orange light became too much for her and she had to just shut her eyes and grit her teeth...

And wait...

Her body screamed in pain as her skin began to blister.

The wait was always the worst part. Some days the fire would be slow, and on others it would seem to last an eternity. There was never a quick session: they didn’t like that. They liked to take their time, to play with them in the flames.

It hit.

...a brilliant flash of light.

...Becky screamed, but there was no pain.

Not this time.

Becky felt the table fall away as her body rose into the air. It felt cool – cold, even. Becky opened her eyes. She had grown accustomed to the regeneration process, but still felt nervous about what she would see upon waking. Raw flesh, glistening as the guards watched over her, picking away the healing skin as it grew. Sometimes it was a bath of bloodsucking maggot-like creatures that would eat through her charred flesh.

Only this time she felt something different. The bonds that held her were gone. She felt something rough and wiry beneath her. It was hard, but compared to what she had been used

to it felt like velvet. It was carpet. Becky rose onto her elbows and looked around; she saw a door and a cupboard. She saw nobody. Not that she could have acted had she had company, for she passed out immediately.

Chapter 8

Richard's Lust For Life

"Hey, Dick, wake up; it's time to play," a voice called out, stirring Richard from his slumber. He opened his eyes with a start, the dream still vivid in his mind, like the ones he used to have when he fell asleep high. He sat up in bed; it wasn't his, but that wasn't a strange thing for him. The only two things that were unusual were his lack of a hangover, or the dull aching head that promised to deliver one. The other was a sharp pain in his upper back, in his shoulders. He raised his arms, swimming in the air, and when they both worked he threw back the bed covers and tried to stand.

"Where are you going, honey?" the feminine voice said. It was then Richard saw the chains. His legs had been fastened to the bed, spread eagled; not in a kinky way, but with real shackles. Heavy iron chains fastened each ankle to the bedposts and were weighed down by large iron balls like an old fashioned criminal. His feet were purple and swollen from where the cuffs cut off his circulation.

"What's...? Who are you? Where am I?" The succession of questions spewed from his mouth.

Richard looked around. He was in a plain, white walled room, the ceiling painted the same off-white shade. The paint was fresh; the Caution: Wet Paint smell hung in the air.

The woman emerged from nowhere; a door concealed in the walls. *It must be a trick of some sort, some crazy ass chick in a futuristic fucking house. Boy, Rich, you sure can pick 'em,* Richard reasoned with himself. He wasn't convinced.

She wore a lacy negligee, which covered her body and made no attempt to hide her curves. White stockings attached to a garter belt clung to her legs

"Don't you want to play anymore?" she asked. Her eyes glistened as she pouted.

She walked up to the bed, her hips swaying from side to side. Richard liked what he saw and wasn't embarrassed when his penis began to harden, forming a bulge in his underwear; the only item of clothing he wore.

The woman raised her arms and flicked her wrists, and all of a sudden Richard's own arms were pulled above his head, which was immobilized by their vice like presence.

"Hey!" Richard called as he tried to lower his arms. But they were held by some invisible force. Richard craned his head back just in time to see thick burns appear around his wrists. "What are you doing? Listen, I don't mind being a bit kinky, but this is too..."

"Shut up, man-whore. Where do you think you are, some slut's bedroom? You must remember, pretty-boy. You fell, and now you're mine until it's time to be judged." Her voice was deep, beyond husky. Her hands glided up and down her body, pulling the lingerie. Yet all the while her eyes never broke their near-mesmerizing contact she had with Richard.

Richard stared at her, his arousal overpowering his nerves. He had fallen, he remembered that, but he had been fine, so drunk at the moment of impact that his body simply bounced

down the steps and into the yard. He had gotten up with nothing more than a grazed knee and twisted ankle. That had been weeks ago. He had stayed inside for a while, sulking about everything. Nobody had bothered him. His friends only came knocking when there was a party to throw.

The anonymous stranger hooked her thumbs beneath the shoulder straps of the lingerie and slid them over her shoulders. She let the garment fall to the floor and stepped towards the bed. Her skin was flawless, her breasts full. Richard's eyes worked their way south, to the barren plains of her groin. She saw his gaze and smiled at him.

"You want me, Dick? You want my tight cunt on your pole?" She jumped up onto the bed and stood astride Richard.

Richard couldn't speak; his throat had seized up. All he could do was give a small effeminate cough and watch in silent awe as the woman – by far the sexiest woman Richard had ever been with – lowered herself onto him. Their embrace was fast and furious, animalistic at best, with its raw fury powering the both of them to an explosive end.

"You were a bad man, Richard. Do you remember all of the women you used, the ones you hurt?" she moaned as she rode him.

"W-what?" Richard asked, surprised by the turn in conversation.

"You heard me. It's time to confess your sins to me, boy." The voice changed once more: it deepened, the final word being spat with contempt.

"I never did any –" An open hand stung his cheek and cut his words short. It was a powerful strike; strong enough to make him see stars.

"Fine, have it your way. I enjoy this part too much anyway," she answered as she began to grind her hips in a circular motion.

Before Richard could ponder this statement or even offer a rebuttal, he felt something change, something inside her. The warmth of her sex disappeared. Pain replaced it. Multiple rows of teeth emerged and sank into Richard's manly flesh, chomping on it with hungry wet smacks like pigs at a trough.

Richard screamed. He could feel the blood seeping from him, he could taste it in the back of his mouth. Still she continued to ride him. The slapping of their skin became wet and sloppy. Richard didn't need to look down because he saw his blood splashing against her skin. She cupped her breasts, moaning with pleasure as she smothered her body with his crimson tide. The pain soon became too much to bear, the initial numbness of shock wearing off quicker than Richard had hoped. Every contact she made cut further into him and the more Richard's blood flowed, the fiercer her arousal became.

"Confess to me, baby. Tell me it all, their names, who they were. What did they mean to you, baby? Tell me," she moaned, licking the spattering of blood from her lips with a long forked tongue.

As if the words had placed him in a trance, Richard saw it all. It came flickering back to him.

Richard remembered the fall. He hadn't gotten up at all. He looked down and saw the faint silver marks of the Y-incision left by the forensic issue scalpel. Yet nothing took away the agony in his crotch and as soon as he thought about it, everything disappeared and he was back with his demon lover and her cannibalistic cunt.

"Confess to me, boy. Do you remember them? Do you remember us?" The voice changed. It laughed a thousand laughs. All of the women that he had slept with, used and then discarded with no respect and no regard for anything other his own satisfaction.

Richard thrashed around on the bed, trying to dislodge her, but the pain only increased. His head sang with agony, and when Richard opened his eyes she had changed. She had become Monique Houston, Richard's chocolate skinned first. Richard's mind managed to pick the name out despite his pain. His body was soaked in sweat, his hair plastered to his scalp, skin pale as the blood continued to leave his body. The bed sheets and mattress were sodden now with his arterial liquid.

"Liar!" the sixteen-year-old Monique Houston screamed. She slapped him with the back of her hand and Richard both felt and heard his jaw crack.

Richard tasted the blood in his mouth; a rich coppery taste that hit the back of his throat like a shot of tequila. All along, she, this mystery torturer – now somehow Monique – continued to chew her way through Richard's manhood.

"You lying pig!" she screamed, clenching her fists as if she was about to beat him again. "I loved you, we all did. That's what you made us do; you didn't just fuck us and dump us, no, that was too easy for you." Her eyes glowed yellow as her temper continued to flare. She stopped grinding him: instead she bore down and forced Richard deep inside of her.

"W-wh-what are t-ta-talking about?" Richard stuttered. His world had started to dim.

"You used me. You fucked me, made me think we would stay together and then you left; just got up and walked the fuck away. How could you?" she screamed at him.

"Love you? Come on, you were the school slut. I only fucked you because it was an easy way to practice." Richard gave her an honest answer, thinking that the truth was what she wanted to hear.

Monique screamed, her hands clasped against the side of her head. She began to grind her pelvis once more, rocking backwards and forwards on top of Richard, sending new waves of pain through his body. It burned and whistled through him like wind against an iron grate.

"Fuck you. You will learn." She smiled at Richard. "It is your time to be judged, so say what you will, for it will only increase your suffering," she spoke in a calm voice. She slapped Richard on his bare chest. The sound echoed around the room like a gunshot. Then, with her talon-like nails, she dug into his flesh. The nails bit through the skin with ease. A slight popping sound could be heard as the hook of each digit entered him. Richard screamed; there was nothing else he could do. In one quick movement, Monique slid her nails down his chest and over his abdomen. The skin tore apart with a rush of hot air and blood; warm spurts jetted into the air as if the nails had struck oil.

“Fuck...you, crazy bitch!” Richard cried as he saw her fingers disappear past the first joint into his chest.

“Confess to me, maggot. Admit to what you did,” she instructed.

“I fucked you. You had a good time, too, so why should I be sorry?” Richard grunted against the pain. It had overridden his brain and taken control.

“You made us love you. Say it... Say it!” she screamed.

“I’m s-s-s-sss-sorry,” Richard whispered, his voice squeaking as it forced air out of his lungs. He could hear a hissing sound escaping the claw wounds in his torso.

“There, that wasn’t hard now, was it? We’re making progress, but you’re not there yet, man-whore. Oh no, I’ve got a lot more pain for you.” The voice was once more than of the woman in white.

The dark chocolate skin of the sixteen-year-old classmate who had taken Richard’s virginity in an empty classroom during lunch on a Friday afternoon began to disappear. As she faded the woman in white returned. Yet her face was not quite as complete as it had been. She was old. Loose skin clung to her face, drooping in wrinkled jowls. Her teeth were twisted fangs, browned and yellowed from years of neglect. Her body too had changed: her pert, full breasts had now become sagging bags of rotting flesh. The nipples were black and festering, and they lactated sour milk the color of concentrated pus.

“Well done, my lover. I see why they wanted you. Can you feel it building?” she asked as he began to rotate her hips once more. “Oh God. Here it comes, baby. Fuck me... fuckmefuckmefuckme!” she screamed in a manner that made Richard think of Linda Blair’s character in *The Exorcist*.

She came, and came hard, her entire body tensing up in ecstasy the same way Richard’s had tensed with pain. It was then that he felt the snap. Her ravenous snatch took that last bite and severed his penis from his body. This new wave of pain shot through him like an adrenaline burst and Richard threw himself around on the bed. His wrists and ankles bled as he tried in vain to rip himself free from the shackles. The deep puncture wound in his chest continued to hemorrhage blood onto the bed.

The woman sat back on the bed, her feet planted on the mattress, her knees pulled apart to give Richard a good view of the show.

He looked down between his legs and saw nothing but a small bloody stump where his penis had once been.

Richard screamed...

...She laughed.

Richard raised his eyes and looked at her. Her face was filled by a smile so large it couldn’t possibly be faked. Richard couldn’t help but look down, and vomited when he saw the multitude of teeth that jutted from her engorged lips. They chewed on his penis with gusto with a sound akin to eating raw celery.

When he came to Richard sat up with a start. His hands grasped at his chest, his groin: everything was still there. He laid back, his body caked with a cold sweat. He could smell urine but didn't care.

"It was just a dream...it was just a dream," he repeated in a small voice. His chest burned as if he had just run a marathon. He gasped for air.

"You tell yourself that, sweet cheeks. But truth is, I just ain't done with you yet," the lady in white said.

Richard looked up and there she was, walking towards him, her nightdress falling to the floor. This time, when she straddled him, her body changed to someone else: Nancy Thomas, the daughter of his father's business partner. Another one of his conquests.

Richard had no idea how long his torture continued. Each time he was ripped apart only to pass out and wake up as good as new. Then it would begin again. Sometimes his genitals would be flayed during a session of heavy bondage, the next day – he thought of each session as being one day – they would be eaten in large chunks. His penis severed, bitten, cut, burnt, ripped, and pulled. Each time Richard would break sooner and sooner, apologizing for what he had done, although she – his Lady in White – could tell when he meant it. When he had had enough. The pain never stopped, and as the days turned to weeks Richard was taken through every girl he had ever had. The stream of scorned lovers seemed endless.

Until...

Richard opened his eyes; he remained still, for he knew he couldn't escape even though she had removed his bonds after the first few days. Looking around the room, Richard saw the walls had darkened yet another shade; they were now a deep red. Every day when he woke it was different, going from off white to pink, darkening in color. Richard had long ago realized that the goal was for them to be the color of blood...his blood. Maybe then it would be over; perhaps only a few more days, Richard thought to himself.

The lady in white appeared – the young (hot) version. She was pale, translucent, as if she were fading as his time with her drew to a close. She walked towards the bed, the sway of her hips lost. Her negligee still clung to her skin, but today she left it on. There was no need for her to change: his time was done. She had been told, the walls were full, and her superiors had decreed that time was time and the judgment was to be passed.

"What, who are we today?" Richard asked.

She said nothing as she sidled up to the bed, climbing onto him. Her eyes were fixed on Richard and she heard his question, but today she was not in the mood to talk.

"I asked you a question. Who are you today? I'm sorry; I never meant to sleep with you. I understand now that I was the destructive point in your life...all their lives. Even the successful ones, those that are still alive and living a good life. Is that enough? Tell me what to say," Richard half commanded and half pleaded.

"Poor puppy, your time here has reached its end, I have come to judge you – so play nice. For I and I alone get to decide which chamber you are sent to, so bite your tongue," she said, and then, moving with the quickness of a striking snake, she kissed him. It was a passionate kiss,

a lover's kiss. Her entire face melted away, once again revealing the ugly truth beneath her attractive exterior.

She broke their kiss and bit into Richard's tongue before he opened his eyes. A mere heartbeat later her face was back to the beautiful woman in white.

"Who are you?" Richard mumbled as his mouth filled with blood. After what felt like years of abuse Richard had built an affinity with the woman.

"That doesn't matter. Today is the last day you will see me. I am here to judge you. Your crimes were heinous, maybe not in the eyes of humanity, but your thoughtless fornication was a crime against the eyes of..." She paused, swallowing as if something was caught in her throat. "Your God," she said weakly.

"What?" Richard began.

"I know where I'm sending you. Somewhere not related to your overactive penis, but a chamber that will address your wastefulness, your belligerent spoilt attitude and wanton disregard for those less fortunate. But first, let me give you a taste of real pleasure, just a final reward..." Her words trailed off as she kissed her way down Richard's stomach, stroking his skin with her curled, blackened fingernails, although they curled around on themselves and formed a sharp point, looking more like a scorpion's tail.

Richard tensed, grimaced against the stinging pain as her claws effortlessly sliced through his flesh, peeling it away in thin strips like the tab around a packet of biscuits; take it all the way around and the package spills open exposing all the goodies stored within. She licked and kissed the wounds, lapping at the blood that flowed into her mouth. She looked up at Richard once, as her mouth began to envelope his throbbing – and once again reattached – penis.

Richard screamed, his teeth clenched so hard his jaw began to cramp. His eyes sealed so tight that he saw stars. It felt as though a belt sander had been turned on and applied to his cock in an effort to smooth out the ridges.

"You may be done here, but I get one more day of you all to myself. See, you're something special; they're all talking about it, the ones deeper down; the powerful ones. They don't tell us, but we hear the rumours, and I've just got to have a taste of you myself," she said as she then resumed her sensual, grating fellatio.

The pain was intense, yet not unbearable. Rather than the white-hot agony of the physical torture it merely felt as though her jaw was not opened far enough and so her teeth scraped against his skin, like a tired hooker at the end of a long day.

"Wow, for a sexual tormenter you're really not very good at this," Richard groaned. He raised his head and looked down at her. His penis was dotted with blood, a few small dots here and there like a chin after shaving with an old razor. He tried to jerk away but she held him in place with one powerful hand.

"Oh, I like to take my time. I'm gonna suck you dry, baby," she said with a smile, and this time when her face changed it stayed that way. Thick, pulsing, purple veins marked her back like an atlas. Her mouth devoured him and with each abrasive stroke she made Richard could feel another layer of skin being stripped away.

The blood flowed, leaking from the corners of her mouth, but her tempo never changed. With an assured rhythm, the demon known in her section of the underworld simply as Margeth worked Richard's penis like a lollypop. She could feel it getting smaller and smaller in her mouth. It didn't soften but shrank. His blood tasted strong; different to anything she had ever tasted. She knew it was wrong; there would be repercussions for sampling him, but sometimes, even in the pit – not that this was the pit, not even a suburb, more like a satellite town – the rules sometimes had to be broken.

“Stop, please,” Richard groaned through gritted teeth. His brain exploded as white hot flames lit up the darkness behind his closed eyes.

Margeth looked at him, her eyes black. In the center of each was a red dot. The spots grew and grew until they consumed her eyes. They flickered, as if something was on fire deep inside her demon shell. Margeth jumped away from the bed, her hands clawing at her throat, choking and coughing in wet gargled gasps for air. Her eyes were wide and a pink foam began to leak from her eyes, her nose, her mouth; every orifice had developed a leak. Margeth fell to the floor and Richard could hear her sizzling like meat placed on a barbeque. Smoke drifted from her nostrils and ears in delicate white tendrils.

“You...you don't ev-e-even know, do you?” Margeth stared at Richard, although he could tell she was blind. Her eyes were swollen. The jelly within each ball bubbled and boiled before they exploded, showering Richard with warm jelly.

Margeth leapt towards him, her claws elongated, slimy lips pulled back to reveal sharp needle-like teeth eager to take one last bite, and it was then that Richard felt the invisible forces that held him to the bed disappear. Richard sat up, his reactions quicker and more fluid than he had expected them to be. His crotch burnt but he knew, or at least hoped with a vague sense of certainty, that it would heal. The bleeding had already stopped. Richard stood. His body felt strange, like a sailor setting his feet back on dry land after months at sea.

Richard walked towards Margeth, who lay on the floor, curled double in pain, her skin red and flushed as the fire Richard had seen ignite behind her eyes devoured the rest of her. She looked scared. Out of all of the emotions he had expected to consume him should escape ever been an option, Richard had never once run through the scenario using pity as the driving force. Yet standing there Richard realized there was no other emotion that could be more fittingly used to describe what he felt.

Behind him, Richard felt a cool breeze blowing, as if a door or window had been opened. He began to turn when the voice spoke.

“Come; we have little time.” It was a tired, scratchy voice, and before Richard could answer he felt a hand fall on his shoulder. He was engulfed with light. Richard lost all sense of direction and purpose and so allowed the light to envelope him. “The poison won't slow her for long,” the voice said.

Richard had no idea for how long they travelled, but as they rose he passed through several levels of screams, each one separated by a few moments of silence. Richard could not bring himself to open his eyes, not even the smallest of cracks lest it all was a dream and he was still tied to a bed, held by the ropes of hell. After a while the sounds disappeared, replaced instead by silence: a warm, airless silence.

Finally they stopped. Richard felt solid ground beneath him; he felt his legs tense up as his fully body weight was lowered back onto them. It was hot and there was an abrasive wind that scratched at his face and irritated his sensitive new skin.

His crotch continued to throb.

“You can open your eyes now. It’s quite safe.” The voice speaking to him was one of kindness. Richard opened his eyes and felt his body tense in preparation for what awaited him.

Pain; bright flaring pain seared his eyeballs and he clamped them shut again.

Richard raised his hands to his face and then tried again, peering through his fingers, first his left eye, then his right, and then finally both of them. After a few seconds he lowered his hands and stood squinting, looking out from a great height across an endless desert.

“Where am I now? What’s waiting for me here?” he questioned, not fully trusting anything anymore. It hadn’t taken Richard long to accept that he was dead, and he was strangely okay with that fact. What had hit him was the punishment he received; not from Margeth...but from himself. Not a day went by that he didn’t recall some moment or incident from his past that he regretted. Emotions felt stronger: grief felt like despair to him, sadness felt like a black, heavy depression, seconds felt like hours, and each moment saw Richard slip farther and deeper into his own mental hell until it reached the point where he would almost look forward to the physical pain.

“You are safe,” the man said. Richard turned to face him. He had to squint in order to focus. The light and fresh air seemed to overload his mind. The man was short, much shorter than Richard, and old, at least sixty if he was a day; but then again time seemed to have a strange way of drawing across life’s sky and so the man could well have been older than the earth itself. He was as good as bald and his skin so tanned and weathered by the elements that it looked as if it were made of leather. He wore a long, brown robe like a monk, and in one hand he held a long, thick, wooden staff. The image that came to Richard’s mind was the love child between Friar Tuck and one of the Buddhist monks whose orange robes were famous across the globe.

“How long have I been dead?” he asked, his voice shaking. Did he really want to know the answer?

“In the time of this world it has been ten years. A lot less back in the world you occupied previously, but still ten years remains a decade,” the man answered.

“Ten years. Fuck no. That’s not possible.” Richard opened his mouth to continue when he realized that the time for such a limited way of thinking was past. “I’m in Hell,” Richard said under his breath.

“Well, not exactly. I cannot take you to where you want to go, but only where you need. Your righteousness must be tested, and you must not be found wanting in order to move on.” The stranger remained standing. One arm held the staff, the other hung by his side. Another gust of warm air wrapped around them, howling a sad, lonely cry, and it made the hairs on the back of Richards’s neck stand on end.

“Who are you?” he asked. “Why did you save me?” The question needed to be asked. Richard wasn’t a saint; he didn’t deserve to be rescued, or so he himself believed.

“I am Jizo, a wanderer of the spirit world. Now, you must begin. I cannot be here when you do – the challenge of righteousness must be undertaken alone,” he said, moving his head to one side. It made him look inquisitive and was the first sign of any real life inside his leathered exterior. He looked at Richard. His eyes seemed to burn a hole through his skin; he wasn’t looking at him, or through him, but in him.

“What am I supposed to do? We’re stuck on a mountaintop in the middle of the fucking desert. And what? You want me to just take a walk...some Indian spirit quest or something like that? How am I even supposed to get down from here?” Richard asked, throwing his arms out wide in a sign of his exasperation and growing frustration.

“I cannot help you. Your test is your own; only you can decide its course. I am sorry it must be this way.” He paused for a moment, and looked at Richard before beginning again, adding a second statement. “We will meet again at the end, and then I can take you where you need to go.”

With his words spoken Jizo raised his staff and was gone, and with nothing more than a rush of wind, Richard found himself alone.

Chapter 9

Helen: It's the Quiet Ones You Have to Watch

The sound of water running – a small stream or a brook – roused Helen from sleep. It was a peaceful, serene sound, one promoting a quiet, restful place, bordering on idyllic. A cool breeze brushed her skin, her auburn hair, longer now that it was when she had first died, wafted, submitting itself to the will of the wind. She didn't want to open her eyes, but once she was awake there was little choice left in the matter. The pain would begin and then there was no choice but to open, to see what clever way of torturing her he had come up with this time.

“Good morning, beautiful. How are we feeling today?” a sneering snarl of a voice asked. It was always him. Deep inside, beneath the disguises he wore, it was always him. Luther was the name he had used when he introduced himself.

“Bite me,” Helen answered, spitting the words like a feral cat. Cornered and out of options, she would fight until she had nothing left to give.

“Ooh, now there's an idea,” he sneered once more. Even with her eyes closed she knew he would be leaning in close to her, his thick lips pulled back, exposing his yellowed teeth. She felt his rancid breath heat her skin.

Helen shuddered. Her mind struggled to keep hold of the sound of the brook running its course through wherever she was. Then, without thinking any longer, she opened her eyes. Luther stepped back, allowing her to look around her. He liked to take things slow – but Helen knew that.

The light hurt her eyes. She was outside for the first time in many sessions. She saw the stream. It was crystal clear and babbled like the picture perfect brook it was. Wildflowers grew on the shallow banks – yellows, purples, reds – their blooms all facing her, watching. They were in a wood, not quite a forest but approaching it. She could hear insects buzzing all around her and the floor beneath her bare feet was carpeted by pine needles, yet the trees were all green. None of it fully matched. All four seasons seemed to be represented as if that somehow made the whole scenario more real. It was the only thing she ever looked for now. The small conflict of details that told her it was just a trick; another one of Luther's games that would end with her blood being spilt regardless of how she played.

At first Helen fell for his tricks, believing she had been let go, allowed to escape and return to her normal life, but then after a while, just as she began to relax, let her guard down, the hooks would come. Now she expected them: she would wander through the various colorful worlds he created for her, looking for flaws in it. The sun moving in the wrong direction across the sky, a tree with no leaves in the height of summer, anything she could see that seemed out of the ordinary became her earth wire. Once she noticed the mistakes, flaws in his design, it meant that the hooks were not far behind, and she would brace herself.

It had all happened in the blink of an eye. Helen remembered working in the salon, and then there had been silence, a painful silence and then she fell, not to the floor, but through it.

When she had woken up Helen was tied to a chair with ropes that smelt of urine and sweat. She was alone. In that first small room her tears had been enough. The visions she was sent, the places she was taken, places from her past that reminded her of how ungrateful she had been. She had seen the arguments that she had had with her in-laws, only petty things for the most part, but almost every time they got together, a fight would ensue, and more often than not it would continue long after they had left. Helen and her husband would argue about them for days. Her father-in-law Herbert would start drinking, and this in turn would make her mother-in-law Jocelyn cry. Helen was shown over and over again not just the arguments but their consequences, the continued fights between the two as they drove home and often long after they locked their front door.

Helen finally broke when she was shown a fight over the middle name of a child that hadn't even been discussed, let alone conceived.

Helen's hands instinctively touched her own stomach; she hadn't even been able to tell Mark that she was pregnant before she died.

The argument had ended and her in-laws drove home and, once behind their own front door – in a quaint suburban area where their age was the perfect median for the neighborhood – Herbert had turned on his wife. He beat her with an open hand, then when Jocelyn still didn't accept the blame Herbert used his fist. Helen couldn't believe what she saw, and she called out her apologies to them, begging them to stop.

No sooner had she called out and the images were gone.

"You have been judged," a figureless voice had said, and then he had arrived: Luther and all of his toys. He had wasted no time in sharing his ideas of fun with Helen.

Above her, the trees had all linked together forming a sort of canopy, although the clear blue sky of the day was visible through the smaller less supportive branches. It was hot; it was always hot. Every day the oppressive heat would play an equal role in her torture. Helen would be drenched in sweat before Luther had even begun to apply his trade to her flesh, which somehow managed to regenerate each night.

"Do you want to take a walk with me, my dear?" Luther asked. He was always polite. His manners were impeccable: that was part of his charm. That was what made him so dangerous. He would attack her body with the feral power of a serial killer in the height of his spree, and yet the next day he would arrive and whisk Helen away to a romantic candlelit dinner. Oh, how charming he would be. Walks were his favourite; he would often come and invite her to walk with him. They would wander through the woods, hand in hand like young lovers. The touch of his cold, slimy skin against her own warm flesh made Helen want to vomit, but she was powerless to resist him. As they walked, they shared intimate secrets and memories with one another. Luther would talk to Helen about his conquests, the people he had brought to and from the rack – as he liked to call his place of work. His tales were not special; they held no hidden meaning: they were simply a glimpse of all the things that he planned to do with her.

"Okay." Every instinct within her body told her to turn and run. She had no shackles, no bonds holding her in place, but Helen knew by now and had learnt over the years that running offered nothing. Luther or the people he worked for were in control. Helen knew that if she left the

wood, she would blink and be back in the middle again. Her world had become a maze. It didn't matter which way she fled: she would always come back to the same starting point.

They wandered in silence, the woods thickening around them. The pine needles crunched underfoot until without warning they changed. Helen's feet felt as though they were on fire. She looked down and saw that the carpet of pine needles had become a field of shattered glass. Along with this, scattered around as if for good measure were hypodermic needles, some clean, others used and dirty, caked in dried blood. Helen's bloody footprints glistened in the sun. She screamed but before anything else could happen, she felt her body lift into the air.

"Well, my dear, it appears that we have come around to that time of day again," Luther said.

Helen closed her eyes, bracing for the pain.

"Fuck you, Luther." It had become her standard response at this stage of the day.

"My, my, my, nearly ten years we have been doing this—" Ten Hell years, that was. In the reality that Helen knew, it had been little over ten months. "...yet still your dirty mouth comes forward first. It just isn't the way a lady should behave, Helen." He smiled as he pulled the scalpel from his inside jacket pocket. "And just think about how meek and mild you were in life. Tut...such a waste," he sneered.

The first hook pierced through her shoulder, an invisible hand forcing it through the bone. Helen clenched her teeth and felt every sinew in her body tense in unison. Pain, it seemed, was the one thing to which the human body could never grow accustomed.

The second hook passed through her left side, separating two ribs. Helen couldn't help but cry. "I don't know what you want from me," she sobbed as she felt the third hook trace the contours of her body in search of a good place to strike.

"Stop, please," Helen begged as the hook passed through her ankles, stringing her like the famous Achilles. Her words came out slurred as the blistering pain began to affect her basic motor functions and speech abilities.

"Helen, my dear, you know if you want me to stop, then you just need to say the words. Tell me you love me, embrace me, and I can begin to teach you. I think you have great potential, and me, well...I'm not getting any younger. I need to start thinking about a replacement," Luther said, waving the scalpel in front of his face as he spoke. He swung the blade back and forth in front of her like a hypnotist waving his pocket watch on stage.

"Then get on with it, because I won't ever love a creature like you," Helen spat. A clot of dark red blood flew from her lips.

"I admire you, Helen, I really do, but we both know it's just a matter of time." He smiled at her and turned his back as the remaining hooks did their job.

The chains rattled, and before she could even think about fighting against it, Helen found her world inverted. Pain exploded like fireworks behind her eyes. She could see the hooks by her ankles, see her skin stretching to the point of breaking – but it never would.

Blood flowed down her shins and dripped from her knees onto her face and chest. She was naked, but that was not a surprise. Helen could recall one such session in which she had been hung by only her bosom, one hook passing through each breast. She had been left there for weeks before Luther came back to begin his torment.

"I'm sorry, my dear, I do despise of vulgarity. You should understand that your naked body means nothing to me. I don't see you like that, but times must, I am afraid." Luther winked at her and walked away. He would leave her, allow her to stew a while with her own mind. What ghosts would it conjure up to haunt her this time? Over the years she had received numerous visits from wandering spirits who could not let go of their rage and were trapped in the forest as a result.

Helen remembered the first spirit she had encountered. She had been hanging in a cave. It was only once he got close did she see what it truly was. Its skin looked as though it was three sizes too big for its skeleton; large flaps hung from its naked frame. Helen thought it was male, but its genitalia had been ripped off, or so it seemed from the gaping wound between the person's legs. The one thing Helen did see was that in the center of each flap of skin was a black, festering hole: the place where the hooks took hold. It hadn't come too close that first time. There had been many encounters over the 'years' and they were a great deal more interactive and violent than that first time. Yet it was for some reason the only one that stuck in her mind.

The final hook came out of nowhere, catching even Helen unawares. With her guard down, the pain brought forth a scream that would have brought a Cheshire cat-sized smile to Luther's face. With her legs above her head and pulled out to either side the hook had an unobstructed path and pierced through both lips of Helen's vagina, whereupon the majority of the weight was shifted.

"Stop...please...Luther..." she begged, but her voice trailed off and just as she lost consciousness she heard footsteps crunching on the broken glass.

A sweet aroma caused Helen to stir from the blackness that had consumed her. It was the smell of...honey. She could taste for the first time in a long while; several years she guessed. Her stomach cramped and tore at her in demand of sustenance. Helen licked her lips and tasted it again: honey, thick and sweet. She opened her eyes and saw that she was covered in it, from her bloodied feet to her swollen, weeping vagina, all the way up to and over face. It was as if some artist had brushed it onto her while she was unconscious, some sweet-toothed James Bond villain.

"Oh good, you're awake. I didn't want to have to start this while you slept; it would have been rude not to give you a final chance to save yourself."

"Go to Hell," Helen spat, her words harsh and strong, while inside, every part of her screamed to be let free. She didn't care what she would have to do, she just wanted the pain to stop, she couldn't take it anymore, but...

Maybe today is the last day, she thought. Maybe from tomorrow it will be less...

"Very well. This will hurt, by the way – a lot." With that Luther leaned in and kissed her on the lips. His skin was cold, his lips hard and stony, yet when he kissed her, in that fleeting moment

of contact, Helen felt all the pain disappear. She felt free; she felt herself. As soon as the contact was broken it flooded back.

Luther looked at her, his thumb held out before him, one eye closed, and he studied her like an artist admiring his latest model or chosen landscape. Then, with a few assured and strong cuts, the sharpened blade drew Helen's blood once more. Today she saw he had opted for the rusty cutthroat razor. It meant two things: he was in playful mood, and it would be a long day. The pain bordered on being refreshing; it cleared her head from the lingering dizziness of the kiss. It was the first direct contact between them that hadn't been meant to inflict pain and Helen forced herself to think that maybe, just maybe, Luther was losing his touch; she was winning.

The blood that flowed seemed to bond to her honey skin, congealing rapidly like candle wax. Her body was still; struggling was no use. Once she had managed to wrench herself free from the chains, pulling them through her skin, fighting against the waves of nausea that had washed over her. Yet before she had even gotten to her feet they were back in place.

"Luther, Make it sto— I... lov—" Helen was just about to cry, to offer herself in any form of service that would be accepted, but when she looked up, Luther was gone.

A solitary bee was the first to arrive. It flew along more by luck than any scent or knowledge of the riches that lay ahead for it. Yet once it found the girl, it couldn't leave. It settled on Helen's stomach just above her navel. It stood for a while, wandering along the sticky contours of her flesh, before plunging its stinger into her skin. It left a small, burning swelling behind, one that soon began to pulse, continuing to grow in size until it was the size of a pea.

