

# **See Jack Die**

## **(Part 1 of 5)**

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Other books in the See Jack Die Series: **See Jack Hunt**

## PROLOGUE

*21 JUNE, 325 AD . . .*

*The first ecclesiastical gathering in history, to eventually be known as the Council of Nicaea, was summoned on the day of the summer solstice. Constantine, ruler of Rome, chose this date to celebrate his initiation into the religious order of Sol Invictus, one of the two thriving cults that regarded the Sun as the one and only Supreme God.*

*It was held in a hall of Osius's Palace, and there were hundreds in attendance. The intention of Constantine, through this convention, was to create an entirely new god for his empire. A god that would unite all religions, and other very vocal and violent factions under one deity.*

*The factions were diametrically opposed and all argued vigorously for the adoption of their beliefs and their Gods to be a part of this new, unified religion. Throughout these debates the different factions became quite heated as they argued their positions.*

*Fifty-three gods were tabled for discussion. For 17 months they continued to ballot in order to narrow this list of potential deities. In the end, the list of gods had been voted down to just 5 prospects: Caesar, Mithras, Horus, Drisna, and Zeus.*

*Constantine, the ruling voice at the Council of Nicaea, had another idea. He proposed a merger of sorts, an amalgamation of the different deities. And this proposal enraged many of the independent factions.*

*Behind the scenes, while these decisions were being argued and debated vigorously, several religious factions were angered by this process. A secret group was formed to counteract the Council's actions. When the scripture and books were presented that would eventually become the text of the Christian Bible, this secret group had their own scriptures and text. They went beyond the books and Gospels of the bibles we now read.*

*And the story they told . . . is much darker.*

***1,685 YEARS LATER . . .***

***R.H.DEDMAN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, DALLAS.***

***MAY, 9<sup>TH</sup> . . .***

My name is Jack Pagan . . . and I might as well be four months and sixteen days old. I need to tell you about *them*. I need to prepare you for the monsters.

My name—*Jack Pagan*—is one that the doctors at the hospital gave me. Jack, because that was a hell of a lot better than *John Doe*. And my last name—*Pagan*—well . . . that's because I told those doctors they could keep all of their religious propaganda. Save somebody else. If there is a god, he doesn't seem to be in my corner.

Like when my life disappeared, where was *He* then? When the first few decades of my existence were snatched away . . . I could have used some faith. I didn't need a big sea splitting miracle. A floating bible would have been enough. I'd have settled for a toasted Jesus on a grilled-cheese sandwich, even.

But nope.

Just silence.

I don't actually remember what made the darkness come. There's this shrill ringing sound that seems to permanently echo in my head. Like some loud explosion that's stuck bouncing around in my mind, forever. A stagnant memory being replayed, over and over.

Imagine a DVD scratched *just* right to repeat, and repeat, and repeat the same second in time. An answering machine stuck on one fraction of one message. An anonymous frame in time that I won't be allowed to forget.

It never gets any duller, this sound. And it never leads me any closer to what actually happened. Whatever crashed my hard drive, did it completely. It's like, with that one loud pop, everything else was wiped-out.

These know-it-all doctors, they keep saying how lucky I am to be alive. Massive trauma to the base of my skull which caused,

*“ . . . localized bilateral lesions in the limbic system, notably in the hippocampus and medial side of the temporal lobe, as well as parts of the thalamus, and their associated connections.”*

That's doctor talk for *messed-up head*. They tested me for all kinds of brain disorders and diseases—*Cerebral arteriosclerosis* (hardening of the brain arteries), *Korsakoff's Syndrome*

(deficiency of vitamin-B, or Cerebral tumors involving the third ventricle of the brain), and *encephalitis* (brain inflammation).

I was negative on all of those.

Of course, that still doesn't explain the things I see crawling around.

They, in their white lab coats, with their European sounding names, and their accents, keep telling me that I am a testament to the advances in emergency medicine. They say I'm an example of the breakthroughs in neurosurgery.

They don't know the half of it.

I was told, by the attractive, tall neurosurgeon, that losing my memory was like being reborn. Like I was fresh to the world. I could start over. Do anything I could imagine.

I told her that I liked my old life. Wanted it back.

She smiled one of those knowing, learned smiles, her greenish-grey eyes looking down on me like I was a fool, "But, Mr. Pagan . . . how would you know if you liked your old life? All your long-term memories are gone. Forever." She shrugged, "Those parts of your brain are damaged beyond repair. You can't miss what you can't remember."

And even though she wasn't trying to be mean, there was this condescending undertone to her words that told me I was an idiot. Maybe she didn't mean it. Maybe this was part of her getting me to cope with my new reality. But all I got out of it was, *idiot, idiot, idiot*.

They take an oath, those doctors, to save everyone . . . even idiots. So then I tell her that, other than my head wound, I feel fine. I explain to her how I want to work on getting my life back. She then corrects me, and I rephrase . . . I want to get my *new* life started.

And here comes that pity-laden smile again. And she gives me all this fancy talk about how the parts of my brain that hold long-term memories—predominately the *mammillary bodies*, circumscribed parts of the *thalamus*, and of the *temporal lobe* (hippocampus)—how they're destroyed, and will never be repaired. How I'll never remember anything that happened before Christmas Eve of last year. And she emphasizes the word *never* each time she says it.

"It's all gone, Mr. Pagan. You need to find a way to stop looking for your old life. It doesn't exist anymore. Try to imagine that it *never* did."

I asked her why I still remembered words and locations on a map. I wondered, if my brain is so messed up, why I can still figure out the area of a square? How I remember that I like Rocky Road ice cream? How I like the Victoria's Secret models? How I could almost taste a thick crust pizza with pepperonis and mushrooms?

She carefully explained, with her eyes looking down her nose at me, that those things were stored in different parts of my brain. Parts that were still functioning normally. In fact, she said, my brain was performing quite exceptionally . . . considering the trauma that my head suffered.

I'm tired of this hospital. I'm sick of the food. I don't like the pastel colors that everything is painted. Mood calming colors. It's always cold and everybody that works here, from the doctors, to the janitors, are emotionally cold and distant. Like they're waiting for me to die, or leave.

I want to leave.

*They* want me to leave.

Then she asks me how the classes are coming. Amnesia patients—like myself—have to go to all of these special classes that the hospital offers. I think it's an insurance set-up. Kind of like them hedging their bets if we go loopy. The classes are on different subjects that are supposed to drastically affect our “ . . . new life scenarios.”

There's a class on *Coping*.

A class about *Nutrition*.

One about *Anger Management*.

A boring set of videos on *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*.

Oh, and a long spiel about the '*Dangers of Prescription Medicine Abuse*'. That particular class is good if you're ever thinking about picking up an addiction, because they tell you everything you need to know to get your 'fix'. I learned more about drugs in that class, than most junkies learn in a lifetime.

Anyway, it's all legislated living skills. All of those important things you need to know about life, broken-down, sub-divided, and agreed upon by a board of doctors somewhere in New England—where they *really* know what it takes to have a productive life.

I told the lady doctor that I liked the classes just fine. That I'd whole-heartedly recommend them to anyone in my position. That they were really helping me put this all into perspective. They like to hear things like that, one of the nurses—a young kid—whispered to me after one of the classes.

I made it clear to the lady doctor that I would soon be ready to start my life anew. And maybe I was selling it too much. A bit overly optimistic. Because there were *some* things I was leaving out.

She nodded as she scribbled some notes down, asking me about my eating habits. I shrugged. I haven't been so hungry lately. Nothing has much taste. But that could be a commentary on hospital food. She laughed at that.

After all of these questions, she looks at me, like I'm an injured stray puppy. Like I'm cute, but too broken to take home. Her face is thin and symmetrical with a small perfect nose.

“Is there anything else going on that you would like to talk about?” she asks carefully.

And while I'm considering her question, she adds, “. . . anything strange? Anything at all?”

Did I tell her about the shadows?

Did I tell her about the things I see just before I fall asleep and just as I wake-up in those blue minutes near dusk and dawn?

About the screaming that comes from that *other* place?

Doctors—even fancy, know-it-all, neurospecialists—they don't understand things like that. Heck, I don't understand things like that. But I know that you get a padded cell and a Thorazine drip if you mention creatures crawling around in the darkness. People like me, who talk about the monsters . . . we end up slobbering pharmaceutical test subjects.

We become numbers.

Lab rats.

So, *no*. I didn't tell her about any of the things I see lately. And the whole time we're talking, I'm trying not to stare at the dark grey shadow behind the door, that's looking at this lady doctor as if she might just be dinner.

# CHAPTER 1

## *DEEP ELLUM, DOWNTOWN DALLAS . . .*

I'm about to turn five months old, so I decided I should treat myself. Because of my outstanding progress, and because there seems to be no criminal record of my DNA, finger prints, and dental records, I have been allowed to go out on my own, and search for a part-time job.

If I get a job and maintain it successfully for a few months, they will consider moving me into off-campus housing. That means I wouldn't be living at the hospital anymore. And that would be just like being released from prison. I guess.

Ricky, that young nurse I mentioned, he told me where I could find a good psychic. He knows things like that. Life things. Ever since I woke-up in the hospital he and I kind of became friends. He was working in my area, tending to all the head cases, like me, and we hit it off.

Anyway, I decided that instead of hunting for a job, I was going to do a little investigation into the paranormal. See, I've been reading everything I can about Amnesia, Retro-grade Amnesia, Organic Mental Disorder, Nervous System and Brain Dysfunction. All of it. I feel like I took a mini course in Neuropathology. But I'm looking for answers to questions that don't appear in books written by Nobel laureates.

Ricky says that doctors don't really know shit, and that I need someone who can *see*. And the only place he knows is a psychic by the name of Josephine. She has a small tarot card, psychic paraphernalia store in Deep Ellum—a rather seedy part of Downtown Dallas where you can find tons of bars, small clubs, and head shops. People in this part of town have lots of piercings, and motorcycles, and track marks running up and down their arms. From my classes I know that probably means *methamphetamines*. And those people are typically unpredictable and dangerous.

I have a yellow, crumpled page that I ripped out of the Yellow Pages, with *Ms. Josephine 'Channeler and Psychic'* in small black print at the bottom left of the page. And as I look up from the smudged page to the street signs, I see that I must be getting pretty close. Ricky said that I'd see a big red-neon marijuana leaf, right next to her place. And from the way Ricky seems to always have bloodshot eyes and a bag of *Doritos*, I figure he knows the area pretty well.

The street smells like it might explode at any moment. Like all of the fumes are flammable enough to start a runaway chain reaction. It's unseasonably hot in Dallas for the end of April. At least, that's what the local news says. I have to take their word for it.

When I walk by people, I look at them a little longer than I probably should, wondering if they are somebody I knew. But as I see the pieces of shiny steel poking out of their ears, and chins, and eyebrows, and nipples, I figure probably not.

All of this walking is kicking my ass. I'm in pretty good shape, just looking at myself in the mirror. But several months of lying on my back in a hospital bed have made my body lazy. I find myself breathing hard after just a short walk. My classes stressed how important exercise is, and there is probably something to that. I'm going to mark 'Cardio' as an area for improvement.

My clothes are generic. Blue jeans and a green polo-style shirt. I don't remember my past, but I *know*, beyond any doubt, that I wore nicer clothes than these. These hospital handouts are itchy, and smell like mothballs. Ricky said it was good to look like a bum in Deep Ellum because that would keep me from getting mugged. I told him that if people robbed me they'd be upset because I don't remember where my wallet is. He didn't think that was funny.

