

# **See Jack Die**

## **(Part 2 of 5)**

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

## CHAPTER 12

*JACK'S APARTMENT.*

*FRIDAY MORNING, EARLY . . .*

*Bang, bang, bang!*

I heard the pounding, and at first I wasn't sure if it was inside of me, or actually the front door. Then I heard Ricky's muffled voice talking to somebody outside the door. I almost fell on my face twice on my way to the door. My balance wasn't up and running, yet.

I pulled open the door and Ricky walked in, talking to somebody on his cell phone.

“ . . . we'll be there as fast as we can. Thanks, Rupert.” He disconnected the call and took a quick look at me, “You look like hammered dog shit.”

Thanks. It's always nice to have friends.

“Come on,” he pressed me as he headed to my mini-refrigerator, opening it up and rifling through it for anything tasty; which there wasn't. “ . . . Rupert just said that he had a hit on the book. Says it's important that we go see him . . . *eeeeee-mediatly!* His words.”

I told him I needed to take a shower and brush my teeth. He tossed me a half-wrinkled shirt and told me that we were going . . . *now*. I acquiesced. What the hell, maybe old Rupert had figured something out.

Hopefully he tells us the book is a scam.

Or even better, that it's some useless old gardening book.

A how-to, maybe, about building grass huts.

Renaissance Kama-sutra.

Something I can use to narrow down the list of my possible neuroses. Anything that proves to me that I'm not seeing the spooks. Give me tumors. Give me stagnating neurons. I'd even take a double shot of paranoid schizophrenia.

I'll be the mad scientist, with a smile on my face from ear-to-ear.

*DALLAS PUBLIC LIBRARY . . .*

*37 MINUTES LATER . . .*

Rupert met us at the large doors near the front entrance of the library. The library wasn't even officially open, yet, but he had a set of keys and a look on his face that seemed to have been carved out of stone. There were bluish bags under his bloodshot eyes.

“I would have called last night, but I didn't get word until just a few hours ago, and I had to make all of the necessary skeptical inquiries.”

“Rupert,” Ricky said, “. . . you sound a bit loco there, buddy.”

“You must excuse my crass nature this morning,” Rupert apologized as he led us to the 'dangerous' books room. “It is quite rare that we find a book of this magnitude and cultural significance.”

We found ourselves sitting at the rectangular table, quietly staring at the *Book of Sighs*, while Rupert shuffled through a stack of papers he had printed recently. They had that hot-ink smell.

“Alright, Rupert,” I said as I steepled my hands, “give us the goods.”

“Yes, of course,” he said as he pulled two pieces of paper to the top of the pile, then adjusted his Coke-bottle glasses. “Gentlemen, our search yielded some remarkable results for this particular volume. If it *is* what it looks to be, then it will be just incredible.” He shook his head, looking from the printed pages, down the book, and back. “. . . incredible.”

“Rupert?” Ricky nudged. “You’re killing us, here.”

“Oh, right. Well,” he said, clearing his throat several times in that kind of gross way that made me want to clear my throat, and get a pneumonia shot.

He laid the first page down on the table, a few inches from the book. On the printed page there was a small grainy picture of the book. Well, of some book.

“What we have here, this book, is one of three.” He lowered his voice. “This book, called the, 'Book . . . of Sighs' . . .”

Ricky and I glanced at each other nervously.

My tumor just got a fraction smaller.

Rupert continued reading, “. . . these books date back to three twenty-five AD. Do either of you know the significance of that year?”

We both looked gloss-eyed at him, our shoulders and eyebrows lifting, and dropping.

He had a smug grin, deliciously sinister, “. . . that dates back to the *Council of Nicaea*. A quick lesson. In three-thirteen, Constantine—the new emperor of Rome—ended the persecutions of the Christians. They were a small percentage at that time, but the religion, now protected, grew quickly. The various other pagan religions made up the remainder of spiritual thought at that time. But there was movement in progress.

“They all felt that they were fulfilling a mission and ministry based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. By three-fifteen, many people saw the advantages of belonging to Constantine's new imperial faith, and

the churches swelled in ranks. Constantine himself was a pagan, only pushing Christianity for political means. He was trying to keep Rome from ripping itself apart. Religious turmoil is not something new.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “I read the *Da Vinci Code*. I remember that part. The Council of Nicaea was where they all got together and voted on which texts were going to make-up the bible. Lots of wheeling and dealing.”