Word soon spread however and before long an entire striped army clouded the blue sky. The furry bodied beasts roamed around Helen's naked form, stinging with the unprovoked viciousness of wasps on a hot summer's day. Beetles and other flightless creatures, their scuttling bodies bouncing off each other in the chaos, soon joined party, their jaws nibbling not just the honey but the flesh beneath. Helen felt the first few insects dive into her exposed raw meat, her silence only maintained by the simple knowledge that if she opened her mouth to scream they would come flooding inside of her.

The insects and creatures continued to arrive; a pair of earwigs had perched atop each of her nipples and took it in turns to pinch them, drawing little spots of blood each time. Helen could feel her skin being stripped away one small bite at a time. They were inside her, too: she could feel them burying through her open wounds, deeper and deeper into her body, foraging for fresh, sweeter meat.

The spiders were the last to the party, their fat bloated bodies swollen and wet before they arrived. Their legs were needle sharp and left tract marks all over Helen's skin. One particularly bloated arachnid with a yellow lightning bolt running the length of its abdomen settled on her face. Helen's blood flowed freer as her wounds were stretched. She felt something hard burrow its way deep into her body, hissing and buzzing as its powerful legs propelled it deeper. Her tears that seemed to excite her living second skin welled in her eyes. They erupted en masse, bursting out from within her. They spewed up her throat, a wave of living vomit. A tide of scurrying legs and mandibles ripped into her bleeding gums. Her tongue was stung and bitten until it was swollen and plump with venom and finally it simply exploded,

like a cartoon shotgun, leaving her with nothing but a stump that fanned out at the end like a peeled banana. Then...

...as if some invisible gag or weight had been removed from her, Helen found the power to her voice. She cried out, a long, ear splitting wail, a mix of terror, pain, and anger that had been boiling away under the surface. It had been displaced by the bugs and insects that now burrowed through her flesh; large tracks swelled all over her body, marking their progress like thick pulsating veins.

She managed to form a word that expressed her pain. "Why?"

Everything froze: the pain, the burrowing, everything. "Because it is necessary. You were a bitch on earth; you mistreated and abused those who loved you, the people who took you in to their family with open arms, people who loved you as if you had been their own," Luther whispered in her ears, appearing as if conjured from thin air.

"You keep saying that, but I don't understand. I said I was sorry. Why can't you just let me go? Please, I can't take it anymore," Helen begged. Her voice was tired and just as emotionless as Luther himself. Her hopes that the words would have any effect had long since died: this was merely a process that they followed; a script.

"Well you know what you have to do, my dear. Admit your guilt, open your heart and release the hatred you have for people like your in-laws. Submit yourself to me. I'll take the pain away from you, teach you how to master it, to gain control over it, and maybe, just maybe, when these parasites you hate so much die I'll let you, my dear protégé, spend some time with them... alone," Luther hissed, his tongue sliding out of his mouth. It was long and thin, and forked with three sharp points. He licked the side of Helen's face. She felt her entire body shudder.

"No, I won't do it; I'm not like you," Helen whimpered. "I didn't hate them. They just wouldn't let us live our own lives. All I wanted was some peace. Was that too much to expect?" She stopped as the pain returned, just as intense as it had been. Her entire body cramped as the insects buzzed back to life. Only this time, instead of a feeling one mass body, Helen felt each individual creature, every stabbing motion their pointed legs made, every ravenous bite they took.

Helen closed her eyes and saw her husband. He sat at home by their dinner table. A wedding photo in his hands, an open bottle of liquor stood beside him, his face red and swollen with tears. Between his body and the picture was an empty bottle of medication. He wore a suit; the same suit he always wore to work on a Monday. It was the first suit – it wasn't a suit, rather a shirt, tie and trousers set – that Helen had bought him when they got together. He always said that wearing it on a Monday seemed to make the week seem much more bearable. The house was dark and messy; papers and letters lay strewn over the dining room table. Dirty dishes and several empty bottles of various liquors littered the floor, while a thick layer of dust had gathered across every exposed surface.

"Mark," Helen called, not thinking that he couldn't hear her.

Everything seemed so real. She raised her arms, and saw them, not the swollen poison-filled flesh sacks that hung inverted in the air, but the slender tanned arms she had had in life. She reached forward to her husband, but just as she was about to touch him he turned to face her.

His face was twisted as if it were a mask pulled over some other beast's head, a head that was far too large for it to fit properly. His eyes were black as the night and his mouth curled into a snarl. "Bitch!" it roared, just as Helen was pulled back into her nightmare world. The pain thumped and pulsated deep within her body like an itch on a covered wound, and no matter what she did, Helen couldn't quite find any release.

"You hated them. Every time you saw them, your blood would boil – ah, such a wonderful sight. You felt contempt for them like you had never felt before, and that is why I know you, know what you are capable of should you put your mind to it. You will break, so why make it harder on yourself? Join me, leave the pain behind and take your position on the other side of the rack," Luther said. He was crouched down onto his haunches, his fists resting on the shard covered ground. As Helen watched he began to dig his fists into the glass and needles, twisting them in slow forceful circles.

"You don't know me!" Helen screamed. Bitter tears stung her eyes as they rolled up her forehead and into her sweat-matted hair. "They wouldn't let us live our own life. Even our holidays had to be booked by them...where we went for a day's shopping or a romantic meal...everything had to be run through them first. They had us trapped like naughty fucking children, so what does it matter that sometimes, just sometimes, I wanted to see them in the cocksucking ground? Fuck them and fuck you!" Helen spat a ball of dark red bloody spit into Luther's face. He allowed the clot to ooze down his face before falling off into oblivion. Helen couldn't see it, but her own pale blue eyes had become as black as the night.

"I think that's enough progress for today. I would offer you another chance, but I know you won't take it. I am a great many things, but a fool is not one of them. So I will leave you with your children and return tomorrow. I have something rather interesting in store." He smiled and without speaking another word he was gone, as was the light.

The sun set with visible speed. The shadows of the trees grew longer and the air cooler. The pain was gone; the insects retreated; her flesh and body returned to its pristine condition, as was always the case. Only, tonight Helen felt a strange, fluttering in the pit of her stomach. *Nerves*, Helen told herself. Yet it continued to grow, and soon, just as the last remnants of light left and a howling wind began to rustle the trees, it became an itch. The deep seated kind, and no matter how she moved and wriggled it would not let up in the slightest.

"Fuck you!" Helen screamed into the night. A howling gust of wind blew through the trees, echoing her mournful cry as if in sympathy. Helen began to thrash about like a filly yet to be broken in yet fastened with a saddle nonetheless. The feeling grew. Her flesh began to crawl, her head to thump and ache. Long shadow fingers from nearby branches began to fondle her still naked body as her flesh began to ripple and bubble as though her fat and blood had begun to boil.

Helen coughed once and a fat swollen bluebottle burst from her throat. It flew drunkenly through the air before crashing into a tree and exploding, its yellow insides splattering the impact zone like a burst white-head hitting the mirror. Helen had experienced all manner of pain over the years, she had suffered unspeakable act after unspeakable act – with one in particular guaranteed to haunt her time of reprieve each day without fail – yet the pain that washed over her was new. Even for Luther it was agony. For he felt everything as she experienced it; it was a bond he had shared with her.

Next came a stronger gust of wind. It rustled the trees and their leaves; it sounded like flapping wings, wings so large they caught amongst the branches.

Birds, he sent birds to just peck away at you. Close your eyes; they always go for your eyes, Helen told herself, trying to remove the image from her mind's eye. That of the neighbour in Bodega Bay whose face had been fed upon by Hitchcock's flock of hungry feathered friends.

The rustling grew louder, intensified further, and then all at once Helen was bathed in light as if a spot lamp had been opened up and she was center stage. Helen's body froze. The light burnt her eyes, yet she couldn't close them. The deep ache that had burnt from within her for so long, the itch of her healing wounds, died. Her body felt her own again. Yet before she could do anything about it her body was wrenched free from its bonds, her world returned to the right way up. A warm breeze enveloped her like a blanket; it protected her as she rose higher and higher. Above the trees she climbed, as though conveyed by the glass elevator itself. As Helen's world went black, her body filled with warmth. *I finally get to die happy,* were her final thoughts before the welcomed darkness overtook her. Just as the curtain fell Helen saw the trees of the forest stretching out for as far as she could see. They rose and fell like the optical illusion of the never-ending staircase. It was as if she were trapped in a Leonardo DiCaprio movie. There was a small clearing in the center of it all – or at least in the center what Helen could see – and in the middle of that she saw him. Luther. He stood, dressed not in a business suit but a robe, a white robe. He stood staring up into the sky, watching her ascend. The last thing she thought may have been about having a happy death, but the last vision her mind processed was Luther as he blew her a kiss, flashing her a smile that said, "See you soon, my love."

Chapter 10

Graham: Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks

"Do you not fear God?" a voice cut through the darkness, slapping Graham in the face like a bucket of cold water, shattering the rather comforting darkness that had overtaken him ever since he had died.

How long had it been? He felt as if he had slept forever. His body tingled with energy. It hadn't hurt. Dying. Not in the way he had expected. The worst part by far had been the waiting. Graham had never known what to expect once life had ended. He had been raised a believer and for all his talk, his faith never left, but rather faltered.

After a while Graham opened his eyes. He was tied to a chair, bound tight at the wrists – and with a shuffle of his legs his ankles were also added to the list of secured limbs, fastened by large steel cuffs that looked like something you would find on the electric chair. They were hinged and locked into place by large old-fashioned bolts.

A gust of cold wind sent a shiver up Graham's spine, creating a full body wave of goose bumps which ran along behind it like the wake from a boat. He was in a dark room. It was cold, and somewhere he could hear water dripping in slow steady drops; a leaky pipe? The floor beneath his feet was bare concrete, and above his head a naked lightbulb swung back and forth. Its dust-encrusted shell only offered a limited level of sight. To Graham it looked like a basement.

"I asked you a question. Do you not fear God?" the voice asked again. It was neither angry nor threatening, but rather curious. Its question posed with genuine – or at least well-acted – interest.

"Why would I fear him? I've seen what he can do, I lived through it. From my way of working things out he should fear me," Graham said. His voice came out strong and proud despite his dry throat and feeble shallow breaths. "I survived his petty games and came through the other side still willing to play my role. That makes us at least even."

The voice laughed. It was not a mean spirited laugh, but a simple chuckle of continued amusement.

"Oh yes, your war all those years ago, yet the memories so fresh in your mind. I can taste them," it whispered. "I know the things you saw. We use them here as tales to calm the younger ones of our kind."

Graham couldn't see its face but he could tell that wherever it was, it wore a smile. Its eyes gleaming in the darkness, quite possibly red; or green, an absurd yet certain thought came to him.

"You don't scare me. So just get it over with already," Graham said, drawing his shoulders back as far as his bonds would allow.

"Very well, let's see if you can accept your judgment." The voice changed to a snakelike hiss.

As if on cue, the room began to spin. Colors flashed, filling Graham's entire field of vision with the power of a thousand flash bulbs going off at once: the *Hell Press*, eager to get front page pictures of the newest recruit. When it all cleared, Graham found himself still tied to the chair, in a dusty field. A few struggling plants jutted from the ground; not growing so much as reaching out of the bulb trying to claw their way out of the soil and escape. Vines and stems twisted and hooked like bony fingers scratching away at the earth. A choking air hung all around him. Graham coughed. He could feel – no, he could taste the dust; it was putrid and dried out his mouth immediately.

It was hot. There was no wind. Graham looked around and knew where he was. He wasn't surprised at all: he had always said to anybody who asked him that a large part of him had died over there...here...the Netherlands...in Europe. The whole godforsaken war had murdered him. Yet the field – this one small place – had been the spot where the final nail had been driven into his coffin. It was the cornerstone behind every dream or nightmare he had for the rest of his life. And now it seemed he had finally come home.

In the distance, Graham heard a thundering explosion. Another blast followed soon after, and with it, as if carried away from the battlefield, were the screams and shouts of those caught in the path of the blasts. Several lesser explosions followed like an echo. They came in waves, volleys of fire. The determined artillery unit made not war, but rather a work of poetic beauty; a vicious score to orchestrate their side's movements and intentions. The earth around him shook as if it were scared by what approached. Accompanying the explosions was a mechanical sound, a tired groaning source of motion that was unmistakable even to ears long since unaccustomed to war: a tank. It was moving fast, and in their direction, and it was then that Graham realized he was not alone.

He was, in fact, surrounded on all sides. Men stood behind him. The majority were in uniform. Graham couldn't tell where they were from; the only thing he saw was their dead, lifeless faces, all staring blankly towards him. Eyes white, not empty, but bleached by standing in the sun, immobile for too long. The group stood, their weapons on the floor, discarded, clutched at by the grasping digits of the war-ravaged greenery. There were civilians among them also; men, women, and even a few children; a quick count had Graham thinking they numbered around fifty.

They all simply stared at him, yet Graham doubted that any of them could see. "Hey, hey, could one of you come and untie me?" he called out but got no response. All the while, the mechanical whining grew louder as the tank, no, wait...tanks, approached.

"They won't help you," a voice inside his mind said.

Graham didn't recognize it as one of his own. Over the years he had created many different voices that dealt with his past. Each character had their own role and part to play in his dreams. It was the same ownerless voice that had spoken to him when he was still in the basement.

"Don't you remember where you are?" it asked him.

"I couldn't forget this place if I tried," Graham said inside his mind. He learned early enough that talking just made him look even crazier. "I remember everything about this place," he said.

His voice threatened to break, yet he did his best to remain defiant. “Who could ever forget something like that?”

“That’s good, because all of these people remember you,” the voice answered. It ignored Graham’s question in favor of a chortled laugh.

Graham recoiled on his stool; images flashed into his head like a slideshow. Images that weren’t new to him but seemed somewhat more vivid than the last twenty years’ dreams had been.

“What do you mean?” Graham asked, dumbfounded.

“Oh, I never like to spoil the ending. I would rather let them tell you themselves anyway. I enjoy a bit of a role-play from time to time,” the voice sneered. “So just close your eyes and cast your mind back. Go, they’re all waiting for you. Don’t worry; maybe you can win this time.”

“Bobby?” Graham whispered.

It was 1944, the start of winter, Arnhem Bridge still stood, yet operation Market Garden had been deemed a success despite the fact that casualties and unplanned problems – an arguable consequence of war – had depleted numbers in the north of Holland by more than double the estimated figures. Graham led his small company – they totaled twenty – on a regular tour of their designated stretch of countryside.

They had not been part of the market or the garden, but rather had been stationed closer to the Belgium border. Graham was the first one to see the church. He led the way, whistling a nameless tune to himself as he went. The first thing he saw was the wisp of smoke on the horizon. It had snapped him out of the comfort zone he had slipped into; smoke meant fire, fire meant people, and that invariably meant Nazis – or so they had all come to think. As they got closer, however, a strange calm washed over them all. They came over the crest of a slight rise in the road and it was then Graham saw the church. A small fire was burning out front. The emergence of a figure from behind the church set them all on alert. Yet the closer they got the more confident they became with the knowledge that whoever was there was friendly.

Graham was the first to make contact with the family; a farmer, his wife, and their three children. A boy of about thirteen, a tiny, scrawny thing with a mop of unruly jet black hair which had already begun to thin in places, giving the kid the look of a middle aged man.

The two daughters were in no better physical condition. The youngest, Wilhelmina, would have been a cute looking thing if not half staved. She was only six years old, and despite her skinny frame and a swollen left arm that hung limp at her side, she still had a sparkle in her eyes; the eternal optimism of youth. Comparably, the eldest daughter Johanna who was eighteen, was quite the opposite: her face was sunken, her eyes dark and deadened to all emotion. Her hair was a beautiful chestnut color, her body not as skinny as the rest but certainly on the wrong side of healthy.

She had smiled when Graham approached, and part of him – that small part nobody can control – fell in love with her. She looked utterly helpless, scared and indefinitely damaged by what she had borne witness to. Yet, despite it all, she was, for lack of a better word, beautiful.

She wore a shirt that came to just below her hips, and a pair of shorts that had been so damaged, Graham would have believed it if they had said they had once been trousers.

They welcomed the American troops with open arms and kisses to each cheek. The only one who didn't offer her cheek was Johanna. It was the mother, a woman who looked twice her forty years, who told Graham through a rudimentary mix of English, sign language, and Dutch that her daughter had been raped by the German soldiers in the town they had lived when the occupation happened.

Just as they let their guard down the ground began to tremble as tank tracks tore at the dried dusty soil.

"Sarge, targets approaching from the south. My count is at two tanks. Panzers are my best bet. Not enough movement for a whole platoon. I would say just a couple of stragglers," Henry Balfont said. His thick Southern accent disguised every other word. Graham was the one person who seemed able to understand him well enough to not have to ask for a repeat of every other sentence.

"Move the men; head into the trees yonder. Henry, take the family with you just for precaution. Let's not make any hasty decisions before we know what we're up against," Graham answered. The trees would give them the best position for mounting a possible attack while also offering enough shelter should the unexpected guests be too strong in numbers. Better then to wait for them to move on, radio the news and then stage an attack under more favorable conditions.

"Yes, Sarge," Henry called in response, although it came out sounding like "Ayuh-Saage" before signaling to the others. They moved silent and they moved fast, but when Graham turned back to the family, they were gone, the doors to the church just closing behind them. Graham ran over to the door but it was locked. He knocked and waited, then knocked again, harder this time. The drone of the approaching tanks grew closer. The door didn't open.

"Come out, we will protect you," Graham called to them. "You don't have to be scared," he added.

It was a blatant lie, but he guessed they either couldn't understand or wouldn't listen to him anyway. He tried once more, refusing to give up until the last possible moment. They would not be able to explain their presence in the church and would no doubt be killed.

"Sarge, come on, will ya?" Henry called, grabbing him by the shoulder. "Jimmy's got the base rat on the wire. What do you want us to say?" Henry asked him as they ran for cover.

The air turned grey as a lone tank approached, and offered Graham the first clue that things were not as they appeared to be, but he waited nonetheless.

The tank drove up to the church, stopping close enough for the barrel of the cannon to be inches away from the sidewall. The other held back, standing point.

Graham and his men watched as seven men clambered out of the machine, not wearing the expected Nazi uniforms, but rather a mixture of what seemed to be every uniform involved in the war; the American Army and Air Force, British infantry and RAF colors. Some of the men had even gone so far as to mix and match their military ensemble with British shirts and

American trousers and boots. Graham couldn't see any of the marks of the 30th Infantry; his unit.

"You seeing this, Sarge? They's tryin' to be us," a New Yorker named Martin Brittori whispered. They were the same words that were on the lips of the entire group. Martin laughed under his breath. Graham smiled in spite of himself. "Shall we go t'em?" Martin asked.

Graham was about to answer when one man dressed in a complete British uniform walked to the church, picked up a rock and threw it through one of the small windows. This seemed to be some sort of signal, because the others walked over to the door and with a small burst of gunfire succeeded in wrenching them apart before storming the building like a modern day SWAT team. They all heard the screaming, followed by the familiar rattling burst of gunfire erupt from within the church. The men emerged soon after, holding both the wife and Johanna by the hair. They dragged the women behind them as if they were mules at auction. There was no sign of the father, son, or young Wilhelmina.

"What do we do, Sarge?" a voice said up from the background. Graham didn't hear who it was; he was focused on the scene unfolding before his eyes. The fight or flight syndrome, as people had labeled it over the years, raged through his body. Graham knew that any action would result in bloodshed, and although it took him many years before he would admit it to himself, the only thing he had thought about back then was which way would be the most likely to leave him alive.

The group remained in the trees and watched in silence as first the mother and then the daughter were bent over the tank to be stripped and beaten by the soldiers who cawed with laughter throughout the whole ordeal. Johanna screamed while the mother was silent, her face unemotional, broken; she had surrendered.

"Sarge, we can't wait any longer. Jesus, look at what they're doing, for Christ sake!" Martin shouted from beside him. "Come on," he called and charged out of the coppice followed by ten other men, the movements fueled by rage, their actions clumsy. Their minds shunted over into the passenger seat for their joy ride into death.

"No!" Graham called after them – but his words were cut off by gunfire, and not from the group of men, but from a new group, hidden by the trees to their far left. Their attention still held by the helpless women.

Martin was the first to fall, his head exploding in a red mist; quite possibly the same mist that had descended over him a few moments earlier. The rest of the group fell after a scattered burst of panic fire tore through them. The first shot was more luck than a specifically aimed headshot.

Graham had seen them, something, a glint of light which he was sure came from either a pair of binoculars or the sight of a rifle, but he hadn't seen it in time to stop Martin from doing exactly what he himself had wanted to do.

"Two o' clock. Unknown number of targets. Watch the trees and open fire as soon as they emerge!" Graham shouted over the rattling sound of his own gunfire directed towards the tank. The German soldiers threw the women to the floor behind the tanks in what looked at first glance like a strange act of protection.

The Nazis (for there was no other option other than that) jumped inside the British tank which they had somehow acquired – no doubt at the same time they picked up their uniforms, Graham reasoned. They heard German voices barking orders on all sides of them, and when the tank's engine roared into life the group's resolve was broken.

The battle intensified and when the turret of the giant tank turned in their direction Graham didn't need to give any orders. The group turned and fled. They moved along the trees rather than deeper into them. No sooner had the last man broken into a run than a booming shot rang out, shaking the ground like an earthquake. The splintering sound of trees being felled shook their bones. Tendrils of smoke overtook them like a mist rolling across the English moors; only the snarling hound was not the Baskerville ghost, but the machine gun fire of German troops.

By the time they stopped moving to regroup, the hidden German soldiers had emerged, another tank, this one a Panzer with approximately ten men walking beside it, all in German uniform.

Graham couldn't help but offer the world a wry smile.

"Waas'up, Sarge?" Matthew Paterson asked, his voice barely a whisper, his body crouched low to the ground behind a small bushel which had at one time been a wild blackberry plant.

"Just thinking about how fucked we seem to be," Graham whispered in return. Their situation was indeed grave and at that point in time he saw no options open to them other than to make a stand.

The ensuing battle was inevitable. The German troops joined together and spread out, leaving the tanks guarded but not occupied. Graham knew that once the skirmish began the tanks would be useless, as not even the Germans would use them in such close proximity to their own troops.

Matthew, Henry Balfont, and Jimmy Stevens, the radio operator, were the first to fall, followed soon after by a number of German soldiers. The cover offered by the trees, although sparse, was enough to give Graham and his men a degree of shelter. They moved fast but with caution towards the edge of the copse, moving away from the church. Graham was relieved when no more German troops arrived. The numbers had not been in their favor when it began, and with nine of his initial twenty men dead and one other with a nasty wound in his shoulder, things hadn't gotten any better.

"Listen, we need a plan. If we run now they'll mow us down. If we stick in the trees they'll unleash the big dogs on us." Graham gestured towards the tanks. The Germans were less than a hundred meters away, remaining outside the line of trees.

Graham crouched down to his haunches and fired a burst towards the moving stumps that were legs attached to hidden German bodies. None of his shots killed but several of the group fell, their screams breaking the eerie silence that had fallen. Graham sprang from the trees, his rifle ready, and unleashed another volley, partnered by Harold McCarb – the oldest man in their group at twenty-five – yet he still had yet to be promoted to a higher rank despite his near perfect service record. He and Graham had both enlisted together before the war even started, unlike the majority of the others.

“Walter, John, we’ll divert their attention. You guys need to get to those tanks,” Graham instructed the two men he knew could operate a tank.

They sped off at once without even daring to question his order. The skirmish wasn’t a long one; Graham took a flesh wound to the right thigh from one of the tank guards – who he had rightly guessed didn’t dare even consider firing the big guns into their own men. He remained on his feet long enough to fire one round. The man’s face disappeared in a cloud of red, and he fell backwards onto the Panzer and everything fell still. The only sound that remained had been groaning of the injured Germans, their bodies broken and bleeding, their guns fallen out of reach.

Slowly, the scene around Graham began to dilute the same way a photograph reduces in clarity over the years. The color was the first thing to fade. Then the lines and boundaries of everything began to blur. Colors ran and collided with each other. The tanks half sank into the ground, their motors still grumbling. Graham looked to his left, but Harold was gone. He had been replaced by a faceless, flesh colored orb; the eyes, nose, mouth, everything had been erased. The dawning realization that it had all been a dream came when Graham tried to move. He was still sitting, lost between worlds. His wrists were bound, his legs also. His army uniform was gone, replaced instead by a strange and rather uncomfortable suit, the top button fastened in a choking fashion.

“You remember, I see. Well, that makes my job somewhat easier,” a voice said.

Graham felt a surge of emotion rush through him, and he fought hard to keep control of himself, tensing his jaw until it hurt.

“How could I forget? But it was a war. I killed. I shot first and cursed when I missed, but I accepted what happened over there,” Graham said defiantly. The room was cold and his breath clouded before his face with every word he said.

“Really? You can tell yourself that, you can even tell me that, but we both know that this is where you finally broke. Doesn’t it still haunt you, the look on those women’s faces?” Was there pleasure in the voice?

“Fuck you. I still remember them...how could I forget? I remember every man who served and died by my side, so I guess you’re out of luck.” Graham tried to sound strong, but even he could hear his voice start to waver, just a little.

As Graham’s eyes adjusted he found he could make out more and more of his cell. The walls were lined with wood. There was nothing but earth on the other side; he could smell it, rich and peaty. Before long, Graham could see from one corner to the other, yet try as he liked, he could not find the owner of the voice.

“I believe you, I really do. That’s why our time together it about something else entirely,” the voice whispered in Graham’s ear.

“Oh, then please enlighten me, set me on the right path so that we can get this over and done with,” Graham responded, not with fire and guile but anger. An instinctive reaction brought on through having to relive memories that now they had been replayed and brought to the surface again didn’t seem to matter.

“First, answer me this: why did you leave them?” the voice asked. It came from behind him now. Graham turned his head. He saw someone, two people in fact. Shadows in the corner, but just as Graham thought he could see his tormentor both figures disappeared, leaving him with a different scene to contend with. He saw the old church; the brick and stone walls had crumbled away, the small spire fallen through the roof and stood but a few feet proud of the walls that had supported it for so many years. Graham recognized it without a moment’s hesitation.

Then all of a sudden they stood before him. Stared at him, their heads tilted to the right. They studied him. Their faces blank, expressionless. Their grey, sagging flesh was covered in open wounds which, even after so many years, still wept. Fleas and ticks sprung joyously from one body to another. They opened their mouths, yet speech was impossible for the women as they had no tongues. They had long since rotted away or been eaten by some hungry scavenger. As a replacement, each mouth contained a thick white maggot, their bodies swelled so large and obese after having gorged on the rotting treasure trove they had discovered that they now barely fit inside the respective mouths that they called home.

“Johanna, Jesus Christ, I’m so sorry.” The words were empty. They were words he had spoken a hundred times over the years but never had he wished them so earnestly.

The corpse muttered at him, angry mumbled sounds. Yet her eyes said volumes. They stared blindly at Graham but he understood well enough that it wasn’t anger, but warning; a plea for him to once again turn around and just keep walking.

“Answer my question, peon. Why did you leave them? You never gave a second thought to that family,” the voice said through the women. Their mouths opened and closed in no particular synchronicity with the words, like fish. “You just packed up your things and left, eager to get back to the comfort of your platoon and spread the word of your heroics.” The last word was spat, as if it left a foul taste in the back of the mouth.

“They were dead. It’s not as though burying them wouldn’t have helped. We needed to get back and advise those that needed to know what had happened,” Graham lied. He stuttered as he spoke. He always was a bad liar.

“That does make a convenient excuse for you I’m sure, but utterly irrelevant. You see, they were alive; they were healthy, in fact. In spite of their exterior ailments, their bodies were strong. But thanks to you, their family was taken from them, their patriarch, their hunter-gatherer, and their future, the small child. Their bodies were left to rot inside that church... riddled with holes. They drowned in a sea of their own blood. Alone. The women didn’t dare go back inside, not even to say goodbye,” the voice snarled.

“You turned and walked away from us. The fight was over and you turned heels and took your men away from danger.” The two women continued to convey the words of the mysterious narrator whose face he dared not show. Their bodies were thin and haggard, their arms and legs so tiny it looked as though they would break if they had to so much as hold each other’s hands. Their hair was matted and filled with leaves and twigs.

“I thought you were dead,” Graham said, his voice beginning to crumble. “With all the gunfire we just thought you were dead.”

He could feel the warm, salty tears stinging his eyes. Graham tried as hard as he could not to let them fall. It was unavoidable. Not because he was angry or because what he saw upset him, but because he was lying. He hadn't thought that they were dead, not back then, not at the moment. Truth be told he had simply forgotten them, he had been happy to survive and wanted to get himself and his men (although if you asked him at the time, he would have said that they too were expendable) away from the encounter and back to the rest of the unit. There was comfort in numbers. It wasn't until much later, as they sat around a makeshift table playing cards for cigarettes, that the family came back into his head. It was then, at that point and no sooner, that Graham convinced himself that they had died. They had been dead as soon as they had been pulled from the church, the rest was just a faded memory; selective, they called it. It helped him sleep a little that night, and over the years it simply became truth.

"No, no, we were alive and scared. We were alone, our shelter and food taken from us. We were forced to stand there through the cold nights, the wet days." The words were accusatory, barbed, and meant to hurt. Then it went silent. Their voices muted, and then his voice returned.

"It was starvation and dehydration that took them. It ravaged their bodies and melted their minds long before their hearts stopped. They died cold, alone, and still believing that you would come back for them." The words cut Graham like a hot knife. He tried to tell himself that they were dead; nothing could bring them back anymore. It was too late, the damage had been done in Graham's mind. The floodgates opened and try as he might, Graham could do nothing to stop it.

"I'm sorry. I never stopped thinking about you, both of you. It was because of you, Johanna, that I became a teacher. I taught children your age. I wanted to help them understand life. Not just in terms of schooling, but in the broader terms of reality. I helped prepare them for everything life would throw at them, not just the standardized 'do not copy your neighbor's answer' kind of problems, but real issues. You saved my life. I got out of the military as soon as the war was over and I never looked back. You stayed in my dreams until the end and I mean that."

Graham felt his emotion building but his words were cut off. His windpipe closed as if someone had shoved a cork down his gullet. His lungs began to burn and although he was dead Graham felt his heart begin to race. His face grew dark, his limbs heavy; his thumbs and fingers became useless, fat sausages that dangled from his arms in bunches like fruits on a tree.

"I know what you did. I see everything. Don't you get it? I didn't create these images; I just found them in your mind and pressed play. It's my job to ensure that you see everything in the stark, unrepentant light of day. I am merely the tour guide, here to keep you on track and, well...maybe have a bit of fun with you on the way." The pressure around Graham's throat abated, and as he gasped for air with burning gulps, his captor continued to talk.

"I don't care about them and neither should you. They died, you lived, and that's all that matters in your petty human world. Believe me, down here, it's remarkably similar. I would cast my own brother into the pit of Assisi if it would help me advance another level down. Your real problem is what happened to you because of that day," the voice said, but no longer boomed or demanded. To Graham it sounded like the narrator of a game show.

“I don’t understand. I let those innocent people die; I did desert them. I deserve to be here... more than I realized.” Graham felt his resolve crumble faster than the walls of the church that had been the tomb of a father, his only son, and youngest daughter back in 1944.

“Humans, you are so pathetic, with your crude emotions and your lack of control. You’re not in Hell; not yet, at least. You are here to be judged. I am not the executioner, but merely the messenger; a bailiff, if you will. They would have died from their malnutrition even if you had have taken them with you. I mean, come on, the lives of a couple of poor farming women is of no interest to me or anybody down here. If anything, I – personally speaking – applaud your actions that day. No, you are here because you gave up on God. You surrendered all your belief in Him, your fear of Him after that day. Your life became about helping others, but not for a cause any less selfish than trying to fill that gnawing hole left inside you where your faith had once been.” The voice lectured now, and Graham imagined him as a tweed-wearing history teacher, not unlike Robert Carmichael, the history department head back at his first ever high school teaching job. It didn’t make the situation any less daunting but it gave Graham a base from which he could conjure an image to fit the floating voice.

“God, I never forgot God or stopped believing in Him, I just decided that He’s a cocksucker and only interested in seeing people suffer. Eradicating that sadistic son of a bitch from my decision making took my life and turned it into something enjoyable. So if you ask me if I believe, then yes, of course I do. I always did. If you ask me what I would do if I got to the pearly gates, then I would love to kick my bearded creator a swift one in the bollocks and then go find my wife,” Graham spat.

Now it was his turn to feel enraged. Not because of the questioning and not as a result of the images he had seen, but simply because he had been forced to empty himself. He could feel the atmosphere working on him, ridding his body of the pent up emotion and aggression, rendering him passive, empty and tired, making him easy pickings for whatever lay ahead.

“Yes, yes, I find it all very intriguing but also so incredibly...*boring*.” The voice roared the last word. “If you do not fear God, then you cannot fear us, and if people stopped fearing us, then, well, Hell wouldn’t be as much fun, now, would it? Sure, it would still exist, and yes, business would pick up with all the holy defectors, but fear is kind of what we do down here; it is what drives us. The terror helps us survive and keeps us all functioning.”

Graham opened his mouth to speak, but the voice snapped, barking at him in the snarling voice of an old man. “Be an end to it. I am bored with you now. Your ghosts are simple, your past pathetic, and I no longer have an interest in you. You will learn of your mistakes in the Chamber of Blood. Now get out of my sight.”