Walking. Walking. Walking.

And with each street that I pass, I feel like I'm getting closer to something important. Something that will explain what the hell is happening to me. I'm trying to handle this like a detective might. I've been reading all sorts of detective novels that Ricky has been giving me. They balance out all the medical journals I've been lording over.

Fiction to combat the Non-fiction.

Fantasy to wrestle with reality.

Too much of either is a bad thing, I suppose.

In these detective novels, the guy is always facing some intricate, woven *mélange* of unconnected facts and details. Information in every direction. And what he does—Detective Todd Steele—is to test the most logical things first. Every detail. One by one. Until he's left with the oddball, ridiculous, unorthodox possibilities. Good fiction works that way. So that's the way I'm doing it.

I've tried the hospital's doctors. The scientists. The Medical Journals. The courses. *Nothing*. Ricky got me onto the Internet, and we searched around for hours that melted into weeks. *Nothing of substance*. So I thought to myself, what would Detective Todd Steele do? Once out of grounded and logical answers, he would investigate the not-so-normal. And here I am, surrounded by the people that society tries to forget.

The homeless.

The degenerate.

The despicable.



And I just know that I'm close. The sun is hidden behind clouds for the moment, and it's a respite from the atomic level of heat that has been bathing all of us for the last thirty minutes. My green shirt is sticking to my chest and stomach, and I can feel the drops of sweat crawling down the sides of my chest, from underneath my arms, down to my hips. It's a dirty feeling. Sticky.

A large, red truck honks at me as I cross the street, and I wonder if he knows me. I smile and wave at him, But then he yells, "Get the fuck out of the way you homeless piece of shit!" And it's pretty clear from the way that he inflects his words that we were probably *not* acquaintances in my forgotten past.

*Man up, or back down.* That's what Detective Todd Steele would say. Of course, he always carried a nickel-plated .357, snub-nosed, stainless steel revolver. It's a lot easier to 'Man up' when you're packing. But I keep walking. Keep looking.

It's an odd-numbered address, so it will be on my right. And it should be here pretty quick. Marijuana leaf. I hope I didn't miss it. Red neon should be fairly prominent. I doubt I could accidentally walk by something like that.

Sweat is creeping down into my eyes, from my brow, and it's burning. And the fumes from all of the delivery trucks—which there seem to be thousands of—are making my stomach turn. I feel like I need shots. Like I might imbibe a lifetime's amount of carcinogens in my blood, just from this one little trip.

And just as I'm about to start backtracking, I see a ten-foot tall glowing marijuana leaf. Just like Ricky said. Glancing at the yellow page, now moist enough that you can read both sides of the paper without turning it over, I see the black ink. And I hope that she can answer some of my questions.

I notice a small sign, carved on a rectangular piece of what might have been driftwood.

***MS. JOSEPHINE***  
***Psychic/Channeler/Spiritual Advisor***

I place the sweat-moist yellow page in my generic jean pocket and reach for the door when it opens rather suddenly. A short chubby black woman stares up at me with large honey-colored eyes and a strange look of recognition.

Startled, I said, "I was trying to find, to talk to, um, Ms. Josephine?"

She studied me for a moment, looking me up and down—a lot like those doctors did. She cocked her head to the side, her rope of bead necklaces rolling and folding over each other as the beads made little noises. She had on a black dress with strange green and blue squiggles on it.

I could smell incense, and there were candles burning somewhere nearby. It was just the way I imagined it might be. At least, from standing at the threshold, looking into the relative darkness. And then she nodded, extending her chubby little arms, and said, "Come in, Jack. I've been expecting you for six months."

## CHAPTER 2

### *MS. JOSEPHINE'S, DEEP ELLUM.*

She walked me in without saying another word. Instantly all of the smells of the outside—the trucks, the trash, the sweltering concrete and runny tar that filled in the cracks in the road—all of it was gone in a flash. Replaced with the spice of cinnamon, vanilla, jasmine, and even the faint hint of some kind of berry floating in from somewhere.

This store, if in fact it is a store, is dark and cramped. It seems like the only source of light is the flicker of an occasional candle here and there. You can almost see books and small sculptures. There are lanterns, sticks, straw hats, and other more difficult to describe objects. It could be located in Somalia, this tiny store. Or in some jungle in the Congo. Dallas was gone.

This was, if I had to put one word on it . . . voodoo. But even that's not enough.

There were several rows of strange books and new-age objects. And as we walked by I caught some of the titles:

*The Other World.*

*Land of Shadows.*

*Walking Among the Dead.*

Yeah, all of it feel-good stuff. In the background, as we approached a round wooden table near the back of the shop, I noticed that there were lots of little trinkets. Pieces of wood and clay, bent into strange shapes. And Ms. Josephine must have sensed that I was curious, because she started, stopped, and nodded.

“Dose are spiritual barrier-markers,” she said in a soft voice. And there was just a very clear French accent in her words. Creole, maybe.

“Do you need those?” I asked. “I mean, *why* do you need those?”

She continued tugging me to the small round table. In the center was a metal ashtray of some kind. There were several small burning chunks of something, and lines of smoke rising gently, twisting and turning around each other until they dissipated above. I've never been in a jungle, but this is what I imagine it might smell like right before you meet the witch doctor. I half expected to see a bubbling cauldron or shrunken heads.

“ . . . oh, we don't 'ave nothin' like dat, 'ere, Jack,” she said as if my thoughts were something she could read out of the air.

I had this uneasy feeling that I would never look at the world the same way after this. Like I was crossing some imaginary line. A line that I would never be able to uncross.

“How do you know my name?” I asked, feeling a bit naked around her.

She sat down on a rickety old chair that looked like it was made by children. *Blind* children. She motioned her thick fingers for me to do the same. And when we were both down in our squeaky groaning chairs, she placed her hands—palms down—on top of the table.

“I bet you 'ave a lot of questions you want me to answer,” she said, blinking her big, liquidy eyes at me.

Strangely, I felt safe with her. Almost like she was a teacher, or a relative. Someone I could confide in. I'm not sure why I felt like this. But I sense this warmth about her.

“Did Ricky tell you I was coming over, today?” I asked. “Is this some kind of little joke you guys will have at my expense? I don't mind if it is. I like a good laugh like the next mental patient. This whole—”

“Jack,” she interrupted, “. . . you need to relax and listen to what I am goin' to tell you.”

“I am relaxed,” I blurted anxiously. “I'm good. Ready to listen. Hundred-percent open to your explanation.” My eyes danced around at all of the 'spiritual barriers'.

She tapped her hands on the table, raising her eyebrows at my hands. I sighed, and placed my hands on the table. At this point in the game, there was no point in playing the skeptic. I came here for answers . . .

“. . . and dat's what you goin' get,” Ms. Josephine said.

Again, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, her words answered my thoughts. I nodded. “Okay, okay.” I took a deep breath, and let my shoulders hang.

She smiled at me, “Good, Jack. You're doin' really good. Sometimes it takes people two or tree visits just to get demselves comfortable enough to listen. To *see*. Da way we goin' do dis is simple. You ask one question. And if I can answer it, I will. Den I will ask a question. And you got to do da same. Dere are no secrets 'ere. And if you 'ide tings from me—”

“I won't,” I interjected. “I mean, you'd already know anyway, right?”

She laughed, sending the thin lines of smoke tumbling in all different directions. “Alright, you first.”

I cleared my throat. Be smart. Be like Detective Todd Steele. Ask the most logical, most reasonable, questions first.

“How do you know my name?”

“Your friend, Ricky.”

I nailed that one.

She continued, "... 'e talked to me about you a few months ago. February, if I remember right. 'e's takin' a likin' to you. Really wants to see you get out of dis intact."

Something about that seemed ominous. *Get out of this intact?* I nodded slowly. Okay, so Ricky made some calls. So far, nothing I can't live with. He's a young kid, and young kids seek answers in unlikely places. Idealistic youth and all that.

"Now," she said. "My question. What's your last memory ... before it all went dark?"

I considered her question for a while, just staring at the lines of grey smoke as they wiggle and vibrate to unseen forces.

"Truth is, I don't remember anything. I just, I've got this sound in my head. Like a ... like a hammer smashing down on a large anvil. Or, a bat hitting a baseball. That *crack* sound. That's it.

"And then it's just darkness and flashes of bright light. Which, I've been explained by the doctors, was just bits and pieces of the medical procedures as I went in and out of consciousness. Probably some random neurons firing, too. Brain chemistry reacting to trauma." I shrugged. "Just the noise. That's as far back as it gets."

Her fingers lifted and lowered as if she was playing the piano, or typing on some computer. She closed her eyes for a moment, and started to gently rock back and forth. I half expected the ashtray to spark up, or a bright flash of light, or something. But no. She just rocked back and forth for a minute or so and then opened her eyes.

She had beautiful eyes. Unique in a way that I can't put into words. Like they had been drawn by a great artist. They were too vivid. Like there was a tiny universe inside each one of them.

"My turn?"

"Yes, Jack."

"Okay," I closed my eyes for a moment, "... can I ever get my life back? My memories? Are they gone forever, like the doctors keep telling me?"

"Dat's many questions," she said. And before I could reply she continued, "... but I tink I can answer you. Your memories, and your old life, dem doctors is right. Dey are all gone, forever. You won't never get your old life back."

That was just about the biggest letdown of the century. My body slumped forward, as my eyes lowered.

"But," she added, her voice lower than before, "... just 'cause somethin' is lost, don't mean we can't find it in other places."

I looked up, my eyes narrow and confused.

"You see, while your old life is gone, and your brain is broken, dat don't mean nothin' on da other side."

Stay logical. Be an investigator. Remain objective about all of this. “So, my memories are all gone, but you can get them back?”

“I can't do nothin', Jack. But I can show you da way. But dat path, it's a path dat is very dangerous. A journey dat you may not want to take. Cause it's one of dose tings dat, once you start it, you can't ever stop. Not until it's all over.”

“I'm confused.”

She nodded. “Okay, child, tink of it like dis. Your memories, dey's like a computer. Your computer got broken a bit. Messed-up your memory. But when you were using it, all of dose times before your accident, you were sending copies out. So dere is another copy of your memory, somewhere.”

“Somewhere . . . where?” I asked, knowing that this was about to get uncomfortable.

“De other side,” she said softly.

“The *other* side?”

She leaned forward, placing her hands on mine. They were warm. And her touch—human touch—felt good. I could feel her trying to empathize with me.

“Dere is another place, between dis world and da next. Your memories, and da details of your entire life, dey's dere.”

“Can you get them?”

“No, child. I can't.”

“You can't, like, *channel* them or something. I mean, you're a psychic, right? You call up the dead and talk to them.”

“I'm a channel, yes. I don't feel tings da same way as others might. But we's different.” She lifted her fingers briefly, kind of shrugging with her hands. “Psychics are like professional athletes, we're all playing on da same field, but we 'ave different skills.”

“What are *your* skills?” I asked, still unsure where this was all going. I hoped she wasn't going to ask me for money. Not that I wouldn't have paid, but that I only have a twenty-dollar bill, and what's left over from the bus ride and a Double Quarter-pounder with cheese.

“What I do is commune wit da dead,” she said matter-of-factly. “I try to 'elp people dat are stuck in limbo. People dat can't move on. I try to 'elp dem. Sometimes it means talking to deir children or deir parents. Other times, I just listen to dem. Let dem explain tings dey could never admit when dey was livin'. I'm a friend to da departed who can't transcend.”