“That is, of course, a very simplified version of the actual events. But basically . . . yes,” Rupert nodded. “Constantine was a smart ruler. He knew that he needed everyone working together for a common cause. Why not bring all the religions under one umbrella?”

“That's good politics,” Ricky added.

“ . . . and to do so they needed a holy figure that everyone would follow. That is why they elected only scripture that supposed Jesus Christ to be godly. That is to say, they needed Jesus to be born of God. Part God, himself. The masses wouldn't follow a prophet, or a religious scholar. But the son of God . . . now that's someone we can all get behind.”

“But how does this relate to our book?” Ricky said, cutting to the chase.

Rupert tapped his long bony fingers down on the second page. Your book, the *Book of Sighs*, it was also produced at this Council. And there are certain historians that claim it was drafted by scholars right along side the bible. At the same time they were building the foundations for Christianity for the next two thousand years, they were working on these three books. All identical copies.”

Where are the other two? I asked.

“Destroyed by a mysterious fire, in Italy. The circumstances point to some kind of religiously motivated terrorism, but it's all speculation.” Rupert slid his teeth back and forth, almost to the point where they started to grind like fingernails on a chalkboard.

“So we have the only copy?” Ricky said.

Rupert nodded. “And you should see where it's been. The book was kept in secret for hundreds of years, hidden in Rome, then Italy. It spent sixty or seventy years in Spain, in the late fifteen hundreds, before being lost in transit. It was heading to South Africa, and the only remaining stories claim it ended up in the jungles of the Congo, controlled by tribal leaders.”

“This book is well traveled,” I said. The things it must have seen.

“Well traveled to put it lightly. Somehow, it appeared in the jungles of Brazil, in the hands of a group of Indians that descended from African slaves. A British explorer wrote about it in eighteen ninety-four.”

He went on to explain that it was regarded as a sacred object, never to be touched, or even looked at by anyone but the chief of the tribe, and his oldest shaman. And then . . .

“ . . . and then there is no trace of it. Not once. It disappeared into the jungles of Brazil, south of the Amazon. It was thought to no longer exist . . . until yesterday, that is. When you two walked in with it.”

“So it's a collector's item?”

Rupert's mouth turned into a giant 'O'. “To put it mildly . . . it is, most likely, priceless. Millions don't begin to describe what some people would pay. I think it probably belongs in a well-guarded safe, in some museum.”

“*If* this is the same book . . .” I said rather skeptically. “If this actually is the *Book of Sighs*?” And even as I said the words I could feel Ricky's eyes burning a hole in the side of my head.

“Let's suppose it is the real thing,” Ricky proposed. “What now?”

Rupert's face contorted in concentration as he pondered the possibilities. He looked like one of those dogs with too many wrinkles. Like a folded skin blanket.

“Well, first things first, don't go showing it around. People might use various means of deception to procure it,” Rupert said carefully.

“Like bullets?” I asked, looking back and forth at Ricky and Rupert.

They both nodded.

“Is this book *that* valuable?”

Rupert leaned in, interlacing his fingers, his elbows pressing into the table, his eyes locking on mine, “Imagine what was *so* important that it had to be written alongside the bible, and then hidden for almost two-thousand years. Try, if you will, to grasp what was intended by Constantine when he had this book created. We can't possibly fathom what importance this book has.”

Ricky reached over and ran his hand over the *Book of Sighs*.

“Your hand just touched a piece of history,” Rupert said, his eerie voice echoing through the small room. “A piece of history that has been kept secret at all costs.” He nodded. “That book has a higher price than any of us can imagine. And the information it holds hostage in its impossible code . . . that has no price on it.”

“You can't put a price on the truth,” Ricky said softly, his eyes taking in the newly discovered magnificence of the *Book of Sighs*.

And my degenerative brain disease just got a bit less virulent.

My advanced schizophrenia didn't seem so viable.

The tumor just shrunk a tad more.

Looking at the book I realized the frightening reality that I might *not* be going crazy.

Shit.