There was no goodbye, no cackling laughter as Graham had half expected. There was nothing but a rushing wind. Graham began to fall. His restraints had vanished, so too the chair. Graham fell into the darkness and the walls turned from black to purple, from purple to red, and finally from red to a burning blood orange. It didn’t take long before Graham hit the ground...no, not ground, but water, a sea, a vast sea (or lake) and was swallowed by it whole. Graham was effortlessly sucked deep beneath its surface.

When he broke the surface of the water, Graham struggled and flapped with his arms. They seemed to respond to his commands with the same conviction a toddler shows when listening to its parents. He sank beneath the surface again, pulled – or so it felt – by hands grasping at

the newest member of their clan. Graham's body called out in agony, his chest tightened, his vision faded, and yet his thoughts seemed to clarify. He saw the field and the church the way it had been before they arrived. It was a beautiful sight.

With that in his mind, Graham let go. He stopped his struggles and allowed himself to sink. Eager hands tightened their grip on his ankles and pulled him deeper. He opened his mouth. The taste of copper hit the back of his throat and surged down his gullet. Then, suddenly he was propelled upwards, pushed by some hidden force. Graham rose fast and broke the water, coughing and spluttering, gasping for air. For a few moments he wheezed and gulped and, after a while, began to regain control.

Graham tread water and looked around, panicked that they would grab at him again. He saw no signs of a shoreline, but the rough undulating surface could easily have hidden land from view; Graham decided he was in an ocean, for he had never seen anything other than sea so rough and untamed. Only the water was not the crisp blue of the tropics, or even the sewage green of the seas around Europe, but red. It didn't take long for Graham to realize the sea was blood, and he was nothing more than a clot in the system, destined to end up wherever the tide would take him.

There was an obvious current beneath him; Graham could feel the gore pulling at him and so he decided to swim with it. He began to paddle, his body covered in rapidly congealing blood. Thick clots tried to stick his eyelids together. His nose was blocked with black lumps of jelly, and he had swallowed more than he cared to think about; his mouth tasting as though he had bitten down a handful of old pennies.

Graham had no idea how long he swam: all he knew was that he was tired. Not just I've had a long day at work tired, but worn out, falling apart tired, exhausted to the point where further movement was not just hard but impossible.

When he first arrived in the world, it had been silent. Even the blood ocean with its pink froth capped waves had made no sound. Yet now, as he swam heading towards what he hoped would be the shore, Graham realized that the silence was being replaced by an eerie groaning, the same sound one hears in old houses or in pipes long since due a service. It was carried on the air, it travelled through the ocean, it fell from the sky, an all-encompassing cry. It was that of tortured souls screaming, cries of lust, sin and hatred all boiled together.

He stopped swimming and noticed that every part of him that was below the surface was completely numb. It had been a warmth, bordering on burning sensation at first, but now all feeling had gone. He was tired, exhausted, and there was part of him that wanted to be taken by the sea, to simply sink away again to the bottom of the bloody ocean and drown in the fluid of life. It all seemed rather poetic to him. Yet just as he made the decision to let his body go, the water began to ripple around him. It spread in circles as if a helicopter was moving into position to pluck him from the sea. A bright light appeared, bathing Graham in a pure brilliance; a searchlight, or so his natural inclination and rational mind suggested.

Out of nowhere, a pair of hands grasped him, not by the feet this time, but by the shoulders. The grip was powerful and the nails felt like sharp talons as they dug into Graham's flesh; not breaking the skin, but pinching to the point of penetration. Graham felt himself begin to rise above the waves. He was plucked effortlessly from the ocean. It looked as if he had been

bathing in a barrel of beetroot for weeks. He rose higher and higher, not moving in any direction other than vertical.

Graham looked down and saw for the first time how vast it all was. The ocean stretched out in all directions, and squint as he might, there was not even the faintest trace of land on the horizon.

Graham could make out small islands dotted around, and he could see people, souls like himself, swimming, some against the tide, some with it, all heading towards what they hoped to be salvation. They rose another few feet and Graham realized that they weren't islands, but rather giant floating clots that drifted on the surface of the water. Graham could see people clinging to them. He could feel their anguish and hear their groans as they realized that salvation didn't exist, not anymore. He saw sprays of pink foam shooting high into the air just before large grey beasts leapt from beneath the surface, consuming entire groups of people, even entire 'islands' inside their cavernous mouths. Some had fins, and others looked like giant frog/whale hybrids. Some had several heads and some to Graham's shock seemed to have no heads at all. One end simply opened into a giant mouth like an amphibious worm.

There was something else. Graham noticed it at the end just as they reached a height where things all became indistinguishable: beneath the surface, when the ocean was flat and the waves staved off, he could see them, hundreds, thousands, no, probably hundreds of millions of faces staring up through the red liquid. Their arms were outstretched as they grasped upwards, reaching not for the surface but for more bodies, for new arrivals. They were waiting to take a hold and pull them down. To sink them to the Hemoglobic Ocean floor, and in turn lift themselves slightly higher, back to the surface, to their second chance. They were the faces of those who, like Graham, simply gave up and sank. They didn't die, but were made to wait, to gather those that joined their hopeless cause and climb back up and restart their epic journey in the hope of finding...anything.

"What the hell is this?" Graham asked, not realizing he was speaking aloud, his consciousness drifting away from him.

"One of the Blood Seas, pools that are filled with the remains of those skinned in the Chamber of Blood," a patient sounding voice answered him. There was no malice in it, no hidden, scheming lust for suffering, but simply an honest answer to an honest yet terrifying question.

With the answer still filtering through his mind, Graham felt everything slip away from him. All his fears and thoughts wiped out of his mind, replaced by a feeling much akin to sleep, and when it hit, Graham welcomed it with open arms.

PART II
A GREAT HALL IN A DYING WORLD

Chapter 11

Helen's eyes sprung open, panicked. She sat bolt upright; the sensation of being unrestrained scared her at first. After so many years of being bound and immobile, the sudden range of motion her body was given was too much for her and she collapsed back down onto the hard floor.

Helen let out a long, slow breath, wincing in anticipation of the pain that she had learned accompanied such sudden movements. Behind her closed eyes she could see Luther's face, a smirk spread across it, his eyes glowing with orange fire, no doubt merely a trick of her mind, a dream. Yet she felt his hot, acrid breath blow against her face as his mouth opened up into a laugh; a sneering, howling laugh that revealed rows of shark teeth. Behind him fire spurted into the air, flames fanned outwards, licking Luther's colorless skin, leaving red tattoos patterned over his flesh. She saw hazy images of shadowy skulls, and bony limbs twisted and danced within the flickering background inferno – and so, with no other option...

Helen opened her eyes.

The initial burst of panic replaced by a nervous caution; she fully expected the freedom to have been dream, and didn't even entertain the notion that she had gotten away. Helen was certain that she was still hung upside-down in the forest, or maybe that was over and she was above a canyon or gorge. She could see the blood red river running far below her; it looked like nothing more than a small vein running through the body of barren land that stretched out in all directions as far as her inverted eyes could see. But no, the world was not dull and hopeless, yet nor was it bright. The world was pastel. The colors were there but faded, yet felt so real, it was unmistakable. Helen had escaped and woken up in some vintage world, a water-washed pastel kingdom where nothing could be too bright or vivid.

Despite what appeared at first glance to be safe surroundings, Helen could still feel the insects crawling over her skin, and with a frantic flail of arms she pulled off her shirt. Helen wasn't sure where the shirt had come from, but she was glad for it, as she wasn't sure she wanted to see the damage it covered. Her skin was smooth, unblemished. Even the scar from where she had had her appendix removed when she was sixteen was gone. Helen ran her hands over her body, fingers trembling in near disbelief. She refused to believe what her eyes showed her; she needed to feel it for herself. She patted herself down, and only once she was satisfied that her body was her own and that no bugs were preparing to erupt from her chest in a reenactment of the alien birthing scene did she put her shirt back on.

Getting to her feet wasn't as difficult as she had envisioned. Keeping her balance, however, that took some practice. Holding out her hands like a blind woman, Helen supported herself against the grey wall that she had been slumped up against when she woke. It took a few moments for her balance to return but when it did it was instant, with nothing worse than a slight popping sensation in her ears, like when adjusting to the pressurization in an aircraft cabin. The wall was solid and warm to her touch, its surface was rough against her skin, which seemed overly sensitive. The walls looked smooth, but felt like raw brick, scratchy and unrefined. It was dusty, and when she removed her hands Helen saw it had once been a yellow color. No sooner had she removed her hand, when the strange, dust-like coating –

which she would notice at a later date once having left the confines of the room, seemed to affect everything in the town – returned, covering her palm print like steam on a bathroom mirror.

There was a large window to her left. The curtains were tied back neatly, but the glass they were hung to cover was so filthy that it offered up no view of the world beyond the walls. With first impressions being the powerful tool that they are, Helen thought that it was merely misty out. Reluctantly, Helen pushed herself away from the wall, giving herself complete control of her body. Once she was stable, Helen walked over the window, wiping it with her fist, creating a small porthole through which she could see. While Helen could not make out any distinguishing features or individual landmarks because of the ‘mist’ as she thought of it, it was obvious that she was in some sort of town. From the shadowy look of the buildings opposite, Helen had only one thought occupy her mind and it was too absurd to even speak aloud.

(The Wild West)

“Where the hell... Where am I?” She caught her words without realizing it. The stupidity of the statement occurred to her, however, and when thinking about it after the fact she realized it was a silly saying when one thought about it.

“I hoped you could tell me,” a deep, somewhat groggy sounding voice said from behind her.

Helen let out a startled scream as she turned around and saw the shadowy figure of a semi-naked man standing in the far corner of what she now saw was a large bedroom; a hotel room. The random scenic paintings placed on the wall above the bed, the rather surreal oil painting in the far left hand corner of the room, a small alcove where there should have been a desk or wall mounted trouser press. The floor was carpeted with cheap nylon and the bed decked with an ever outdated floral bed spread. In fact, the only thing that looked out of place was the small clapped-out cupboard, which looked as if it would fall apart at the slightest of touches. The cupboard was immediately to the left of the door upon entering, yet it stood at least six inches away from the wall, with no obvious obstruction having caused its unusual placement.

“W-wh-who are you?”

Luther?

Helen stuttered, her voice a shocked whisper. The small amount of power she did put into her words seemed to be absorbed by the air long before they reached the stranger’s ears. She moved backwards as she spoke, reaching behind her for support of some kind, her legs losing the strength they had just found.

“What do you say you tell me your name first and we’ll take it from there? Who are you, how did you just appear out of thin air, and what the fuck is going on here?” Marcus demanded, his tone serious, straight to the point and downright terrifying, or so the scared and disoriented Helen thought.

“I...I don’t know, I mean...I was, um...I think I died, but then I thought it was a dream. Him. Oh God, I just don’t know.” Helen couldn’t take it any longer and she burst into tears. She collapsed onto her haunches and buried her face in her hands, her hair doing its best to hide it all as she sobbed.

Marcus moved across the room and crouched down next to the woman. It felt strange to touch another human being, and he wasn't surprised to see his hand shake as he reached out to her. Marcus laid his hand on the sobbing lady's shoulder. He felt her shrink back from his touch and recoiled himself.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I guess we seem to be on the same side here. I...um, I died also," he said, admitting it to himself and speaking it out loud for the first time. "You just put the wind up me with your sudden appearance." Marcus continued, "Come on, why don't we stand you up and see if you don't feel better?"

Marcus slipped his hand under her arm and applied a gentle pressure that helped guide Helen to her feet. "You don't happen to have a key, do you? I had kind of hoped we could get out of this godforsaken hotel. It doesn't feel right here." Marcus managed a half smile. He meant what he said but didn't want to scare the girl; she looked as though she had been through enough.

"Wh-what do you mean, I j-ju-just appeared?" Helen asked, stuttering as she always did when nervous.

Or scared.

She knew that the conversation had progressed from the stranger's opening statement but she didn't care. It had stuck with her and she needed to know what he meant.

Marcus, who had turned to stare out the window – which had held him captive since he had awoken – looked at her over his shoulder. "Well, that's just it. One minute I was here alone, the next, there was a strange grating noise and there you were." Marcus looked Helen right in the eyes as he spoke. It was enough to convince her that he spoke the truth.

"I don't understand, I don't remember what...I was just at work and then, then I was...in Hell, with him. And it was so long, and...and, and now..." Helen's words faltered as a fresh wave of warm, salty tears fell from her eyes.

"You were in Hell," Marcus finished for her, jumping on her words. "You and I both. I was just walking back to the car ready to finish my shift when trouble starts just out of nowhere. This guy stabs me and boom...out went my lights. Next thing I know, I've got some strange creature showing me what I did wrong and sending me to some chamber. And I'll tell you one thing...I saw that place, and I don't plan on going back." Marcus exhaled a long, deep breath. Under normal circumstances he wasn't one to run his mouth, but after being alone for so long it felt good to get it all said in front of someone else.

Helen tried to smile – it was the only gesture she could think of – as she steadied herself on her feet. She stood steady and then walked over to the man. He was big, broad and in good shape. Three things which, when combined, made Helen feel safer than she had ever in her life.

"Helen, Helen Attinson." She offered Marcus her hand. He took it – enveloped it, more like – within his own gigantic fist. His grip was gentle, although Helen felt the power that lurked behind it and felt safer still. "I was stuck in the chamber for years, or at least it felt like years. I was tortured every day in ways that even now I can't fully imagine." She stopped talking; the

memories that flooded back into her mind were too painful and the wounds too fresh. Every time she closed her eyes Luther was there, smiling at her, waiting.

Marcus stared at her, his eyes wide. "Jesus—" he began, but Helen cut him off.

"It wasn't your fault." She tried to smile, and felt the corners of her mouth twitch; it was the best she could do.

"Marcus Fielding. You said you were there for years in one of those oil cauldrons? I can't what that must have been like. I was falling, these things flew towards me and then...then I woke up here. I have no idea how long ago that was; the time never changes. Never day, never night," Marcus said, trying to fathom how the attractive young lady in front of him had earned her space in the oil.

"Oil? What do you mean? I wasn't in oil. I was...well...I don't want to talk about it." Helen quieted down as she finished talking, her eyes scanning the ground. "No offence," she added as an afterthought, not wanting to hurt Marcus's feelings.

Marcus didn't push the subject; he knew that once somebody decided that they didn't want to talk then there wasn't anything that could be done to make them. Plus he knew well enough that she was on his side. There was a look in her eyes that just couldn't be faked: sincerity.

"So what is this place? Have you been outside yet?" Helen asked after the silence between them became too much for her to bear.

"The door is locked; there isn't any way out of this room. I thought I would go insane before you arrived," Marcus answered with all seriousness.

Helen looked at him out of the corner of her eye. He was clearly in good shape; his body toned and showed signs that once it had been a muscular one. She also saw a wedding ring and the shadow left behind by a watch which was no longer there. "Well I guess we can go crazy together then."

What happen next surprised the both of them. They looked at each other, and laughed. Not a crazy laugh, but simply a good, old fashioned 'my sides are stitching' laugh. Tears welled and rolled down cramp afflicted cheeks as every emotion they felt boiled over in a fit of the giggles.

Once the laughter subsided and their breath had been re-caught the pair began their introductions again. The mood between them lightened; a friendship was instantly formed.

"Wow, I can't believe you were a boxer. My dad used to love watching boxing – all sports actually, but boxing was his favorite," Helen said. She sat cross-legged on the bed, listening intently to Marcus's life story. Wondering at the same time how she could make her life sound half as interesting.

"Yeah, they all claimed that I was the next big thing, but I got out of the game. I discovered that it had a dark side...a very dark side. I didn't want to become a Sonny Liston, some puppet who winds up dead in a hotel room. So I left, retired before my time had even begun and joined the force," Marcus continued. The entire time he spoke he held studied Helen. He couldn't help it. She sat with her hands in her lap, and played nervously with her fingers,

twisting them, rubbing them against their opposite number like Lady Macbeth. She was uncomfortable, not to mention shy. Marcus kept his story short, giving her the highlight reel rather than the blow by blow account.

“And that was how you died? You were stabbed?” Helen asked.

“Yeah, this guy was beating up on his girl. I tried to split them up and that was when he stabbed me. The blade must have gotten under my vest. I just bled to death in the street. It all happened real quickly. I know it sounds like a standard movie cliché, but it is the truth.” Marcus paused for a moment, looking down at his own hands, which he saw were clasped into tight fists. He ground them into his thighs as he spoke. “The last thing I heard was the baby screaming,” he added absently. “My wife was at home packing for our holiday. I never got to say goodbye, or hug my kids.” Marcus stopped, his tale done. It was the condensed version, but it had been said nonetheless.

It had left him feeling sore, as if someone had scrubbed his soul with a wire brush – but it was said and he did feel better. Even if the sudden mention of his wife and children, the realization of the withdrawal of his role in their lives, reduced him to tears.

“I’m sorry,” Helen offered. “I know it doesn’t exactly help, but I am.”

She rose to her feet and both her knees gave a loud crack. “My life wasn’t anything like that. I was just at work. The next thing I know, I was naked and hanging upside-down. The first time I was in a warehouse. There were large hooks everywhere. Like a meat factory, I guess; a slaughter house. I was alone and these large hooks had been put through my feet. That was when he came.” Helen paused to compose herself. She had moved over by the window, and as she peered out into the grey she thought she saw a shadow float across the street. No, not a shadow but a figure, someone else. She blinked, clearing her eyes, and it was gone.

“Who?” Marcus asked. He had moved beside her. He didn’t push her for an answer. He knew that she would tell all when it was time, when she felt ready for it. Together they stood in silence and stared out of the window, simply enjoying the feeling of company. It was quite some time before either of them spoke, and it was Helen who broke the silence, continuing her tale as if she had never stopped.

“Luther. It was always him. Every day, for years on end he would come.” There was a slight pause as Helen fought to find her words. Her voice sounded embarrassed by the admissions she was about to make. She could feel her cheeks beginning to heat up with a blush. “He would do all sorts of things to me, always smiling; sometimes he would even hum some Hell tune to himself. It was strange because he was...well...charming. When he spoke he was a real gentleman. He was never crude or vulgar, but the things he did...” Helen stopped, unable to go on any further without having Luther come forward out of her mind, a shining steel blade in his hands, his eyes glowing with hellfire, yet pining at her absence with the same longing lust as a couple reunited after a period of separation.

The click startled them both, although Helen was the only one who let out a startled scream. The atmosphere of wherever they were seemed to eat their words, but that sound – whatever it had been – thundered in their ears like cannon fire. Helen and Marcus both spun around, Marcus’s hands coming up in front of his body, fists clenched; his body weight moved onto the balls of his feet; his eyes narrowed. He was ready for anything.

Helen was startled. She shrank within herself. She brought her arms up and wrapped them around her chest. Unknowingly, she had taken several steps backwards, behind Marcus.

Or had he stepped in front of her? It didn't matter.

The room was still empty.

"The door." It was Helen who saw it first. The booming sound they both heard must have been the lock turning. The door, a large windowless point of entry, swung open a few inches. It wasn't much, yet at the same time it was just enough. A beam of bright, powerful yellow light squeezed through the opening. It looked like something from an early Technicolor movie where most parts were still in black and white, and any color that appeared seemed far too powerful and brilliant to be true.

"We're not alone," Marcus responded. His gaze was focused on the door, but his body was more relaxed: if there was a threat lurking out there, it wasn't ready for the fight just yet. First it wanted to play.

"Well, you've been here longer than I have, but I've already had enough of this place. Let's get out of here while there is a doorway we can use. Please," Helen said, making the statement, but not wanting to be the first one to make a move.

"Stay close to me. We don't know what's out there," Marcus said, his voice quiet, his words slow and steady.

His eyes never left the door. They studied it the way an artist studies a slab of clay or blank canvas before beginning their masterpiece. He took a gentle hold of Helen's right arm, moving her even further behind him, and then, together, they headed toward the door.

Chapter 12

The yellow light was not only too bright, but it was too thick, displacing their air, hanging like oil. Marcus raised his hand and gently prodded it with his middle finger. It felt like jelly. The surface didn't break but pushed inwards.

"It's like a balloon," Helen whispered. Both of them felt the strange yet certain sensation of being watched, or at least eavesdropped on, and so automatically they began to speak in whispers.

"Something like that," Marcus said, puzzled. It was unlike anything he had seen before, but a balloon was a good enough description for him.

Carefully, Marcus opened the door, expecting for some strange reason for it to creak like an old haunted house. It opened smooth and silent. Together Marcus and Helen stepped out into the hallway.

"Good God." Helen caught her breath as she spoke. The yellow light hung close to the ceiling, and travelled along the corridor before making a ninety degree turn to the right. "What is this place?" she asked the air, echoing Marcus's thoughts to the letter.

"It's like a Tardis, or the theory of one," Marcus remarked. He felt his age when he saw the blank look of Helen's face. "It didn't feel this big when you looked out the window." Marcus backtracked and redirected when he saw his Tardis comment would need extensive explanations.

The corridor stretched out in both directions and disappeared into the distance. The floor was carpeted with what their minds told them was a rich ruby red carpet, but in reality – or the reality they were in, at least – it was a faded pastel, pink. The walls were decorated in two styles; the lower half was covered in wallpaper, embossed with a floral-cum-tribal design that swirled around in semi-hypnotic patterns. The longer Helen and Marcus looked at it, the more convinced they were that the patterns were moving, swaying in some invisible current. Above the wallpaper was a wooden rail, not a feature of decoration, but more of a handrail to guide those who might get lost in the labyrinth. The rail stood apart from the wall, held by regularly placed brackets. Marcus wrapped his hand around the bar and gave it a series of swift sharp tugs; when it didn't give, he seemed to loosen up just ever so slightly.

Helen could see in his naked torso that his shoulders were anything but at ease; his muscles rippled with every movement he made. The top half of the wall was painted what they thought to be cream, but it could just have been a dirty white. The color of the wallpaper was dulled beyond recognition. Miniature chandeliers hung at regular intervals from the – supposedly – whitewashed ceiling. The yellow beam swerved effortlessly around them like a slalom skier, first to the left and then to the right. To finish the look, there were delicate ornate wall lamps placed between each of the chandeliers. Yet, in spite of all the lights, the only illumination proved to be that emitted by the strange yellow beam which seemed even more vivid in the watercolor corridor.

"There aren't any doors," Marcus noted. It was a poor attempt to strike up a conversation and, coupled with his expression, he was surprised Helen answered him at all.

“No, wait, take a look at that,” Helen said, pointing to the opposite wall.” Marcus looked, following the guideline laid by Helen’s outstretched arm and finger.

At first Marcus saw nothing; the swirling design of the wallpaper stole his attention – but then just as he looked away he saw it. A faint outline –

Just a shadow

– against the wall. Marcus looked back at the door they had just walked through. It stood out like a sore thumb. Its mahogany coloring seemed completely out of place amid the faded kingdom that they found themselves trapped in. Marcus turned his attention back to Helen, who had moved away from him. She approached the wall, her left arm raised; she made to touch it. It looked to Marcus like nothing more than a thin crack. Granted it just happened to change direction at the crucial moments, creating the appearance of a door.

Helen had moved forward, unaware that Marcus had remained standing. The closer she got to the wall, the clearer the image became. The outline thickened, taking form with each step Helen took until she stood before it. She could do nothing but stand and stare. The door was plain, naked, untainted by stains or paints. There was something about the number 937 that spoke to her. They hadn’t been that high, assuming the hotel was numbered with the same principle as every other hotel she had ever known.

“I told you there was a door,” Helen called. She looked back at Marcus, giving him a look that only a woman can give properly.

“What are you talking about? I can’t see any door,” Marcus began. He walked over to Helen, his attention no longer focused on the wall, but rather he surveyed the scene as a whole, looking for something, anything.

It was then that Helen looked past Marcus, over his shoulder at the wall where their door had been. Only it wasn’t there. It was gone, vanished. All that was left in its place was the wall, uninterrupted, as if it had never been there.

Marcus looked at Helen and saw her pale as she opened her mouth to speak. Her eyes widened as if she had seen a ghost or some other spectral figure. The change was so sudden that he even felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Acting on instinct, Marcus took a look behind him, expecting to see some Hell beast which Helen had yet to find the right words to use as warning. When he saw nothing out of place, Marcus moved forwards once again, walking over to her, watching as her face didn’t change; the look of slight horror held firm. It was only when he got close enough to Helen that Marcus realized it wasn’t horror, but sheer puzzlement. The kind of bewildering speechlessness had come over her that affects a child when someone pulls a coin or a small toy out from behind their ear.

Marcus opened his mouth to speak but then saw part of the riddle for himself. The door. It was right before him. Marcus closed his eyes, squeezing them shut until they itched with cramp. When he opened them he expected the door to be gone, but it wasn’t. Marcus did everything but rub his eyes with the heel of his hands but the door remained fact. He reached out and touched it, expecting it to disappear, to burst like a balloon, but it remained solid. Marcus even made a fist and rapped three times on the door’s hard surfaced; the booming clouts of each blow echoed on the other side of the door and simply confirmed that the door did in fact exist, and so did the room behind it.

"I don't get it. This place, I mean. What on earth is this place?" Marcus turned to look at Helen as he spoke. He noticed that her face had regained a measure of color, although it would never be what it once was. It was the atmosphere of the hotel; it was draining them of their color just as it had drained the building.

"That's not all," Helen began, but before she could finish speaking Marcus saw it for himself. The door that they had only a few moments ago passed through was gone.

"That's interesting," Marcus offered, unsure of what else to say. He was more surprised to find that he wasn't surprised.

"Wait a second. Let me try something," Marcus said, his voice distant, not really there. In a way, he wasn't. Marcus had retreated, crawled deep inside his own mind. He acted, he didn't overanalyze or underestimate. He simply acted with an innate knowledge; it was carved into his bones and had saved him on more than one occasion. Both in and out of the ring.

He turned his back on Helen once again and walked back towards the original door. His eyes were focused on the wall. As he had expected, every step he took brought the door further into focus; first the outline, then the shadows, and finally the substance. Marcus reached the door just as the handle appeared. He turned around and looked back at Helen. She was still there in the same spot. However, the door to room 937 was gone.

"Can you see me?" Marcus asked.

"Yes," Helen answered him, confused and uncertain why had would ask such a simple question.

"Can you see the door?" he asked again.

"No," Helen responded.

Marcus raised his right arm, and with firm strokes rapped against the door three times. Although Helen could not see any door, she heard the unmistakable knock of wood, of visitors requesting entry.

"Your turn," Marcus called. He had a hunch that he would hear the same sound when Helen knocked on the wall (as he saw it). He was sweating; he could feel the droplets forming on the top of his head.

Slowly, Helen raised her arm and knocked on the door. Her hand shook – all her strength was gone – but Marcus heard it clear enough. Satisfied with the conclusion he had reached, he walked back over to Helen, looking over his shoulder with each step. He walked as if he was walking down the aisle.

Left foot forward.

Look at door 937.

Feet together.

Look over shoulder.

Left foot forward.

And so it went. One door disappeared and another came into being.

“We’re not going in, are we?” Helen asked once Marcus had returned to her side. She wasn’t sure if she wanted her words to sound hopeful or hesitant.

Marcus looked at her. His bare chest twitched as he thought, and despite herself Helen couldn’t help but give him the quick once over with her eyes.

“I think we are supposed to follow this light.” Marcus realized how corny it sounded when spoken out loud but he meant it.

“I guess you’re right; I mean, it does seem to be going somewhere,” Helen agreed. They both knew that following the trail of bright yellow floating jelly was the right idea, but neither was ready to put their complete trust in it.

“Do you think this is another part of Hell?” Helen put the question out there. It had been resting on the inside of her lips ever since she woke up, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to raise it; now seemed like as good a time as any.

“I don’t think so. From what you told me, we were in two different places. Two different...what was it, chambers? I’m no expert on Hell – I don’t even think I believed in it all – not to this extent – but I don’t think you just get moved around. Judged is judged. That whole process seemed damned official. If you ask me, I think something pulled us out.”

They walked as they talked, Marcus always half a step ahead as they followed the yellow bubble of light. It was that half step which allowed Helen, with help from the yellow glow emitted from the beam, to see the mark on Marcus’s shoulder. It was as clear as day in the strange light. A bright red burn covered Marcus’s shoulder; a hand...an enormous hand, but a hand nonetheless.

“Jesus, you’ve got a...um...you have a hand...handprint on your back,” Helen stammered. The print was enormous; easily three times the size of a normal man’s hand, but it was unmistakable.

“What?” Marcus stopped. It wasn’t so much Helen’s words, but rather the vision they seemed to create.

He was falling. The bodies around him cried out, laughed at him. A few threw lumps of molten flesh in his direction. Then the hand grabbed him, just as those beasts had flown away. It had grabbed him by the shoulder and lifted him to safety.

“I remember,” he said before Helen could say anything.

“What, what do you remember?” Helen asked.

“Turn around,” Marcus told her. Reaching out with his hands as he moved, he pulled her shirt upwards. Her shoulder was bare, the flesh unblemished, flawless. “Shit. There goes that theory,” he said out loud to himself.

“What are you?” Helen asked, her words catching in her throat as her own vision broke through into the forefront of her mind. A hand had reached out nowhere – light – and grasped her by the ankle. “Wait...wait...” she said, kicking off the shoes – which, much like the clothes, had been placed upon her between her rescue and her waking – and rolled up her trouser leg.

“I was upside-down. They grabbed me by my leg,” she said, her voice filled with an excitement she couldn’t explain.

Marcus saw the imprint, but only once Helen stood in the glow of the yellow beam. The large red hand print that wrapped around her ankle. The imprint was not as clear as the one on Marcus’s shoulder, but it was clear enough.

“Do you—” Marcus began.

“Yes, I remember,” Helen finished.

“Okay, well that gives us something we can go on at least. We were pulled out of Hell and placed here, so that means, in theory, that this is...what...some sort of safe house?” Marcus pondered; his mind busy working through a number of different theories.

“Okay, then why us?” Helen asked. Questions bounced around inside her head, desperate to be spoken. Not because she expected Marcus to offer her anything other than a thoughtful observation, but because she had missed having somebody else to talk to, and wanted to make the most of it should everything fall apart. Sure, Luther had talked to her, had broken the loneliness, but that wasn’t company; that was just his fun and games.

The only sound was a strange, electric buzzing noise, like when you stand too close to overhead power lines. It came from the yellow light. Neither of them was surprised.

“Beats me, it really does, but my guy tells me that if we follow this path long enough we will either find either the beginning or the end. Either way there has to be a way out.” Marcus looked over his shoulder at Helen; he could feel her nerves and felt sorry for her.

The emergency lighting, as they liked to think of it, took them down the corridor and then turned right into a second corridor which was just as long as the one they had come from. Impossibly long given the size that they had gauged based on the other buildings in the street. The meandering corridors appeared and disappeared much like the doors, which they now passed at regular intervals – even numbers on the right and odd numbers on the left. They’d made yet another turn when Helen stopped; frozen, she looked over her shoulder, certain that someone was watching them; there was nothing. No sign of the corridor they had just left. Instead, she stood but a few feet away from a wall. She reached out and touched it. It was real. Marcus, who had felt her fall behind, stopped and turned to face her. While he wasn’t surprised by what he saw, he still let out a startled grunt.

“How big is this place?” Helen asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between them once again. Their pace had increased ever since they reached the agreement on the safe house theory. They felt much more relaxed and even walked side by side, as if they were old friends out for a stroll.

Despite the relative comfort that had fallen over them, they were both still uneasy with the strange atmosphere that hung in the corridors. Every corner they turned, every door they walked past, they just couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched.

“I have no clue. I think it’s as big as they want it to be,” Marcus answered before Helen had finished speaking. It was the same question he had been asking himself since they made the third ninety degree turn. They had walked for a good twenty minutes now, twisting and turning

through various corridors, following the light which never wavered or diminished in any way, shape or form.

“Who are they? If they rescued us then why can’t we see them? What’s going on? Can we leave? If we find a door, I mean,” Helen continued, rattling off half questions which seemed to answer themselves. Marcus didn’t know whether they needed to be answered or not, and so he kept quiet until Helen was finished.

“We’re trapped here.” It was a simple answer, and when Marcus saw the look of desperation wash over Helen’s face he decided to elaborate. “Someone or something rescued us from Hell, but I don’t think that this is the end of the journey; rather a truck stop if you want to think of it in terms like that. We aren’t being held prisoner, but I don’t think this place wants us to get out. Not just yet.” Marcus unraveled his mind, which had been balled up like a knotted ball of yarn. His answers may not have answered any questions, but Marcus felt better for speaking it, and he could see from Helen’s expression that she felt better for having heard it.

Helen nodded for a while, contemplating what Marcus had said. “You mean we’re in a maze,” she commented at last.

III

A short while later, they stopped walking and stood in the middle of the corridor, both acutely aware of the sudden hunger pangs that had cramped their stomachs. Helen began to swoon. She put her hand out to steady herself against the wall. The door appeared out of nowhere, as had all the others. Helen fell against the door and was immediately thrown back by a jolt that could only have been electricity. Bright green sparks filled the air. They zigzagged over the surface of the door as if startled.

“Helen!” Marcus called, rushing over to her. The force of the shock had thrown her into the corridor, where she lay motionless. A faint licking of green sparks drifted over her body in much the same way as it had the door.

“I’m okay,” she said groggily. She sat, her hair filled with static. Marcus crouched beside her, careful to avoid all contact until the residual charge had gone.