I wanted to ask her so many questions, but the one that kept repeating behind my eyes was, “Where are they? These people who are stuck, where are they stuck?”

“Dey's stuck in a place very nearby.”

She stared at me for a moment, and then a slight grin appeared on her face as she cocked her head to the side and squinted. “‘ave you started seeing dem yet?”

Them. The shadows. The things that run around when I'm falling asleep. The little creatures that form from the darkness, and lurk among us. I didn't have to answer. Ms. Josephine seemed to already know.

“And when do you see dem?” she asked, her hands gripping mine more firmly than before.

My mouth and throat were suddenly quite dry. “When I'm tired, mostly. Right as I fade off to sleep, and sometimes when I'm waking-up. That's when the hallucinations come.”

“Dose are *not* dreams, child. Dose are da dead. Da wandering souls. Dose dat can't move on. And other, darker tings, too.”

I didn't really know how to respond. I'm either going crazy, or she is, or we both are . . . or neither of us are. I actually hoped it was one of the first three. That I could deal with. I can stomach brain disorder. I can palate dysfunction based on severe trauma to the head. I can deal with stress-related dementia.

What I don't want to hear is that the things I see are real. I want something I can take a pill for. I want an answer that can be cured by 20 cc's of this, or three milligrams of that. Electroshock? Sign me up. You want me to stand in front of a group of strangers and tell them I was touched in inappropriate ways by my uncle? No problem. I'll do whatever it takes to be rational. For this to be sane.

*Anything* but this.

There are no ghosts in Todd Steele novels. The dead don't commune with the living. Shadows don't jump out from behind doorways and gather around sick people, waiting for something to happen. Things that you can't see don't scream at you to look away.

No, none of these things ever happened to Todd Steele.

“Ms. Josephine,” I asked, “. . . can you see them, too?”

“No, child. Not like you can. Whatever 'appened to you, it opened a doorway to da other side. I can 'ear dem. I can even talk to dem. But you . . . you can see dem. And my guess is, dey can see you too. Dey's goin' try and communicate with you, sooner or later. It's only a matter of time. And when dey do, you 'ad better be prepared.”

“And how do I do that?”

She patted my hands several times and then backed away, standing slowly. I could tell by the way she stood, that she was aching.

“Are you alright?”

“Oh, dat's just my old bones lettin' me know who's boss.”

She didn't look older than forty. Fifty tops. And her skin was clean, her face energetic and powerful. She seemed healthy.

Again, with her parlor trick, she replied, "Oh, I'm much older dan fifty, child."

"Really?"

She smiled as she walked to a small doorway that was almost hidden from the front of the shop. Several strings of plastic beads clicked and clacked together as she disappeared into another room. A minute later she appeared again, holding a dusty leather-bound book. It looked about a hundred years old, with yellowed pages.

"Much older dan dat," she said as she laid it down in front of me.

I looked up. "What is this?"

"I want you to go back to da 'ospital and read dis. I want you to understand what you're gettin' yourself into. When you're done readin' it, you bring it back and you can give me your answer."

"I need to pursue this," I insisted. "Nothing is going to change my mind."

I told her how I needed to know what happened. Who I was. What I was. I told her that there might be a family out there—a mother, or children—looking for their father. People might be counting on me. And I suddenly disappeared. For them, and for me . . . I needed to follow this as far as it takes me.

"Read da book, child," she said, patting me on the shoulder. "And when you're done, we'll talk about it."

I opened the book and noticed that it was in some language I didn't know. And actually, it was in a language I had never even seen before. "What is this?" It was all sorts of dots and swirls and scribbles. It looked alien, or nonsensically childish.

She laughed politely, ". . . you know dis language, even if you don't remember it. Da pages read from bottom to top, and from right to left. Give it a little time and you'll read it better dan da *Dallas Mornin' News*. You've got da sight now. It's your choice if you use it." And with that she took me by the hand and led me slowly up and out of the shop.

This whole thing was such a whirlwind that I couldn't tell if I was walking, or if we were both floating. Maybe the incense made me high. Maybe pot fumes were drifting in from the head-shop next door. Maybe all of the important connections in my brain were unraveling.

Wires disconnected.

Retarded neurons banging their heads against the insides of my skull.

Lots of maybes and very few certainties.



When we got to the door she took my free hand between both of hers and placed my palm on her head. And I felt something. Almost electric. A vibration. Then she released my hand and her eyes locked with mine.

“Da shadows wit da burning eyes,” she said very seriously, “. . . 'ave dey approached you?”

“No,” I said, a bit unnerved. There was something eerie in her words. “Who are they?”

“You don't never talk to dem. Never. Do you understand me, Jack?”

I nodded, glancing down at the book that suddenly felt very heavy. As if the pages were made of lead.

“Dose . . . dey's looking for people like you. People who can cross. People who can *see*. And dey . . .”

“What, Ms. Josephine? They *what*?”

She shook her head, her eyes glancing nervously around. “Don't you never talk to dem. Dere are tings on da other side dat can be dangerous. Tings dat will do a lot more dan run around in da darkness of night. Da ones with da red eyes, you'll 'ear dem by deir screams. 'orrible screams.”

I swallowed deeply. “I've heard screams.”

“Den you don't 'ave as much time as I tought.” She opened the door, rushing me outside, “Go now, Jack! Read dat book and come back to me da second you're finished. Your world is about to change.”

And as I walked out into the street, the sun was gone. Clouds had taken over the sky. The temperature had dropped from the 80s, to what felt like the 50s. Night was only a couple of hours away.

And I didn't want to be out when the monsters came.

## CHAPTER 3

### *R.H. DEDMEN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL.*

#### *LATER THAT EVENING . . .*

I didn't eat much that night. My stomach was twisted in about a thousand knots. And when I finally sat down to look at the book, all I saw were scribbled pages, empty of anything I could understand. I tried looking at it in different colored lights. From different angles. Even got real close to it and breathed on it, giving the bottom of the first page a hot liquidy breath. Blank, nothing more than old, crinkled egg-white paper . . . with squiggles. I rented *National Treasure I* and *II*, but that didn't even help.

The book looked old and valuable. And it had that musty old book smell. The odor of nostalgia and history. But what it didn't seem to have were any words I could recognize. I tried squinting at it for a while, but that just gave me a headache. I even closed the book, and then reopened it, really fast. Like that would make a difference. Todd Steele doesn't have any clever advice for magical old books . . . I checked.

So, I called young Ricky. He sounded like he was eating something when he answered the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Ricky, this is Jack."

"Oh, hey man. What's up? You talk to that psychic chick?"

"Uh . . . yeah," I replied, ". . . she gave me this book and I—"

"Hmmm?" Ricky said.

"I said that she gave me a book. Like a voodoo book or something."

"What's it called?"

And that was a pretty good question, because I had never even thought to ask. "Not sure, hold on a second." I reached across the bed and grabbed the dusty old thing, dragging it back across the bed. "This damn book is heavy," I said as I flipped it back and forth, turning it over onto my thighs. "I don't see a title."

"What kind of book doesn't have a title?" Ricky asked as he chewed on something that made his words bloated.

"She said that it would help me understand what's happening to me."

"You talking about all of those shadow thingies that you keep hallucinating?"

I sure hoped he was right. That would be wonderful if all of this was just me losing my mind. “Yes. Whatever it is I keep seeing. She says they will come more and more. Until I start seeing *other* things.”

“And the book will explain all of it?”

“I guess.”

“I’ll be over in a few minutes,” Ricky said, between chews, “. . . I’m finishing up a little grudge match on-line. This guy from Germany has been talking big shit all week about how he will take me down in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. So I have to put his ass in check.”

“You’re playing a video game?” I asked, thinking that my little ‘*seeing the dead*’ problem wasn’t very high on his list of interesting things.

“He’s stuck in this building, in the south of the city, right now. I’m going to sniper his bitch ass and then I’ll be on my way. Ten minutes, tops.”

*Click.*

And the line was dead. And my head still hurt. And my stomach felt like it had turned inside-out and was being pricked with a hot iron. And really, I’m not sure why I think that Ricky, a 22-year-old nurse who smokes more weed than Cheech-and-Chong is going to be able to help me. I hope I don’t eventually find out that he was my kid.

### ***13 MINUTES LATER . . .***

“Smoked his bitch ass!” Ricky says as he walks into my room. He was wearing baggy tan khakis and a long, red pin-striped sweater. He had a Texas Rangers baseball cap on, covering his shaved head. “Germans can’t fight.”

My place near the hospital is modest, but comfortable. Our tax dollars at work. Think of it like one of those hotel rooms where you can stay for weeks on end. Like where junkies and drug dealers stay so that the government can’t ever snatch them up. There’s a little kitchen nook. A bedroom, with a bathroom so small you can extend your arms and touch both walls.

The living area is in the few feet of space between the kitchen and the bed. Everything is either blue or brown. Blue Formica covers the table and counter tops. Blue carpet, and light blue floor tiles for both the kitchen and bathroom. Brown shelves and furniture. This would probably be like entering the seventh ring of Hell for an interior designer.

And I’ve got a small refrigerator that can hold little more than a meal at a time. It’s almost the same scale as a Barbie Refrigerator. But then, this is just temporary living, until I get on my feet and the hospital caseworker in charge considers me fit enough to have my own place in town.

I've actually got a meeting with my caseworker, Dr. Smith, in a couple of days. I'm supposed to talk to him about how I'm coping. And how my job hunt is going. I probably won't mention any of this *other* stuff to him. Something tells me that it would probably set back my progress . . . at least, in his eyes.

"Is that the book?" Ricky says as he drags his feet across the carpet, leaving little Ricky trails in his wake.

I nod, lifting the thing towards him. He reached out and took it, and his skinny arms almost buckled. "Geez! What's this made out of . . . lead?"

I laughed, "That's what I said."

He sat down on a small brown stool that might actually be a coffee table, we're still not certain. He laid the book on his thighs and opened it delicately, using just the tips of his fingers to lift the cover.

The book was covered in a dark, leathery material. "Think this is, like, dried human flesh or something like that?" He lowered his head and studied the inside of the cover. "What language is it written in? It looks kind of like Arabic."

He looked up, "I took a course in Middle-eastern studies. This could be some old terrorist propaganda. They do that, you know."

I shrugged. "Ms. Josephine said that I would be able to read it soon enough. But I've been staring at the first page for over an hour and it still looks like nonsense."

"Maybe there's a key," Ricky said, slowly turning the pages. "Lot's of old books have keys."

I pointed to the bottom of the page, "Ms. Josephine told me that it's read from the bottom up, and from the right to the left."

"That makes sense, I guess."

"What part of any of that makes sense?" I said as I frowned.

He closed the book. "It's something that they don't want people reading. Whatever it says, the people who wrote it thought it was a secret. Thus the absence of a title, and any other instructions about its use."

He handed the book to me, almost struggling, and leaned his head back. "You know, maybe it's music. Do you know anything about music?"

I know that I like some of it, and hate most of it, I told him. Country music makes me feel like taking prescription medicine until I can't see straight. Rap makes me want to do a drive-by. All the other stuff they call rock, I'm not even sure about that. I like jazz. Just jazz.

Ricky smiled, his eyes lighting up, "I took a class on music appreciation. And sheet music follows a system, just like the written word."