## CHAPTER 13

*JACK'S APARTMENT.*

*FRIDAY NIGHT . . .*

We left Rupert feeling a bit awestruck. This book—the *Book of Sighs*—it was pretty important. If it was real, that is. And we had no way of knowing for sure. But something told me that it was legitimate. That this wasn't a fake. No prank here.

Ricky agreed. Why would Ms. Josephine have given me a fake super-secret book that nobody can interpret? Something else struck me, too. Ms. Josephine had said that I would eventually be able to read it. Perhaps all of this seemingly nonsensical research was toward that very aim. I mean, who could resist the temptation of figuring out what some 1,700 year old book was trying to say?

What was Constantine trying to keep secret . . . but was important enough to have three copies of it?

Lots of questions that none of us, even salty old Rupert, could answer. Ricky thought we should take much more care with the book, even recommending that we get a safety deposit box for it. It wasn't a bad idea, but I was worried that without the actual book, maybe I wouldn't be able to figure out any of the coded pages. We agreed to sleep on it. Literally, *sleep* on it, until a better idea arose.

Two hours later I find myself flipping mindlessly through a *National Geographic*. On page 79 there are a series of photos from the Typhoon damage in Burma. And these pictures are so, I don't know . . . sharp. Edgy. Grainy, just to the point where you can actually feel the black mud underneath your fingernails.

As I went from one glossy page to the next, seeing dead bodies next to collapsed buildings, I felt very greedy and arrogant, and ashamed. Here I am, I got a little pop on the head, and the state is shelling out gobs of money, care, and personal attention so that I can *cope*.

These people, with their broken lives, their crushed cities, places that look like they were destroyed back when Atlantis disappeared—they've been left with nothing. Just pieces of broken concrete, and rusted rebar, and shards of glass and trees . . . and death everywhere. This is beyond catastrophe. In the blink of an eye, 100,000 people ceased to be among the living.

Why?

Were they in the wrong place at the wrong time? Did they not have faith? Or did they have the wrong faith? Is this the world that Constantine was trying to build, or the one he was trying to protect us from?

Or is it all a dice game?

There were a few black-n-white photos of a family—all kids—huddled together holding a small dead child. There wasn't a parent to be found. All of the kids looked like they hadn't eaten a good meal, ever. And they have this blank look in their eyes. This empty stare that says, this is just the way it's supposed to be.

Like they expected it.

Like they deserved this devastation.

And those pictures, those pixelated, grainy, black-n-white photographs, I stared numbly into them as if they were just more Rorschach Inkblots. I was waiting for impressions. But I'm so used to faking it, that my mind doesn't know how to actually interpret this level of sadness. I am actively trying to empathize with these people, but it's difficult.

Where is the humanity in that?

Where is the divinity?

And then I glance over at the book, sitting on that same wooden chair that matches the other three chairs in my apartment. That fucking book.

The sky had turned blue and peaceful, growing closer to black with each minute as the sun hurries away. Ricky would say we were between dogs and wolves.

It's quiet in here. My apartment has a low hum. It's a mixture of all the different appliances and lights and the air-conditioner all strumming along together to create their unique collaborated sound. But all of it kind of cancels itself out. It makes the world some foreign place beyond the protective borders of my balcony and the front door.

So all is as quiet as it will ever be.

I close the National Geographic, my fingers a bit sticky as if those children sweat ink onto my fingertips. And I take a deep breath and lay back. I'm guessing that at some point, I should feel the drummer's beat inside my chest, and that I will suddenly be able to read this book. But nights, quiet nights like this, they have taken on a far more foreboding nature.

Nights like this are when I see the spooks.

So I decide to change the way I have been handling all of this. I make the choice to just sit back, alert and aware, and study them, just like Dr. Smith studies me. The same way that Rupert studied the minutiae of fine details on the book's cover, distilling from it knowledge.

I lean back and relax, taking my slow, deliberate breaths . . . just the way Dr. Culligan said I should when I need a *time-out*.

And I'm breathing, in 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . out 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . .

Positive pools of warm energy.

I'm using my thumbs to lightly massage my temples. Then the top of my eye sockets. My eyebrows. The upper part of my nose.