“Well I guess now we know it’s their maze and we are the mice.” Marcus offered a smile with his words and felt relieved when he saw Helen’s eyes twinkle, the corners of her mouth rise up. A second later, a small giggle escaped her lips. He also saw how her nose wrinkled slightly on the bridge when she smiled. “Do you want to rest a minute?” he asked with genuine concern.

“No, it’s fine. Let’s keep moving.” Helen stood groggily, speaking like someone recently roused from a deep sleep. “Just don’t let me rest against any more doors,” she said, smiling, as she brushed her hands against her trousers. They both saw green dust-like flecks fall from her clothing and disappear into the floor.

Moving at a slower pace, they resumed walking. Helen felt a strange dizziness creep over her but she said nothing. She knew that Marcus was a good guy and on her side, but she wasn’t quite ready to unload everything on him. Like the way she kept seeing Luther every time she

closed her eyes for longer than it took to blink. He stood with his razor blade in hand. How he would turn towards her, creeping ever closer each time, as if he planned to jump out of her mind and take her back with him.

She also wasn't ready just yet to divulge that she wasn't alone, that she carried a baby in her stomach. A living thing that had died with her before it was even large enough to be called a baby. Yet Helen was consumed by the haunting knowledge that her baby was still inside her – that it was alive. She had seen Luther slice her stomach open, she had watched as he pulled the rotting fetus out of the long gash in her abdomen. Helen knew beyond shadow of a doubt that inside her womb, her baby had returned. It was floating in a bag of stagnant amniotic fluid, its body decomposing, rotting away as nature intended – until the green lightning had given it a kick start, brought it back to life and given it a hunger that could not be quenched, a thirst for blood that would be satiated not matter what the cost.

The beam carried on before them and took one of its now customary and tiresome turns, this time to the left. Both had noticed it followed a simple left-right pattern, only this time when they reached the corner, there was nothing. No new hallway for them to march down, no monotonous continuation of dying colors and moving wallpaper. The swirling effect of the wallpaper – which they were now both certain moved – had given them both a headache, and so they now walked either looking at the beam or at the floor, thus minimizing eye contact with the walls.

“Great. What does it want from us?” Helen asked before adding, “I’m sorry, I know you don’t have any more answers than I do, I just feel better asking questions. It calms me down; you should have seen me in school.” She smiled.

“I had noticed, but I don’t mind. I’ve got the same questions in my head, too, and it does good to keep things out in the open.” Marcus returned the smile. He had a friendly smile; a single glimpse of it was enough to put anyone at ease. Or so Helen thought as she stared and image of her husband Mark flashed in her mind. She felt tears coming, but managed to hold them at bay.

She and Mark had always been in the same schools, right from primary school. Yet Helen never noticed him until they met several years after high school had ended. It had been a chance meeting that worked out great for both of them. A whirlwind romance followed by a stylish but not too over the top wedding, all within eighteen months. Despite the time that had passed, they both seemed to remember everything about each other. As if their subconscious had been one step ahead of them and decided to take matters into their own hands. They were best friends before they became husband and wife, and had remained so until the end.

“I guess we just have to wait,” Marcus said. Helen saw he had turned his attention back to the wall, studying it as if it were a piece of art.

The both stood and stared when, without warning, a crack appeared. It began at the bottom, just above the skirting board. It proceeded to trace its way upwards before taking a ninety degree turn to the right. A little later another right turn was made and the crack hurtled down towards the floor like a rollercoaster on that final descent, the one that everyone simultaneously dreads yet longs for.

“It’s...” Helen began

“A door,” Marcus finished.

They watched as the doorway materialized before their eyes, and to their combined relief there was no sign of any danger, green or any other color. It was just a door, a real, solid wood door. It appeared like world’s largest Polaroid picture being developed.

“Don’t tell me. We have to go through this one,” Helen said, once again taking the words from Marcus’s mind and making them fact.

“Looks that way. Besides, we don’t have much choice,” Marcus answered her, gesturing with his head. The hallway was gone; there was no sign of where they had come from; only a black shadow-like cloud that successfully limited the options available to them.

“What the hell is that?” Helen asked, panicked and unable to keep it hidden any longer.

“I don’t know, but it started following us not long after you got shocked by the door back there. It could just be coincidence,” Marcus added, realizing that it sounded as though he was placing the blame at Helen’s feet.

“But what is it? Shadows, is it them?” Helen asked, her words coming out so close together it was hard to distinguish between them.

“Think of it like being trapped in a Mario game,” Marcus said. The strange image popped into his mind. He saw the two of them crashing through the door to find giant mushrooms wandering around and nothing but a thick green drainpipe protruding from the wall on the other side.

“Great. Then I hope it’s unlocked.” Helen began to panic, her voice higher in pitch. Her eyes had begun to water – not cry – and she could feel her heart thunder like a stallion towards the finish line of the Grand National.

Marcus reached forward, his hand shaking. The veins in his arms stood thick and proud, tracing their way up his forearms before disappearing beneath his biceps. He knocked on the door; careful, fearful, testing it for any current that might be lying dormant. He felt nothing. The wood felt warm, as if heated.

“Come on.” Helen hurried him along, trying hard not to scream. She watched the ground disappear behind them. Only a few meters of flooring remained before the black abyss would swallow them. She knew what that meant: it would send them back to Hell... send her back to him.

Marcus tried the handle. The door wouldn’t budge. He twisted it further and pushed again but got nothing. He pulled, thinking maybe it was all just one big trick, yet the door remained immobile in its frame.

“It won’t budge.” Marcus grimaced as he pushed against the wood with all his strength.

“Do something. Break it down. You were in the police. Try anything. Hurry!” Helen screamed. The shroud was less than a meter away and she could feel the vacuum grab at her. The pressure of the air around them increased with every second; Helen could feel it crushing her chest. Her entire body felt heavy.

Marcus crouched down, shifted his weight, and launched himself at the door. His shoulder struck and twisted. The sound of it popping out of joint was loud enough for even Helen to hear above her own screaming mind. The door wouldn't budge.

"Help us! Somebody, please! I don't want to go back. Not to him. I can't take it anymore." Helen was crying, stinging tears that felt like concentrated acid burning her cheeks, peeling away strips of her flesh as she wept. She kept glancing over her shoulder at the approaching shadow, and that was when she saw him... Luther. He stood – no, floated – in the black center of the void.

Marcus turned to face the door. He gripped the side of the frame, raised his foot and brought it crashing down against the lock. Once, twice, three times – and finally the door gave way. It flew inwards, crashing against the wall. The lock splintered and the frame buckled, causing Marcus to fall into the room, his momentum carrying him forwards. He turned, with reflexes honed through years of police training and gym work. He grabbed Helen by the arm and pulled her through the door just as the void ate the spot where she stood. She fell; her arm slipped through Marcus's sweaty hands. He grabbed at her again, but felt her slip father away, as if a greater force pulled on her than he could counter.

"Don't let me fall. Please...oh, God, don't let me go back there, please!" Helen begged, her eyes were wide with fear.

She was caught in the threshold, her balance thrown. Leaning backwards, her arms flailed wildly, trying to pull herself forwards. Marcus gritted his teeth, set his feet and pulled her as hard as he could, grabbing hold of the sleeve of her shirt for extra leverage. With one final heave he felt the momentum shift and Helen fell through the doorway. He caught her and they fell backwards into the room, stumbling to keep their balance.

Marcus hugged her close to him and Helen hugged him back; her entire body trembled, and the tears she had kept locked away for so long flowed in a tide.

"It's okay. I've got you, you're safe now. Look...it's gone. We're safe here," Marcus said, badly shaken himself now that the he had time to reflect on it. He showed Helen that not only had the encroaching void disappeared, but so had the door. Once again they were sealed in a bedroom.

The room they had been lead into was similar to the one they had just left, its decoration just as sparse. It was the mirror image of the room they had just left. Even the pictures above the bed and in the small alcove were exactly the same. While the decorations were the same, the walls were a pastel yellow, with a matching carpet. The only difference that Marcus saw was that the window was smaller than the one in their first room. It was about half the size and framed by long curtains that stopped just short of the floor.

"Let's split up, there has to be an exit," Marcus whispered to Helen. "I'll take this side and the window, you have a look along that wall, and see if we can't find a door or something." He gestured with his head as he spoke.

Helen nodded, too shaken to find her voice. Helen ran her hands over the smooth painted finish. The walls felt warm and strange to the touch; they didn't feel solid, not in the real sense of the word, but rather fluid. Helen had the feeling that if she pushed hard enough she would not break through but fall. And she knew what darkness waited for her.

“I don’t see anything. Do you?” Helen said once she reached the end of the long sidewall. The room was narrow but deep, unlike their own, which had been square. She looked over at Marcus. She watched him pace up and down, staring at the wall as if he just expected something to happen. She noticed that he never passed the window, stopping each time about a foot or so short. *Probably some cop thing, being seen through the window or something,* Helen told herself.

Marcus raised his arm, and without turning to face her he beckoned her to him. From the simple, short way he directed her, Helen knew that she had to remain quiet. Marcus seemed happy to take charge, and she was grateful for it. Helen crossed the room, holding her breath without realizing it.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered in Marcus’s ear like a lover.

“There’s someone inside the cupboard. I can hear them breathing...moving.” Marcus was calm and rational, as if he making a simple observation, such as advising her of the time of day or the date. “You don’t have to do anything. I just wanted you to know,” he added after he saw Helen tense up and the color drain from her cheeks.

“You’re not going to open it, are you?” she whispered at him, sending a glare out to accompany the words. It said volumes; *WAKE UP, MAN. WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU PLAYING AT? DON’T WAKE A SLEEPING BABY AND LET’S JUST FIND A WAY OUT OF HERE.*

Marcus didn’t answer. He moved to one side, and approached the cupboard from the left-hand side. It was the larger of the two doors in the unsymmetrical piece of furniture and with just a big enough angle to allow Marcus’s body to be hidden, and also gave him the maximum space and reaction time should whatever it was decide to jump out at him, or – God forbid – pull him back inside.

Chapter 13

The door opened smoother than Marcus had expected. Helen held her breath and wished for her eyes to close, but they refused. The door swung open and there he was, standing before her. Luther, his suit neat and freshly pressed; he had chosen pinstripe just for this special reunion. His gleaming blade was sharpened to the point where it no longer looked like a scalpel. It wasn't a surgical blade at all, but a cut throat razor, opened to full length. He had added an additional attachment on the other side; another blade, sharpened to a needle point.

The world around Helen went black as Luther was picked up by a large spotlight. His mouth opened and he hissed at her, bearing his teeth like an angry dog. His head dropped lower onto his shoulders before he threw it back, jaw stretched open a hundred and eighty degrees. He bellowed at the top of the closet. Blood erupted from his mouth, jumping in spurts as Luther gargled with the iron fluid. It was a rich red, too red to be real blood, and the longer he gargled, the taller the bubbled spurts became. Blood splattered against the walls and ran down his throat, staining his suit. As Helen watched, the blood turned from red to maroon and finally to black, no longer blood but a thick sludge. The gargles changed to choking sounds, and when Luther's head snapped back to face Helen once more the flesh was gone. What remained was the wet, meaty face of a partially rotted skeleton. The mouth began to close, but before it did a burst of the foul smelling waste shot towards her.

Helen screamed and covered her face with her hands. Her heart hammered in her chest. She braced herself even in her blind panic for the impact of the slimy liquid. Nothing came. Against her better judgment she spread her fingers, peeking through the gaps like a child watching a scary movie. The cupboard appeared empty, but Marcus stood looking at her, his attention diverted from the task at hand just long enough for the person who had been hiding there to spring out from behind the other door. The woman leapt through the air, her hands curled into claws, her sharpened nails ready to do damage to whatever they came into contact with. Marcus caught her with ease, his reactions quick enough to stop her before she did any damage, but not quick enough to shift his balance, and so the pair tumbled backwards, and once again Marcus found himself on the floor. Marcus moved fast, his body a writhing shadow: he pushed the woman – whether he knew it was a woman at the time Helen didn't know – away from him. He was on his feet and had her arm twisted behind her back in a simple yet painful looking hold. He pulled her from the floor and drove her forcefully up against the wall. The woman soon stopped her struggles and as soon as Marcus released his hold on her she fell to the floor.

“Just get it over with, please, just kill me now. I don't want to go through all this anymore. I can't,” The woman wept, her words stumbling over themselves, half drowned by the tears and ragged, gasping breaths.

“Relax. I'm not going to hurt you,” Marcus said to her, resisting the urge to crouch down to her level. The stranger raised her head and looked at him; her eyes were purple, swollen from tears and fear, while her face was pale and soaked with sweat. Her hair was different, longer, and black, jet black. It was plastered against her head. Despite the swelling around them, it was the clarity to the eyes that proved to be the best part of the disguise. It was she who saw it first.

“You,” she said before passing out, as if the sudden rush of safety she felt and saw was too much for her brain to handle.

V

“You know her?” Helen asked as Marcus carried the unconscious Becky Ponting away from the cupboard. He placed her gently on the bed. Marcus made another observational note to himself, that the bed in this room was made up and turned down, as if it had been expecting an occupant all this time.

“Yeah, she...” Marcus paused, trying to think of the best way to say that this girl looked nothing like the girl she was – or had been, at least. “She doesn’t look anything like she did then,” he started, and when his words faltered Helen finished the sentence for him.

“She’s the woman who got you killed?” For a moment Marcus said nothing. He heard Helen’s words and nodded his response. He stared at Becky as if she were a piece of art, unable to avert his gaze. “Wow, then maybe we should rethink why we are here. Is this like some revenge chamber...a test or something?” Helen got a vision of every horror film she had seen released over the past few years. A chill so thick and heavy ran down her spine that it felt like an avalanche tumbling between her shoulder blades.

Marcus didn’t answer her; he was too busy studying Becky, checking not only to see if she was still alive – if alive is what they were – but also how she had changed. Her clothes and hair were obvious, but the sparkle in her eyes was so bright, it shone through her fear, and he knew what it meant, and another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

“She’s clean,” he said suddenly. “She’s not here to kill us or for me to take revenge on. Besides, it wasn’t her fault. She died, too, trying to protect her child.” Out of the corner of his eye Marcus saw Helen lower her own hands to her stomach. “She’s been in the same place as us, and long enough to be forced through it cold turkey. I think this house led us to her. We were supposed to find her. Feel free to tell me why, because I’m drawing a blank. There must be a reason for the three of us being here.” Marcus rose from the bed and spoke in a lowered voice. Becky’s eyes began to flutter and when they opened they were an intoxicating shade of green.

For what felt like an age, Becky just lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, afraid to even blink. Eventually, she sat up. She stared at Marcus in horrified silence. Her jaw was clenched, and her eyes wide with fright. Then, slowly, a look of distant recognition washed over her.

“You,” Becky repeated as she scrambled to her feet. In her hurry she fell from the bed and scurried backwards across the floor on her hands and knees.

“It’s okay. Stop, please. It’s okay, we’re trapped here, too,” Marcus said, trying to find the right words to make her understand. He backed away from the bed, holding his arms out before him, palms facing her. He saw her shoulders drop (relax), and he finally let out the breath he had been holding.

“Wh-what do you mean?” she whispered through clenched teeth, afraid of being overheard if she spoke in louder tones. “Trapped? You got in here; you can get out,” Becky snapped. “If

there is something going on then I don't want any part of it. I'm out. I'm not going back." Becky rose from her knees and stood hunched over, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Not jonesing for a fix, but ready to run back into her safe house.

Marcus made to walk closer to her; Becky shifted her weight ready to jump. It was Helen who spied the mark on her bare shoulder; the tank top she was wearing showed a clear palm print complete with four fingers and one thumb, although the ends of each digit were lost beneath the fabric. Rather than calling out, Helen nudged Marcus in his side with her elbow and whispered to him.

"I think you know you can trust me," he said, turning around to show Becky his identical tattoo. The smaller window in the room seemed to increase the range of the yellow beam, which had gathered above their heads like a cloud of cigar smoke over a poker table. "You seem like someone who has made her fair share of bad decisions in life. Look at them now, and then look at me. Look at us. Helen here is in the same boat. If you think we are a threat then okay, we'll leave and give you no more problems," Marcus said with well-practiced diplomacy, his words soothing even to Helen, who watched the strange reunion from a distance. Having heard Marcus's tale once before she was surprised to see how her image of the prostitute... the girl had been so accurate.

Convinced, Becky got to her feet. Her hands relaxed from the claw-like shapes that they had been cramped in for the last... God knew how long she had been hiding in the cupboard, sitting in the dark, listening to the whispers that floated through her head, hiding from whatever had been outside waiting for her. The only thing that didn't change about her was the gaze she held on Marcus. She studied Marcus, looked him up and down, before she fell into his arms and burst into tears. She flung her arms around his shoulders, buried her face into his neck and sobbed.

"I'm sorry," she wept. "I'm so sorry." She repeated this over and over until Marcus pulled her away from him, cupping her head in his hands so that he could look her in the eyes before speaking.

"It wasn't your fault. You didn't kill me. You had nothing to do with it. It was my job, and you are just as innocent as I was," he said, but after everything that he had been shown in the judgment room, the word innocent tasted stale on his lips, like a glass of water left out overnight and drunk the next morning.

"I'm not innocent," she said with a broken voice; yet her eyes burned fierce and proud. "I saw everything...the people I abused. I abused them, offering them my body. I stole from them, and I abused my child. I deserve to be down there. Being tied to those tables was too good for me. I deserved much worse. They explained it all to me...made me see. I sent my own daughter to her death the moment I gave birth." Becky broke down once again and it was Helen who moved forward and put her arm around the woman who, despite everything she had been through, was still so young.

"None of us are innocent," Helen said, feeling embarrassed when both Marcus and Becky – although at that point, Helen still thought of her simply as 'the woman' – looked at her. Her cheeks flushed; she could feel them glowing red with heat.

“That’s right. We’ve all done things we regret, but you have turned it around. You’re clean now, you survived that...and you survived wherever you were sent. So you’re not innocent. Nobody is, not in the real world, in real life. Deep down we all know that. I want you to listen to me now.” Marcus didn’t speak again until Becky turned to face him. “You had nothing to do with my death; my conscious is clear on that, and so should yours be. Now what do you say we find a way out of here?” Marcus stood up straight as he spoke, and both women felt safer.

Becky nodded her head and wiped away the tears with the back of her hand.

“Marcus, how do we do that? I mean, we checked this place, there is no doorway here,” Helen said. Now that the confrontation was over she was happy (not comfortable) to speak again.

“There has to be something,” Marcus said, turning around, surveying the room, looking at everything closely.

“Marcus?” Becky asked, still somehow unable to break her stare at the man. “And Helen, right?” She pointed at Helen. “I’m Becky; Becky Ponting.” She already seemed more at ease in their presence, and stood up amongst them. She offered her hand out to Marcus, who took it without question, and then did the same to Helen. She was more apprehensive but took it nonetheless.

“It’s nice to meet you, Becky.” Helen flashed a half smile as she spoke in the hope that it would mask the apprehension she felt.

Marcus turned, opening his mouth to speak, when it hit him: an idea of such clarity that he felt himself recoil as it came into his mind. The yellow ‘balloon’ – it wasn’t a cloud over them; it was showing them the way as it had been since the start.

“Watch out,” he said as he bent down onto the balls of his feet. He grabbed the legs of the bed, and in one powerful movement pulled it from the floor and threw it out of the way. Dust billowed up from beneath it – no, not dust, but dullness; the same strange chalky mist that had covered their previous room also. The sudden nature of Marcus’s action kicked up a small storm and for just a second, the true colors of the room were revealed to them.

The women both jumped and shrank away from Marcus as he threw the bed. His chest tensed, and his shoulders bulged as he threw the bed. Becky let out a small shriek; she had been around enough violent men in her time to become sufficiently scared of the consequences if you get in their way.

“There, look,” Marcus said, panting.

His time in the judgment cell and hotel room had left him weakened. He had no idea how long it had been since he had last eaten or drank anything, and it wasn’t until that point that he realized how his throat ached for a sip of water or how his empty stomach flapped around inside his body like a windsock at an airport, desperate for some meager level of sustenance.

The women stood together and simply peered forwards, craning their necks, neither one wanting to move any closer until they knew what it was they were supposed to see. It was Helen that saw it first: a faint outline on the floor.

“A trapdoor,” she said in a voice filled with wonderment. She took a step away from Becky but found her gaze moved from the floor to Marcus and so she stopped. She didn’t know what it

was about him, but he made her nervous.

“Now we just need to figure out how to open it.” Marcus began to plan things out. Stepping closer to the trapdoor, he crouched down onto his haunches. He placed his hands on the floor in the center of the faint – but now that attention had been drawn to it – clearly visible square.

“What are you talking about? I don’t see anything,” Becky said. Her arms were crossed, but she no longer hugged herself.

“Come here and you’ll see. Don’t worry, I don’t bite.” Marcus looked directly at Becky as he spoke from his squatted position and he saw her face change, relax. “I saw your face change when I moved the bed. It’s a face I’ve seen one or two times before, you know. It’s fine, you don’t have to say anything, but just know that we’re in this together, alright?” he continued, holding her gaze so that she could see his words were genuine.

With memories of rash decisions still lingering in her mind, Becky moved closer, until she stood between Helen and Marcus, leaning over them, not wanting to crouch for fear of not being able to stand up again. Her body was weak with hunger; her legs trembled, and visibly, she guessed, for Marcus rose and steadied her by placing an arm around her shoulder. She looked, squinted at the ground – she even tried crossing her eyes like one of those magic eye puzzles that she had never been able to see as a child, but she just couldn’t see it.

“It’s here.” Helen pointed at the ground, tracing the outer edge of the square with her index finger.

“I see it!” Becky squealed with delight. A childish smile graced her face. She stood with slack-jawed amazement as a bold black line appeared before her eyes, travelling along the floor like the lines of an earthquake in a cartoon. The line wasn’t much thicker than a hair’s breadth, but she saw it. She could see the shape and that made her happy; she wasn’t the one left behind this time.

“It’s hot – ouch, really hot,” Helen exclaimed as she stood up, shaking her right hand as she did. She put the burnt finger in her mouth and felt it throb against her tongue.

The trio stood side by side. Marcus loosened his arm around Becky and when he felt her stand on her own he removed it completely.

“Is it just me, or is anybody else starving?” Becky said at the same time as her stomach gave a loud, lengthy growl.

“Oh, God, I could eat a horse sideways,” Helen remarked as she continued to suck on her burnt digit. None of them had even thought about food until they got close to the trapdoor, but now the hunger grew inside them like a parasite.

“I think we’re getting close,” Marcus offered. “It’s our bodies catching up with us, what has happened, how long we have been gone,” he reasoned. And while he was aware that it sounded as if he knew what was happening, the reality was that it was all guesswork. If anything came out in some sort of sensible order it was pure coincidence. Nothing that had happened to them had been normal in the terms that they had been raised to believe, and so why should this time around be any different? If they felt hungry it was because they hadn’t eaten in a long time.

“How do we open it then?” Becky asked, looking around the room, struck by a sudden feeling that something was watching them. Not in that creepy mansion sense of the eyes in paintings moving, but rather like being in a police interview room, all of them hidden behind the mirror watching her every move. She was sure of it even before the hairs on the back of her head stood on end.

“No idea. I think we just have to wait. The last time...it appeared when it was ready,” Marcus answered. His left arm was crossed over his body, while his right rested with its elbow on his forearm. He stroked the thick layer of stubble that had appeared on the lower half of his face as he thought. He knew they were being watched, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Chapter 14

The first cracks appeared just as the ground began to rumble beneath their feet. A gentle shake at first, but it escalated to a tremble that rattled the windows in their frames. The loose fitting shelves in the closet fell from their holdings, creating a strange sound, muffled by the unusual atmospherics of the building. It sounded haunting and melancholy. The line traced its way around the outline of the square, not following the faint but crisp shape, but rather tearing the floor open. Wooden splinters shot into the air before they rained down around them like Lilliputian arrows fired at invading giants from another world. Helen flinched, ducking backwards, Becky remained stationary, while Marcus stood tall, watching the scene as it unfolded with a curious intensity.

“Get back,” Marcus said as he stepped before both of the women, spreading out his arms and holding them in front of them, creating a temporary barrier. His block soon turned into a swimming motion as he pulled his arms backwards, sweeping the women with them, just in case. The crack made the first turn and sped towards the second. Its speed along the third straight slowed, even stopping twice. Yet each time it started again. Reaching the third and final turn without any further problems, the line then decided to straighten out, moving crisply and cleanly towards the finish.

All three of them held their breath as the vibrations that shook the room increased, and until it was a tremor. The building seemed to shake in fear of what lay ahead...lay in wait.

“Becky, get back a bit. We don’t know what’s going to happen,” Marcus called. He found himself shouting even though there was no real need for it.

Becky ignored him, or so he thought. In reality she didn’t hear him. She heard a faint sound, like someone talking through a wall, or underwater. Becky heard her name – or the last syllable of it at least – but her focus was elsewhere. She watched as the crack in the floor spread, first becoming a thick black line in place of a thin grey draft. She looked on as it widened; with it came the voices. They hit her like a rush of air escaping a recently discovered tomb opened for the first time by eager scientists and archaeologists whose only interests deep down are to better their own names.

At first, the rush of air sounded like the wailing song of the helpless, a truly lonely sound that Becky was sure would break her heart in two all over again. For hidden within the mournful cry, she heard her daughter. Crying as she left her womb, ripped into a world that was destined to look down on her. She heard the cry of a baby’s first teeth and first fall when learning to walk. She heard the crashing sound of a bicycle falling, the tears of a child with knees scraped and bloody.

The gap spread, opening like the legs of the crack where she once was, and with it came the howls of disbelief, of refusal, as her daughter was told who her mother was, hearing the truth that her real father was just some bum, who was bored with his own wife and kids and too spineless to leave them, yet couldn’t keep the itch in his pants. So he had offered a girl half his age three times the going rate to fuck unprotected. To Becky, three times meant three times as much escape and so she had accepted without hesitation.

She heard her daughter scoff as she was told her mother didn't care. They told her that he could have fucked her all night wherever he wanted for just a small rock or a few hundred bucks and a cup of coffee.

She didn't feel Marcus grabbing at her as the crack spread further, cutting the square from corner to corner like a sandwich. She heard nothing other than the cries of her child before they turned into the wails of a woman, a woman so desperate to avoid her mother's life that she unknowingly ran harder towards it.

The screams turned to moans of pleasure and ecstasy. Then screams of terror and pain as her legs were spread against her will. Men, sometimes in groups – she could hear their taunting laughter – ploughed her young body with their own instruments of torture.

Becky heard the weeping shallow breaths of depression as her baby took her first hit from a crack pipe handed to her by some pimp in an alleyway. Becky clasped her hands to her ears.

The square disappeared, revealing a black void, and in the center a dot. A dull yellow light fought its way through the darkness. To Becky, it didn't look like the light at the end of the tunnel, but rather the headlight of the oncoming locomotive ready to meet them halfway. The light cast long eerie shadows on the walls and Becky screamed as her daughter's weeping turned itself to the guttural screams of terror that brought back the images of the endless rows of bodies being burnt, turned on roasting spits, helpless and at the mercy of the merciless, flames forever licking at their wounds. She could feel the heat of the fire flicking through the floor, tasting the air for her scent. It was then that Becky understood what waited for her in the dark: Adramalech. His burning, fire filled eyes would fill the void, and the festering open wound that was his hand would reach through and pluck her from the group, just as King Kong first abducted Fay Wray's unforgettable character from the safety of her hotel room.

It was then that Becky felt the tremors, felt the floors beneath them begin to melt and roll as if they stood on a waterbed. She threw out her arms for balance as the screams in her head grew worse. The cries of those who were left behind, strapped to their tables for however long their sentences were deemed to be, the cries of her daughter's life, marred and influenced by the absent parents, the mother who cared so much for her baby and died in a fight to keep her, and the faceless father who didn't even know she existed. Becky's world became vague, her head became warm and heavy, and she was sure that she cried out her daughter's name before the darkness consumed her.

Chapter 15

“It’s okay. We’ve got you.” It was him – the cop. He had caught her and pulled her into the center of the room, away from it all. While the entire room still trembled, the ground underfoot felt sturdy.

Becky’s vision continued to shimmer; it was like looking down a long stretch of road on a hot summer’s day. She hadn’t lost consciousness; she had passed out enough times in her life to know this was different. She looked back at the hole in the floor. The wailing was gone, the sobbing vanished, the fires of hell extinguished and replaced instead by a simple hole in the ground. There was a faint light in the center but its source was still some way off.

The ground stopped shaking so abruptly that it threw them all off balance.

“Are you okay?” Helen asked. “Come on, you’d better sit down for a second.” She took a step closer to Becky, but stopped. She didn’t want to get any closer to the trapdoor than was necessary.

“No...no, I’m fine. Did you guys hear that? As it opened, did you hear the screaming?” Becky asked, her voice still trembling from the images that her head had produced.

“I didn’t hear anything. Did you, Marcus?” Helen answered before reposing the question to the man they had unofficially elected their leader.

Marcus gave no answer at first; his attention was diverted to the whole in the floor. “No, I didn’t hear anything.” He looked up at the two women. “I think it’s this place; it plays tricks with your mind. When I first got here I kept hearing my wife calling my name – well, more yelling my name, and...” He paused. “Well, the finer points aren’t necessary details at the moment.” He stopped. They didn’t need to know everything yet. Not about his past at least. What would be the point?

“I have it, too,” Helen said just as the silence began to settle. “I keep seeing Luther, the thing who tortured me in Hell,” Helen added, speaking the words before she had a chance to think them through. They leapt from her mouth like a juicy good secret. She was shocked at herself; usually she kept her problems to herself; why would anybody else be interested in what was wrong with her life? Everybody had problems; she knew that.

Marcus moved closer, leaning over the hole, peering into its depth to get a better picture of what faced them. All he saw was a tunnel that descended on the vertical, before turning into a slope that headed away from the hotel – outside – taking the light with it. There was rickety ladder which looked as though it were as old as the earth itself. Marcus understood that at that same moment they would have to make the descent and trust that the wood wasn’t too rotted. It looked old and unstable; a homemade contraption from planks of driftwood and rusty nails – but at the same time he had a feeling that it would hold.

“Well, it would seem that I’ve found the way,” he said as he stood up straight again, hearing his back pop as he stretched.

The two women moved next to him and peered over the hole, both grabbing a hold of Marcus as they did so. Both fully expected their respective demons to come charging at them through the darkness like Graboids, taking them back down below where punishment would be waiting.

“Where do you think it leads?” Helen asked nervously. Sure, there was a light, but where did it come from? It could have been anyone or anything; there wasn’t any way for them to know whether what was lurking in the basement was friend or foe.

“We won’t know if we never go down there,” Becky said, making the first move. More than anybody she was eager to get out of the room. She hoped that getting away from the four walls would stop the voices and cut down on the splitting pain that continued to rip her head apart with the relentless ferocity of a wild dog with a bone.

Becky made the first move and Marcus shot Helen a compassionate look that said she was right. Helen knew it. They had no choice but to follow. After all, they were just rats in a maze. Helen was resigned to follow them, but couldn’t shake the idea that some hidden corner of Hell had been opened up just for them.

Becky went first, stepping gingerly, tapping each of the rickety wooden steps several times with the ball of her foot before taking the actual step in its entirety. Against her better judgment Helen allowed herself to be ushered into the mid position, with Marcus taking the rear, keeping his eyes open and attention focused on anything that may come after them. His footfalls were swifter and more assertive; he reasoned that his two cohorts had passed over them with no ill effects, and he was eager to leave the hotel behind him. He loved his wife, but hearing that voice constantly whispering in his mind was too much; the things she said, the threats she made.

The deeper they descended, the cooler it got, and they all realized for the first time how hot it had been in the room – or maybe hot wasn’t the right word; airless perhaps being the more fitting term. There had been windows, but none open, and it had created a stifling atmosphere, like entering a car left out in the summer sun.

Marcus lost track of how far they descended, but after a while their pace increased, their footfalls became less tentative and more assured. The two women were completely focused on the way ahead; it was only Marcus who noticed that the hole in the floor that had been their entry point had sealed itself tight not long after they had all passed through its threshold. He wasn’t surprised, and so said nothing.

He saw it as a pointless bit of information at the time. After all, there was no other way for them to go and he knew it, they did, and with more clarity each step they took.

Chapter 16

The light grew steadily brighter; it both guided their way and kept their spirits bright. The slope began to level off and a relief swept through the three of them when they finally reached the bottom and saw the tunnel stretch out before them.

It wasn't a dead end, not yet. It was a T-junction, with a tunnel branching in each direction, although their choice was a simple one because the light only came from one branch. They turned right without even stopping. They followed the light like Theseus followed the string through the labyrinth once the Minotaur was no more than a rotting pile of meat behind him. Unlike the lighted gel bubble that had drawn Marcus and Helen from their room and brought them to Becky, this light seemed to be a genuine; a beam of sunlight, or at least electric lighting.

The tunnel widened as they left the stairs behind them, and the crude wooden floor that had been laid at the base of the ladder was exchanged for compact earth. He saw old, dead roots poking up through the ground, and a shudder went through him as he remembered the arms he saw reaching up out of the boiling vats of human fat. The skin, blackened circles surrounding raw red wounds that sparkled as if encrusted with tiny jewels, yellow blisters and thick clumps of wet skin hanging from their bones as they clawed and dragged themselves above the surface in a pointless attempt to escape. Marcus pushed the image out of his head and carried on after the girls, who had picked up speed since the ground leveled off.