"I've lost my memory, Ricky. I'm not retarded."

"Yeah, yeah. But listen . . . not all people write music in the same way. Think about tribes in the jungles of Africa, or South America. They don't read sheet music, so they find other ways to record their music, like dots and squiggles and shit. Maybe this is that."

I sighed, "You think my magical, no-name book is musical notes?"

Ricky crossed his arms, "Look, Jack, I'm just trying to think this all through. Like an investigator would. I'd think you would be a tad bit more open-minded about all of this. You did just wake-up with your memory erased. You're the one seeing ghosts and shit. Anything is possible."

I crossed my arms, realizing that he was right. I was getting frustrated and it was clouding my judgment. "Okay. So, if I can't read it, and we can't find what language it's written in, well . . . then what?"

"The Morgue," Ricky said, his eyes wide as he nodded slowly.

I squinted at him. "What in the hell are we going to learn at the morgue?"

He stood up and walked to my balcony door, peering out into the night. "That's where the dead people go. So, if we go there, there should be a shitload of spirits floating around, or whatever. Maybe the book would work there."

He turned back toward me, holding his hospital ID in his left hand, fanning it back and forth, "And . . . I can get us in. Probably wouldn't even be that busy right now."

That was the most ridiculous idea that he had come-up with yet. This was quickly deteriorating into an epic waste of time. For sure, we would both be less capable adults when all of this was over. What was next?

Dungeons and Dragons?

Japanese Animal Pornography?

Finger painting with mustard?

No, all of this was getting too creepy. Sane people don't engage in this kind of behavior. I should know, I've been taking a class on *Integration with Society*. I'm going to end up one of those losers who works in a comic book shop, instructing teenagers on what issue of Super-Mutant Fish is the best.

"So," Ricky pressed, ". . . what do you think?"

I'll get my jacket.

## CHAPTER 4

### *R.H.D. MEMORIAL, MORGUE . . .*

Of all the crazy things that I've ever done—at least, that I can remember from the last nearly five months—I can't recall doing anything as dark and morose as this.

Ricky walked us in, smiling at this thin blond girl at the reception desk. She smiled back in such a way that I knew there was more going on there. He whispered something to her, and then we walked on by. We headed toward the Emergency Room where, thankfully, there was not a lot of activity.

"It's a good design, keeping the morgue close to the ER," Ricky said under his breath. "Less work for the orderlies and interns."

We walked down several glossy-floored hallways that smelled like they had a fresh coat of bleach on them. It was stinging my eyes it was so prominent.

Ricky seemed to notice me squinting, "Bleach kills everything."

"Even walking shadows?" I miffed.

He shrugged, "Maybe."

We continued on down the long, hallway, our bodies reflected in the shiny white linoleum tiles. I could see our green scrubs rolling in front of us. Ricky had gotten the scrubs from the back of his black SUV. He had all sorts of expensive-looking stuff back there. Stuff they probably didn't *give* him.

A couple of doctors walked past, not even noticing us. Like we didn't exist. We were as inconsequential to them as lonely molecules floating through the cold dark universe. The caste system is still very much alive and well in America's hospitals.

Ricky played it cool, as always. And soon we were turning left and heading down a shorter, darker hallway. "The morgue is like a big refrigerator," he said. "To keep the bodies in a sterile environment. All sorts of concerns in a place like this."

"Like what?" I asked as we approached a large set of double doors.

He slid his card into the magnetic strip reader and a small green light flickered a few times. The double doors opened slowly as if by magic.

" . . . disease and pathogens getting accidentally spread. Decay of the bodies—before and after autopsy. Contamination of the testing machinery. The whole thing is clean. Actually," Ricky said

as we approached a large, baby-blue door, "it's cleaner than the average kitchen table. You could eat off of the floor of a morgue."

"Not that you'd want to."

Ricky nodded, "Right," as he slid his card into another strip-reader. There was an audible click and the door opened.

As we walked in I felt a cold chill swallow up my body. The only part of me that was warm was my stomach, where the book was hidden underneath my t-shirt.

"So, how should we do this?" I asked as I got out the book.

Ricky held up a warning finger as he walked around the room looking in the different offices and small hallways. On the floor, there were checker-boarded black and white tiles. All of the machines were different shades of polished metal, some brighter and more reflective than others. The room had a sharp, pointy feel to it. Like, at any second some guy wearing a leather mask was going to come in with a huge knife in his hand and start hacking at the dead.

This whole place felt surreal. In the large room beyond this one, there were several square doors on the wall. Each one of them had an index card with some printed text on it.

Ricky walked out from that room, thumbing me to follow him. "This is the *Body Farm*, in here."

How cute.

I reluctantly walk forward, entering the room with all of the cadavers. My nose was getting desensitized to the bleach sting, so the smell wasn't as bad. But it was colder in this room. Ricky pulled up a couple of heavy black vinyl chairs and drug them to the center of the room, near a large stainless-steel table that had little troughs cut along the edges.

"That's where the magic happens," Ricky said. "Maybe we should put the book on there and try reading it?"

I shrugged. Why not? I lifted the heavy thing up and placed it in the center of the examination/autopsy table. I got this feeling that I was violating something sacred. I felt like someone was going to burst in on us at any moment. I needed to get my mind collected and calm.

"So tell me, what happens here?" I asked. I'd read about places like this. Seen a few on television, but I'd never been anywhere near one. Something told me that I could definitively scratch *doctor* off of my list of possible jobs in my erased past-life.

"Well, this is where we perform the Autopsy. Also referred to as *necropsy*, *postmortem*, or *postmortem examination*. It is basically a dissection and examination of a dead body and its organs and structures to determine cause-of-death. In addition, we also observe the effects of disease, and establish the sequences of changes and thus confirm the evolution mechanisms of disease progression and processes."

“You have to remember all of that to be a nurse?”

“No,” Ricky laughed, “. . . you have to learn that shit to become a doctor.”

“You went to med school? I didn't know that,” I said, wondering what happened. Wondering if it was drugs, or girls, or video games about drugs and girls that stifled his education.

He nodded, his eyes looking off into the past, “Yeah . . . lots of money. Lots of time. Very little fun. I burnt out. I started med school when I was nineteen.”

That's young, I said.

He explained that he used to be something of a prodigy, but somewhere along the way, whether it was his parents pressuring him, or his friends needling him, he just quit. Said, *no more*. And went to nursing school.

“The first real dissections, to study disease, happened around three hundred, B.C. This Alexandrian physician Herophilus and his partner Erasistratus were the first. But it wasn't until *Galen*—a Greek physician—in the late second century, A.D., who was the first to correlate the patient's symptoms and signs—you know, complaints—with what was found upon examining the *affected part of the deceased*.”

He tapped his fingers delicately on the shiny, metal examination table. “And that, my memory-challenged friend, is what eventually led to the autopsy. It signifies a great progression in modern medicine.”

“You're actually smart,” I said, not trying to sound surprised.

“Oh, I'm a stoner, now. But I used to be a real Doogie Howser.”

“What's a Doogie Howser?” I asked, not sure if this was another one of his trendy terms.

“Never mind,” Ricky said as he shook his head. “Open the book and see if it makes sense, now.”

And for the next 30 minutes we looked from all manner of angles, with all kinds of squints from every direction. Nothing. It still looked like a bunch of nonsense. We found ourselves sitting in those vinyl chairs, leaning back, yawning. The room had it's own sound. A kind of low buzzing.

“What do they do next?” I asked, breaking the frustrated monotony. My head was hurting again, and I was tired. This was all a waste of time, so I figured I'd try to enjoy the moment. In a morgue.

“Next?”

“. . . during the autopsy?” I reminded him.

He kicked his legs up on the examination table, his arms folded behind his head as he leaned back in his chair. “First thing is an examination of the exterior for any abnormality or trauma. You have to make a careful description of the interior of the body and its organs. Then, depending on how much time you have, you do an examination of the cells and tissue under a microscope.



“The next thing is the main incision. For the torso, a Y-shaped incision is made. Each upper limb of the 'Y' extends from either the armpit or the outer shoulder and is carried beneath the breast to the bottom of the sternum. You cut to the breastbone, in the midline. And there's really not that much blood like you'd think. None left. They've sucked it all out.”

He stood slowly, leaning forward over the table, as if there was a body in front of him. “From that point, at the bottom of the sternum, the incision is continued down to the lower abdomen where the groins meet in the genital area. Sometimes you get a model that overdosed. If you know what I mean?” he said, raising his eyebrows up and down several times.

That's gross.

“That's nature, pal. Even dead chicks have nice bodies. Well, until you start cutting on them. Some morticians actually got charges pressed on them for, um,” he tip-toed around the words, “. . . *inappropriately* manipulating the bodies.”

I sat up, “What kind of person does that?”

“A lonely person,” he sighed. “Anyway, listen. Depending on where you went to school, the procedure changes a bit. In one method, each organ is removed separately for incision and study.

“But . . . in the *en masse* methods, the chest organs are all removed in a single group and all of the abdominal organs in another, for later examination. The great vessels to the neck, head, and arms are ligated—which is, um, tied-off, basically. The organs are removed as a unit for dissection. The neck organs are explored *in situ* only, or removed from below.”

“In situ?” I asked.

“Where they stand. Then the dissection proceeds. They usually go from the back, except where certain case specific findings may warrant a variation. Every death is a little different, especially when there is a lot of trauma involved. So if the body is mangled, you have to adjust. Go with the flow.”

“Doesn't that make you sick to your stomach? I'm getting nauseated just imagining it.”

Ricky laughed, “No, man. I mean, maybe at first. But then it's like your not even cutting on a person. It's just a thing. An object. A piece of meat.”

A thing.

An object.

A piece . . . of meat.

That's what we all are once we die. Kind of a depressing reality. Even as our body is cooling, we are nothing more than a mound of flesh, numbered and catalogued by some lonely morticians who might or might not touch you *inappropriately*. Makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

“Anyway, all of those organs are removed, in groups, so that they can study the functional relationships. The human body is fascinating. But it's not really that complex, once you take apart a few of them. So then we study the brain, in position. Once the notes are made, and all of this is being videoed, of course—”

“Of course.” My stomach was crawling around near my neck, tickling me with bile.

“... then we free the brain attachments and remove the whole thing. You can, depending on the cause of death, remove the spinal cord, too. Just depends.”

“And that's that,” I added, standing from the chair, feeling something strange.

Ricky looked up at me, “No, Jack. Then we study the external and cut surface of each and every organ. We look at its vascular structures, including arteries ...”

And as he's talking I see something in the back corner of the room start to grow from the shadow of a small metal table. It's actually darker than the shadow of the table, cast by the florescent overhead lights. It's about four feet tall, slightly bent at the waist, with stubby little arms and long curled fingers.

“... lymphatics, fascial or fibrous tissue, and nerves ...”

This *thing* starts to creep towards the wall where all of the cadavers are resting. Where each body has its own metal bed. This dark thing ... it's searching for something specific. It wants for something. And this shadow, it definitely has form. It's three-dimensional.

“... specimens are taken for culture, chemical analysis, and other—” and Ricky's words trail off as he looks at me looking at something behind him. “What are you looking at, Jack?”

My eyes glance over at Ricky briefly, and then back to the shadow that has now made his way to the far side of the body farm. I whisper, “No ... nothing ... I think I'm just tired, and ...” And even as I'm speaking I realize that my words don't make sense. My mumbling has only made Ricky that much more apprehensive.