My palms press and circle around my cheekbones. Then I make soft imaginary rivers of energy from my temples, to the area just in front of my ears, and down to my lower jaw. All of it just like the good doctor told me.

Self-meditation.

It beats self-medication, I guess.

And in 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . out 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . .

Positive rays of healing power.

I open my eyes, expecting to see things that will get your average guy locked away for a long, straightjacketed time. My eyes work their way slowly and tentatively, starting from one corner of the room to the other, studying each and every shadow. I don't want to miss anything.

The black outside is beating out the blue, and it no longer looks peaceful and kind. The sun is running for cover, afraid of something. And my eyes continue to scan. Under a table, beneath a chair. To the corner where a lamp sits idly on a small end table. And I know, out of my peripheral vision, that something is going on around the chair where the book is. But still I don't rush my eyes there.

I have to be a scientist about all of this.

I need to be an objective observer.

I must be a detective. Todd Steele.

In 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . out 4 . . . 5 . . . *holy shit!*

My eyes skipped past a dresser, and right to the chair where four spooks are gathered. My heart rate, maybe it jumped up a beat or two per minute. My mouth, perhaps it was dryer than it had been recently. And the little hairs on the back of your neck that tell you things are not as they should be, those hairs are all standing at attention.

These spooks don't seem to notice me, not at all. And, come to think of it, they never have paid me much attention. Well, except for that first time, when those gatherers were digging in my chest. And I'd rather forget all that.

But these spooks, they seem wholly concerned with the book, as if it's glowing or something. Maybe it is, to them. They're just crawling around, checking it out the same way they were checking-out that dead traffic cop in the morgue. They look like primitive scientists.

The way they're all crouched, it's like they are considering something. Trying to figure out how to open it. How to steal it. They definitely seem bothered. One of them appears to be much more animated than the others.

He, or she, is probably the ring leader of this invisible posse. This spook is circling the chair, very careful not to touch it, even with his shadowy fingers. Like the others I've seen, these are short, 3 ½ to 4 feet tall, bent forward and almost crouching as they walk. Their limbs, and especially their fingers and toes are long and curled, as if they have to hang on to trees or something.



I don't understand why they would need fingers and toes like that, but then I don't understand why I'm looking at creatures made of shadows, either. I'm feeling braver, now. More confident than I ever have been around them. Not that I'm some expert, or anything. But I'm pretty sure that this isn't an everyday thing for most people.

I wonder—as they huddle around the chair, gazing at the book—if I sent out some alarm when I felt the name drumming inside of me. Like a locator beacon or something.

A tracking system from the netherworld?

Satan's *lo-jack*?

And then another possibility crosses my mind: what if I initiated a pager? Maybe my messing with the book sent out some signal. A call to the other side. And this is their advanced party coming to check it out. If that's the case, the grim reality sets in that they will eventually come looking for me.

To make contact.

To establish communication.

Perhaps this is the way it's done. At first you see them for a few fleeting moments at night. Then during the day, when you're tired. Pretty soon you see them after a set of sit-ups in the park. And when they're convinced that you're not going to pull a major freak-out, they make contact. This idea, while it sounds reasonable enough, sends shivers down my spine. I don't want to get the kind of attention that those other things—the gatherers—gave me before.

All of the sudden the cold hugs my body and I feel myself shaking. I'm trying to breathe in 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . out 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . . but all that's happening is I can't breathe at all. My body is trying to stockpile oxygen and I'm starting to hyperventilate. I know they can probably hear me, now. My cover is blown.

Somehow, though, they don't notice me losing control. And accidentally, I have performed my first experiment. They can't hear me. Suddenly, the shivering stops, as if my brain told the rest of my body to nut-up! Be a man.

I get a little bold, and whisper, “Hey . . . *spooks*.”

Nothing.

“Spooks!” I say a bit louder. “Over here you spooky bastards.”

They're still focused on that book.

I carefully crawl to the edge of my bed and sit, my feet dangling just a few inches from one of them. And in a natural voice I say, “What do you want? Why are you messing with me? Why does this book interest you?”

And those rude little bastards don't answer. Not only can they not see me, but I'm not sure they can even hear me. “Hey, you little bitches!” I bark.