"Do you smell that?" Becky called from up ahead. Her voice sounded loud and booming when in reality it was not much more than a whisper. "Vanilla. Oh my God, I feel like I'm high again. I can taste it, right in my mouth." She was panicked by her choice of words, and hoped that the others would ignore them.

Marcus heard, but thought nothing of it; his own head spun with overpowering sensations and it was all he could do not to collapse onto his knees.

They all stopped and, yes, they could smell it. The aroma filled their noses and made their heads swim like alcohol. It attacked their bodies and made them reel.

"Bacon, I smell bacon," Marcus said, his mouth dribbling as he spoke. His stomach began to cramp as the aroma travelled through his body, reaching his brain before being shot out through his entire frame like an air raid siren during the war. *Incoming, Incoming. Brace yourself.*

"Coffee. Oh God, it's so strong," Helen said quickly, her head spinning just as fast as Marcus's, only her stomach wasn't quite as strong and she began to retch. A white froth spewed from her mouth and Helen collapsed to her knees. Helen couldn't help but laugh as she vomited once more. "It's so strong, I can't take it." She giggled despite the sour taste that burned in the back of her throat and stung her eyes.

"Come on, why are you just standing there? Let's go," Becky asked. Turning, she resumed her high tempo walk and strode away from them without waiting.

Marcus bent down beside Helen, resting his arm over her shoulders, pulling her hair out of her face. "Are you okay?" he whispered, not wanting to speak too much for fear of throwing up himself. "Just count backwards from ten. It always works for me." He gave her shoulder a squeeze and when Helen was ready he helped her back to her feet.

"We'd better follow her before she gets lost or forgets all about us." Helen rolled her eyes in the direction Becky had taken.

Marcus and Helen soon caught up with Becky not half a mile further along the tunnel. The aromas had become so strong that Becky had been forced to stop. She stood like a sprinter at the end of a tough race. She was panting. Sweat dripped from her brow and the floor around her feet was sodden with vomit. Marcus had Helen stopped a few paces short of where Becky stood; they understood enough of who she was to know they didn't need to get any closer. When Becky was ready, she looked over her shoulder at them, gave them a half smile, and once again they walked away as a group.

After a gentle dog leg to the left, the tunnel came to an abrupt and rather unexpected end. When they reached it nobody spoke. The large circular door filled the entire tunnel, leaving only enough space for the light to spill through around its circumference like a corona during a solar eclipse. The door itself was made of iron, solid iron, and engraved with all manner of symbols. They covered its every inch; swirling patterns, symmetrical designs and oriental looking characters. Marcus was the one to take them closer. They had come this far, and he knew that the way behind them was not only sealed but had begun to disappear like the corridor before, forcing their hand and putting them up against a very strict clock.

"What are they? Hieroglyphics or something?" Becky asked, knowing that they weren't but unable to find a word suitable.

"No, they're something else entirely." Marcus exhaled as he spoke, a long, drawn out breath.

The aroma of fresh coffee and hot food was strong still; they could all smell cinnamon buns and fresh bread, vanilla and a great range of other aromas that created a kaleidoscope of patterns inside their brain, like a psychedelic montage from the sixties and seventies. Their heads spun with the intoxicating mix, their stomachs cramped from the pain while their legs struggled to support them.

"We just need to find the key," Marcus began. "Look around, there must be something, a lock or a button...something." Marcus hoped they would find something as he was already lost in the designs of the wheel.

Marcus reached out and ran his hands over its surface. He was surprised to find it was cold and damp.

The three of them – the ladies joining in a little later, their hands trembling as they approached – searched every inch of the gateway that was within their reach. They found nothing. There were no buttons or hidden levers like all good rich people have built into their libraries. Marcus even traced the outline of the engravings to see it was like some sort of puzzle box with the engravings that needed to be turned in a certain way, forming completely new images that would in turn unlock the door and grant them passage into the next phase of the unknown. He found nothing. Everything was as it was supposed to be. Frustrated, tormented by the aromas and – possibly the greater factor of the three – exhausted, Marcus slammed his fist against the

surface of the blockage with a flat wet slap. He grunted from the jarring shockwave that travelled through his wrist and up into his shoulder. Once the dull echo of his knock receded, the ground began to shudder. The door winched open as the sound of old machinery sprung into life.

“Of course, why didn’t we think of just knocking on the door?” Becky quipped. Helen and Marcus gave a short chuckle as they waited patiently to see what awaited them on the other side.

Chapter 17

The group walked through to doorway together, unaware of the bond that had formed between them in such a short space of time. The strange grey shroud that had been so smothering in the hotel rooms was gone, vanished into nothing. Instead they found themselves standing in an elaborately decorated room with a high ceiling which was decorated with all manner of ornate designs.

Only, upon closer inspection, Marcus saw that they were not casts, but one immense flowing sculpture, carved into the building itself. Large crisscrossed beams created regularly spaced squares, which were further segmented into triangles. From the center of each cross hung a large chandelier, and along the horizontal axis of each triangle was a hidden light source that beamed not down towards the guests but rather up against the ceiling, reflecting a much crisper light that could ever be achieved with a bulb. A marble floor traced its way around the room. Its grain flowed and swam much like the floral patterned wallpaper in the other building, while the main flooring was jet black, and as cold as pack ice beneath their feet. Large arched windows were covered with heavy gothic style drapes, which stopped a barely perceptible distance from the floor. Everything about the great hall was pristine, every detail perfectly arranged and placed with precision.

It was daylight outside. None of them knew how they knew this, but they were certain beyond any shadow of a doubt that on the other side of the walls the sun was shining, the air was clear, the temperature warm and summery. Yet the drapes kept this locked outside and their dark fabric and dense texture helped create a rather strange and surreal atmosphere. In the center of the room – running lengthways – ran a large dining table, or quite possibly a series of dining tables. It was set with a bone china service, plates and bowls stacked high in the center of each place setting. Nestled upon the apex of the china tower was a napkin folded into a rose. A pure silver ring glistened at the base of the flower, keeping it in perfect balance so that neither stem nor bud touched the plate. The cutlery was laid out in rows: forks and knives of all shapes and sizes, spoons and serving cutlery all lay in perfect formation. There were crystal glasses for water, wine, and of course the after dinner brandy, and they all glinted and chimed melodiously in the electric atmosphere of the room.

The trio walked along the table, the two women on one side and Marcus on the other. He ran his hands over the backs of the chairs as he walked. They were heavy to his touch and refused to move when he tugged on them. They reached the end and stood together, looking down the unoccupied table, wondering what it all meant.

Looking down the room back the way they had just come from, none of them were surprised to see that the large iron door complete with its strange markings was gone, vanished completely, not like the doors back on the other side, but removed in its entirety. In its place, mounted high on the wall, hung a large oil painting of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*.

Behind them, a glass rattled and a gasp filled the air.

"How did you get there?" a startled, aged voice asked. "Who are you people?"

The voice came from behind them. Marcus turned first, followed by Becky. Helen froze; she turned slower, her face tensed, eyebrows raised in a mixture of surprise and apprehension.

The three turned around and saw the room was all of a sudden much longer, extended at least the same distance that they had travelled. The tables continued, unaffected by the sudden change in the room's volume, their elongated surface decked immaculately once more. The only difference was that the large, silver serving dishes were filled with all types of food, fresh fruit, and breads. Butter dishes with fresh butter, margarines, pastes and spreads. Decanters filled with red, white and rosé wines were positioned every other chair. In total there were five settings stocked, with three glasses already filled with generous amounts of each.

Leaning against the back of the first chair sat an old man, certainly in his seventies and possibly older if he had aged well, and likewise younger had he experienced a tough life. His hair was white and he had a faint beard that covered his strong-featured face. He was a solid man, his clothes fitted him well, but he was broad shouldered and had a wide chest. His T-shirt showed that despite his age his arms held a deep rooted natural strength; his forearms etched with deep, sweeping, curved lines of muscle.

Without invitation, Becky, Helen and Marcus walked to the place settings that they understood had been laid for them. It was then they saw the second man, a young man, not much older than a boy. He was sat in a semi-catatonic state, his head bowed, staring into his own lap. He was pale, his face damp with sweat. His arms were wrapped around each other as he hugged himself. He didn't look up as the newcomers sat down. He didn't seem to notice them at all.

"I could ask you the same question," Marcus answered. He felt himself stand taller as he spoke.

"That's an easy one. I've been here for days already, just me and my rather subdued friend there." The old man rose from the chair with the ease of a man half his age and pointed to the younger man. Standing behind his chair the man looked at Marcus, gave him a quick glance up and down and then continued to speak. "My name is Graham Williams, and I fear that, much like you, I have no idea what is happening to us. I will, however, speculate that we all died in some way. That we went to our own personal flagellation chambers. As to what this place is, I am in the dark, but I think it is safe to say that we are all on the same side. How am I doing, sport?" Graham said with gentle honesty, yet inside he was shocked and confused as to how the trio had arrived given that there was no door to grant anyone entry or exit.

Graham had been trapped in the building for what felt like an age. The sunlight outside never faltered, not even broken by a passing cloud, and so he had closed the drapes to create some degree of darkness only to find the lights came on as if on a sensor. The tables had been filled with food prior to his arrival, and all five place settings had been set. It was this specific number of settings at such a large table that offered a strange level of reassurance when Graham looked up and saw three strangers stood around like lost sheep.

Marcus stepped forward. He was unsure why he did this before speaking, but he went with it. "Pretty good. We all died, you got that right. Where we went, well..." Marcus paused to choose the right word but was cut off by Becky, unafraid of speaking the word that hung on all their lips like a gossip.

"We were in Hell, old timer. We all know it even if we won't say it. Now, I don't trust people easy but we're all in the same boat, and right now I'm fucking hungry so let's just have some food and see where this delightful day will take us from here," Becky said with anger, but even Graham could tell that there was more to it than the stress of their unfortunate situation and so he let it slide. Instead, he sat down and raised his glass to them. It was a signal to them. It said, *I am a friend. Eat with me so that we may talk.* Across the table, the pale figure of Samuel Westford turned his face to them; his eyes were swollen and bloodshot, surrounded by red blistered circles that looked like somebody had played a prank on him with a pair of binoculars that had been dipped in acid.

Helen gasped, but caught herself before she uttered the cry that rose in her throat.

"Hi," Sammy muttered weakly, his voice cracked and broken.

"You will have to forgive Samuel...pardon me...Sammy," Graham corrected himself and smiled at Sammy while doing so. "He isn't ready to talk about things yet, and until he is, I have promised to leave him to work through it on his own." He finished speaking, took a long sip of the wine, and smiled as it warmed his throat.

It was the first time any of them had touched the spread. They had been too concerned and confused to think about eating, even though the aromas tied their stomachs into knots as they looked at each dish in turn, feeling the pain travel along their jaw as their deprived senses became overloaded.

Marcus looked intently at the burns around the boy's eyes. The skin was sore and blistered, the surrounding areas blackened and festering, while the eyes were not bloodshot, but rather weeping sores. His eyeballs had been damaged and what remained would never offer him the power of sight, even once the burns had healed.

The trio sat at the table. The chairs were heavy but slid effortlessly over the floor. The thick velvet padded cushions welcomed their tired posteriors and enveloped them, wrapping around the individual contours of their bodies to provide them with the most comfortable sitting position. Soon, they were all seated, with Graham at the head of the table, on the left-hand side when viewed from the direction Marcus and his ladies had approached from. Helen had positioned herself next to him and Marcus sat beside her. Becky took the place that was set on the opposite side of the table to Graham, beside Sammy. He had released his hold on himself, and now searched the table for his wine glass, having heard the others both raise and drink from theirs.

"Here, let me help you." Helen leaned across the table as far as she could, and Marcus couldn't help himself but steal a peek at her behind as she did for her shirt rode up and exposed both her lower back and her belly, which was smooth and flat. He felt less guilty when he saw Graham doing the same.

"Do you want white, red, or rosé?" she asked him softly.

"Red, please," he answered, his voice a whisper, but certainly more audible than before they took their seats.

Becky handed Sammy the glass, and waited before lowering her hands just in case he needed some help in replacing it on the table.

Despite their stomachs cramping in hunger nobody was prepared to make the first move and dig into the food. Occasionally one of them took a sip from their wine. The men had all chosen red, while Becky had taken the white and Helen opted for rosé. It was only once one person broke the standoff for a drink that the others all followed suit, and it soon turned into a round robin, each one taking a sip when it was their turn in the cycle.

“Bugger this,” Becky finally said. She reached across and pulled the cover from the nearest dish and placed it on the table beside the container. “I’m famished,” she added as she looked at the contents.

The silver serving dish was filled with bacon; crispy, fresh cooked bacon. It was hot and just too good to be ignored. All four of them dove in, piling their plates high with food. Marcus removed the cover from another platter revealing eggs; a mountain of scrambled eggs on one side and a tower of fried eggs on the other, some sunny side up and the others over easy, each cooked to perfection. The other dishes offered steaks, mixed vegetables, sautéed potatoes, mashed potatoes and a pasta dish with what they all assumed was chicken and large, thick sliced mushrooms covered in a rich cream sauce. The final serving dish that was within their seated reach was much deeper than the others. It was filled with fresh baked rolls; whole-wheat and white, covered with sesame seeds, poppy seeds, sunflower and pumpkin seeds. Not to mention ciabatta and flat breads a-plenty. There was also a wide selection of butters, margarines and spreads, including olive and walnut spreads, jams, preserves and various herb and garlic butters.

With their plates filled they sat back. Only Sammy remained sitting with an empty plate.

“I can smell it all. It smells so good,” he said as if speaking to himself, forgetting the fact that he was in company.

Sammy’s mind was overpowered by the smells. While he could put no images to the aromas, which by the time they reached his nose were mingled into one large, flavored cloud, his world was lit by a fireworks display. He struggled to speak because of the saliva that filled his mouth and the screaming that still rang in his ears.

“Here you go, Sammy, I filled one for you. It’s got a bit of everything. I hope you don’t mind,” Graham said as he handed the laden plate to Becky, who in turn placed it in front of Sammy. She also handed him his cutlery. At first he took hold of her hand and gave it a grateful squeeze.

“Thanks,” he said as he began to shovel the food into his mouth like a ravenous animal. Unlike the others he wasn’t privy to the tense and stifling Mexican standoff that had played out with the wine. Nor was he aware that he ended it when he began to eat with such gusto.

It wasn’t long before they were all cramming food into their mouths like hamsters, swallowing mouthfuls whole in instances where chewing seemed to take too much time. They drank their glasses empty – and refilled them without hesitation – to wash the slow descending food away and clear the route for the next forkload. They ate through bouts of nausea, stomach cramps and sweats, but also through periods of near orgasmic pleasure and warming reassurance such as is only possible to feel through food. They never felt full, never felt the head dizzying effects of the drink.

The more they ate, the more relaxed they began to feel in each other's company. The more they drank the warmer they felt from it, the more alive they seemed to feel, even if the alcohol seemed to be nullified somehow. Conversation began to flow, albeit stalled and rather awkward at first, nobody wanting to begin talking about their experiences or their current situation in general. Partly out of fear of the judgment and reaction of others, despite the link between Marcus and Becky, and the knowledge Helen had gained in a short time, they were still all strangers. Perhaps the main factor behind the short, choppy sentences and curtailed responses was that none of them wanted to stop eating. The risk of a serious conversation arising was too large. Not to mention the possibility that it could lead to a debate, and that would cost valuable mouth-filling moments. Instead conversation remained light and jovial. Memories of embarrassing moments and funny childhood stories were shared as if they were a group of old college buddies gathered for a barbeque one hot August afternoon.

"I remember when I was a kid," Marcus began, before forking a pile of scrambled eggs into his mouth – he was on to his third plate, having moved from bacon and eggs to a glorious steak dinner; he had been seduced once again by the perfectly cooked and seasoned eggs. "We used to go away almost every weekend...camping, hiking, biking, it was only the four of us, but my mom was such a stickler for organization that she planned a simple two-day hike..." Another load of eggs entered his mouth, this time accompanied by some garlic sautéed potatoes and a small piece of steak – his third of the meal – "as if it was the invasion of Normandy." Marcus let out a small snort of a laugh at his comparison, one that in the station would have elicited a similar response from the audience. While Becky gave a slight chuckle, Marcus saw the look on Graham's face and stopped. It was not a look of anger or disappointment, but one of remembrance.

"Carry on. It was a long time ago. Don't get all upset because some old bastard like me was there. I'm old, not an idiot. I do understand the concept of humor, you know." Graham had a friendly voice and a wry smile across his face, immediately sensing or understanding the reason for the derailing of Marcus's tale.

"You were there?" Helen asked with a look of disquieting eagerness. "Sorry if I sound excited but History was the one subject that always kept my attention at school," she continued before stopping to reload her mouth. She too was onto her third plate of food, although her's were not stacked as full as the men's were.

"Yes, not for long. I didn't storm the beaches or anything but I was there. My war was fought in the Netherlands...Holland." He added the second name after a short pause to check for recognition or confusion. He saw neither but thought it best to include it to be on the safe side.

"*A Bridge Too Far*," Sammy said, looking up from his second plate of food. His mouth was ringed by bits of food and butter from the bread rolls that he had taken such a shine to. His shirt was dirty also, but they forgave him that given his unfortunate circumstances. "I liked that movie." It was the most Sammy had contributed to a conversation yet.

"Yeah, that was a good one. I saw it myself. It wasn't that operation for me, though. I was stationed closer to the Belgium border..." Graham paused, suddenly aware of how close he was to the subject they had all worked so hard to avoid. *Fuck it*, he thought before continuing, "We were there until the liberation, fighting small battles here and there. Had a couple of damn close calls too, I can tell you. In fact, it's part of the reason why I'm sitting here today." He

raised his glass and drained it empty, enjoying the clean taste it left. "Do you know? I think I'm done eating," he added as an attempt to lighten the mood, or at least change the course of discussion.

In seeming agreement, the others too set down their weapons and called a truce with the endless delights that lined the table.

"Now would be a good moment for a cigar," Marcus added, also aware of the direction the conversation was taken.

"At least you went to Hell for doing the right thing. Protecting people, I mean, not killing. I got this because I looked at my hot neighbor when she was out and about in the summer," Sammy said, not looking at any of them, but rather gazing blankly at the center of the table – not that he knew it.

"All I did was dislike my in-laws," Helen said. She had been as good as silent since they had arrived. Even more so than when they first met Becky, and even now she seemed somewhat embarrassed at having spoken.

"Crack whore." Becky put her hand up as she spoke. "Long story short," she said and smiled, and it was true: while there were many factors she was sure that contributed to her fall into the pit, it was this basic fact that remained the constant.

"You two should have been neighbors," Marcus blurted, pointing across at both Becky and Sammy. He smiled, and before long the entire group was laughing, the pressure removed now that things had been brought to surface.

"So you three don't know each other then?" Graham said. The conversation had moved on at a natural pace, Marcus admitting his adultery, which he was surprised to find still stung him to say aloud.

"Well, not really. I mean, that firecracker over there and I kind of have a history," Marcus began. He winked at Becky as he said it so that she knew he meant nothing serious by it. It was just his way.

"What he means is he tried to be all Action Jackson when I was in trouble and got killed as a result." Becky smiled back, pouting.

"Something like that, but we only met once we got here, in that weird hotel-style building. I guess it's on the other side of the street or something. It was too bizarre for words," Marcus offered. They had already discussed the building, the strange grey living dust that seemed to detest color in the extreme, not forgetting the moving doors and wallpaper.

Both Sammy and Graham had woken in the Banquet Room, as they had christened it, and so the tale of the mystical hotel held a great appeal for them. Sammy listened with his head turned away from Marcus, who did most of the talking, giving at least one ear direct access to the waves of spoken sound. Graham listened keenly, entranced by the tale like a kid at camp sitting around the fire listening to the others tell ghost stories.

The group remained at the table, yet was far more relaxed than they had been at the start. The wine flowed in more irregular streams rather than in the previously adopted synchronized

style. Even Sammy had brightened up and seemed to be feeling far more comfortable with his position.

“Does it hurt?” Becky asked with genuine concern, touching Sammy on the shoulder with the merest of brushing movements, just to let him know that she was talking to him and because she wanted to know, not through pity or through awkward formality, but because she genuinely wanted to know.

“Not anymore. It did, but once I got here it began to fade,” he answered, looking right at her as he spoke.

“How come...I mean, I got...um, well, injured when I was, you know, down there. But when I got here, everything was gone,” Becky stammered as she tried to find the right words to use when phrasing what she viewed as a delicate question.

“It’s true,” Helen agreed, her cheeks flushing a warm scarlet. “I was tortured for years, but I don’t have a mark on me,” she finished. Despite all they had been through, it seemed remarkably easy for them to talk about it all. The initial fear that had held them all in its vice-like grip while alone had begun to loosen in the presence of company. Much like an abusive spouse, it seemed happy to play along while the others were around, but nothing comes without a price, and it would be reaped when the time was right... when they were alone again.

“That’s because the demon that put their hands on you was powerful. A demon of the second hierarchy, and not someone you would expect to find getting their hands dirty in the lower levels of the pit such as the chambers you five occupied. His name was Rosier, and we cannot undo his touch,” a new voice said. It was deep and monotonous and made all five of them jump.

Unlike the others, Marcus and Graham reacted more than jumped, both leaping to their feet. Marcus noted how sprightly Graham was for an older man.

“Who the hell are you?” Marcus demanded. He turned as he snapped to attention, and saw the four other men standing at the head of the table far to his right.

“Sit,” the one in the middle ordered. He stood half a pace ahead of the other three, who stood with their arms straight, hands resting over each other in the center of their waist like personal security or the guardians of *The Matrix*.

Marcus felt an overwhelming urge to take his seat again, and very nearly did when he heard a chair scraping behind him. Out of the corner of his eye Marcus saw that the others had also risen to their feet, even Sammy.

“No. You see, I’ve had about enough little surprises and strange goings on for one day. You sound like someone who can give us some answers, so why don’t you start by telling us who you are and then, maybe, if we like what we hear we’ll sit. What do you say?” Marcus stood firm, his shoulders back, blood surging through his veins. He was nervous. His hands shook but he held them before his body, fists clenched. The fact that he felt so nervous was actually a comfort for him.

“How dare you speak to...” One of the minders took a stride forward, his face a thundercloud of restrained rage. His eyes seemed to flash and spark like a live electric cable, while his hulking muscle ridden frame looked to have expanded and stretched the skin that covered it to the limit. The other man, the obvious leader of the group, simply stuck his arm out and held up his hand in a silencing gesture.

“Calm down, Nakir. They are sinners and know no better. Besides, they are right. We haven’t introduced ourselves to them yet.” He turned his head to his friend as he spoke, then turned back to look at Marcus. After some pause, he added, “My apologies.” He flashed them a smile and folded his hands before his body much like the others. Behind him, the one he called Nakir had resumed his place in the line. “My name is Raguel, and these are my brothers. Nakir has already made his presence felt, as is often his way. The fellow on my left here is Sariel.”

Raguel pointed to the man that stood at the end of the line; he was an ordinary looking man, not as large or imposing as Nakir. Raguel wore a pair of faded blue jeans, a regular work shirt and a pair of black shoes. His hairline receded slightly as the later stages of youth began to give way to approaching middle age, and also unlike Nakir, whose eyes were so dark they seemed black, Sariel’s were green; nothing out of the ordinary but clearly more colored than his muscular counterpart.

“And this is Nemamiah.” He was dressed in a casual suit. He had a pair of glasses perched on his nose but he seemed to not understand their purpose for he kept removing them and then replacing them, and when his name was mentioned and the attention directed his way he dropped them. He was the youngest of all four, or so he looked. Nemamiah offered them a strained smile, but for the rest, his body did not move.

“Okay, those are nice names,” Marcus said sarcastically. “But not what I meant. Who are you?” he asked again.

Raguel opened his mouth to answer, pausing before continuing in a tone that was one of complete surprise, as if their names alone should have been introduction enough. “Why... we’re Angels of the Lord.”

Chapter 18

The sun beat down. The sky was cloudless a deep shade of azure, impossibly so. It was the kind of blue sky seen in surreal movies or comedies, and had Richard not been staring into it for the past week he would not have believed it even if someone had told him and made him watch their home movies of the trip to prove it. Truth was he had no clue how long he had been there, stranded on the top of a mountain risen in the center of a large desert. Although it wasn't just desert, no, there were patches of what looked like dry earth, cracked open like the soles of the feet that must have tried to cross this landscape at some point in times past.

The sun moved across the sky, a large burning disc that traversed the world far too close to the ground to be considered a good sign – although that could have been aided by the impossible height of the rock which Richard found himself stranded on. It rose in the East, and lowered in the west, but its pace was as impossible to gauge as the mind of a woman, especially one who bases all of her important life decision on the measure of drink and liquor floating through her system at the time of asking. Some days would go by slower than the last afternoon of school before summer. The heat would boil the sweat while it was still beneath Richard's skin, and the night would go even slower, the cold air freezing him.

With no place to turn for shelter from either of the two extremes, Richard lay flat against the rock, fighting against the elements. The sun would rise and he would welcome he oncoming heat, and the moon would come out and usher in an equally welcomed cool. Then, just as Richard would get accustomed to the system, it all changed. The sun would rise; the temperature would shoot off the chart before the burning orb had revealed itself for the day to be gone in a matter of hours, before a night came that lasted twice as long as Richard could bear. There was no pattern to the concept of time, except maybe a randomness which could only be seen once the approaching insanity could decode.

The first few days after his arrival, Richard stood or sat in the same location, just waiting for the man, Jizo, to come back and take him further on whatever journey it was that he had to make; escaping Hell or simply being moved further into it, he wasn't sure which. However, after a particularly long day and halfway through an equally slow night, Richard finally realized that he was waiting for something that would not happen. It was his move to make.

On the fourth day Richard began his search for a way down, or at least a route that was less than vertical and offered a modicum of grip. There was nothing. He was stuck on the plateau of a large mountain in the middle of the desert without even so much as a tree to offer him shade. There was no way down that wasn't merely a feat of chance. By the end of that fourth day, the sun had begun to take its toll on him. Richard found himself weaker, the night was harder, and even by mid-afternoon on the fifth day beneath the blistering sun, he shivered. Richard was reduced to crawling on his hands and knees as he continued to scavenge the mountain top for something, anything. Each day he would cover the same ground, hoping for some change, for some miraculous or overlooked escape point. He thought he had seen a root or some other form of vine not far below the edge on the evening of the fifth day, and so he had headed for it, but no sooner had his grasping fingers found their target did the vines crumble in his hands, disappearing to dust and floating off into the wind.

At the peak of the sixth day, Richard sat back, resting on his elbows, forearms flat against the burning rock, like a holiday maker on Bondi Beach. He watched as a fascinatingly green colored scorpion crawled along his legs. The creature seemed rather interested in this new find, for it had stalked Richard for the best part of ninety minutes, much to Richard's amusement. It circled him like a cat circling the unaware blackbird, moving it seemed in ever decreasing circles until the time came for its first approach.

Richard's body had been coated in sweat as the beast approached him. He was exhausted, unable to move away if he wanted to. His body burnt from the sun, blisters had erupted all over his flesh and they seemed to pulse in a strange rhythm, his right arm was tingling, while his left had lost nearly all sensation other than a dull ache which lingered in the back of his mind. The unusual coloration of the creature also held him captive; the fine hairs on its body were clearly visible and to Richard's sun-bleached mind it looked like a gooseberry. Richard had laughed, chuckled until his stomach cramped.

When he focused again, the beast was gone; it had moved from the rock and now sat, perched neatly, on Richard's legs. His trousers were torn at the knee, his legs exposed. The scorpion moved with a gentle grace. Its feet were tipped like needles yet they didn't break the skin. Its curled tail twitched at regular intervals and its body expanded as it took a breath. The barb was a much darker shade of green than the rest of its body, dyed by the poison that filled it, no doubt. The large pincers were held up in the air, the left one higher than the right, as if it was taking up the defensive stance of a boxer, ready to strike with one claw while protecting itself should the enemy get a shot off or even evade the first attack.

Afraid to even move, Richard lay still, his breath burning in his lungs, his legs trembling as his body began to scream for oxygen. For a while he thought the creature had fallen asleep; it didn't move, didn't breathe. It just sat still. Finally, after what felt like an age, with a startling leap the creature jumped from Richard's legs and landed more than a meter away. It remained where it landed for a few moments – winded, perhaps – before scurrying off again, disappearing over the edge of the cliff.

Richard watched the creature, awed by the certainty of its movements, and he was overtaken by a sudden surety that the answer to his eventual descent laid in the beast. Rolling onto his front, ignoring the cries of his body, Richard forced himself onwards. He crawled on his belly like a snake, not stopping until his bloodied hands hooked over the lip of his elevated prison. The sun blisters that covered him had burst, becoming open, weeping sores. Sweat stung them and the pain sounded in his ears like wind chimes. Richard also felt his crotch begin to itch, a mere flutter of a sensation that went away with a simple veering of the mind.

Richard hauled himself further over the edge, giving himself a clear view straight down the side of the cliff. At first the scorpion was gone: Richard scoured the cliff face but saw nothing. Then, there it was, scurrying effortlessly down the side of the mountain. It reached about halfway down and stopped. Richard waited and watched as the beast jumped from the rock and plummeted towards the ground before a set of wings came loose from its back and began to flap furiously in a bid to slow its ever accelerating descent.

With the task accomplished, the beating wings took on a much more rhythmic pattern, and the unique creation flew away, gaining height and picking up speed. Richard watched it go and then turned, exhausted, exasperated and defeated. It was at that moment, with his head still

hanging over the edge of the cliff, that Richard raised the question of just letting himself fall straight down into the desert below like Wyle E. Coyote.

That wasn't possible – although, if it could do that, then why can't you? a voice spoke inside Richard's head. It was a voice he was familiar with, although in the past it had always been more aggressive. It was the instigator behind many of his sexual adventures, the whispering voice that sat on his shoulders, directing his moves, aiding and powering his thrusts, enhancing his love making until he could outlast even the most energetic of women in bed and leave them begging for more.

Maybe. I mean, nothing makes sense anymore, his own mind answered the voice. It was the first time he had answered, or reasoned with himself, but the voice was different now; it was withdrawn, worried, maybe even scared.

If you believe it, then surely it makes sense, and then anything is possible. I mean, this rock you're on, it looks a little, I don't know...um...sandy to me, yeah, real brittle. I reckon you could just dig your way down, if you had enough time.

Richard found himself peering down the side of the mountain once again. He was shocked by what he saw, the sides no longer the hard, smooth rock of a few minutes previous, but fragile piles of sand that seemed to be flowing as the top layer drifted down to the bottom, where it formed the new base and pushed the pile back up to its full height.

Was it always like that? he asked himself. No answer came.

Of course it was. You just missed it, Richard gave himself the answer.

Richard's movements were slow, more through his body's weakened condition than as a result of any planned caution, but he swung himself over the ledge and, with a series of weak kicks, managed to create a foothold and followed this up by creating a second. He swung his second leg over, ready to begin his possibly foolish Papillion impression and try to escape an inescapable prison.

His progress was slow and it didn't take long before his body began to rebel. His shoulders cried out as cramp surged through them. His forearms and fingers burned from the constant tension that they were under. Sweat blinded him and his gums bled as his clenched jaw forced his teeth deeper into their beds.

Through it all, the itch in his crotch grew. It was no longer a thought in the back of his mind but a fact, cold and hard to ignore.

In an attempt to catch his breath Richard stopped and rested his head against the rock. Its surface was chalky, and although he couldn't see it, he felt a layer of powdered rock dust stick to his sweat drenched forehead. Once it became clear to him that resting in his current position would not lead to recuperation in any form, he continued his descent, slamming his feet into the softened sand-like rock, driving his legs with power generated in an attempt to ward off the itching which had become too much to bear. It had progressed beyond the point of a need to scratch and become something painful in both mind and body.

His feet hit home, eliciting a grunt which could have come from either him or the rock. Richard lowered himself another step, hands filling the indentations left by his feet from an earlier

strike. Richard had struggled at first, but now he had found his rhythm. It was slow and steady but it worked for him. He looked up and saw the ledge towering above him.

What are you doing? the voice whispered to him, impatient with the halt of his descent.

There's no way I've come that far. Fifty feet, seventy-five maybe, but no way have I come this far. Richard looked back up again. The ledge must have been at least two hundred meters above him, too far to change his mind.

Richard clenched his teeth, closed his eyes and tried to wipe his mind.

It itches so bad, doesn't it? The voice changed its approach, trying to find another way to worms into Richard's mind, to sell him a deal he couldn't refuse.

It itches, but you can make it stop. Just scratch it. It's burning, right? it probed.

No, it's not. Focus. Come on, we need to get down. I'm saying that this is all wrong, don't you see? Richard told himself

Okay, but just scratch it, we can't think like this. Scratch; find that sweet release and then we can think things through with a clear head.

The argument raged inside his head, and Richard could feel his mind being pushed and pulled in both directions. Through it all, his crotch continued to burn as the itching became so intense it brought tears to his eyes. His whole body called out to be scratched, yet he knew only one place would be the right one, the sweet spot that would make it all go away.

Richard tried to grind his crotch on the rocks, but it was to no avail. This relief needed to be delivered by a much more intimate method. He closed his eyes and the voices grew louder, so he opened them again. Determined to ignore them, he looked around. He was unfocused but determined to find a way to the bottom. He looked down, and thought the cliff no longer looked like such a vertical drop, but had turned into a curve. The change in gradient was slight, if at all, but it was better than the sheer face he had begun with.

If I can just find a way to make...

Scratch IT! Burning, we're burning up!