“If I turn around, will I see anything?” he asks with a whisper.

I half shrugged, my eyes still watching the shadow do its inspection. It was crawling in and out of the different body drawers, I suppose to give the cadavers a firsthand inspection.

Ricky turned slowly, as if he might spook whatever it is I was looking at. And as he turned, I noticed another one stalk past us, paying us no mind. It headed toward the body that the first one was taking interest in.

Ricky squinted, looking in the general direction I had been. “Where is it?”

“*They*,” I whispered as silently as I could. “There's a couple of them, now. They are taking a keen interest in one of the bodies on the right. Second column, third body up.”

“I don't see anything,” Ricky said.

“That's because you're sane. And I'm turning into a lunatic.”

“You're lucky,” he said reverently, as if he would have traded anything in the world to have my eyes at that moment.

I can't imagine anything less lucky than this. This is something that will ruin whatever life I have to live. Hell, it might be the reason I'm messed-up to begin with. How do I know I wasn't some ghost hunter? Some paranormal investigator? A misguided priest performing exorcisms?

And even though he couldn't see them—three of them, now—he felt something. Maybe he just felt my terror radiating outward. There was no doubt in his mind that there were things going on around us that science and med school couldn't explain. And so the two of us, Ricky and I, just stood there watching. I realized that I was shaking, too. Not a Todd Steele reaction, I know.

And we stood there, as if time had stopped.

Just him and me . . . and these little spooks.

Two things.

Two objects.

Two pieces of warm meat.

And in as calm a voice as I could muster, I said, “I'm not lucky, Ricky . . . I'm cursed.

## CHAPTER 5

### *MCDONALD'S, NORTH DALLAS . . .*

We hadn't spoken much since the whole, spooky little shadow creatures incident. I wasn't sure if he thought I was losing my mind, or if I was really seeing something that he couldn't. Ricky waited until I said the spooks were gone before he walked towards the body. I pointed out the correct cadaver, not wanting to get anywhere near it. I wasn't so much scared, as bothered by the fact that I was fully awake when I saw them.

Before, since that first time after I woke-up, they only came as I was in those delirious calm stages that come before you fall asleep, and just as you awaken. Those moments where time and space and life don't matter. Those elongated seconds where you can kind of hear your environment, but you don't have the physical prowess to interact with it.

Like being paralyzed.

Like being a semi-responsive vegetable.

A computer, in sleep mode.

So it was time to get some food. I needed to eat warm things with lots of taste and cholesterol. We ended up at McDonald's.

Ricky turns to me, handing me those small ketchup packets that are marked 'Fancy', and he's chewing so much of his cheeseburger that his cheeks are puffed out like a blowfish. He says, "Let's assume that you see what you claim to have seen." He let the words linger.

I nodded as I squeezed a line of fancy ketchup near my burger. We were sitting on the hood of his black SUV, our legs dangling far above the hot pavement. I can't even imagine how much money it costs to fill this thing up. I suspect that Ricky has money coming in from other places, and I don't dare ask about it.

"Why, then, do you think they were interested in a dead traffic cop?"

The body they had been looking at, that particular corpse had belonged to a Dallas Police Officer who had been working faithfully as a traffic cop for six years. When he was giving some poor schmuck a ticket, a moving van had clipped him from behind. Officer John Farlow was pretty much dead on contact. One second he's scribbling down a traffic infraction, the next second the lights go out . . . forever.

So, in answer to the question, I have no earthly idea what the spooks might want with him. I ate more fries, wondering if there was anything on this planet that rivaled the McDonald's fry in

the sheer amount of pleasure they bestow, compared to the time it takes to get your hands on them. No matter where in the world you go, Ronald has a bag full of hot fries, just waiting for you. If there's a heaven—a concept I'm just now starting to contemplate—they probably have a McDonald's at the corner.

My mouth full, my hands kind of greasy, I say, “Maybe he was a bad cop?”

Ricky took another bite of his second burger. He had purchased three. Don't even ask me how a skinny guy like him eats that many burgers. It doesn't make sense that he can even fit all that in his stomach. I should be able to see the outline of at least one of those burgers in his belly.

“Do you see them often? I mean, more than before?” Ricky asked casually as if we were discussing the weather.

I swallowed, cleared my throat, and took a sip of Dr. Pepper and something flashed in front of my eyes that I hadn't remembered until just that moment. “*Whoa!*”

“What?” he said, turning towards me, his mouth hanging open a bit.

I told him that I just saw something. A memory that I hadn't known about. He was quiet, letting me make sense of it. And it started to come back. It was gooey, as if I was watching a grainy video of the event. A taped image, copied a thousand times. Each time getting darker and more twisted.

But it was me.

## CHAPTER 6

*POST-ACCIDENT, DAY 1.*

*RECOVERY ROOM, 9:36 AM . . .*

The first flashes of light, they startled me. They shook me, and I began to shiver. I knew nothing. I was a blank sheet. An empty book with no title, no beginning, no ending. Nothing.

All around me were bright, blurry lights. I couldn't hear anything, but I felt like something was missing. Something important. It was my heartbeat . . . there wasn't one.

People—doctors I guess—were racing around me, doing all sorts of important, medical things. There were needles, and paddles, and yelling, but I didn't feel any of that. I felt something else. Like somebody was tugging on me. And right in front of my face, these dark masses were looming. Like someone was sitting on my chest.

My mind couldn't make sense of it. Something was draped in front of me, blocking my vision. And the doctors and nurses, they didn't seem to pay it any mind. Something was sitting on my chest and they didn't even notice.

And then I realized that I was paralyzed. I couldn't breathe. I had no control over my body. I didn't have any sensation in my fingers or toes. Just this pressure on my chest. This crushing.

A truck sitting on my ribcage.

Like a million pounds of ice-cold metal flattening the life out of me.

And then it began to come into focus, these dark heavy things. They were moving around purposefully. They had long, thin arms and hunched, thick bodies. They might have been built of smoke. The absence of light. As my eyes struggled to figure out where I was, my mind was scrambling to understand what was happening to me.

*Who am I?* didn't even come into the equation, yet.

These big cold things on my chest, they started to carve at my sternum. They had some sharp things in their hands. Large knives, maybe. Each knife seemed to have two blades, side by side, both of them tearing into my torso. Cutting and cutting and cutting. And there was no blood. Just the repeated stabs.

They just kept on doing this. And the nurses and doctors, they didn't care in the least. Like this was something that happens normally. Like they couldn't even see me being ripped apart.

Strangely, I didn't feel much. The stabs of these knives were cold, and they came so fast in succession, one right after the next, that I didn't have time to feel the pain. Slice after slice, they cut deeper.

And then, without warning, they began tugging at me; tugging at my insides. Pulling me inside out. They yanked, and I felt myself being ripped free of my body, an inch at a time. I watched as I was pulled away from my eyes. Watching from inside my body, looking at the inside of my face disappear. I'm seeing the parts of my body that only my Dallas blood, and morticians, ever get to see.

I saw my head, my teeth and nose . . . all of it from the inside. And I fell, down my spine, towards my chest. And then, somehow, I could see the bright lights of the room again. Above this giant opening in my chest, I saw four long, clawed hands reaching for me. Trying to free me from the constraints of my body. No eyes, no voices, just sharp claws and long, bony fingers.

Those arms and fingers, they were like the appendages of insects—thin until their joints, where they thickened briefly, until the next joint. Like the arms of spiders, were each thin sharp finger. And they wanted me. They wanted to remove me from this body. And just as I felt myself being tugged away . . .

. . . it all suddenly stopped. And I fell back into my body, crashing into my head. And my eyes were rolling dizzily. And my head hurt in a way I will never be able to comprehend. Sounds started coming back.

Beeping.

Some woman barking muffled orders that my mind couldn't interpret.

This pain in my head that felt like being kicked a thousand times by a horse. And as the tears poured from my eyes, and my throat began to feel choked and constrained, I could see that they were gone. Those beings that had been sitting on my chest, cutting at me. They were gone. Their spider arms, and their knives, and their sharp fingers, all of it was gone.

And the first thing I did was look at my chest. I couldn't turn my head, but my eyes were free to move. And my chest . . . it was . . . it was fine. Nothing at all.

No gaping wound.

No giant gash.

My body wasn't turned inside out.

A young woman with dark hair and the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen—I think—wiped my face with a cool towel. And she smiled, “You're going to be just fine. Just try and relax, okay.”

Her accent was distinctly Southern. And the only thing that I knew for sure, was that I knew absolutely nothing. I had no starting point. No moorings. No frame of reference.

“Can you tell me your name, sir?” she said, her face soft and tanned. She continued to wipe my forehead and cheeks with the cool cloth.

“Do you remember your name?” she insisted in such a wonderfully sweet voice.

I tried to say, no, but the blackness overcame me before the words made their way to the surface. And as I faded off, I knew something was wrong. Things were not balanced. For reasons I may never be able to explain, I knew that there were doors open to me that should not be. My body had made a call to some other place, but it never hung up.

I was still connected to this place that I shouldn't be. And that line, it wasn't dead. It wasn't empty. On the other end of the line . . . things were listening.

***MCDONALD'S.***

***MOMENTS LATER...***

When I finished telling Ricky about this, he didn't have much to say. Nothing constructive, anyway.

“You're either some kind of psychic phenomenon,” he said as he finished his burger, “. . . or you're as crazy as a shithouse rat in a rubber factory.” He shrugged. “Six in one hand, half dozen in the other.”

Thanks for the vote of confidence, *buddy*.

Twenty minutes later I was lying down, staring up at the bumpy landscape of the ceiling in my apartment. Like looking at the moon from an orbiter. I'm seeing the way satellites might see. And the whole time I'm floating above this strange terra, this other tingly feeling vibrates through me.

I'm half hoping *they* wouldn't show up. But kind of hoping that they will. I'm not a spook junkie, or anything like that. But the adrenaline I feel pulsing through my body when they're creeping and crawling around . . .

There's nothing like it that I've experienced. But then, I'm not quite five-months-old, yet. So I have a lot of growing up to do.



## CHAPTER 7

*DALLAS PUBLIC LIBRARY.*

*THURSDAY MORNING, 8:11 AM. . .*

I decided that I needed to do some research on this odd book of mine. The book that still didn't make any sense. I swear, if Ricky and this Ms. Josephine are messing with me, I'm gonna take a hostage.

Anyway, Ricky has this bright idea to go to the public library and let the *real* research begin. I've been to the tiny room that the hospital calls a library, but this was completely different. The Dallas Public Library is the real deal. There must be about a million books in this place. Ricky, wisely, put a plastic bag around the book, and headed over to the '*Help/Information*' desk.

A tall, gaunt man who looked like his skin was as thin as plastic wrap peered over his thick glasses. His eyes were huge in the lenses—which looked thick enough to see the surface of Mars. His big bulging eyes blinked a couple of times, and you could almost hear them.

*Blink-blink.*

"We have a rare book, here," Ricky says, lifting the plastic bag onto the oatmeal colored counter top. The counter and the man with the big eyes, they were both the same color. He could be a chameleon.

The man used his right index finger to push his glasses back to his eyes. He leaned in, and with a long, almost English accent he said, "And I presume that this is the volume to which you are referring." He sounded smart. That accent, his glasses, it all made him look like I imagine a very intelligent person would look.

Ricky glanced at me, and then pulled the book out of the plastic bag. He laid it down in front of the library guy.

"Oh, how rude of me," the man said, ". . . my name is Rupert."