With an empowered sense of strength and vigor, I kick my left foot a few inches forward, pushing through one of them. And that will go down as one of the dumber things I have done in my 4-and-change months of life.

They all stop what they're doing and turn to face me. Suddenly the book isn't so important to them. They are not moving, now. Just looking at me. I can't see any eyes, but I know from their body positions that they're only concern is me. That I am now much more important than some dusty old book.

Those shivers I had before, they were like a massage compared to the sheer fucking panic that engulfs me like a typhoon.

I close my eyes, leaning slowly back, knowing that they're probably surrounding me. I keep my eyelids shut with more force than the muscles in my face have ever had to exert. I try that breathing in-and-out stuff, but that's not happening. At this point, I'm just hoping they don't start hacking at my chest, again.

It could have been minutes, maybe hours, I'm not sure. But when I finally opened my eyes . . . they were gone. The book was still in the chair, seemingly untouched. I glanced at my chest, there was no gaping hole in it. So that was a relief. I looked back across the apartment. Nothing.

All gone.

Their excursion, or my delusion, was over.

I got up, my shirt was drenched with sweat, and walked to the kitchen where a stainless steel wash basin was dripping water at a semi-constant rate. The drops at the bottom of the sink were like bright pearls, with tiny diamonds around them. So many colors in just those pearls of water and the brushed grey and silver of the basin. All those shades I wouldn't normally stop to notice.

I ran the water for a moment, and when it was cold to the touch I cupped my hands and splashed my face several times. Each time I felt more alive. More safe. Grounded in reality. Whatever it was that was happening to me, I was learning to control it. If I didn't mess with them, then hopefully they would leave me alone.

To observe.

To study.

I took a couple gulps of water, straight from my hands. I didn't much care if that was sanitary or not. I was so thirsty that I didn't have time to fill up a glass and drink like a civilized adult. The liquid invigorated my body. The coldness crawled from my stomach and throat outward. Kind of like it was charging me.

Stopping to breath, I realized that, for the first time, I felt good. Really good. I was lucky, even. This, whatever it turns out to be, is special. And that made *me* feel special. I'm not like the next guy in

line at the grocery store. I'm not the same as my neighbors, or the old lady on the bus. I have a purpose.

I am supposed to do *something*.

Something important.

I lift my head, cold pearls of water falling down my face, down my neck, and melting into my shirt.

I take a deep cleansing breath, and turned around. And a dead girl is standing right in front of me.

## CHAPTER 14

*JACK'S KITCHEN.*

*14 SECONDS LATER . . .*

I froze.

She was young, maybe in her 20s. She had long dark hair that looked flat, almost wet. She was searching my face with wide wanting grey eyes.

Her face was somber, lifeless.

Her arms were at her sides, her shoulders hanging off of her body as if she was the saddest creature on earth.

Everything about her was cold and dead. She didn't say anything. She didn't move. Just inches away from my face, she might have been a mannequin. A life-size poster of a girl. This is pretty much what you imagine when you're thinking about hauntings.

Nothing moved. Nothing at all.

And then she blinked.

I felt myself not being able to breathe. I felt flush and dizzy. This was way beyond anything I had bargained for. I need air, but am too afraid to move so much as a muscle. But she wasn't going anywhere. Just her silent, probing glare. And all around us it's freezing cold. Like, frost-on-windows cold. Your-breath-making-mist cold.

The back of my jaw is starting to quiver, and I'm worried she'll see my fear. Feel it. Feed from it.

And my only choice is to close my eyes, hoping she'll be gone when I open them. So I squeezed every muscle in my face, as if it was my only protection.

My barrier of safety.

My safe zone.

And when I finally open my left eye, just a fraction . . . she's gone.

I glance around the kitchen, then out into my apartment. But it's clean. Well, relatively speaking. I take a moment to catch my breath, her image still very clear in my mind.

There was something about her that stuck with me. And it was much more than the fact that a ghost—for lack of a better explanation—was just standing inches from my face, in the middle of my kitchen. It was more than that she was as cold and dead as a corpse. Her face was somehow, I don't know . . . familiar.

Somewhere, at some point, somehow . . . I had known her.