I just need to work out how...

To scratch it. We could think clearer if we did...

"No!" Richard bellowed aloud, his voice raspy, his throat agony as a result. His grip loosened as cramp buried into his forearms while his swollen fingers were skinned down to the bone. Unable to take the strain any longer, they released their grip, and for a split second Richard hung in the air. It was a sobering moment, akin to when one falls asleep while driving. Having not noticed your head drooping towards the steering wheel, you are jolted awake when your head snaps back up just in time to avoid disaster. Richard closed his eyes and forced his fingers to do the same. They dug into the rock. It didn't stop his fall, but rather sent him sliding like Errol Flynn down sail of a ship, knife-like fingers slicing through the sandy cliff face. His descent slowed – after a few more meters Richard came to a stop.

The unwanted descent had taken Richard closer to the ground, but now his feet were left without purchase. He tried to create some foothold like before, but the soft surface was gone, replaced by hardened, terracotta colored rock. Time passed, the sun beat down on him, and Richard felt his grip begin to give. His kicks against the rock lost their impotence, his toes numb from the blows. Still the maddening itch buried its way deep into his crotch, like a flesh-eating bug. At some point during his descent the thin, healed skin had been ripped away. The skin beneath the scab was wet and raw, and Richard's every move irritated it further.

Just FUCKING SCRATCH IT!

The sweat blinded him as the need to scratch continued to grow. Richard realized it was unavoidable. Much like mosquito bites, there was only so long he could resist before he just had to scratch them, stopping only once he had broken the surface of the swelling, spilling the white poisonous fluid that filled them.

Richard's hands slipped further, the surface of the rocks slick with a mixture of blood and sweat. His strength had deserted him; he hadn't even the energy to tell the voice in his head to shut up. He needed to think and find a fast way down – and then it came to him.

There's only one thing for it, he told himself as he looked down between his legs.

Just scratch it then, get it over with. You know you're not thinking straight. Scratch it and things will look so much different. Don't do anything stupid.

Fuck you, Richard snapped at himself, unsure if he spoke aloud, not caring either way.

Richard closed his eyes, and a sudden moment of clarity came rushing into his brain as he realized what he was about to do, and for the first time he could remember, certainly the first time since his parents had died, Richard Hamilton prayed. The words felt hollow and stale in his mouth. He knew what he planned to do was wrong, but at the same time it felt right.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on earth, as it is in heaven.*

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
forever.*

Amen"

Richard whispered the final word and then kissed the rock. Wanting no further moments to risk additional reflection, Richard released his grip. The feat itself was harder than he had anticipated and for a while Richard wondered what that meant.

Cramp raged through his arms and shoulders, which he found to be locked into position, yet somehow Richard managed to force his hands to open far enough to allow gravity to do its part in the proceedings.

Turning as he fell, Richard felt his back grate against the rock. He began to pick up speed. The rock wasn't as smooth as Richard thought, yet after a few feet his body came away from the

wall and removed the issue from his list of problems. Richard pitched forward and for a moment thought that he would do a somersault in mid-air and land head first in the ground like a javelin launched from the top of the highest mountain in Hell.

Thankfully the curve of the cliff face began at just the right moment: Richard's heels hit first, creating a jolt that ran up his spine like a static shock. He twisted and felt his spine crack. He gave a small cry but was cut off when his torso slammed into the cliff face, bouncing not once but three times before settling into the slide. Richard's head also took a solid whiplash jolt which caused fireworks to explode before his eyes, and twilight descended over the entire desert.

Richard managed to remain conscious but felt his slide getting out of control; his speed was much faster than he had thought it would be in his brief moment of contemplation. Before he reached the burning sand of the desert, he had twisted and begun to tumble rather than slide. His arms went out behind him to try and create some stability, but succeeded in merely losing several layers of skin and being pulled to the limit of their arc of rotation.

When his slide finally came to a halt, Richard's body landed in a limp heap, his legs bent one way, his upper body twisted another. His neck snapped to the left so hard that the pain erupted through his entire body like a ball of fire. Just before his world went black, Richard managed to raise his arms and drape them over his face to protect him from the sun which had now passed over the mountain and had the rest of the afternoon to focus all of its damaging attention on the prostrate figure that lay below it.

Richard had no idea how long he was unconscious, but when he came around a genuine twilight had taken over the world – not just the hazy blackness of impending unconsciousness, but the actual look of the world as the light is rubbed out.

Richard sat up, his skin dry cracked and sore, already blistered from overexposure. Weeping sores covered his arms from where they had been raised. His legs were straight out before him, and he could see that his left ankle was badly swollen, his knee was locked into place, and Richard saw his jeans were soaked to a hardened crisp from where his blood had been spilt. A large tear ran through his jeans leg, stretching from his knee down to the midpoint of his shin. Through it, Richard could see a deep laceration that ran the same length as the tear. Yet miraculously he could feel and move both of his legs and saw no immediate sign of continued blood loss.

Looking up at the mountain Richard was amazed at how large it looked. He couldn't see the exact place where he let go, but he made a groggy estimate and found he didn't like even the most conservative of numbers.

How did we survive that? the voice said. This voice wasn't groggy, and it didn't seem to be suffering from the heat or overexposure. The only thing that seemed to affect him had been the itch, which, now that Richard thought about it, still burned like the memories of a first love.

I don't know. I guess somebody up there likes me today, Richard thought. He shivered. It was cold. Night approached fast in the desert, no matter the passage of time once it arrived. The stars were already out in force, and Richard just knew that this night would be a long one.

A fluttering sound behind him made him turn sharply, and his neck called out a bright reminder of its recent off road adventure. Moving slower, turning his entire upper body in one sweeping motion – it was stiff, but not as painful as when he moved his neck – Richard saw nothing. Not just in terms of a source of the fluttering sound, but nothing, simply endless rolls of undulating sand dunes and valleys of dried cracked earth which he assumed had once been the bed of rivers, wild water highways that had cut through this arid landscape and offered respite to all who graced the vicinity.

The fluttering sounded again, buzzing in his ears like a mosquito in the middle of the night. Richard turned back again – and then he saw it. It hovered in the air, its body not exactly glowing but shimmering in the moonlight as if it had a phosphorescent shell. The scorpion hovered mere inches from Richard's face, its wings creating an ever so slight breeze that battered against his nose, making it itch.

“Hey, little guy, I guess I owe you a lot of thanks, or at least half of a lot.” Richard smiled, unable to take his eyes off the magical creature.

Moving with a grace that defied its species, the creature landed on Richard's injured leg just above the knee. He could feel its legs prickling his skin. Richard winced at the sensation – not pain – but the scorpion stood perfectly still. Richard smiled at it.

“You are a strange little bugger,” he began, but before he could say anything else the scorpion struck. With the speed of Mohammed Ali's jab, its barbed tail whipped out and dug into Richard's leg. It struck three times in quick succession, each strike so fast that Richard didn't even see it move more than once. “Ah...son of a bitch!” Richard snapped, flicking out his hand and slapping the creature off of his leg.

The scorpion landed on its feet and turned to face him. “Your journey has begun,” the creature said, and then in a sudden burst of fire the jade scorpion was engulfed in flames and disappeared within seconds. It left behind not even a scorching on the ground or smell of smoke in the air.

The pain was instantaneous; Richard could feel his leg begin to swell as the poison worked its way into his body. It was excruciating. Richard felt his heart begin to race. His breathing accelerated but became shallow at the same time. A bellow of rage grew in the pit of his stomach where it remained prisoner for as long as Richard could contain it. His leg was swollen to the point where it looked the same as when Bill Bixby's Bruce Banner got mad.

A sudden gust of wind ran through the desert, carrying Richard's screams off into the distance, leaving behind nothing but a howling echo that came close to taking Richard's focus away from the pain. The pain remained long into the night, and Richard lay awake the entire time. He screamed and roared in agony until his throat was raw and the coppery taste of fresh meat filled the back of his throat. His leg alternated from periods of burning, fire fuelled agony to near frozen cold spells that only served to aggravate the poison further.

When the sun finally rose in the morning, Richard lay once again with his eyes closed, only this time it was a light form of sleep that held him captive. Even in his dreams his leg burned, but he was elsewhere, lost in a happy place. The scene changed every few moments, or so it felt. One moment he was at the local water park where he had spent many summers as a

child, and then he was in a forest, the floor thick with pine needles that crunched beneath his feet.

He turned a corner and found himself looking at a church; a small quaint country church surrounded by barren fields. A small campfire smoldered beneath the shadow of the church, a thin trail of grey wispy smoke dancing into the air, pushed along by a light breeze. Just like the breeze created by the jade colored scorpion. A close up image of the rare creature appeared in his mind, spot lit and taking center stage. Its talking head's monologue was short and simple: *Your journey has begun.* The words echoed through Richard's dream world: taking him by the hand, they pulled him from slumber.

Richard's eyes fluttered open. The lids were heavy and his head called out groggily, his mind swimming in the strange sensation of too much sleep, leaving him feeling shattered. With his mind temporarily blank, he sat up and looked around him. He remembered the dream, the strange places he had visited, and the subtle threatening nature of them. A strange feeling that some unseen hostility lurked in the background, behind the images he saw, had created a feeling of dread the emanated from the pit of his stomach and just could not be shaken loose.

After allowing his head to clear, Richard immediately noticed the changes, not only in the desert around him but also in him. His clothes were the same, but his body beneath them was not. His leg was healed, the deep incision which if it had been viewed under more professional circumstances would have revealed a wound deep enough to see the bone, was gone, and not even a scar remained, not even a scab to show he had fallen. His leg was as good as it once was. Richard sat looking at his healed limb, having rolled his trouser leg up to get a better look. He remembered the scorpion, its lightning fast tail stabbing him several times, he remembered it exploding in a flash of light, and slowly the pieces began to slot together.

It was a test of faith, he told himself. The scorpion rewarded me for making the right decision.

Before the other voice that dwelled inside his mind had a chance to add his two pennies worth of information, Richard scrambled to his feet. The sun had begun to warm up the sandy world once again but Richard felt certain that he would be fine. As he stood, his back cracked several times, and his legs ached with sciatica from his rather unusual choice of sleeping locations, but once he started walking it soon passed.

Turning his back on the mountain, Richard faced the desert and looked at how it had changed. There were two paths, one heading east, the other heading west, or so he assumed given the path of the sun each day – but who was to say that in this world the sun followed such a strict path – and each path extended as far as Richard could see. All around him was sand, undulating unbroken rows of sweeping dunes. Each one rippled from the flow of sand and the occasional gentle gust of warm arid wind. The horizon seemed to shimmer as it met the once again cloudless blue sky. Richard turned his focus back to the two pathways. He stood at the beginning of each, the starting points so close to one another that only after closer inspection showed that they did not meet.

A decision; you must make a decision, he told himself.

In the center of each path, but several meters after they began, lay what could only be considered a guardian. On his left, the path heading east, he saw a dead bird, its body plump and gaseous. It was still covered in feathers. They were dark grey and looked almost like that

of a pigeon, only longer, much longer. The legs were bright orange and seemed to have curled up into the body like the legs of the wicked witch that Dorothy was so kind as to flatten with her house. The wings, however, were completely decomposed, all traces of flesh and feather removed, leaving nothing but bone bleached by the sun and polished by the abrasive nature of sand. The wings were not curled up or broken as Richard would have expected, but rather spread out wide as if the animal were in full flight. The wingspan was large, much larger than would be normal for a bird of that size. Its neck was broken, the head twisted so that it looked right at Richard. The eyes seemed alert. Even in death their piercing brown color led Richard to believe that if so inclined the bird could spring up and hop away.

Of course, it did not.

To Richard's right, the path that headed west was guarded by a snake. The large reptile was coiled up on itself. Its head rested on its spiraled body. The creature seemed to sense the gaze of the strange man that stood before it and raised its head – not a lot, but just enough to show it was alive and that it was a bad motherfucker. The snake had seen man before, many years ago, and it still carried the scars down its flank which served as an everyday reminder for him to always be on his guard.

Richard saw the snake and understood the danger before it moved. He could hear it, the hissing of its forked tongue as it shot out of its mouth with the same lightning speed as the striking stinger on the end of the jade scorpion's tail. It tasted the air, tasted him no doubt, inhaled his scent. Uncoiling, the snake raised its head ever further and Richard could clearly see its coloration. Its body was a dark green, with yellow edged diamonds running down its belly. Along its flank ran spots of red – at least from the sensible and safe viewing distance Richard had decided to keep they looked like spots - but they could well have been random patches of color, or even watery edged diamonds to match the reptile's belly tattoos.

The snake opened its mouth, hissing like a cornered cat, and in doing so revealed two rows of large hooked fangs in each corner of its mouth. The large fangs were at the front, and behind them, just slightly offset, was a smaller set. The larger front fangs glistened in the sunlight, coated in and dripping the venom that it was so eager to share with whoever came too close.

What a choice, Richard said to himself. He wanted to sit down. His body was tired and his head felt groggy. *Well we have to pick one of them*, he told himself, eager to make a decision before the unwanted voice returned. Richard looked at each path in turn, from east to west. Neither looked any different. The dry riverbed off into the distance rose and fell in rhythm with the dunes.

I would choose the snake, the voice spoke up again.

Why? It looks dangerous. I think we should go east, if for anything simply because it heads away from the sun at the moment, Richard reasoned with himself. He was unsure if he spoke out loud but when he thought about it found that he didn't care either way.

You have to be kidding me. Look at that thing. It's dead. D-E-A-D. Dead.

I know, but the snake is dangerous; it's just waiting to take a bite, and I have a bad feeling about it.

Remember the fucking scorpion. It's a test. West is the answer.

No. I'm in charge; we're supposed to go east. It's in my gut.

I'm in your head, you fool. Go west. The snake is here to help us.

Richard stood still, simply staring from one path to the other like a child checking the road for traffic but never being brave enough to take the first step even onto an empty street. He looked from the dead animal, with the decayed extremities and the life-like torso, to the cold-blooded, evil-eyed snake. The small black dots that Richard assumed were its eyes seemed to be fixed on him, as if trying to beckon him over.

The issue of the scorpion weighed heavy in his mind, and he turned his body to head towards the reptile, when he remembered that the scorpion helped heal him; it had served a purpose. This time he didn't need to be cured; he was as healthy as could be expected for somebody stranded in the desert. He also remembered the Bible. Genesis. The creation of the world and the tempting of Adam and Eve, man's fall from grace and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It was all masterminded by the serpent.

The serpent is not the right choice, Richard said – or maybe just thought – to himself. With that he turned and started walking towards the eastbound riverbed.

Oh, so choosing death is better than a snake. That's what this path is, you know: DEATH for us both.

The voice staged its protest vehemently but Richard's mind was made up, the decision already made.

If it is a good death, then yes. I would rather die (again) knowing I made the right choice.

Concentrating hard, Richard made himself bring down – or erect – some mental walls and block the annoying conscience themed voice from coming any further forward. It wasn't a sturdy construction but it would hold him long enough for Richard to start his journey, and by then it would be too late for further protest.

Richard reached the dead bird and paused. He stood over it and looked down at it. He was amazed at the way the wings were spread, as if it had been placed so at some point in time. Before he set off, Richard cast his eyes back over his shoulder at the path he had decided against. It was a momentary glance, but enough to tell him he had made the right decision. The snake had risen even higher from the ground, its body thick and powerful, overflowing with a deadly force and Richard could have sworn, even though it was the quickest of glances that he gave the beast, that it had smiled at him.

Richard turned back again and with his head down, staring at his feet, watching how they moved over the cracked arid floor beneath them, he began his eastward journey, unsure where it would take him or what he would do when he got there. He was just happy to be off the mountain, and to have a direction to head in, but most of all he was thankful to the scorpion, for its sting had finally taken away the maddening itch of his groin. He hadn't checked the merchandise just yet, but it felt all in one piece and seemed to swing the right way so he would take it.

Chapter 19

"I'm sorry...could you say that one more time for me, please?" Graham said first; each stuttered word was interspaced with stifled laughter. The kind you get at all the most inopportune moments throughout your life; church or the school assembly were always the popular ones, not to mention business meetings or remembrance services.

"Yes, with pleasure," Raguel said in a stoic fashion. "We are Angels of the Lord and we have been sent here to gather you all." The words were cold, emotionless; they smelt foul on the air coming out of Raguel's mouth and they felt even fouler when they entered the ears of the feasting group.

"A-angels. As in wings and halo angels?" Helen stuttered and mumbled. Her voice lacked the mocking undertones that had accompanied Graham's initial statement, and instead made her sound rather fearful.

"Well, your conception of us is a fool's mindset and depicts us in a certain way, but for the sake of your own understanding, then yes. Angels with wings and halos is exactly what we are," Raguel said.

It was obvious to all that he was in charge, the person to deal with, to come to when you wanted to file any grievances. The others stood stock still behind him, and if they hadn't all moved earlier at some point in time after their arrival, everyone in the group would have been forgiven for thinking them to be statues.

They don't even blink, Marcus thought.

"Bullshit. Tell us the truth. I mean, you pulled us out so I guess we are indebted to you to a certain degree, but don't bullshit us." Graham rose from behind the table, his chair grating on the floor, eliciting a sound not unlike long gnarled yellow fingernails scraping the top layer from a blackboard in a classroom filled with unruly children.

"You dare question us? Call me a liar, you peasant?" Raguel roared. He threw his hands out and the room began to shake as if an earthquake had picked a most poetic moment to release its rage. The lights dimmed and Raguel seemed to grow, rising into the air. His feet left the floor as his face reddened with a controlled yet imposing rage. His eyes were wide, his lips clenched tight, and electricity seemed to snap and crackle in the air around them.

Sammy, in his blind and rather disadvantaged state, jumped as a charge hit his arm and jolted through his body. The curtain that hung before the windows was thrown back. It grabbed all of their attention, with the exception of Graham, who seemed to have his gaze held by the furious Raguel. The angel's face had continued to darken and now looked like somebody who had been hung to the point of suffocation only to be revived at the last second. Outside the sky too had darkened, as if someone had flipped the theoretical switch and brought darkness forward but a few hours. The ground seemed to tremble and even in the near night conditions they could see the thick bubbling thunderhead clouds that had gathered overhead. A fierce wind surged down the street, whistling through the eaves of the other buildings; it kicked sand up from street and battered it against the window like a fine rain. Mini tornados of gritty dust raced along the road and disappeared into the night.

Thunder rumbled along like the wheels of a carriage and the pounding hooves of the steeds that pulled it across the plains. The wind's whistling had turned into an eerie groaning; a cross between a creaking door and a more classical impression of a ghost. The thunder rumbled again, expressing its own obvious annoyance at the insolent attitude shown by Graham and his group.

All of them could feel the tension growing in the room. It pressed against them all like the G-force in an accelerating aircraft. Outside, lightning flashed, lighting everything for a short moment. The buildings' silhouettes were traced in a phosphorescent light, which remained once the lighting was gone and darkness returned to the world, creating a negative impression of the desolate world that awaited them...or so they feared it was.

With a demonstration of incredible self-control, Raguel calmed. His face returned to the normal pale coloration, the light returned to the world, first moving from midnight to late dusk through to a dawn style lull before the sun re-emerged and the town took on its old Wild West look once again.

The others felt the change and were without any shadow of a doubt impressed with the sheer power that the men...no, angels – it would take time to get used to the word – possessed. Graham somehow seemed either less than impressed or completely taken aback by the display, for he remained standing where he was, staring down the men, Raguel in particular. It was a look Marcus knew well, one he had seen many times, both in the ring and reflected in his own face by the mirror in his dressing room before and after his appearance. Although the latter was often less intense and more ponderous, considering not only his actions and reactions during the fight, but also his future, and the normal questions of doubt that arose inside him. Why he did it? He never had an answer.

Raguel held Graham's stare and matched it with one of his own, and the thing that struck both Marcus and Helen was how human it looked. Unlike the previous image that had captured them, this stare, while being without any doubt cold and harsh, was undeniably human.

"You are a cynical man, Graham Williams. You are responsible for more death than anybody in this room and yet you question the existence of a God the most. So did you kill because you wanted to, because you enjoyed it? Many men in your position with no faith would have turned and fled or allowed others to engage," Raguel said, his voice now calm, all traces of the rage which had just consumed him was gone.

"It was a war, it was kill or be killed." Graham's comeback tasted stale in his mouth, words used all too often, words which had now been reduced to nothing more than meaningless syllables uttered on an exiled breath. "The war is why I question. Men killing each other, turning on each other, rape, murder of innocent bystanders, people just trying to live their lives. Good people for the most. Believers. Where was your God then?" Graham asked. He had no plans to get involved in a theological debate with a man who called himself an angel and so far seemed to have the goods to prove his story, but he felt the anger rush through him and was unable to hold it back.

Raguel smiled, a sight even more unnervingly human than the cold stare, and behind him the three other angels chuckled amongst themselves, like schoolchildren hearing someone say a dirty word.

“Well I could give you the answer to that, but, to be honest, it’s more fun to keep it a secret.” He laughed. Neither an evil laugh, nor the frolicking playful laugh one might expect from an angel. It was the laugh of a private joke of a secret piece of knowledge that people would never guess, nor would science prove.

Marcus looked from Graham to Raguel and then back and forth between the two several times. He could see the tension in Graham’s face and the look of near boredom in Raguel’s, and so he decided that it was time to intervene.

“Gentlemen, forgive our skepticism over your true identities. It is just that when certain things are introduced to you in life, you have a certain degree of expectation that goes with it. Thunder and lightning, for example: you don’t expect anything else to follow that first thunderclap than the next wave of lightning. Were you to look outside and see snow falling, you would stare in disbelief despite the real possibility of it occurring on a regular basis.” Marcus was in full flow, using his best courtroom language, hoping that it would sound, if not respectful, at least sincere. “Let us do this. We will assume that you are indeed Angels of the Lord, sent here to pull us from Hell, but I ask you, at least allow us some time to judge you or at least time to adjust to the notion that you don’t all carry harps and live on the clouds like a child’s cartoon would have us believe.”

Raguel looked from Graham to Marcus and back to Graham again. “He doesn’t believe, he doesn’t want to believe and, to be honest, I wonder why we had to save him in the first place. You keep him under control or I’ll cast him back into the fallen world for good. I’ll bury him in such a deep level surrounded by his own nightmares that he will be wishing for the churchyard and the sounds of the pretty young Dutch girl screaming.” Turning his attention back to Marcus, Raguel continued. “I will not pander to your petty will. Your concept of perception will need to change, and so it changes now. You will listen to me. We pulled you out, but I will throw you back without warning should you so much as think about questioning us again. We have a lot to discuss – or should I say I have a lot to say and you all to hear. So let us begin, shall we?” With that he clapped his hands, creating a wall of sound like cannon fire, and everything began to change.

Chapter 20

The tables with food disappeared, faded away, eaten out of existence by time itself like childhood memories once old age takes its icy grip on the mind. It moved like a flood and erased the color from the world first of all, and then like a cloud of cartoon termites it ate its way through the fabric of it all. The contents of the tables disappeared first, the silver serving sets and crystal glasses becoming tarnished and dusty, before becoming paler and paler until they were translucent. Once the tableware had become nothing more than faint silver outlines, the last few graying strands of the hairline that was their feast, it became the turn of the table and chairs, each one disappearing at a uniform pace, a curtain call of the most actual possibility.

“What’s going on? Why are you doing this?” Helen cried, her voice filled with fear, her eyes were wide with terror. She felt dizzy. She reached out, took hold of Marcus’s arms and held him tight.

The angels – for that is now what they were – said nothing. Raguel raised his head back and stared rather fittingly into the heavens while his three bodyguards remained standing in their statuesque positions.

The building was next to go. Unlike the rest, it crumbled around them rather than disappeared. It decayed and fell apart, large clumps of brick and concrete. Marcus found this strange as all the other buildings he had seen through in the street had been old fashioned wooden creations. The sort of buildings that one would have seen in the old frontier towns back when Wyatt Earp justice was the reality and the saloon fell silent when a stranger came to town.

It’s all a mirage; just showmanship, Marcus thought. His years of police training and a level-headedness which had been beaten into his skull as a result of all the gym work and sparring had taught him to always look around not just at the center of the problem. He had learnt that more often than not there was a lot to be learnt by the problems created as a result of, rather than by, the initial problem itself. At least he had found it to be true when it came to investigating alibis and group encounters such as this.

“Relax, they won’t hurt us. Not after everything they did to get us here. They just want to show us how powerful they are so we know they mean business,” Marcus whispered to Helen. Although he felt her grip on him loosen, he didn’t look, it was now his turn to hold the stare of the angels – only it was not Raguel he was in contact with but the other three. Their eyes were as heavy as lead on his soul. He could feel them looking through him, inside of him in the place where angels – or so he assumed – waged their combat with all mortals.

Helen said nothing, and felt no better. It might well only be a hallucination or whatever, but it scared the hell out of her. In all honesty she was still in denial over everything, and in the back of her mind was the constant thought that she would wake up in bed next to her husband. He would be snoring away, lying with his back to her as he always seemed to be if she woke up in the night despite them having fallen asleep curled up together in some form or another. She expected to be covered in sweat, shivering and scared to open her eyes or look around for fear of seeing him... Luther... standing there his face, grinning as he drank hot blood from a large glass like the vampire he was. Oh but she would look, she would look with pleasure if

she were to wake now and hear those deep inhalations of her other half, the man she loved with all her heart and soul. She would look not because he gave her strength, or because love conquers all, but because she would be alive. She would know it was had been but a horrible dream. Oh how she would look, she would stare deep into Luther's cold ruthless eyes and smile at him and then allow herself to disappear like the buildings around her, fading as the memories of dreams always do.

Yet deep down, beneath it all, Helen knew the truth. She knew she was trapped, she knew what lay ahead from them all would be horrid. She thought about Marcus's words once more and felt better.

The building disappeared, rotted around them the same way the world had done for H. G. Wells and his 'character' of *The Time Traveler*, only this journey did not yield any new civilizations or monstrous beasts, but rather seemed to leave the group standing surrounded by a pile of rubble. They stood stranded in the center of what looked like a smoldering bomb site in some war ravaged country.

Small fires licked at the air in random places, smoke rose from towering piles of rubble and the choking air filled their throats with every breath, making them want to gag more and more each time. The ground beneath them was dirt; the stunning marble flooring was gone, vanished into the folds of time. In the distance they could hear screaming – or maybe it was just the wind as it whistled through the debris.

A large crater had opened up in the ground before them. It separated the group from the angels, and it continued to open in a yawn. The earth fell away as if a vacuum pump had been turned on far down beneath the surface. The air was thick with dust and it was hot, the temperature well over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and dry. It was as if some hygroscopic element had been released and had absorbed all of the moisture from the air. It was hard to breathe. Panic soon began to creep in, despite the fact that they were all dead and had no real need to take in air. The women were the first to show signs of it, but soon, much like a wildfire, it spread. Sammy felt his head beginning to spin; even in the darkness he had a concept of what was stable and what was not, just as he knew if his eyes were open or closed.

Graham and Marcus stood firm the longest, but soon even they began to feel the effects of the thin air. They began to pant. Sweat greased on their faces and made them sparkled in the firelight. Marcus tried to take a step forward, but his legs felt as if they had been weighted into the earth. Behind him, Graham, at least thirty-five years his senior, stood with his hands on his knees, head down low, looking at the ground like a sprinter at the end of a hard race. Graham fought hard to keep his balance, but in the end he fell.

When Raguel finally returned his skyward gaze and directed it on the group, only Marcus had remained standing, although how much of it was simple, old fashioned stubbornness he couldn't have said. It felt as though he had been caught right on the chin, yet even now, after all those years, all he wanted to do was hang on, to stay on his feet until he heard the bell.

"You are strong. Even for a lesser being, you are strong, but still it doesn't impress me. Nothing about you people does, but I have been told that you are needed, and so we must come down to your level even if only to bring you back up to ours," Raguel said in a patronizing tone. The entire time he spoke his eyes glowed, pulsing in time with the rise and fall of this pitch. "Look at me. All of you," he bellowed.

They all looked; even Sammy snapped his head around to look in the right direction. There was a flash of light, followed by the roar of the earth splitting open, bringing with it a scream that made their blood run cold and goose bumps erupt all over their flesh, from the tips of their fingers to deep down into their toes. Even their genitals were treated to a tight layer of chicken like flesh. The atmosphere crushed them and forced the remaining out of their lungs, and even Marcus was forced to take a knee.

Raguel calmed and once again darkness fell, only this time none of them felt scared. They felt their lungs fill with air, their heads cleared. Their racing heartbeats, which had felt like the thundering of stampeding hooves in their chests and ears, began to slow as if the drover had finally taken control and brought the herd back under his command just before they decided to charge over the cliff edge and plummet to their deaths. They remained still, although Graham did manage to rise to his feet. His joints roared with fire, and his hips cracked, but he straightened himself and stood tall.

What occurred next left little doubt in any of their minds as to the genuine nature of the claims the angels had made. A bright light appeared, one more brilliant than anything any of them had ever seen before. Suspended in the center of it stood Raguel, and behind him the source of the light spread out for several meters both to his left and to his right. Sprouting from his back in large sweeping shapes were two wings. Their feathers were pure energy, each one detailed in ways the human eye cannot fully perceive. To the group they appeared as a brilliant white, yet in truth they held every color. None of them were visible, at least not on the plane of mortal vision, but they all knew that they were there.

The ground shook beneath them and while fire leapt into the air, jumping from the ground like reverse lightning, none of them noticed. They were locked, held hypnotized by the wings, and the rustling sound of the feathers, which began to speed up quick and quicker, moving from a gentle rustle through to that of a bird ready to take flight and leave the nest in panic. The pitch increased until it reached such a frenzy that it hurt their ears. The light emitted by Raguel's wings enveloped them, ridding their lives of shadow and fear, of everything. There was a flash and it was gone: they were back in the decrepit scene that they had just left. Only now they could breathe easy, and for the first time really take in their surroundings.

"Where are we?" Becky asked first, her head and eyes in constant motion, surveying everything, watching, waiting for something.

"What was that?" Sammy called. He had somehow been turned around and had walked away from the group. Not a great distance, but enough for him to realize without help that he had moved in the wrong direction. "What did I miss, someone?" he called, holding his hands out before him, and just for that second he looked exactly like the one thing he had promised himself he would not become: helpless.

Becky, despite being the poser of the question, didn't wait to hear the answer, but instead went towards Sammy.

"It's me. Don't worry, I think we're about to find out what's going on, but believe me, you don't want to see it," Becky whispered to him. She took his hand, locking her fingers through his own. She gave them a slight squeeze, an invisible sign sent from her to him, just a way of giving him some reassurance while getting some for herself in return. She smiled when he squeezed back.

Raguel seemed to wait for Becky to return to the group with Sammy before he answered. He did not do this out of his own good nature, nor because he wanted them all to hear what he had to say, but simply because it was a good game to him. Watching how these creations of God moved around so clueless about the world they lived in, their minds so one-dimensional – if that – and unable to accept what they were about to be told without the intervention of himself and his brothers.

“What did you do to us?” Marcus asked. He had felt the silence growing heavy and been pushed to speak. Raguel shot him an angry glance, a ‘how dare you interrupt when I was about to speak’ look.

“Something you do not deserve. I have enlightened you, helped you all to ascend to a higher level, as you would say. In short, I let you live,” Raguel said, but the words themselves were empty, nothing more than verbal shells.

It was the manner and tone with which he uttered them that conveyed all they needed to know. He was bored, and had no desire to chat with them more than was necessary. They all noticed this and braced themselves for what was to come. They understood that it would only be spoken once and even then only if they were lucky.

Raguel began.

Chapter 21

“Think of this as Purgatory – I will try to keep to your simple way of categorizing things. There are many places just like this, realms or realities that exist alongside your own, within your own, and a near infinite number which exist in the different pathways of time. This you will see for yourselves, I am sure.

“These worlds exist to house those who had died. To allow them time for contemplation, and to give us time to judge them. Some worlds are filled with those who led a righteous life, one worthy of a happy eternity. Others are fire realms, nothing more than holding pens for the cattle that will be marched below to where our fallen brother leads his hedonistic life.

“Then there are many filled with lost souls; empty, lonely places void of all feeling; ghost worlds filled with those that were forgotten, left behind when it was their time to rise... or fall. These worlds all exist separate from each other. Those who dwell or wait in one know nothing about the others. Although memory of your own world remains, given time it fades. Those in the fire realms seem to remember the longest. They are the ones who grasp onto their human memories as if it could somehow help them find redemption. While those who are righteous are given a mere taste of what awaits them and realize that there was no point to their lives.

“They are merely a short test which will determine your place in eternity. Pass and you will be rewarded, fail and punishment is a certainty, do neither and you will be destined to carry on living your mediocre existence in a world fitting to the task; a place such as this, for instance.

“This community, if you would like to call it that, is long abandoned. The souls simply fell from existence. In these outer worlds the boundaries that keep them sustained are weakened, bending all the time. It is not unheard of for these dimensions to disappear along with everybody in them. This was where we needed to bring you, for it is here that the boundaries are weakest.

“There is a war coming, a fight that has been brewing beneath the surface of all worlds since before time, and it is here that the first tears will appear. Once they start they cannot be stopped, and given time the barriers will break and all worlds will collide. Your earth, your mortal life, the kingdom of God will come crashing down from the heavens while the fiery underbelly of Hell will rise up and Lucifer, our fallen brother, will try once more to take control. This will not happen; it must not. Do you understand me?” Raguel’s eyes seemed to focus on all of them individually, yet simultaneously. It held them captive and allowed them all to see that this angel was far from the stereotype.