"I'm Rick Chamberlain the third," Ricky said, and turned to introduce me.

"I'm, uh, Jack. Jack Pagan."

"Cheers gentlemen," he said, dipping his head a few times. Very respectful, this Rupert. His tongue briefly raced across his lips. He was either hungry, anxious, or testing the air like snakes and lizards do. "Now . . . where, pray tell, did you acquire this?"

I told him that there was a death in the family and that it was left to me. I wanted to have it translated, but could not pin down the language. Ricky helped me fill in gaps here and there. And

maybe Rupert bought it. From the look on his face he was much more interested in the book, and its interesting cover and bindings, than in our account of how we got it.

He ran his fingers delicately over the cover. "This is very old, you know." He leaned down, squinting his planetoid eyes. "Is there . . . why yes . . . there is *something* here. A symbol perhaps."

Rupert lifted the book up, staring at it from different angles. "One moment, gentlemen," he said, reaching down into a drawer to find something. He brought up a magnifying glass. One of those that has a small light on the bottom side to illuminate what your studying. He gave the book's dark brown cover a closer inspection as he talked from the side of his mouth.

"Sometimes, you can find a wealth of information about a certain volume just by studying the cover. That is, after all, where the eyes first begin their voyage."

Ricky and I exchanged 'cuckoo' glances, shrugged, and then leaned in conspiratorially.

Rupert continued, "Volumes this old . . . and I assure you that this is several hundred years old . . . they were hand-stitched. Quite a magnificent amount of work, really. Leather," he said, squinting his eyes briefly, " . . . if this is leather, was often used to hold patterns and designs. It's quite sturdy, but over the years the skin has a tendency to flatten, and thus, your image can become almost unreadable."

"Can you see something on the cover?" I asked, finding myself leaning in, standing on my toes to get a better look.

Rupert nodded to himself, and then looked up and Ricky and I. "Gentlemen, I think what we have here is very old. Quite obscure. Would you allow me to make a scan of this cover and send it to the national archives in Washington, D.C.?"

"How long will it take?" Ricky asked, glancing around the library. The place was quite busy for a Thursday morning. Not that I knew what the traffic was like on any other day. I guess I didn't know that this many people liked to read anymore.

Rupert scratched his bony chin with his bony fingers, "I don't imagine it would be more than about an hour for some preliminary results. And while we're waiting, we can run a language search. I assume . . ." he opened the book, thumbing very carefully through the first few pages. "Yes . . . we can use a sample of this for an advanced language search. Who knows . . . we might get lucky?"

I told him to do it, and within seconds we were following tall Rupert to a large computer center on the second floor. There were all sorts of computers and printers, and what looked like a copier—that was explained to me as a high-resolution, flatbed scanner. I didn't tell Rupert that I knew what a scanner was. I kind of liked hearing him talk.

Fifteen minutes later he had scanned the cover of the book, along with several inches of text, and we were waiting for hits to come back on the computer that he referred to as, "*Merlin*," and then giggled.

As we waited, I noticed Ricky looking at the computer equipment, sizing it up. "What?" I asked.

"These puppies are old school. *Way* outdated," Ricky said, almost turning his nose up.

Rupert looked perplexed, "But we had all of these computers put in less than two years ago?"

"That's like a decade in computer-years," Ricky said. "Moore's Law, man."

"What's that?" I asked, prying my way into the conversation.

Rupert crossed his arms defiantly across his chest, "Gordon E. Moore presumed that computer components—transistors in specific—will shrink in size, and double every year. He later revised his presumption to eighteen months. So computer power and capability theoretically grow at an exponential rate every couple of years."

"So what you got two or three years ago . . ." Ricky said with a knowing grin.

". . . is outdated by now," I finished. I knew enough about computers. I read my *Wired* magazine. But if you think about it, everything is outdated, the second you get it.

They both nodded.

I bit my bottom lip, my stomach growling a bit.

And then we heard a few beeps from *Merlin*. Rupert's eyes lit up. "We have a hit, gentlemen. We have a hit!" He raced over and printed out a copy of the text on the screen.

Then, without explanation, he headed out of the computer center, motioning us to follow him with his head. He didn't want to talk. So, we did a lot of fast walking, turning, up some stairs, down a hallway, past two storage rooms, out into another book area, then down another hallway. I was thoroughly, completely lost.

This library was like that cornfield in the *Twilight Zone*, the one you enter, but can never ever, exit . . . ever. But we followed old Rupert. And as we neared an office, he glanced around.

He stopped at a thick, grey door. "This is a special room. A place where we keep some, oh," he searched for the words, ". . . more *controversial* volumes."

Ricky asked him why he considered this book controversial.

"Voodoo, gentlemen. Voodoo."

And with that, he entered a code onto a small keypad near the door handle, and we entered the room. It was a lot larger than hotel room. There were rows and rows of books in locked glass cases.

Rupert explained to us that most of these volumes were very rare, and worth a lot of money to Black Market collectors. They were obscure, hard to find, first and second printings of books that had, at the time, been considered shocking, and blasphemous. Books that went against the Catholic Church. Poetry that spoke of things less than . . . kosher.

“Most of the books in here speak of witchcraft and mischief. The words in these books instruct the readers to practice the darkest of the black arts.” He looked at us with a warning glare, “And don't be fooled, gentlemen. In these volumes there are unspeakable acts and sacrifice and violence. These books spilt blood, be sure of that.”

“So, then,” Ricky asked, “. . . where does our book fit in?”

Rupert continued walking, nodding to himself again as if he was having another discussion inside his head. “Well, we didn't get a hit on the exact language . . . but we got close. Our software—developed by linguistics experts at MIT—takes the various symbols, and crosses them with details about the production of the volume. And by that I mean the bindings, and cover materials. Designs. What have you. And then it gives you a 'best guess', if you will.”

He walked over to a small glass-covered cabinet and tapped his finger on top, “And the computer's best guess puts us with a section of books on voodoo and the occult, that originated in Haiti.”

“Haiti,” I echoed, as we all kind of let it sink in.

“They eat humans there,” Ricky said. “In Haiti. They call it *Long Pork*. They say it's better than horse meat.”

“You've eaten *horse* meat?” I asked, my stomach turning more than before.

Ricky answered as if I'd asked him the most obvious question in the world. As if I'd asked whether he knew how to swim. “Uh . . . *yeah*.”

Rupert looked visibly rattled, his Adam's apple lifting as he made a hard swallow, and slowly lowering in his thin throat.

“You'd be surprised how good it is,” Ricky added with a hauntingly satisfied grin.

“Perhaps we should take a look at some of these volumes, and see if that helps us to narrow it down,” Rupert said, lowering himself to the lock on the book cabinet.

“Voodoo it is, then,” I said. And I was wondering if the book cover *was* made with leather. Or if it was something else.

Something a little closer to home.

Something like Long Pork.

## CHAPTER 8

*DALLAS PUBLIC LIBRARY.*

8:56 AM . . .

Each book had a protective plastic cover around it, like evidence in a police locker. And with each book was a small notebook with printed information. Some of it was history of the particular texts. Some of it was bits and pieces translated by curious researchers. Slices of the environment in which these documents were originally created. Some notebooks were bigger than others.

“To understand these volumes, gentlemen,” Rupert professed, “. . . one must understand their history.

Haiti doesn't have any official religion. The country's constitution allows for religious freedom but gives special recognition to the Roman Catholic church. More than 60% of the population is Roman Catholic, and about a quarter is Protestant. Since the 1970s some radical priests have espoused *liberation theology*—the theory that God speaks predominately through the poor.

However, most Haitian Roman Catholics are also practitioners of voodoo (*voudou, or vodun*)—a religion whose gods (*loas*) are derived from West African religions. Most of the nation's Protestants consider Christianity to be incompatible with voodoo.

The religion of Voodoo is a creolized religion forged by descendants of *Dahomean, Kongo, Yoruba*, and many other African ethnic groups who had endured enslavement. They were eventually brought to colonial Saint-Dominique (as Haiti was known then) and Christianized by Roman Catholic missionaries in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The word Vodou (Fr.) actually means “spirit” or “deity” in the Fon language of the African kingdom of Dahomey (now Benin). This religion encompasses philosophy, medicine, justice, and religion. Its fundamental principle is that everything is spirit.

Humans are spirits who inhabit the visible world. The unseen world is populated by *Iwa* (spirits), *Myste* (mysteries), *Anvizib* (the invisibles), *Zanj* (angels), and the various spirits of ancestors and the recently departed.

All of these spirits are believed to live in a mythical land called *Ginen*, a cosmic “Africa.” The God of the Christian Bible is understood to be the creator of both the universe and the spirits. The spirits were made by God to help him govern humanity and the natural world.

The primary goal and activity of Voodoo is to *sevi Iwa* (“to serve the spirits”). This is done by offering prayers and performing various devotional rites that are directed at God and particular spirits in return for health, protection, and favor.

Spirit possession plays a very important role in Afro-Haitian religion, as it does in many other religions. During religious rites, believers sometimes enter a trance-like state in which the devotee may eat and drink, perform stylized dances, give supernaturally inspired advice to people, perform medical cures, and execute special physical feats. These acts are supposed to exhibit the incarnate presence of the *Iwa* within the entranced devotee.

“So,” Ricky read aloud, “. . . it's all about restoring balance and energy in relationships between people, and the spirits of the unseen world.” And then he glanced over at me, like I should know something about this stuff because I claim to see spooks crawling around every now and then.

“It says here,” Rupert read, sitting at a rectangular wooden table, his chin resting between his thin, meatless palms, “that families can inherit familial spirits, along with the differing devotional practices from their elders.” He looked up, his eyes curious and speculative, “So there are whole societies that pass this along, from father to child, over and over.”

I was thumbing through a small book, about the size of a paperback novel, with several pages of strange drawings. Some of the drawings were of symbols and faces. There was a sketch of a bunch of people dancing around a fire.

Then the pictures got darker, and more supernatural.

And as I flipped the pages—silicon gloves on my hands that Rupert gave us so that we wouldn't get our 'oils' on the pages—I noticed that some of the shadows in the drawings were stretched differently. They had personality. The shadows were characters in the sketches, even if the artist hadn't intended it.

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand when I turned the next page. There were drawings of people with things crawling around them. Looking at them, from the darkness. These things, they had long thin hands. Hidden in the shadows, waiting and watching.

“. . . the priestesses are the *oungan*, and the priests are called *manbo*,” Ricky read.

And I turned to the next page, and there were three of them. Three of the spooks. The creepy little shadows that I had seen crawling around in that morgue.

“. . . the children of the spirits are the *ounsi*, and the ritual drummers are the, uh, *oun-togi*.”

I flipped the next page and I saw a different creature altogether. This one was short and stocky, with long, skinny arms, and in its hands were knives. Knives with two blades. And it was hunched over a body that looked to be tied down to the ground. Maybe in some kind of sacrificial

ritual. That creature with its arms and knives, it was cutting away at the victim. Cutting away at his chest.

On the next page, that same creature was pulling something out of the body. And even though I don't read French, nor all of the various random squiggles and dots and symbols, I knew *exactly* what it was doing.

I realized that my hands were sweating inside the silicon gloves. Ricky and Rupert had stopped reading, and were standing over me, looking down at the picture.

"Ah, yes," Rupert said, ". . . *le Ramasseur.*"

I looked up.

Rupert put his hand on my shoulder, "That is the *Gatherer*, in French."