## CHAPTER 15

*SATURDAY MORNING*

*4:52 AM . . .*

I think I'm awake. Although, my body doesn't seem to be responding to anything I do. My eyes can move, but other than that I'm completely paralyzed. And this is one of the more worrisome positions I've been in. Not that this whole night hasn't been completely unraveling.

I've been lying here for probably 15 minutes. I can hear the things going on around me. Somebody up above flushed their toilet a couple minutes ago. A cat outside in the parking lot was hissing at something. My refrigerator just dumped a fresh batch of semi-cubed ice. And here's me, just still as a board.

An inanimate object.

A useless thing.

A piece of frozen meat.

I can feel myself breathing. My body doesn't know my mind is awake. And I have this awkward feeling that I am actually two different pieces—the mechanical *me*, and the mental *me*. The first thing that starts to grip me is panic.

What happens if there's a fire?

What if somebody comes around looking for me? I can't move. Not a single muscle will listen to me. No cooperation with my body.

I hope this isn't forever.

I pray that this state I'm in will wear off, like drugs. Like, when you're coming down from anesthetics. Sobering up. Then the thought crosses my mind that this is a vivid dream. A super-intense, lucid dream. A hallucination. I'm just tricking the other parts of me.

I try desperately to scream, and I start to squirm around inside of myself. A snake stuck inside his old skin. A butterfly in its cocoon. Like, the conscious part of me is not connected to the physical part of me. Not completely. And I feel sick, like I'm on a boat that's rocking in the middle of turbulent waters.

What in the hell is happening?

I hope I don't throw-up in my immobile state. I might drown. To drown in your own puke, not only would it be the pinnacle of embarrassment, but I imagine that it will be horribly painful. Drowning

scares me more than any other type of death. Give me arrows, or lightening. I'll gladly take fire, or a firing line, even. Stone me, eat me, crush me up into little bits. But please, don't let me drown.

Because—and I'm not sure why I have this intense fear—drowning is *slow*. You see it coming. You know the pain is on its way, and then it chokes you. And you're trying to fight the urge to breathe, but you don't have a choice. And then when you do, death grips you.

See, with drowning, you're dead way before you actually die.

You die, but are aware that you haven't yet died. It's a prolonged struggle into the abyss. Some people, it takes them several minutes to finally pass on. Can you imagine?

And I feel this nauseous wave wash over me as my eyes start to water. I can't control any of it. Desperately, I am trying to remember any of those relaxation techniques that the doctors taught me. Something designed for people to get calm. And I'll just do the opposite of that. I'll do it backwards and wake-up.

This is my plan, and it's fairly moronic.

Since I can't control my breathing, the old 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . thing isn't going to fly. I don't have any feeling in my fingers or toes, so all of that positive energy crap is untenable. Somebody might find me and shake me back. Unlikely, though. Ricky isn't supposed to come over for several more hours.

It's still dark outside. And as I'm coming to terms with my helplessness, something in my apartment starts to shake and vibrate. It's the glass patio door. Earthquake is the only thing I can imagine. In Texas? If it's an earthquake, I'm done for. This whole place will flatten and crush my body like a bug under a falling load of bricks.

The shaking continues, but it's only just the patio door at first. Then the chair with the book on it starts to vibrate, too. Just those two things, the door and the chair. Everything else in the room is still.

But more and more, different objects in the room start to shake and quiver. And they're getting so energetic that they begin to blur. That's it, I'm losing my mind. That's what all of this is about. It has to be. It's the only explanation that makes any sense. I just passed that mad scientist stage in my rotting cortex.

The entire room—everything in it—is jiggling and blurry, and I feel this deeply powerful hum pressing me, like I'm stuck in a giant speaker box. The hum is pressing me from every side, and I feel like my body is sinking deeper and deeper into the depths of some dark lake, or ocean.

And then it starts to fade, while the things—the chairs, dresser, kitchen cabinet, the *Book of Sighs*, the wall mirror, and the stand-alone lamp in the corner—they all bend and morph. They stretch and shift, longer in places, thinner in others. It's as if everything in my apartment went through some metamorphosis.

Like everything was pliable and elastic. The lamp was taller, and tilted to the left. The dresser warped down in the middle, the edges twisting slightly. The refrigerator was no longer a perfect rectangular shape, but more of a trapezoid—the right side a few inches higher than the left.