The group stood in silence. The words they had just heard were heavy to digest, and their brains had been sluggish before Raguel started, and so it took a while for everything to sink in. When it finally did they all had to fight back the urge to laugh, especially Graham who, despite his age, or possibly as a result of his age, was the most skeptical and cynical of them all. Once the laughter was contained without even so much as a nose snort, they all returned their attentions to Raguel, but instead of continuing with his explanation, he simply stared at them. There was a flash of light and a loud rustle of feathers. The wind created as the angel took flight brought tears to their eyes. Raguel was gone before any of them could register anything, the wind and sound apparently coming after the fact. All five of them had been looking straight

at him, or so they would swear in later conversations, but yet none of them saw him leave. Like the greatest magician in the world, he was there one second and vanished like the victim of a David Copperfield illusion the next.

“Forgive Raguel. He does not deal with mortals well. He is a warrior through and through. Maintaining the balance is his purpose, keeping a watchful eye on us is his responsibility. The troubles of our father’s favorite creation are of little and no concern to him,” the angel who had been introduced as Nemamiah said. His words were noticeably more cordial than Raguel’s had been.

“Can you answer our questions?” Becky said, her words forming not a question although it certainly would look like one if written down, but rather a stern statement. It was one that Nemamiah, if not all three of them, seemed to understand with relative ease.

Helen turned and looked at her. She didn’t know who she was, but she knew what she had been, she knew that she had gotten at least one of their group killed in the past, and she didn’t trust her. Becky met her eyes, and if Helen’s were soft and naïve to the ways of the world, Becky’s were hard and cold. Those of someone who has lived through the worst and come out the other side, uncertain which side of the line they had returned on. They find themselves forever perched upon a fence as they wrestle with themselves, with what they have done and what they wish they could have done differently, yet at the same time they take on the world with the subtle, brute force of a Caterpillar running full speed on the building site. Helen held the stare that was returned to her for what felt like an age. She felt her heart race, her mouth begin to dry and her palms to moisten. When it became too much, Helen averted her gaze, dropped her head to study her feet. She could feel Becky’s eyes burning into the top of her bowed head. After making sure that her feet were all in good order, Helen raised her eyes more. Becky had returned her attention to the angels, who they all realized stood like fish out of water. Their appearance seemed more and more bizarre with each passing second.

Out of the corner of her eye, Becky glanced over at Helen but said nothing. She had changed, and while buried deep down inside her was a small voice that spoke from the corners of dark streets in the early hours of the morning, a taunting, goading voice that told her to fight, to grab that beautiful blonde by the hair and throw her face first into the first wall or tree she saw but she silenced it before even realizing that the thought had truly occurred. After all, that person was the fake. Who she was trying to become was the same person she had been before that dark figure in her mind had taken control. She forgave them their thoughts and perception of her; she didn’t even like whom it was they believed her to be, and she promised herself that she would give everyone the chance to see who she really was.

God, it all feels like so long ago, she thought, already finding it harder to remember her old life, both the highs and lows.

“Raguel, he’s an archangel, isn’t he?” Marcus said with a reassuring confidence.

He wasn’t a big religious fan, and certainly didn’t claim to be able to regurgitate his favorite psalms or quotations when the right situation arose, but he knew enough to make his statement one based in knowledge rather than pure speculation.

“Yes, he was sent out of Heaven to oversee your...collection.” The word came after a slight pause and sounded wrong, but what better word was there for what happened to them other

than those offered by a thesaurus? “But now is not the time for that discussion; we have business at hand and it is time for you to hear it to the end.” This time it was Nakir who spoke. Now that Raguel had gone, the group had expected the others to become more relaxed, but they remained in their rigid positions, standing to attention the whole time. When one spoke they did so by stepping forward, raising their eyes from the floor and looking at the group as a whole, rather than from one to the other in turn. Now that he finally spoke and had their attention, they all noticed – apart from Sammy, of course – that Nakir’s eyes were jet black. In fact, they thought there was a good chance he had no eyes at all, and all that they saw was a heavenly void, filled with flawless rounds of onyx or possibly, given his angelic persuasions, black sapphires or even diamonds. For they did seem to sparkle with a little bit of what Marcus liked to call the ‘Ali gleam’.

Nemamiah stepped forward once again. He shifted himself as if uncomfortable; his body seemed bloated and stiff, overstuffed, a balloon blown up to the point of bursting, the lettering on it claiming whichever celebration was right for the occasion stretched not to the point of complete nonsensicality but distorted enough for it to be noticeable only by those who looked close enough. When he spoke, they all felt compelled to listen.

Helen stood beside Marcus, her grip on him released, satisfied with the close proximity between the two and the comforting way his shadow seemed to fall over hers. Graham stood behind them; he stood alone, while off to his left stood Becky. Her arm was wrapped around Sammy’s waist; her hand, which had settled on his abdomen, was covered by his own. Their fingers were not interlocked but did more than overlap one another.

Nobody noticed that, the more Nemamiah talked, the more Sammy’s eyes bled.

“Take a look around you. This place was once a bustling halfway house for those that have passed. For those whose deaths had been noble, their lives less so, their true place in eternity not yet fully known. It wasn’t a happy place, nor was it one filled with sorrow. A piece of the grey lands, we call it. Many years ago, too many for you to be able to comprehend – for time, time moves at a faster rate in the between worlds, and faster still in the greater worlds, but then when you live in paradise time has no meaning for you anymore,” Nemamiah added as a side note.

His eyes left the group and seemed to gaze listlessly for just a moment or two, his train of thought not broken, but detoured before being brought back on track.

“Mirantaea is lost, this shell a mere husk of landscape and empty buildings is all that remains now. The barriers here are thinner than any other worlds that I know of, and our presence here is unwise, but it is what is needed for you to understand what has happened here, and what will happen to your world. So we must allow it to begin. You must watch as a world falls out of existence, for it is the only way.”

Doing as they were instructed they all looked around at the world they were in. What they saw was powerful enough to reduce them to tears. The buildings that they thought looked like they belonged in a wild west movie, possibly a Henry Fonda classic, were much older than that: they were little more than mud huts held together by spit and crossed fingers.

The wood used for the support beams were rotted through – scorched and dry. The ground which they had mistaken for sand was dust, a grey dust which had once been earth; it was

cracked and open like the sores on a junkie's arm at the end of his needle fuelled life.

There was an occasional orange glow that brewed beneath the surface. It ran beneath the surface of the entire town like blood, and the more they looked the more they could see the crisscrossing pattern of orange fire veins than ran beneath it all. Far beyond the borders of the town, which was now no longer than a quarter of a mile from start to finish, buried somewhere out in the middle of the desert like barren land that surrounded them, a golden fireball heart beat and struggled to bring life to the world. With each pulse it further inched its way to the surface, where it would cease. The ground pulsed beneath their feet, and a groaning sound like a mosquito that wakes you in the middle of the night began to hum in their ears.

"You wouldn't believe it..." Becky began to whisper to Sammy, who she could feel stiffen beside her. He could hear the silence that had befallen the group, and felt the awe of what the rest could see.

"...If you told me. No need, I can't see it, but I know what's there. I think they want me to see it. I can see them, too, standing over there." He nodded to the left, right at the point where the angels stood. Becky cast a quick glance towards them. They stood still and stared at her – no, not at her, at Sammy. She turned away as a shudder tickled her flesh. She could have sworn that one of them – she couldn't remember all of their strange names – smiled at her.

"What do you mean?" Becky asked, confused.

"I can see them, the real them. I don't know what you see, but I don't think it's anything like this," Sammy said with a quiver in his voice, an undertone of delight; for good reason. What he saw was as close to perfection as any conscious mortal mind could ever hope to experience or be able to describe.

"They look normal, just like regular people, only a little bit, um, stuffed, I guess," Becky answered. She didn't need to look at them any more to know they were all focused on the two of them. "What do you see?" she whispered.

"I see them. They are brilliant. They're light, you know, but not just shapes; I can see everything about them; the one with the black eyes, and the other two. The one on the left is injured; he holds his arm as if it's in a sling. He's nice; I can see it in his face. The others are different, vague. I see them, but not as clearly as him." Sammy's voice sounded frayed, raw and gruff. He held back the tears, even when Becky squeezed his hand tighter and pulled him in close to her. The arm around his waist rose up to his shoulder, and he whispered, "I always believed, through everything, I believed, but I see them, I see Angels of the Lord standing right before me, and I don't trust them."

"It's okay to doubt, Sammy. I didn't believe in anything before I died – nothing like this, any case, but by all accounts God made us, and God made them first. Maybe He isn't perfect; we all have flaws, after all," Becky whispered, although she was sure that they heard every word.

This idea seemed to perk Sammy up. He stopped shaking, that ever so slight tremor that he quite possibly hadn't even noticed himself, and he began to walk; he allowed Becky to lead him to the others. They had spread out – only a few paces each – exploring the strange new world that they had just been told was about to end. "Can you help me?" he asked Becky gingerly. The concept of having to rely completely on others was still hard for him to come to terms with, but with Becky it came easy.

“Of course, whenever you need it,” Becky whispered in his ear, enjoying the fluttering sensation that flitted in the pit of her stomach, like nerves before an exam. Although in Becky’s case the most recent memory that had caused her to be nervous was the night of her first ever trick.

“What’s that?” Helen asked, pointing at a cluster of orange veins, which they now saw ran beneath everything.

Before any of the angels could offer their explanations, Graham popped up with a simple one.

“It’s Hell, my dear. Or so they want us to think.” The last sentence was spoken with the tone of a true conspiracy theorist.

“Oh, it’s more than Hell, old man.” Sariel stepped forward to speak. His voice was hoarse, like that of a man with a sixty a day habit. “The Hell you think of, even in your wildest variations thereof, cannot be compared to the kingdom Lucifer has established. Your world would be swallowed whole, absorbed without even upsetting the balance down there, which, given how fragile it is, should be regarded as nothing more than embarrassing.”

Graham said nothing. There was no need for him to speak; the three angels already knew what he would say. He could feel them rooting around in his head, plucking at his thoughts the instant they formed, sometimes before he had even heard them.

Keep your doubts, old man. It doesn’t matter. I’ll send you back down there myself the moment you stop being of any use, a voice said – well, it didn’t speak, but rather came from inside Graham’s head. He didn’t know who it was; possibly a combination of all three of them. Either way, Graham knew a threat when he heard one, and decided it was best to play simple.

... Although...

...He didn’t think it. He was careful not to do that.

“Okay, so it is Hell, I’m not going to disagree either way. I mean, I know what I saw and went through down there,” Becky said. Now it was her turn to hold onto Sammy for support. “What you’re trying to say is the end of the world is coming; Armageddon and all that shit. Only you say it has always been like this and now the walls have gotten a little thin, like an aneurysm waiting to happen, and you have no idea how big it’s gonna be?” She let the words flow, aware that it didn’t exactly make sense, but they were stuck inside her and she needed to get them said. They just happened to come out in a flood.

The angels looked from one to another, as if conferring. Once again it was Nemamah who spoke. “You think of it in such simple terms. The world you think of as being the center of your universe will not be destroyed, nor will the people in it – not all of them, at least. They will simply be overrun. When the barriers to your world begin to break, beings will emerge. First it will be the lower level sentient beings...like those you encountered. They will overrun your world and fill it with terror, getting ready for the cracks to open wider and allow the Kingdom of the Damned to take control. To answer your question, if that is even what it was, then no, this isn’t new. Cracks appear all the time and beings escape, as do souls – those brave enough to fight through their way through the torture racks and pain thresholds. We do our best to keep it to a minimum, although there are always a few who manage to evade us. It is just that this time...this time something big is brewing, and...” Nemamah looked across at the other two as

he spoke. Once again they seemed to smile at him, a wry smile that none of them noticed, not even Nemamah, who had returned his stare to the group.

"You don't know what it is, do you?" Graham piped up, seeming to take quite some degree of pleasure in the statement.

"Lucifer was thrown from Heaven after a great war within our family. He questioned our Father's decisions. We tried to reason with him, we tried to help him find his faith, but his anger made him powerful, more powerful than many of us realized. So there was a war, civil war. The angels fought amongst themselves, our purity was ruined, and our Utopia was ripped apart like the Garden of Eden had been after the touch of mankind. With our brother Michael leading our army, we banished Lucifer and his followers from Heaven. As punishment, his soul was tainted, meaning he couldn't find a vessel on earth, and so he fell deeper into the very bowels of the universe itself," Nemamah said with the soothing tones of a storyteller. All five of them stood captivated by his words.

"You mean the like the core of the earth?" Helen asked clumsily.

"No, female, that is not what we mean. We mean the bottom of the universe, the basement of all existence. It is here that he came to rest, and even that was too good for him, the traitor," Sariel began, but he was cut short

"Sariel, bite your tongue or offer penance," Nemamah bellowed. The power of the voice was enough to make the group of mortals jump, and had it been directed at them they were all certain that it would have been too much and turned them into liquefied jelly puddles. Thankfully, however, it was directed at Sariel, who shrank visibly and took several steps backwards. Even Nakir seemed to shrink away. Then, as if nothing had happened, Nemamah continued talking.

"Lucifer fell. By your own way of calculating the passage of time, he fell for millennia before landing on a desolate piece of rock at the bottom of the universe, the edge of all existence. So fierce was the wrath that God unfurled on him after his defeat. It was there, on a small rock fighting for its survival in the truest possible sense, that Lucifer began to create his realm. Four of his followers survived the descent and impact. Their bodies were broken and disfigured, twisted into hideous beings with a thirst for revenge that consumed them completely.

"Lucifer saw his chance and so fueled their rage with crazy promises and desires. Lucifer spoke to them so as to keep himself whole. His anger was channeled through them, and as time passed they grew stronger. They remained there, balanced on the brink of everything, when more rocks began to pass them by; used up, dead chunks of everything, crushed down into rocks and floating debris islands by the pressures that the end of all existence exerts. There were gathered together and fused to each other, and thus his empire began to grow. The denser it became the more it began to rise. Not ascending, no, the path home was closed to him, but they pulled away from the edge. It was here as they rose, that Lucifer found the portals, and so too he found their weaknesses." Nemamah stopped, pausing to let everything sink in. To give them time for a question and answer session. None of them knew what to say; his voice held them captive, while his anger kept them tamed.

Marcus wanted to speak but found himself frozen, his lungs filled with air, but when it came out it brought no sound. It was like he had been hypnotized, yet all of them were aware of what

occurred around them. After a while Nemamah resumed his tale and they all stood; their minds filled by the words, yet hungry for more, as if they had been offered fruit plucked from the tree of knowledge itself.

“Once Lucifer found the portals and learnt how to use them, it was merely a matter of time before he became strong enough to travel through them. Your world is not the only one, as I am sure you now understand.” Nemamah swept his arm out before showing them once again the barren, oven baked land upon which they stood. “Yet it was man that he was truly seeking, it was man that he blamed most for his fall, and man who, sadly to say, was the easiest to corrupt. He filled your world with hate, murder and deception. Envy and lust became mainstays of your existence and the more you sinned, the more his power grew. Despite it all, he could never take you whole, unlike the spirits and beings that dwell in the outer worlds. He had to wait for your death before he could claim your spirits, a small parting gift from us to him when he fell.” The voice had changed now, or maybe they had become accustomed to it. Maybe all angel stories were told in such mesmerizing tones and you just had to build up a tolerance.

“If he could move around all this time, why hasn’t he broken out already?” Marcus said. He had many a great many questions stored up, but he feared at least half of them would not be answered – however, this question was one that he wanted to get out in the open. He treated it as a test to make sure they weren’t just playing a trick on them. It was a question that he hoped would give him enough information to be able to use it at a later date in a number of different capacities and help them on their way.

“Travelling the portal pathways is not easy; it drains you, and if you get lost along the way the energy of the paths will consume you,” Nakir said to them, but Marcus noticed – he could not speak for the others as he had forgotten that they were there, with the exception of Helen – that neither Nakir nor Sariel dared stepped forward now to speak, nor did they look so bold and brash. Apparently an angelic ticking off had a lasting effect.

“Then what is so different now?” Graham asked, his tone of voice still one of deep cynicism. He sounded quite annoyed, as if they had woken him from a good nap or pulled him away from a good football game to talk at him nonsensically.

“A great many things have changed. Lucifer’s domain has grown, and broken through the portals. He has fused masses together across the pathways, breaking them down and setting the balance of everything off center. Each new piece of land, every extra world he adds to it, causes the balance to topple further,” Sariel answered. His tone was much like that of Graham. One of deep annoyance, and Marcus couldn’t quite work out whether it was a good imitation or if they were genuinely annoyed at being made to talk to humans.

Another tremor shook the ground, this one lasting about thirty seconds, and even the angels seemed to look startled. In the distance, lost somewhere in the reaches of the wastelands, a pillar of orange fire spurted into the sky, glinting in the sun like a tower of jewels. The power of it was felt even in town: they could all hear the foundations of the skeletal buildings creak and groan. Fibers snapped even further as the wave of heat washed over them, pushing a cloud of dead, dusty earth before it like a shield, preserving its heat for as long as possible.

“The underworld is a powerful place, and Lucifer was the most powerful angel in paradise, but even he is not exempt from the effects of the portals. The large beings, like Lucifer and what

remains of our other fallen brothers, are easy enough to find and contain, but his army grows at such a rate even we cannot keep track of them all the time. It has always been so – beings escape through the portals and come out in other worlds. Their sole purpose is to recruit, to gather new souls, new bodies for Lucifer to bend to meet his will. ”

“You mean on earth?” Sammy raised his voice. He looked blindly towards the angels.

“To coin a popular phrase, there are other worlds than this. Have you not understood that yet? There are beings, energy forces everywhere that can be taken. The lost souls of mankind are but a small piece of the population. You are merely Lucifer’s own personal fascination, to be honest, in the grand scheme of things, you are but cannon fodder for his soldiers.” As he spoke Nemamiah cast a nervous glance at the floor beneath their feet where thin snail-like traces of a warm orange glow could be seen shining through the crust. “We must be quick,” he added in a tone much more somber than anybody would have liked.

“Why us?” Marcus asked, another one of the questions he felt must be asked.

“The answer is simpler than you realize. You are God’s favorites. He had us, and then he created you, and commissioned us to ensure your safety. Lucifer will do anything to control mankind simply to anger our father.” It was Sariel who spoke, his gravelly voice resonating deeply in the air.

“I mean *us*,” Marcus said again, only this time he swept his arm out and drew an imaginary circle around the five of them. They had moved closer together again.

“In good time you will know,” Sariel said before he stepped back and turned the floor back to Nemamiah.

Chapter 22

All around them, the strange humming sound began to work its way into their heads, not forcing its way but rather worming inside them, sneaking in through the back door while they were occupied with other more important matters.

“Every world that Lucifer conquered or emptied was welded to his own, but nothing is able to satiate his quest...his hunger for control over humanity has transformed him. There have been battles for as long as your time has existed. You hear them but cannot interpret them for what they are. Besides these worlds there are parallel existences where humans live in the same place as you, the same time, but you never meet. Time runs adjacent in each parallel, but the portals access them all.” Nemamiah had once again resumed control of the story telling. He stood more relaxed now, as if he had grown slightly more acclimatized to his guests. If there had been a sofa and a few beanbag chairs, Becky was fairly sure he would have sat down in one and resumed his tale, possibly smoking a pipe as did. With this image in her head she could not help but give a smile.

“You mean like a parallel universe, a world existing within our own, people living in the same house as us, shitting in the same pot,” Graham scoffed.

“Yes,” Nakir’s curt response came even before Graham had finished speaking. “More than one. You may catch glimpses of them from time to time; reflections and shadows for the most. You call them ghosts.” At this, both Graham and Becky gave a stifled laugh. One in disbelief, the other a distorted form of understanding. “Believe me or not, for I have no time to deal with the simple gradient of your thoughts,” Nakir snapped before being thrown another, if not even more furious glance from Nemamiah.

So heavy was his face that even Nakir’s black eyes seemed to pale compared to the thunder red rage that appeared on Nemamiah’s face. Without saying another word, Nakir spread his wings; wings so bright and pure that none saw, apart from Sammy; they shone in his mind’s eye as beams of pure brilliance, with a detail that the human eye could never even hope to comprehend. Then, with the speed of a flying bullet, he was gone, and Sammy felt a wave of depression sweep through him as his world was once again restored to darkness. Even the light of the remaining two angels seemed dark in comparison to what he had just witnessed. He let out a slow, quiet sigh.

Nobody spoke for a few minutes. The banishing of Nakir – for they all knew that was what it had been – left them all ill at ease. The humming sound continued to push its way into their ears, and for the first time since they had gathered to listen to that what they must be told, they noticed Sammy’s eyes. They were bleeding, not as though someone had taken a knife and divided an artery, but certainly more than the weepy nature of the crusted over wounds would have warranted under any normal circumstances. Even Sammy raised a hand to them and felt the sticky residue on his fingers as he pulled them away.

“They’re not too bad. Honest, just a bit...wet, that’s all,” Becky lied to him. She knew she was lying, and worst of all she knew that Sammy knew it, but it was what he needed to hear. She had been in the position where a small and completely unconvincing lie had been the best medicine.

Nemamiah noticed it also, as did Sariel, but neither moved to offer any help: instead they looked once more at the ground and then decided to continue with their tales.

“The concept of multiple layers and worlds within the fabric of your own can be a tough one, but at this moment in time it is not imperative that you understand, but simply believe. Understand that Lucifer means to take much more than just your world and those that exist within it. He looks to claw his way back into the heavens and this time he is strong enough and has an army large enough to be a real threat to the balance.” Nemamiah accented his words and mimicked mortal speech as best he knew, and could see on their faces – with the exception of Graham – that they were at least willing to consider what he had told them.

“Okay, but what can we do? I mean, you said that you guys, sorry, I mean the *angels*, have been fighting Lucifer for a long time. I don’t understand what we can do; I mean, you have stated our insignificant stature in the overall balance of the universe several times, so why are we here? Why pull us out of Hell, and not some other creature, a clan of warriors or...or...I don’t know, something more useful. I just don’t get it.”

Marcus posed the questions, but they were all a variation of the same one that danced on all of their lips. He had one arm crossed over his stomach and the elbow of the other rested on the enveloping forearm. Marcus scratched his chin as he tried to think and stay at least one step ahead of the game, or in this case as few steps behind as possible.

Nemamiah considered this for a second, his head tilted slightly to one side. He looked at Marcus, and opened his mouth several times before closing it, trying to find the right words for the occasion. “You of all people, Marcus, should understand the concept of fighting for a cause that you cannot fully explain. You dedicated your life to fighting the very things we now speak. The low level sentient beings that manage to slip through the openings that appear or those that use battle as a cover, fleeing when our eyes are diverted.” Nemamiah’s answer was vague, yet Marcus nodded. He thought he understood.

“It is God’s will that you help; He gave us your names and told us to pull you from Hell. You all died a death that was not due; you were all plucked from the earth by something, and that has never happened before, not to the extent it did with yourselves. You were sent straight to the judgment chambers. You should have been sent to one of the grey worlds to await your trials.” Nemamiah did all of the talking now.

“So what made us so special?” Becky asked.

Marcus turned his head to face Becky as she spoke, and in doing so he caught a glimpse of the look which had set itself on Graham’s face. It was as if the wind had changed direction and frozen it in a look that was not anger but one of worn patience. It spoke volumes to Marcus. Graham was clearly exasperated, because, despite it all, everybody seemed to be coming around to the ideas being presented to them – everyone apart from him, that was. Graham thought it a waste of their time. He wanted to get through this and then either wake up or simply move onto the next stage of his afterlife.

Becky was scared by the possible reaction her words may have elicited from the angels, even as she said them. She knew what she had experienced in Hell, she knew that was where she had been, and deservedly so in her own eyes.

“Nothing makes you special, not that we can tell. Your deaths were unique; they were random; you were victims of circumstance. The portals opened exactly where you all were. It has long been rumored that Lucifer was searching for something in your reality, something that was lost when he fell, and we took this to be a signal of his intent, so we intervened,” Sariel said, his tone one of moderate – forced – enthusiasm.

“We all died at the same time? That must be something special, surely. You said these portals were difficult to use, yet five of them managed to open up and swallow us simultaneously.” Marcus didn’t speak but rather speculated his mind.

“Truth be told, for this is what you must hear, there were more than just the five of you, and your deaths were not simultaneous. Marcus Fielding, you died in 2009. Graham, your wonderful skeptic, died a few months later. Helen, you were pulled back in 2007. Sammy, you left your car and girlfriend wrapped together a half year before that in late 2006. And, Becky, well, you obviously share your date with Marcus. Everything happens for a reason, we angels do not believe in coincidence, as you would have it phrased.” Nemamiah was quick with his information, rattling it off like one of those pitching machines used in batting cages and tennis courts. “We do not have time for questions; you must all be educated on what is happening. There are battles that do currently and soon will rage, and you must learn how you are to play your part in our war. I beg of you, please, listen to me now.” Nemamiah held his hands outstretched, palms facing upwards, his request a genuine plea for all ears to be cast in his direction, questions held until after the sermon and a change in venue.

The humming noise began to drown out the sound of Nemamiah’s words. Turning them vague and diluted, muffled somehow, like talking inside a night club. The ground now had also started to groan, growling as if digesting a large meal; Thanksgiving or maybe even Christmas dinner. The ground beneath their feet had begun to move. It was softening, melting as the intense heat below continued to worm its way up to the surface. The all found themselves adjusting their balance and foot positions regularly. If they stood still for too long they were sucked into the ground the same way your feet disappear into the sand when you stand in the surf.

“You asked about our battles, and yes, the war between Heaven and Hell as you view it is not the signal of the Armageddon unless you will acknowledge that the final battle began millennia ago and is but nearing its conclusion.” Nemamiah paused for a moment, then continued, “Lucifer is powerful and as his empire grows so does his strength. He is driven by anger and rage, emotions that when harnessed are stronger than all others. We have not seen him for many generations now, but he has been changed, the same way our other fallen brothers and the beings he caught as he fell were changed. The problem is that his empire is built from not one thing, but many worlds crafted together, crossing through the dimensions and portals of time. It is a fragile place, forever shifting and changing its position, and as Lucifer changes, his control lessens. It is in these periods of change that many sentient lower grade beings escape. The majority of the time these shifts simply move them to another place within their own world. Yet sometimes they land in a light world, one inhabited by those who are righteous, or, like your world, one filled with those yet to request judgment. It is only once they arrive here that we will learn of it and the problem will be dealt with.” He paused, his face pensive as he tried to search for the right – *simplest* – words to use.

“However,” Nemamiah continued after his brief period of thought, “we cannot be everywhere, we are not omnipresent; sometimes we are simply too late. If a being enters a world of the righteous, or your own,” he added with a snort of disgust, “then they will do the one thing that they know, and that is to collect. They will gather *en masse* like a harvest.”

“Earthquakes...you’re talking about earthquakes, aren’t you? I mean, shifting pieces of ground, a lot of people dying.” It was Marcus once again who drew all the conclusions, yet once it was said the others saw it, too. It was embarrassingly obvious when they thought about it.

Nemamiah regarded them with a look that was hard to place, but when pushed, the closest would have been pride. The sort of look a parent gives their child when watching the school play or seeing them score the winning goal in a soccer game. He wasn’t necessarily surprised that they had figured it out, but was just pleased with the speed they had done it in. He could read it from all of their faces – even the old man – that they understood as a group.

“Yes, but what you feel and see in your world...it is not a result of a shift, but from the force of the portals when they open – the ones that open into your world, the world you all came from. It is key you understand that you all came from the same world, the same time, and the same plane of existence. The force of the gateways opening pushes around the plates that cover your planet and creates what you call earthquakes. In fact, the same applies for everything you consider a ‘man-made’ disaster.”

While he didn’t use air-quotes, when he spoke the word ‘man-made’ they all had an image in their minds of Nemamiah doing so. It was the tone his voice took on when he said it. Thankfully – or so they thought later on when looking back on this first fateful day – Nemamiah didn’t seem to notice and continued to talk unbroken.

“Earthquakes and hurricanes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions are all the result of portals being opened. Those who perish are taken regardless of their worth, their righteousness. Sometimes we arrive in time; we see the signs building the same way you humans can do with your machines and the technology we allow you to develop.”

“Seismologists,” Graham scoffed. His contempt for the angel was now clearer than ever. “You’re telling us that seismologists have been able to track the battles of Heaven and Hell, and that earthquakes are little snippets of Hell that escape into our world.” He laughed as he spoke, not with joy, but rather a vicious sounding laugh, and it made the colors of Nemamiah’s face darken several shades.

“He’s mad,” Sammy whispered to Becky, who had loosened her arm around him, although they still leant against one another not for support but for the company. “He isn’t so bright any more, but kind of flickering like an old lightbulb,” he added.

“Hey, come on, Graham, don’t you think after all that we’ve been through we can be a little bit openminded about this?” Becky said, pausing before speaking his name, having overcome a strong notion to call him either old-timer or Nigel. The latter name, she had no idea of its origins in her mind, but then again given the way that the humming sound had now embedded inside her skull and thoughts it was possible that the name Nigel was simple a result of black noise.

As the humming increased, they all noticed that it began to sound less musical and more like moaning. It was Becky who recognized it first, for it sounded similar – if not less agonized – to the groans of thousands of humans having their skin peeled from their bodies after being roasted on an open fire like Christmas chestnuts. Her skin crawled and she found herself listening to the sound rather than the words being spoken. She could feel herself getting lost in it somehow, as if it created a maze inside her mind, one that twisted and turned, and the more she followed it the harder it would be to find her way back out again. She wasn't sure of it, but guessed that the others all felt similar things, given the strained look on their faces.

“You are a non-believer. Even after everything you have been forced through, you disbelieve. Well, fine, don't believe, but remember that I pulled you out of that Hell ground myself, and the moment I feel you overstep the mark, I will throw you back myself. I'll reunite you with that rotting young girl whose life you took and leave her to have you in any way she sees fit. Just remember that as you keep your mouth shut.” Nemamiah was calm as he spoke, although the rage on his face and the obvious anger in his words made his rage clear. The words had that parental effect and tone to them, the same one used to deliver the famous, *'I'm not angry with you, just disappointed'* speech. The one that crushes you and has more effect than any bellowed argument or length of grounding could even hope to accomplish.

Graham said nothing, and when he saw the whole party turn to look at him like the naughty boy in school, he felt himself shrink back a little. He bit his tongue. Even for an old cynic like himself, the existence of God could no longer be denied. He had been to Hell, he had seen an angel, and was now about to watch a world be consumed whole. You cannot have one without the other, that was common knowledge in all walks of life, and so to have a Hell, there must be the other.

Before he continued talking, even Nemamiah raised his hands to his head and massaged his temples. Beside her, Becky felt Sammy begin to sway on his feet.

His eyes had begun to pulse, as if behind each blood encrusted socket was a small heart, seeping its precious cargo a little more with each rhythmical pulse.

“We do not have enough time to discuss everything, so I must be brief. I can feel the barrier breaking and the worlds merging. I'm sure you can, too, although it will sound different to each one of you, just as Hell itself is unique at many levels,” Nemamiah said, with his head lowered, hands still rubbing his temples, and when he took them away it looked as though he had worn through the thin skin that covered them, for where his thumbs had been circling, a bright light shone through, like a torch beneath a child's bed covers or seen through a tent while camping late at night, telling ghost stories. Finally he was ready to carry on his monologue – without any further interruptions.

“What I say is what it is, how it is, and there will be no more questions,” he said to the group, but they all knew who his comment was intended for. “It is not only these earthquakes, as you call them, that mark Lucifer's progress; more often than not a demon simply makes a lucky choice with the portal he takes and finds himself in your when and where. The same is for hurricanes and – what is it – twisters, it is strange that they descend from above while in fact they bring those from beneath up to the surface. It is dependent on the proximity of the portal to your world. The same is for the battles. You have all been witness to them, many times, yet they occur in a time different to yours, so that only the slightest of blows is felt. Thunderstorms,

you call them: a clap of rumbling sound and a strike of pure brilliant energy. We are surprised that in spite of the large level of religious fervor in your world, nobody has yet made any concrete connections.” He had sidetracked himself, but without even a pause in the flow of his words, Nemamiah brought the conversation around and continued. “The storms are where you come in, for those who die in a thunderstorm, as a direct result of the storm, being touched by the lightning, or having their head implode as a clap of thunder rolls through their body, are people taken before their time, struck down in a fury. Friendly fire is the phrase you have created for it. Their souls are lost, banished from the world, and often they are grabbed by the beings who stand in wait along the edges of Lucifer’s kingdom like sentries. Others fall into the Purgatory realms, and are left to fend for themselves, for we have no way of tracking them...”

...*Pause for thought.*

“Your deaths were the same. Each of you taken before your time: only there were no battles, no storms or earthquakes; nothing out of the ordinary occurred at the times of your deaths. You were simply plucked from the earth and removed, banished to the chambers without the balance being weighed. What did it? I am afraid to say we don’t know, but we had to rescue you. Raguel brought us the word straight from God’s chamber, and so we came, and so we stand.” Nemamiah stopped speaking, his breathing heavy as if he had run for a short while at maximum speed. The shiny spot at his temple had spread, as if the skin, once broken, simply melted away, absorbed by whatever it was that was hidden on the inside; his true body.

“There was a storm when I died,” Sammy offered, unaware of the strange light that grew before the others’ eyes.

“No, that is true, but it was not *your* turn to pass,” Nemamiah answered. His voice seemed to be faltering just a little bit, like a boy’s voice breaking at the start of puberty.