"He cuts out your soul?" Ricky posed, leaning down to the drawing.

And those words kept floating around in that room. Floating around in my head.

The *Gatherer*.

He cuts out your soul.

And, again, I feel myself shaking. Ricky and Rupert, they don't say anything. We're all just sitting there quietly. Ricky knows why I'm bothered by this image. He knows what I told him I saw when I was coming back from whatever it was that stole my life.

Rupert, he probably just thinks I'm getting caught-up in all of this stuff. He turns his head, glancing back at my book, and then down at the drawing of the Gatherer, and then to Ricky and I. And he narrows his eyes suspiciously at us, saying, "You told me somebody in your family left you that book?"

Neither of us answered.

"Do either of you have *any* idea what you are getting yourselves into?"

Good fucking question, Rupert.

## CHAPTER 9

*R.H. DEDMEN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL.*

*NEUROLOGY DEPARTMENT, 2:14 PM . . .*

I'm sitting in a waiting room, looking at two-year-old issues of *GQ* and *Cosmopolitan Lady*. But, since I don't remember anything that happened farther back than four-and-a-half months ago, it's all new and exciting to me.

There is one other person in the calm-blue and warm-yellow waiting room. A middle-aged woman, with short red hair and clothes that look tight and uncomfortable, is fidgeting in her chair. I lifted up a magazine for her, but she gave me one of those *'I'll scream rape'* scowls. She is probably waiting for somebody. Her husband, maybe? A child? Hard to tell. Whoever it is, they're in for a nice afternoon. She looks like a snake, unhappy with its skin. An eel on shag carpet.

I thumb through the magazines until an attractive receptionist calls out on the intercom for a "Mister Jack Pagan." I laughed, because there's only just me and this other woman in the waiting room. The receptionist then informs me that I can ". . . proceed to Dr. Smith's office for my appointment."

I walked through a pastel green door, into a lavender and off-white hallway. I'm so tired of 'feel-good' colors. I'd almost opt for blood dripping down the walls rather than all of this purple, green, pink, fuchsia. If I see another smiling dinosaur I'm going to hit him over his big head with a chair, then stab his eyes out until he's extinct, again.

I noticed the caseworker's office door was open. I approached and knocked politely on the threshold.

A short, bald man with sun-reddened skin, a gleaming forehead, and a neck that seemed choked by his tie, waved me in. He had a chubby smile to accent his light blue eyes. It was almost like he was part of the color scheme. Dr. Robert "*you can call me Bob*" Smith pointed to an area in front of his large oak desk. There was one of those brown leather 'psychiatrist' couches—where I'm sure hundreds of people have cried their eyes out—and also a big, leather chair, of the same color.

I wondered if this was one of those shrink-tests. Where, if I choose the couch, it means that daddy touched me wrong and I need to be held; but if I pick the chair, it means I need attention because my mommy ignored me.



“Sit down, Mr. Pagan,” Dr. Smith said casually. He didn't even offer his hand for a shake. Although, I'm not sure if caseworkers in the Neurology Department are even allowed to shake hands. The protocol around here is a little stuffy.

I sat and looked around the office. This guy has a lot of certificates. They all look very professional and important. Each one of them probably has an unpaid student loan attached to it.

Dr. Smith glanced down at a folder in front of him. “So . . . how . . . have . . . you,” he looked up, “. . . been doing?”

I shrugged. I told him everything seemed fine. I was adjusting well enough. My classes were just about finished, and I was already looking for work.

“What kind of work?”

I'd like to work at a library, or a bookstore, I think. Somewhere that's quiet.

“Is your head still ringing.”

Not as bad as before, I explained. Manageable.

“And how about your appetite?”

I'm eating like a champ. I didn't mention our little jaunts to McDonald's. I'm pretty sure the hospital's staff would frown upon that.

“And your vision?”

What about it, I asked.

“Is it clear? Are you getting headaches? Do you see double.”

I considered his question. “My vision is crystal clear.”

*Epecially if you count the spooks and monsters that appear from the shadows.*

I continued, “And my headaches are occurring less and less frequently.”

*And even as I say the words my head is throbbing like there is a city worker in the back of my skull pounding a jackhammer on my cerebral cortex.*

“I'd say everything is fine,” I added, just to sugarcoat it. These shrinks make so much out of nothing. I don't want to give him any ammunition.

He studied me for a moment, leaning back in his chair—a much nicer chair than mine. And he just looks past his cheeks at me, his lips pursed a bit. Then he sits forward, and the skin above his eyebrows wrinkles slightly.

“I'm worried that you may be having a bit *too* much success this early in the recovery.”

Oh, I tell him, that's just because of the exemplary treatment at this facility, and all of the knowledgeable doctors and staff looking after me.

And then he squints. "Right," he says skeptically. "Hold on a second, Jack. I want you to speak with Dr. Culligan." Then he dials some buttons on his phone and talks to somebody in doctor-speak. Something about an inkblot.

Two minutes later, this lady doctor comes in, and if the room was darker and I didn't know any better, I would mistake her for him. They were like freaky twins. This could be an episode of *Twilight Zone*, for sure.

"Hi," Dr. Culligan says politely, and then she went about opening a folder and pulling out several pieces of white cardboard. She laid them in her lap, while Dr. Smith scooted his chair forward, his stomach squishing up against the desk. He looks like a child pretending to be an adult. She looks like a child pretending to be a doctor. I felt like the only adult in the room.

Dr. Culligan turns over this sheet of cardboard and she says, "What do you see?"

I see a bunch of black nonsense. Like a bug smashed on a windshield. Like thick paint pouring on glass. Like a page full of vomit. Like somebody took a chainsaw to a birthday party and made the headlines.

But out loud I say, "I kind of see a butterfly. Wait . . . maybe, maybe he has a picnic basket with him. Yeah," I say as I squint, nodding. "A butterfly on her way to a picnic."

And that Dr. Smith, he never misses a beat, he studies me very carefully. He says, "Is this butterfly in a hurry? Is he *rushing* to the picnic?"

And I can't help but to glance back and forth at the both of them. These oddball doctor twins with their ink and their nonsensical questions. "No," I say, lying back proudly. "This butterfly has all the time in the world."

"Where do you see the butterfly," Dr. Culligan asks, ". . . where in the picture?"

So I point to the center left.

Dr. Culligan, winks at me, and flips to the next picture. Dr. Smith scratches his forehead as he scribbles down something in my folder.

"So was I right?" I ask.

Dr. Culligan looks up at me, ". . . what?"

I ask, About the picture? Was '*butterfly on the way to a picnic*' the correct response?

They both giggled, like twins do, and the female twin replies, "No, no. There is no right or wrong answer for these. This is the part of the Rorschach Test."

Anyway, we go through nine more of these. Some of them have small patches of color. Most of them are black and shades of grey. They all look like car accidents, but I answer them correctly. And with every answer they seem more and more satisfied that I am adjusting quite nicely.

What I failed to mention to Humpty and Dumpty during their lengthy interrogation, is that Ricky gave me a book that helps people successfully navigate and answer these types of tests.

I don't tell the twins that I know all about the Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach, and the test he created in 1921. I had actually planned on the 45-card version of the test, designed by the American psychologist W. H. Holtzman, but what the hell.

They felt good about my responses. I saw trees and birds. Trees with plenty of leaves, and birds with vibrant, full feathers. I even saw a lantern; shining brightly, of course.

And as stupid as this is going to sound, even though I was making all of this crap up, I actually felt better. I guess pretending to be happy and together, actually makes you feel that way.

Besides, I hadn't seen a spook all day.

Well . . . not a live one, anyway.

My version of a good day.

That whole thing at the library was still stagnating in the back of my thoughts. We had taken the book with us, but Rupert had taken Ricky's cell phone number and promised to call him as soon as he heard anything from Washington. It was kind of cool. I have this motley crew of investigators, and we're all working the same case. But, the only one who has actually seen the things we are researching . . . is probably going insane.

Sure, I'm not a full-on, nut-bag psycho . . . but I'm not feeling too grounded right now, either. If I have some complications from the head trauma—which is entirely possible given the circumstances that were explained to me—then there is a chance that they might have missed something. Something big!

See, with a tumor in the brain, sometimes you think things are fine. The tumor might actually stimulate parts of your brain. But remember, it's *still* cancer. Tiny little mutant cells convincing all the other cells to commit suicide.

Cellular *al Qaeda*.

Jim Jones at the microbiological level.

So while I think I am feeling fine and seeing these unbelievable events, it could just be cancer fucking me up slowly and progressively. And I don't want to even think about the possibility that my brain is swelling or something horrible like that. Because if I have the choice of going crazy slowly, or dying quickly . . . I'll take crazy.

Think about it: mad scientists do some of their best work right before they go completely mad. So if I *am* losing my grey matter, I hope it's at a pace that I can't recognize. That way I can at least be productive before I start painting the walls with my own feces.

I left the twins with smiles and handshakes, like they were just so gosh-darn proud of old Jackie boy. I might even be one of their success stories.

As I walked through the waiting room, and out into the hallway, something ran by me so fast I thought it had to be on wheels. No noise, no wind in its wake. Just a dark flash . . . and then *nothing*. And my wonderful, completely artificial mood, it melts away like ice on lava.

Poof, and I'm loco again.

I used to only see *things* as I was falling asleep or waking-up. And even then, only for a few fleeting seconds. Then, in the morgue I saw the spooks when I was just *really* tired. And today, I'm not even all that tired. I was actually kind of relaxed, feeling a bit lazy and lethargic.

So, whatever I have stirring up my cortex . . . it's most likely degenerative.

Barely four-and-a-half months old, and I'm already sliding down the spiral.

This is my decaying perfect success.

I need McDonald's.

## CHAPTER 10

### *VALLEY VIEW SHOPPING MALL.*

#### *FOOD COURT . . .*

I found myself almost in a daze. I don't remember if I rode a bus here, walked, or hitchhiked. I'm sitting in a white plastic chair that is designed to only be comfortable for seven minutes—so that you get up and make space for somebody else who just paid way too much for fast-food.

The chair groans when I lean in on my Chinese food. I ordered Beef-n-broccoli, two egg rolls, and a Double Quarter-pounder with cheese. The people at the Hang-Wong China looked a little confused when I ordered the burger, but a younger kid pointed me towards the McDonald's that was two counters to the left.

I made the mistake of ordering food when I was hungry. The result is that I purchased way more than can possibly be consumed. So, I'm basically surrounded by food. Enough for at least two good-sized adults . . . or 17 supermodels. And in the middle of my linoleum covered table is the book.

My mouth full of cheeseburger, bits of rice and cabbage still hiding among my teeth, I take a deep breath, my eyes closed, and place my hand on the cover. With a delicate and deliberate motion I open the book, feeling for the first page. If people are watching me, the words, *lunatic*, *retard*, and *moron*, are probably being thrown around.

Slowly exhaling, trying to relax as much as I can in this chair that wants to cripple my lower back, I open my eyes. And guess what?

Nothing.

Because the damn book was upside down. I'm looking at the last page. Upside down.

With a flip of my wrist I spin the book around and close the other flap, sending all the pages flopping to the other side. There is an audible 'thud' sound and some yuppie couple is staring at me like I'm a serial killer. And I can't be sure I wasn't.

I shrug them off and glance down at the book, which is now open to the first page. My eyes lazily find themselves at the bottom right side of the page. And what do I see?

Big, fat, nothing . . . again.