The chair where the *Book of Sighs* was sitting, it has stretched to nearly twice its original height, thinned in the middle, so that the book is hanging off both sides.

And all of the color in my apartment—the soft browns, the blue carpet, the white trim around the door thresholds, even the brass door knobs—it's gone. All the color has been washed-out and replaced with shades of grey. Just like the droplets of water in the basin of the sink.

The things that were black, they're not even black. They are still dark, but everything is a version of grey. Cold dead color. Outside—beyond my convexed, bulging glass patio door—is a wet blue sky.

The same sky that rests in the time between dogs and wolves. Perpetual dusk and dawn. And I can't see any stars.

This place I'm in, this dream world, it's a contorted, perverted version of the world I know. Even the clock on the wall is bloated and surreal, like it had been next to a blowtorch too long—pregnant and fat at the bottom, the hour and minute hands, twisted and gnarled. Maybe this is my brain trying to make sense of my disease.

My advanced neuropathology finally taking over.

My tumor eating up the parts of my brain that kept me sane.

And I can't explain why, but I feel this sharp, icy cut in my chest. Not pain, so much as a cold, razor's touch. My head tries to lift, but all that happens is that my perspective shifts so that I am looking down at my chest. My clothes, they're all ripped and shredded.

And on my chest, there's a giant incision. Not the 'Y' incision Ricky told me about from an autopsy. This is the straight cut made by those things . . . those Gatherers. The long, deep cut made by them when I first awoke in the hospital, and nobody seemed to care.

As I look at this cut, I realize that it isn't sewn shut, or gaping open. It's just there, the skin choosing to stay closed instead of pouring my guts out into the world.

This is death, my new life.

I feel like I'm on the edge of a slide, about to fall off. I'm unsteady inside my broken body, and I know that at any moment I will fall off some cliff, pass some invisible line in the darkness. I sense myself sliding downward, again. Once more, I see the back of my eyes, from the inside. I see the inside of my nose, and my jaw, and my throat.

And I'm sliding, falling out of me.

And once inside my chest I see the dark bluish light pouring in from my incision, from my gaping hole. A rush of cool air grips me as my legs and lower body slip through this incision.

I'm reaching for anything that will give me purchase. I claw at the insides of my body for something to hold on to. Some piece of me to keep me from leaving my body. But I can't feel anything.

I reach for my ribs, but can't feel them. To say I was unsettled would be putting it mildly. And just as I was ready to give up, I heard a soft voice,

“ . . . *not yet.*”

And within seconds I was back behind my eyes, again. The room still shaking and blurry. The room slowly quieting. The vibrations eventually stopping. And everything back as it had been. The sky was no longer between dogs and wolves. It was a bright amber, with orange fingers of light spreading across my apartment.

I heard trucks and birds and people and refrigerators.

The clock on my wall, the one that was pregnant and melted just seconds ago, it was now circular and functioning, again. And it said, *7:17 am.*

I sat up the second I could feel my body, grasping at my chest. My white t-shirt was soaked with sweat, and looking through it I could see that my incision was gone. My chest was fine.

Whatever it was that wrestled away control from my madness, it came in the form of that voice. *Not yet*, she said.

Not yet.

I went right across the room, looking at the *Book of Sighs* in the normal wooden chair. I grabbed the regularly-shaped phone and dialed Dr. Smith's number. Perhaps I need to have a more candid and honest conversation with my caseworker.

I don't know what's happening to me. Magic, brain disease, voodoo, prophecy? Maybe I'm going nut-bag fucking crazy. Jury's still out.

But I need help.

Licensed help.



## CHAPTER 16

*SATURDAY MORNING*

*10:08 AM . . .*

“Let me tell you what I think is going on,” Dr. Smith said, leaning back in his comfortable leather chair as it squeaked a bit. I was on the couch this time. Last night put me in the class of patients that lay on the couch.

“You're having lucid dreams.”

“Can I take a pill for that?” I asked, my hands folded behind my head.

“No, no. This is actually very good,” he explains, having been told about the vibrating universe that was my apartment last night. I might have left out a few of the minor details—the spooks, the *Book of Sighs*, the dead girl in my kitchen. But he had enough to go on. You have to spoon feed these doctors, or they'll figure out you've been lying to them the whole time.