Sammy fell quiet. A sudden image of his girlfriend Mandy popped into his head, and the knowledge that they had been arguing as they died. This fact had haunted him throughout his time in Hell, but it had been a while – or so it felt, at least – since he had thought about it at all, and now it was back, and it hurt. He couldn’t for the life of himself remember what his final words to her had been, but he was sure that they were not the ones he would have chosen. Why? It was another question he had asked himself over and over again. Because some jerk she went to university with wanted the girl he had, the girl who wanted him by return. It was all so pointless. Beside him he felt Becky’s body pressing against him, he felt her fingers locked within his own. It felt reassuring in his dark world to know that there was someone with him, not just a voice or two he could hear speaking, but an actual physical human being who stood beside him and who he knew understood him. To some degree they all did understand each other.

“While we do not know why Lucifer chose you, we do know that you all now have a part to play in this war. You are to help us travel undetected through the worlds, to find whatever it was that Lucifer was so sure he had found. We don’t know who it is, but we are certain you are to look for a mortal. It is up to you to find the others who died before Lucifer can claim them,” Nemamiah began, his voice now cracked and reduced to a whisper.

His words were kept simple, cryptic but lacking the mysterious audio book quality that it had before the humming noise of the weakened barriers had begun. His eyes had faded, as if the light inside had been drained, or rerouted towards the ever increasing circle at his temple.

“There were seven others who died in the same manner you did. These seven were all on the same day, in fact. We found one, but he was lost before we could get to him. The remaining six you must find. Track them down and bring them away, keep them safe, and when the time is right we will come to you and take what we need,” he said, more like a general now than the occasionally friendly, usually amicable storyteller.

“W-w-what?” Helen stammered.

“We do not have time to repeat ourselves. The barriers are weak. This world has become unstable. We must be quick. You have been told your role as it has been decreed by God, our Father, your creator. It is what He wishes that you should now concern yourselves with. If you succeed in your task, you will all be granted entry to the Kingdom of our Father. I give you my word,” Sariel answered. His own physique looked to be just as weakened as Nemamiah’s, yet his words sounded stronger.

“God told you this Himself?” Sammy asked, aware of how strange the question was, but it came to him and he thought it best to speak it now. Kind of like at a wedding: speak now or forever hold your peace. He could feel his eyes sockets pulse stronger and faster, as if behind the hardened jellied scabs the sockets were simply filled with blood that sloshed around like cola inside a bottle turned over and over in someone’s hands. He could feel the warm fluid coursing down his cheeks, meeting together under his chin like the ribbons on a bonnet, and yet he felt no pain.

“Do not be so foolish. God does not speak to every angel. The archangels are His passageway for words and messages. Raguel was the one who delivered us the message, the will of God. Our Father does not lie; He does not sin, and we do not doubt His words, so we do what we are bade,” Nemamiah answered, his weak voice trying to gain power and resonance, and for a short time it did, but when he was finished speaking it was obvious that he was exhausted.

“So you’ve never even se—” Graham began to interject, possibly sensing the weakened state of the angels.

He put it down to the scratching parasitic sound of church bells ringing that had invaded his head and hammered around inside his skull until his eyes watered. Yet a quick glance at Sariel, whom he believed was the lesser of the two, silenced him. Sariel’s face had not exactly darkened to the same thunderous maroon that Nemamiah’s did, but it certainly showed Graham enough to cut his words short mid-sentence.

Sariel took a step forward without uttering a word, and for one second Graham held his breath and prepared himself to be flung back into the fiery red ocean that swam beneath their feet. The thin orange veins that had tattooed the underbelly of the ground had burst, merged together to form a giant orange bruise. A contusion on the face of the earth, where, at its center, which also happened to be in the middle of their meeting, a red dot appeared. Graham had noticed it earlier, while Nemamiah had reprimanded the angel who had fled. It had grown steadily stronger as their meeting progressed. It had begun about the same size as one of the marbles Graham remembered playing with as a kid, but now it was as large as a bowling ball, possibly bigger.

Another tremor tore through the ground, and with it came a great ripping noise that caused one of the buildings at the end of what would have passed for the high street in this ruined western world to collapse. Giant vents of steam plumed into the air. It was a dark red color, and after its ejaculation fell as a pink rain; a blood rain. The tremor didn't stop; it lessened, but it remained a background factor to their new world. Cracks began to appear in the dry dirt street. The wooden buildings could be heard creaking and groaning their complaints, like a sailing galleon moored on the quayside, its ropes straining to keep it in place.

Graham breathed a small sigh of relief when Sariel turned his back to him. Instead he chose to face Becky and Sammy, or the kid, as Graham had named him in his silent voice the day they first met. It was impossible to tell how long ago they had met, or how long they had been standing there as a group. It must have been days since he and Sammy met, and hours had passed since they arrived on the streets of Mirantaea, but then again, what did the passage of time matter? They had a clear deadline and that the crux of it all.

Chapter 23

“Samuel, come to me,” Sariel said. His voice was different; it was not the voice which had chided them as they were – what was it that Nememiah had called it again? – enlightened. Now it was a voice that was gentle and soft, one that beckoned you to it like a Pied Piper’s flute. The words formed a melody so glorious to your ears that you couldn’t help but smile and obey. Sammy took a step forward, yet he didn’t relinquish his hold on Becky’s hand. She had to take a small step with him to stop their arms from becoming too stretched.

Sariel said, “Your eyes were wonderful things. The gift of sight cannot be overestimated. Yet it is not noticed or appreciated until it is gone. We did not reach you in time. You were hidden away better than the others, for some reason.”

All around them now the ground shook, harder and harder – not quite like an earthquake, this felt to all of them like something they had ever before experienced. The ground wasn’t quaking; it was being ripped into bite sized pieces. Sariel continued, his eyes fixed on Sammy. He felt it, could see the immense white stack of energy beckon him. Sammy felt Sariel’s hypnotic gaze was held captive by it. “I cannot give you your eyes back – that is beyond even our reach – but we have a gift for you...to make things easier.

Sariel raised his hands and brought them towards Sammy’s face. The group saw this; they saw the bulging, swollen fingers hook around Sammy’s face. All Sammy saw was a bright light which enveloped him in its embrace and held him tight. He couldn’t move, yet he felt no fear or apprehension. Sammy felt his body begin to rise upwards, straighten until he stood to attention, his back so straight that it felt strange to him. The curve of his spine had straightened out into one vertical mass of bone and nerves.

His face felt hot, he felt relaxed, at peace, until an image flashed before his eyes. It was Mandy. She was in a park. She wore a white jacket; a dentist’s coat. She stood still, looking at the world around her. Then she glanced up at the sky. Sammy would have sworn she looked right at him, although he knew she wasn’t there. His heart pulled tight in his chest. Her face had aged, not a lot, but enough that Sammy noticed. She looked even more beautiful than ever. She raised her hands up to her face, her eyes filled with tears. She clutched at her face, hands forming a tent over her nose and mouth. Her eyes reddened by the stinging tears. She lowered her hands again and began picking at the tips of her fingers, a habit Sammy had often told her to stop.

”Sammy,” she mouthed the word.

There was no sound.

There was nothing – only the warmth which came from being trapped inside an angelic embrace, a distant shuddering of the ground and, even more distant to that, locked away inside his mind, was the humming sound. In Sammy’s mind he heard the screeching of car tires, of metal bodies engaged in an ongoing collision course that nobody can stop. Yet he saw the word on her lips, he saw his name spat out, cried out. Her lips trembled as did the hands she raised skywards, palms away from her. She reached towards his face. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but before she could touch him she began to fade. ‘Sammy, Sammy’ she

mouthed, her lips trembling harder now, hands shaking. Sammy could feel them, he could feel them reaching for his face, millimeters away from being reunited with her. He knew that if she reached him, if she could, then they would be together again. Yet her image continued to dim.

“I’m sorry, Sammy. I’m so sorry,” she mouthed to him, calling, he could see from the way her jaw seemed to strain. Then, like a reverse developed Polaroid photograph, Mandy disappeared from his life, wiped out for a second time.

Before she disappeared completely, Sammy saw her body change, like a ghost appearing in a semi-serious horror movie: her imaged flickered, moving between the Mandy he knew in life and the one he had left in death. Her once sweet face alternated like a piece of stop-go animation with that of a corpse. It was wet and rotten, well on the way to total putrescence. She smiled at him: although her lips were gone, eaten or rotted away, the muscles remained, and they tightened, pulling what skin remained of her cheeks upwards.

“Mandy,” Sammy called, filled with a despair that knew no limits.

He tried to move but couldn’t. His arms and legs were locked in place, held together by this angelic embrace. Then, as suddenly as it had started, it was gone, and Sammy was thrown back into a world that was dying. A burning pain ate away at his face, while tears with no possible outlet stung his soul.

“Sammy, are you okay?” a voice asked him. It was Becky, although she sounded a long way away.

“What did you do to him?” another called. It was either Marcus or Graham; he couldn’t tell which. The only thing he knew was that it was a man’s voice and it was angry.

A hand grabbed his, fingers locked within his, and he was pulled backwards, stumbling over his own feet, which felt as if there were embedded in the earth, already being pulled back down below...to him...to them and their games...to...to...

“Sammy, Sammy, are you okay?” the voice asked again, not as distant this time. Her voice came from beside him. It was her hand that held his. The sensation of their skin touching was electric. Much like when the wires in a hotwired car are first introduced they create a spark, a similar jolt travelled through Sammy’s entire body and succeeded in pulling him back into the present.

“Mandy,” he whispered, the words coming out as little more than an exhaled breath. Sammy looked around; his vision was a haze, a swirl of pastel colors all merged together. He saw a shape, a head – it was a woman’s head, dark hair, yes, brown maybe, not black. It wasn’t Mandy. He knew that. Then it came back to him: her name jumped to his lips and made him want to smile. “Becky.” No sooner had he spoken her name and his world went black, as if the lights were just turned out.

Sariel stepped back from Sammy, while the others simply stood, their mouths gaping, a look of horror frozen on their faces. Through it all, Sammy had stood motionless, calling out a name none of them could hear, and he kept throwing glances over towards Becky, looking right at her, his face finding hers despite the blood that streamed down his face. The black sockets that had housed his eyes stared ghoulishly at Becky’s. His arm reached out, groping towards her. Sariel stepped back even further and Sammy fell, stumbling backwards. He kept his feet

and Becky moved without flinching to stand beside him once more, steadying him. Marcus and Graham had both made the move to offer aid, but had pulled up automatically when they saw the pair together; they weren't needed.

Becky's hands were soon sticky with Sammy's blood as she brushed his cheek with her thumb, cupping the left side of his face, asking him repeatedly if he was alright. She got no answer at first, then after a few moments he seemed to come around, like a man waking up from a deep sleep. Becky threw her arms around him and held him tight. She stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck. When they pulled away from each other there was a bloody face print on the shoulder of Becky's shirt.

While Sammy was lost in a pain-free dream world, enveloped by the pure spirit of the angel Sariel, the angel of healing, the others in his group of new friends stood by and watched what really happened. They saw the healing hands of God's servants at work in raw reality.

Sariel had beckoned Sammy to him, and with a speed that took them all by surprise he grabbed Sammy's face and forced his thumbs into Sammy's eye sockets. The crust that covered them broke and thick maroon blood spurted out. It ran down Sariel's arms with the lumpy consistency of milk left out in the sun. The worst thing was that Sammy stood stock still, not even flinching or seeming to feel the way Sariel worked his thumbs deeper and deeper into his skull until the palm of his hand was pressed against the corner of each eye socket. A sickening wet sucking sound belched as Sariel began to massage the inside of Sammy's skull. He muttered something incoherent in a voice so low Marcus was amazed they heard it at all.

Behind them, for they had all turned to face the scene as it unfolded, Nemamiah stood impassive, arms now folded across his chest, his face looking drained and tired, worn thin in fact.

His work done, Sariel the healer stepped back, his head tilted to one side as he examined the end result. He studied Sammy like a sculptor, staring at the lump of clay he had just manipulated, wondering, *'Is this my masterpiece, or do I need to just take this off here, or that bit there mayhap?'*

Before he had any time to make that editing decision the ground exploded around them. The dried earth cried out with a weak crunching sound, and fire erupted into the air, shooting upwards until they could no longer see the sky. The group all cowered; it was instinctive. Becky pulled Sammy down onto his haunches beside her. She clapped her hands over her own head, still refusing to release their interlocked arms.

"Holy shit!" she screamed, looking around for the others.

Marcus was crouched down, his head up looking around, eyes wide with fear – yet somehow he managed to keep himself calm. Helen was next to him, lying flat on the floor, with her arms over her head, hands interlocked at the base of her skull. Graham was a little further away, crouched down much like Marcus. His face, however, told a different story; Marcus sought a way out while Graham seemed at ease, not looking for anything, simply just waiting for it to blow over before they made their move.

The fire flew into the sky, thundering upwards before crashing down on itself and falling back into the chasm from which it burst. At the same time more continued to rise, creating a wall

that ran down the length of the town, or what remained of it. There were several loud explosions as the larger buildings gave up the fight and collapsed on themselves, sending up a cloud of dust and wood so rotten it had been reduced powder on the inside many years ago. The heat was intense yet didn't burn no matter how close the blaze seemed to come to them. After what felt like an age, the wall of orange heat finally began to fade.

"It has begun. Quick, Sariel, we must pass on the word," Nemamiah called out, his voice booming above the agonized scream of the earth. "You have been told. You must track down those we seek. Those six souls are a part of this and they must be removed until we know why our brother is so keen to locate them. Find them, and keep them safe. We will find you when the time is right and take you all to safety." Nemamiah spoke with renewed urgency now. He sweated profusely, Marcus noticed... no, he wasn't sweating, he was *melting*.

The air around them roared. The sky above their heads echoed the dying call of a forgotten world. The group flinched but nothing more; it was a sound they were used to, like a jet plane flying overhead, a lot lower that you would expect but certainly not a sound that was completely foreign to them. However, none of them were prepared for the sight they saw when their raised their heads. The sky had ripped open, the blue peeled backwards from itself, creating a long, thin oval in the sky. Clouds were cut in half and fell to the ground, descending like a strange mist only to burn up in the heat with nothing but a slight puff of smoke. The oval itself was black – jet black. With another bellow the sky cracked even further, the oval widened, and they all began to feel the atmosphere change: the air thinned fast, gravity began to falter. One moment they felt weighted down and squashed and the next they felt as though they would float away on the slightest breath of wind.

"Quick, join hands!" Nemamiah called, having roar to now, not only because of his sudden decline in condition but because the crack in the sky and ground had unleashed the skull penetrating groaning sound at full volume. It was the combined screams of two planets as they merged. It was nails being dragged along a blackboard and cutlery being scrapped on a china plate all combined into one cacophonous din. "Don't look at it!" he called. Was it panic in his voice? They couldn't tell, and had no time to dwell on the matter.

They could all feel it grow inside them like a craving; a desire, a hunger to look up. It called to them, whatever it was. It began its existence in their lives as the humming of underground power cables and had grown into sounds that reminded each of them of their time in Hell. There was a strange pressure that emanated from above their heads. It coursed through their bodies, tearing at them on the inside, the way the moon pulls at the oceans, creating the tides that govern so much of our lives.

"Join hands!" they heard Nemamiah calling, his voice once again distant.

Somehow they all managed to obey his commands, moving to form a small, odd-shaped circle. There was a flash of light, a rustling of feathers, a fierce cool breeze – and they were gone.

Had they been any later in making contact with each other, then they would have been sucked out of existence. They would have seen the split in the sky twist into a smile, they would have seen it open in a yawn and then collapse inwards on itself, and the last thing they would have seen would have been the stars themselves, deepest, darkest space as the world they were

on was pulled away and fused into the underworld as the newest extension to an already overloaded kingdom.

They landed with a strange, stomach shifting feeling, much like going over a gentle, rolling hill in car travelling just too fast. The light that enveloped them left, and for a few moments they were blinded. Children born into a new world, one that was foreign and alien to them, and made them all feel like babes fresh from a mother's womb.

The world they found themselves in was a stark contrast to the one they had just left. This world was alive with vegetation, grass that was a vivid green and smelt as sweet as the first cut of summer. Each blade glistened with drops of morning dew, the sky above them was a deep azure, ocean of brilliance which, when compared to the deep blue emptiness of the previous world, seemed to be much more alive and hopeful. The grass was soft and spongy under their feet, holding natural warmth from its days in the sun. There were trees of all description, from towering oaks to pines with cones the size of melons hanging from their branches. Wild trees grew bearing a strange looking – but later, they would discover, wonderfully tasting – fruit. It was a strange shade of blue; near purple, with a yellow stripe that ran through the center of it. It looked like a strawberry in its shape, yet was the size of an apple.

Somewhere close at hand was the source of the new sound that filled their ears, only unlike the humming of the Hell worlds, this was the pleasant sound of a small stream or brook as it followed its course, either flowing into something larger or quite possibly just looping back on itself and continuing the circle of its own existence. When they found it, the water was impossibly clear; the bed of the stream was dotted with rocks and small fish whose unending game of tag saw them dart from one place to the other with amazing speed and agility. They skimmed over some, around others and even under a few. Marcus even saw one of them jump out of the water and slide across the top of one rather large stones as though it were a slide at the local waterway's park.

“Jesus, they just melted them,” Becky said in a whispered voice from behind them all. The others turned their heads towards her, and saw for themselves.

On the floor just in front of, where the angels had been standing before they made their strange, stomach turning trip, were two piles of what could only be described as liquid rubber.

“I'm gonna be sick.” Helen put her hand up against her mouth and turned her head, gagging. “How could they do that to people?” she asked, the words muffled by her hand but clear enough to be heard.

“They're angels. I think they can do whatever they want,” Graham answered, but his words distracted him as he stared at the pile of melted skin and bone on the floor with a mixed look awe and fear.

The clothes had disappeared, burned away by the power of an angel's touch. A few small strands of material remained, and most of those had blown away and lay in the grass a few meters further into the meadow. The bubbling liquid was peach colored, with a ripple of red running through it. Bubbles of fat had risen the surfaced but cooled before they could burst. Dotted around the mass, some hidden deep down inside and some protruding from the surface still as if nothing had happened at all, were teeth, some capped with shiny metal

crowns, others simply gleaming in their own right, enjoying the warm midday sun. A lone eyeball lay on the right – Nemamiah's – pile. It topped the skin cake like a horror shop cherry.

Turning their attention away from the two melted bodies – none of them quite realized just how easy it was for them all to put the issue out of their minds – they saw that in the distance there was a thick wooded area. Dense trees towered into the sky at unequal heights, their green tops standing out in contrast to the blue sky. There was a small wisp of smoke that rose from somewhere in the distance. Marcus saw it first but heard the gentle gasps of his party not long after.

“That means people, right?” Helen said. Even their voices sounded sweeter in this world, if that were even possible.

“I guess so,” he mumbled, his eyes busy surveying it. “If there are people here, we'd better be ready. We don't know which type of world this is,” he added without thinking.

“Is it me, or are there lights in the trees?” Helen asked, squinting to see if that changed the way the trees seemed to glisten at regularly spaced intervals.

They all looked, squinting in unison without even realizing it. That was all of them besides Sammy. Why the angels did it, none of them knew, but Sammy's eyes had been removed and replaced with nothing, the sockets' now unguarded entrance or exit points into and out of his skull. That being said, he knew exactly where the forest was, and he knew that the people living there were friendly, but also scared. The ground where they stood was the same eternal blackness that Sammy had become accustomed to, however in the distance – this was where he assumed he faced in the same direction as his friends – he saw a hazy green cloud which seemed to rise from the ground and ascend into the sky. He saw a lime green cloud that shimmered and danced like the tarmac on a long, straight road in the middle of summer. Then, above the trees, was a warm orange glow, like the embers of a fire as it starts to die down. From this orange cloud fell an amber rain, or so it looked; small embers floating down, mixing into the green, being enveloped by it.

Sammy looked at the strange colors, which looked something akin to the northern lights in their movements and beautiful vivacity, and it was only when he turned around and saw the tidal wave of red, a blood cloud, swooping towards them that he realized that the trees were safety.

“We need to move,” Sammy spat the words out. Beside him he felt Becky jump.

When they looked at him, he had his back to the trees, and they would have questioned him if it hadn't have been for the look of complete horror that was etched into his face. Much as a look of evil is carved into every devil head found in pawn shops, gift shops and antique shops the world over, there was no question that Sammy was not certain and right in his statement.

“What is it?” Marcus asked.

“You get psychic all of a sudden, kid? See something we don't, or can you smell it coming like a thunder storm?” Graham asked, his already accustomed pessimistic tone replaced by one so cynical and vicious that it shocked them all. “Sorry,” he added honestly, and not just because of the way they all looked at him. “Old habits die hard.” He chuckled to himself as he said this, a private joke no doubt.

"I don't know how to explain it, but there isn't any time. We need to move...now," Sammy said again. He could feel his heart begin to increase its tempo, gathering speed like a stampede.

"Okay, Sam, let's go," Marcus said, leading the way, Helen following close behind him. Sammy and Becky were further back and Graham once again took up the rear, holding point with the same diligence he always had.

"I really am sorry, kid," he whispered to Sammy. "There's something about all this that doesn't quite sit with me." He continued to explain his actions, although Sammy didn't seem to give an answer. He just kept glancing over his shoulder, his face becoming paler and paler with each check and double-check.

For it was over his shoulder that Sammy could see the red cloud as it drew closer and closer, its form changing to that of a giant hand, with large chunky fingers stretching out, reaching for them as they made their way towards the trees. The cloud moved fast, their pace was slow, and from what Sammy could gauge, the trees were too far away.

"We'll never make it!" he shouted, grabbing Becky and pulling her close to him.

"What is it?" Becky asked him, squeezing him just as tight in return. She looked around like a deer ready to take flight at the slightest noise, but she saw nothing; she only felt the warm breeze as it rushed over them.

"Red." It was the last word Sammy said before his world exploded with a bright flash. Once more Sammy fell. The usual sense of weightlessness was gone; he was heavy and fell faster and faster, the wind rushing past his face, until, without any warning, he stopped. The sensation was gone, and he realized that he was still on his feet. It was not him that had fallen, but rather everything else around him.

Sammy reached out with his hand, trying to find Becky; their embrace had been broken as he fell, or thought he fell, at least. She wasn't there. Sammy turned a full circle, sweeping his arms in ever more wild circles as panic began to set in. A voice spoke inside his head; it was *HIS* voice, Xirmon, the creature who had welcomed him with such open arms upon his arrival in Hell. It was the same voice that spoke to Sammy in the dark. It whispered to him now, told him he was alone, they had left him behind. Dropped the dead weight. Panic arrived. Sammy called out over and over again but nobody gave him an answer.

He began to feel dizzy. The colors were gone. He was enveloped by a red mist which held him captive. Disoriented, not knowing which way he faced or which way he should turn, Sammy began to walk, groping for things that weren't there. He hoped that his chosen path would lead towards the trees. He kicked something, something solid and heavy. He stumbled, taking several large lumbering paces, bent forward like a hundred meter sprinter ducking down to cross the line first.

"Becky, Marcus...Graham." He added the final name after a moment of hesitation. The old man had been good to him when they first met in the house, and deep down he meant well.

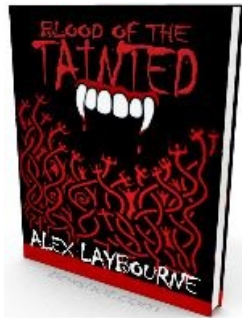
"I'm sorry, but your friends are gone," a voice said from behind him. Sammy turned, but before he could do anything, he felt hands seize him in a strong grip and hold him steady.

“Get the fuck off me!” he called out, struggling and kicking with his legs. He kicked and scraped at the legs of whoever held him, but never made contact. The grip held firm. “I’m not going back!” he spat the words out as they rushed from his body like vomit. “I’m not fucking going anywhere!” he called. His words cut off before he could add a second sentence when a strong hand clamped over both his mouth and nose.

Sammy continued to struggle right up until something cold and wet was pressed against his mouth. It didn’t take long for unconsciousness to take over his world, and only a few moments after his friends disappeared, so did Sammy.

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YOUR FREE BOOK IS WAITING!

Six gruesome murders in two days,
a farm house burned to the floor,
and panic on the streets.

For Sheriff Ian Raskin, this is just the
start of a nightmare ride that will
take him to the edge of his own
abilities where a monster lies in wait.



Who is Alex Laybourne?

Born and raised in the coastal English town Lowestoft, it should come as no surprise (to those that have the misfortune of knowing this place) that I became a horror writer.

From an early age I was sent to schools which were at least 30 minutes' drive away and so spent most of my free time alone, as the friends I did have lived too far away for me to be able to hang out with them in the weekends or holidays.

I have been a writer as long as I can remember and have always had a vivid imagination. To this very day I find it all too easy to just drift away into my own mind and explore the world I create; where the conditions always seem to be just perfect for the cultivation of ideas, plots, scenes, characters and lines of dialogue

I am married and have five wonderful children; James, Logan, Ashleigh, Damon, and Riley. My biggest dream for them is that they grow up, and spend their lives doing what makes them happy, whatever that is.

For people who buy my work, I hope that they enjoy what they read and that I can create something that takes them away from reality for a short time. For me, the greatest compliment I can receive is not based on rankings but by knowing that people enjoy what I produce, that they buy my work with pleasure and never once feel as though their money would have been better spent elsewhere.

An Extract from Diaries of the Damned

Paul Larkin sat in his seat and fastened his seatbelt. His body was caked with sweat and dried blood. His ears rang from the gunshots, and his ankle was swollen again; remnants of an injury he acquired jumping from the first floor window of his suburban home. At least, it used to be suburbia, before everything went to shit.

He sat back and let out a long, deep breath. Shock threatened to take hold of him, so he closed his eyes and waited. The plane filled up and the cries of those refused admittance echoed down the walkway, swiftly followed by the sound of their execution.

Paul spared but the most fleeting of moments thinking about it. He found it strange how killing and death had become such a large part of his life.

“Excuse me,” a fragile sounding voice stirred Paul from the calm place he had just started to settle into. “I believe this is my seat.” An elderly woman, late seventies at best stood before him, her face was smeared with blood, while one eye had been covered by a filthy rag that had been hastily secured to her face with what looked like duct tape.

“I’m sorry...” Paul asked, confused.

“Seat 17b. This is my seat.” The woman waved the ticket in Paul’s face.

Paul said nothing, but gave the woman a look which screamed, *‘the world as we knew it has ended, are you seriously going to complain that I’m in your seat’*. If she could read his expression, she showed no signs of it. So with another heavy sigh, this one of frustration, Paul undid his belt and scooted one seat over.

“Thank you. I don’t mean to be rude, but after all that has happened, I feel the need to remain proper about some things,” she said as she sat down. There was an odor to her person that Paul found distinctly repelling, yet she had clearly gotten through the scanners at the gate.

“It’s fine,” he answered her, closing his eyes once more.

The seat he had taken was a window seat, just before the wings of the Boeing 737, which the military had been using as an emergency evacuation vehicle for the past two weeks. Looking out across the tarmac, Paul saw the troops standing guard at the perimeter of the small airfield. The sun had begun to disappear beneath the horizon, and in the dull afterglow of yet another survived day, Paul found himself staring at the firework like bursts of gunfire and wondering how it could have all gone so wrong, so quickly.

He tried to stop himself, but before he knew it, his mind was cast back. He saw his wife, Julia and their two children, Doug and Maddie. They were outside, Paul standing behind the barbeque as Julia busied herself by setting the table, while their kids played in the garden enjoying the summer weather. He blinked, trying to force the image away. It worked, but was replaced by the memory of his wife’s battered, bloody corpse lying on the floor in their living room; her face blackened and swollen by the sickness, her body broken from the repeated strikes he had delivered with his son’s baseball bat. Her blood was splattered over his clothes, his face, everything.

“Daddy, I don’t feel well,” his daughter had called. Paul had turned around just in time to see the blood flow from her mouth like vomit. She collapsed to the floor, the convulsions already upon her. His son followed suit within the hour. Their small bodies were an easy target for the virus.

“I love you,” Paul had whispered as he hugged them both tightly, and then pushed their heads beneath the surface of the water. They struggled of course, but their bodies were too weak from the disease to provide much resistance. His daughter fought the longest. “You’re with the angels now,” Paul whispered to them as he dried their faces, dressed them in clean clothes, and laid them in their beds.

The sound of an explosion within the terminal rocked the plane and pulled Paul from the nightmare. The sun had fallen behind the trees, yet the plane did not seem anywhere near full.

“Close those doors!” the lone flight attendant called out, running down the aisle, pushing passengers out of the way without a second thought. “Close them now!” she screamed again just as the roar of machine gun fire reached them.

The screams of those still in the walkway were cut off as the doors were closed and the engines roared into life.

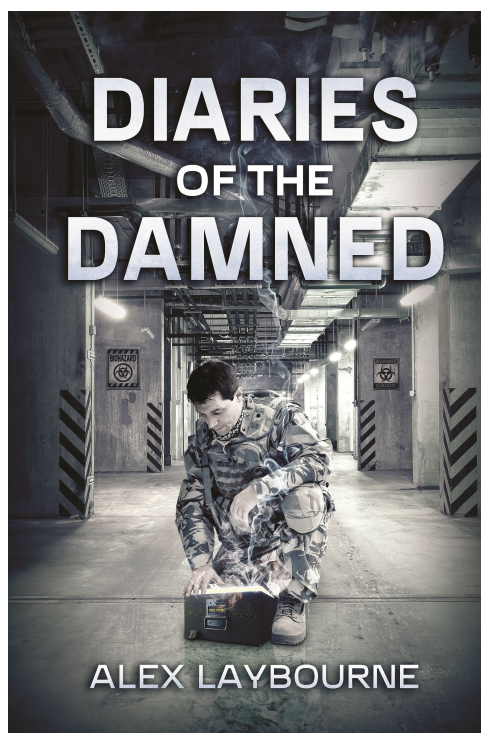
“Ladies and Gentlemen please take your seats. We are making an immediate departure,” the now out of breath young women spoke into the intercom. “God help us all,” she added.

The plane shuddered into life and rolled away from the gate. The coupling that connected it to the terminal was still filled with bodies. Paul watched them cascade to the floor like lemmings; a human waterfall. “Lucky bastards,” he whispered as he stared at their still, lifeless forms.

The plane rolled onto the runway and stopped. They sat there for ten minutes. Then just as people started to get nervous, three armored Jeeps came to a screeching halt either side of the aircraft, the machine guns mounted on the top of each firing into the unseen enemy.

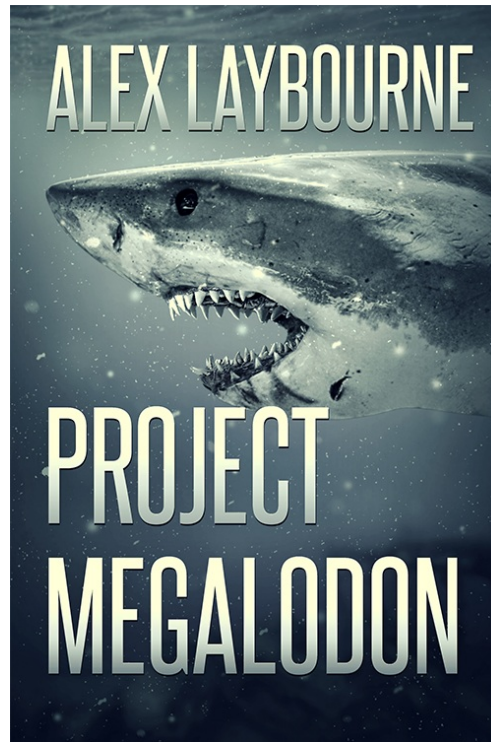
“Oh God, they got past the perimeter fences!” a voice cried out. This was accompanied by a wave of panic that saw people leap from their seats. Paul however, sat still; shock and weariness had overcome him. As a result, he saw the guns cease firing, and the gunner of the car nearest his window waved his hands in a signal which even Paul understood meant, ‘*Get going, NOW!*’

Paul opened his mouth to warn the panicked mob, but he was too late. The engines roared and the plane sped down the runway. People were thrown to the floor and into their seats as the plane gathered momentum. Through his window Paul watched as the bodies of those that had caused the delay were mown down by the speeding jet. Even that wouldn’t be enough to kill them all, but what did it matter now; they were airborne and the legions of the undead were behind them.



Grab you copy of Diaries of the Damned from Amazon today!

If you like creature features and mindless carnage, then feel free to check out any of my titles below:



When Dr. Martin Lucas was recruited to work on the oceanic military base Omega Base Six, he had no idea of what lay ahead of him.

Tasked with genetically engineering a megalodon for military use he was the most important man on the base. That also made him a target.

Six years after a terrorist attack on the base almost cost him his life, Martin is brought back to face off against the monster he created. His shark has lain dormant, but with Omega Base Six set to be scuttled, she returns, bigger than ever and ready to protect her home at whatever cost.



When Lieutenant Jenna Harrington and her crew pulled their US CoastGuard cutter up against a stricken fishing vessel, the last thing they expected to find was a boat covered in blood, the lone survivor muttering about a sea monster. Yet before they know it, they are locked in a battle with a beast straight from the gates of hell.

Pitted in a war against a creature they don't understand, the US Navy is caught in a fight that will change everybody involved, forever. When tensions run high between the captains in the makeshift attack group, their internal squabbles threaten to get them all killed.

The Kraken has risen, and the world will never be the same again.