Shit.

I close the book, reach for what's left of my cheeseburger, and out of the corner of my eyes I see something on the cover that looks like a mustard stain. Oh, I'm a real dunce, now.

I reach for a napkin, to clean up my desecration of a priceless antique, and notice that it's not mustard. It's an inscription of some sort. And something behind my chest starts to pound. Like a drummer. Like those rap songs.

*Bump, bump, bump!*

And I slide the book in front of me, knocking off a small carton of rice onto the floor. And, squinting, there seems to be more to the inscription than at first glance.

*Bump, bump, bump!*

Now, I can't explain exactly how it happened, but I felt the words. I didn't read them. I didn't hear them. I just *felt* them. Like they were tapped, beat, into me. Into my chest. Right along the huge invisible gash that those gatherers ripped into my body.

And I felt it clearly.

*"... The Book... of Sighs..."*

I realized I was shaking again, and colder than I can ever remember being.

## CHAPTER 11

### *JACK'S APARTMENT.*

### *LATER THAT NIGHT . . .*

First thing I did was race home. Or, more accurately, to my hospital financed apartment. I laid the book carefully down on a wooden chair near my bed and I got on the phone. I had to dial the number several times because I kept glancing back at the book, waiting for something to happen.

“Yeah,” Ricky answered, seeming as if he was engaged in something.

“Hey, it's Jack, I've got the title of the book.”

That seemed to get his attention. In the background I heard him say, “. . . I'm out, dudes, I got some important shit to do . . .” and then his voice got louder, “Okay, Jack. What is it? No . . . wait. I'll be over in a few minutes.”

*Click.*

That Ricky's a strange one alright. It wasn't a full 10 minutes and he was walking through the door, “So what happened? You fall and hit your head or something?”

I was in the kitchen, eating a stack of Oreo cookies. I had designs on a glass of cold milk, but Ricky seemed impatient. Cookie bits in my mouth, my fingers a dark brown, almost black, I walked over to the chair and joined my young friend.

“It was the weirdest thing,” I told him. “I was sitting there, at the mall.”

He turned, “Galleria, or Valley View?”

“Valley View,” I answered.

He nodded his head a few times.

“. . . anyway, I was just sitting there and the book was in front of me. And I had food all over the place and I thought I spilled some mustard on the cover.”

“Shit dude! You need to be more careful—”

“No,” I explained, “I didn't spill anything on it. I *thought* I did. And there was a symbol on the cover, the one Rupert had been looking at under the magnifying glass. And I just felt it.”

“Felt it like . . . how?” Ricky said, kneeling down so that he could study the dark-skinned cover of the book. “Like music? Like emotionally? Like fake tits?”

I told him that I felt it like a beating in my chest. As if loud drums were being played in my body.

“*Oun-togi!*” he said as he leered at the book.

Huh?

*“Oun-togi, the spiritual drummers. Remember?”*

I tried to convey to him that I didn't think there were invisible drummers stalking around in my body, sounding out the names of religious books, but he wasn't trying to hear it. I think Ricky had more faith in all of this Voodoo stuff than I did.

My money was still on brain tumor.

“So, then . . .” Ricky said as he reached out his hand and gently played his fingers across the cover of the book, “. . . what's it called?”

*“The Book of Sighs.”*

He cocked his head to the side, considering something. “That's got to be something we can find on the Internet.”

I crossed my arms, unsure how much the Internet was going to help. “That's just for pornography isn't it?”

Ricky turned to me as if I'd just called his mother a filthy prostitute. “Jack, if you're *ever* going to survive in this new world, then you're going to have to start shedding that fear of computers.”

He stood, pulling out his phone, “While the Internet may, *factually*, be a good place to find all kinds of porn, that is not the only thing there is to be had. Our entire human history is accessible through the World Wide Web. It is the one thing that breaks down all barriers, passes every border, and cannot be stopped. No man, no group, no government can control it. It is a living thing, now.

“The Internet,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder, “is the thing that humans will look back on, generations from now, and say, 'that right there was when it all changed.' It is man's greatest contribution to a global awareness.”

“And it's a good place for porn,” I added.

A dirty little smile briefly crossed his face, “. . . and it's a good place for porn.”

## ***12 MINUTES LATER . . .***

Did you know that you can find a coffee shop with wireless Internet access every two-minutes if you drive in any direction in Dallas? That is one of the many fun facts that Ricky enlightened me to as we were skidding around in his SUV. He drove through traffic the way I imagine he would if the vehicle was stolen.

When I asked him why we were in such a hurry, he looked at me like I was an idiot and replied, “You know how much of our lives is wasted away in traffic?”



No.

*"A shitload!"*

I pulled on the shoulder strap of my seatbelt, just to make sure I would be safely inside the vehicle when it rolled. I figure it's only a matter of time.

When we skidded to a stop at the Starbucks, Ricky grabbed a small leather case, a bit thinner and wider than the quasi-mystical book I was holding. We sauntered across the parking lot and made our way inside. It was pretty busy for the early evening. We found a table in the left corner, near the condiments, and sat down.

He unzipped the bag and pulled out a thin laptop computer. It was sleek and silver, and looked like it belonged on an alien spaceship. Thin grey men with big black eyes and anal probes were probably turning their saucer upside down looking for that thing.

We were going to *Google* the name of the book. That, he explained anxiously, would get us close. If that didn't work, we'd *Ask Jeeves*, do some *Yahoo!*, and then *Lycos* the title. I've never felt so illiterate in all my days. This was a new language I was just going to have to figure out.

Once he got his computer purring, he headed over to the counter and got us a couple of double mochas. "These are the coffee equivalent of crack rock."

He entered the words:

### **the Book of Sighs**

And as quick as he clicked on the '*find*' button, there were several hundred results. He read off the first few as our eyes scanned the top 12 search results. None of them mentioned the '*Book of Sighs*'.

"Sighs, Bridge of . . ."

"The Doges' Palace (from Venice) . . ."

"Minor poets of the later period (from English literature) . . ."

First one, we decided. And seconds later we were looking at this,

### **Sighs, Bridge of**

**Italian Ponte Dei Sospiri, Bridge in Venice, Italy spanning the narrow canal of the Rio di Palazzo, between the Doge's Palace and the prisons.**

**It was built about 1600 by the architect Antonio Contino. The enclosed passageway was so called from the "sighs" of the prisoners who were lead across the bridge. They were to endure unspeakable acts of torture, violence, and molestation.**

We both read the text to ourselves, wondering how it might apply.

"I guess it could be Italian," Ricky pondered under his breath. "What do you think?"

“I'm still an infant, what the hell do I know about old books?”

Ricky took a sip of his liquid crack, “. . . kind of scary, huh? Torture, violence, and molestation. So basically, when you marched across that bridge . . . that was it. You were done for. That would suck, big-time!”

“And I'm guessing people didn't ever make it out of old Italian prisons,” I said, taking a glance around the coffee shop. There were a few older couples, but mostly the crowd was young and fresh. People with their whole life in front of them.

These kids, they all learned more by the time they were in the third-grade than I probably got in all of my schooling—well, if I went to school, anyway. This generation, they have access to so much information, and I wonder if they have any idea what to do with it.

“This is something Rupert would know more about,” he said, sitting back in his chair, eyeing the book in my lap. “Let's look at the next one.”

*Click-click.*

The Doges' Palace. This should be interesting.

### **The Doges' Palace**

**The core of political life in Venice was the Doges' Palace (Palazzo Ducale), whose crenellated mass appears to float upon the waters of the lagoon.**

**Erected over many years after the burning of the original 9th century structure in 976, most of the present building dates from the 14th to the 16th century. It was not only the residence of the elected doge, but also the meeting place of the republic's governing councils and ministries.**

**On the east side of the palace runs a narrow canal spanned by the Bridge of Sighs, which led to the state prisons and is immortalized in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold*.**

“What do you think?” I asked, having read the modest text.

“Not sure if this is the right angle. Maybe we're off on a tangent.” He took a frustrated breath and then sipped at his mocha.

He set his brown cardboard cup down carefully and turned towards me, “All you got so far is the title of the book?”

Yup.

“Nothing else?”

Nope.

He folded his hands behind his head. “So, what now? Do we just wait until the drummer starts pounding away at your chest?”

I looked down at the book, my eyes blankly staring at the cover the same way I had at those stupid inkblots. Numbly, I said, "I saw another one, yesterday."

"Another one of the shadowy things."

"Spooks. Yeah, right after I left Dr. Smith's office."

"Were you on any medication?"

"No!" I replied. "I'm not some junkie. I have major head trauma. Long-term amnesia. I'm not some addict pill-popper."

"Calm down, buddy," Ricky said with a smile, "... I'm just trying to rule things out."

"Fair enough," I said. I took a few breaths, trying to remember every sordid detail of my sightings. "At first I only saw them when I was falling asleep, or just waking up."

"Between dogs and wolves," Ricky said.

"What's that?"

He explained to me that the dusk and dawn times—when the light was blue and surreal, and your thoughts were ethereal and floating—that was what the French called, *the time between dogs and wolves*.

"Okay then," I said. "At first it was only then. But then there was what I saw a couple nights ago, in the morgue..." I realized that I was speaking a little louder than I should have been because when I said the word, *morgue*, at least three tables of people looked over at us.

Ricky looked around the room with a thousand-dollar smile, holding his fingers as if he had an imaginary pencil in them, "... we're writers." And all the nosy patrons were instantly relaxed and put at ease as if he'd said the magic code word or something. A fickle bunch, these youths.

I continued, my voice several notches lower, "... so then we were at the morgue and I saw them, again. And that night, I was *really* tired. And no medication, either."

"Okay, so it's when you're tired. Sleepy," he noted.

"That's what I was originally thinking. Because that makes sense for hallucinations to happen when you're really tired and having problems staying focused."

"But then?"

I nodded. "But then I saw one on my way out of Dr. Smith's office, right when I left the reception area. Something flew past me at about a hundred-miles-an-hour. *Fwoom!*" I said using my hand to illustrate.

"Well," Ricky surmised, "... I guess that makes sense. You were in that office, talking to that shrink and his pudgy twin. You were focused, but then you got worn-out by the Rorschach test. So when you left the office you were emotionally drained. Same as the other night in the morgue. Same as when you fall asleep and awaken."

He nodded, took another sip, and scratched his chin, "You were between dogs and wolves every time."

He wasn't understanding why I was worried. "Look, what happens when I start seeing them when I'm just a little tired? And then, I see the spooks when I'm just relaxed. And eventually, if I go up a flight of stairs too fast, I'm seeing these creepy little bastards in every corner."

He had an 'Ooh' face. "I see, now. You're worried that you'll start seeing them all the time, and won't be able to chalk it up to hallucinations."

"Either that, or I *will* be hallucinating all the time," I complained. "If I'm going insane, it's happening much quicker than I am able to deal with. Hell, in a couple of weeks, the time between dogs and wolves might be infinite. I don't know if I can deal with seeing these things all the time. I might be losing my shit, here."

"Don't get all carried away," Ricky said reassuringly.

I looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"I mean, for all we know, all of those *spooks* might actually be running around. You might not be going crazy at all."

"That's comforting."

"Anyway," he said tipping his cup towards me, "... this stuff should keep the spooks at bay for a little while. Like jet-fuel for your brain."

Now I understand why people get hooked on drugs.

*Please look for **Part 2 of 5**, available at **free-ebooks.net!***