He went on, “. . . this is quite a wonderful point in your mental healing. Your brain is rewiring. Fixing itself. The fact that your dreams are so vivid means that you have much more *REM* activity than we originally thought you would have.”

“So,” I posed, “. . . what, exactly, *is* going on in my head? Because this feels a lot like crazy.”

He laughed. *No, no*, he said. This is a *good* thing.

What's happening, he explained, is that I was experiencing NREM—Non-rapid Eye Movement sleep—sometimes. And at other times, my REM sleep—where the dreams happen—is in overdrive.

“You need to understand that because you are actually getting good, quality sleep most of the time, your REM sleep is on . . . well, as if it's on steroids. That's a bad example.”

“I get what you're saying,” I said, a bit confused. “NREM, that's without the eye movement?”

He goes on to explain that NREM sleep is conventionally subdivided into several different stages, on the basis of EEG (Electroencephalograph) criteria. In the adult *Stage 1* is observed at sleep onset, or after momentary arousals during the night—like when the spooks start crawling around—and is defined as a low-voltage mixed-frequency EEG tracing with a considerable representation of a *theta-wave*.

“A what?”

“Theta wave,” he replied. “Four to seven hertz, or, uh, cycles-per-second of activity.”

*Stage 2*, he said, is a relatively low-voltage EEG tracing characterized by intermittent, short sequences of waves of 12-14 hertz—also called “Sleep spindles”—and by formations called K-complexes. Those are biphasic waveforms that can be induced by external stimulation.

“Like sounds in the night?”

“Sure,” he answered, nodding slowly, “. . . could be anything that's introduced and processed by your mind. Some of them occur spontaneously in your sleep.”

*Stages 3 and 4* consist of relatively high-voltage (more than 50-microvolt) EEG tracings with a predominance of *delta-wave* (one or two hertz) activity.

“You guys have to memorize all of this?”

He shrugged, “It's easy because it all makes sense.”

Right, sure.

After the transition from wakefulness to NREM sleep, most functions of the autonomic nervous system decrease their rate of activity and their moment-to-moment variability. Thus, NREM sleep is the kind of seemingly restful state that appears capable of supporting the recuperative functions assigned to sleep.

“It's recovery sleep,” he says with a cheery grin.

“Then why am I dreaming all these horrible things?”

“That gets us back to your REM sleep being on overdrive!” he said excitedly. “I would like to run some tests on you, but my theory is that your dreams are *uber-realistic*.”

I'm not sure if he was making fun of me, cussing me out, or explaining the intricate fabric of my nightmares.

REM sleep is a state of diffuse bodily activation. It's EEG patterns are at least superficially similar to those of wakefulness. So I would *think* my visions were real. Most autonomic variables exhibit relatively high rates of activity and variability during REM Sleep. He told me that my heart-rate would be higher, and my respiration-rate would be elevated—hence the sweat soaked t-shirts.

My blood pressure would increase. I might even experience full or partial penile erection. So that's an added bonus. The dead will see me with a hard-on.

In addition, he said that I might have a low rate of gross body motility, but with some periodic twitching of the muscles of the face and extremities. Add to that high levels of oxygen consumption by the brain, increased cerebral blood flow, and higher brain temperature. And my cerebral neurons . . . they would be firing like a marching band.

My neurons could, in theory, be more active during this juiced-up REM sleep, than during the times when I'm awake. That and some bursts of rapid eye movements pretty much summed it up.

“Your NREM, recovery sleep, is enabling you to have lucid dreams during your shortened, but heightened REM sleep stages,” he said, straightening himself in his chair. He had an anxious look on his face, and his right hand reached down to his waist, somewhere—thank God—obscured by his desk. He took a quick breath, and his face softened in such a way that I knew I didn't want to shake hands with him *ever* again.

I still had a few questions for him. To challenge his theory.

I wonder if my *uber*-REM is what's warping the world around me?

If that's responsible for the creepy-crawly spooks and the Gatherers?

For the giant gash in my chest?

For the dead girl in my kitchen?

But out loud I say, "Well, I guess that makes sense."

He folded his hands on the desk in front of him, content that another patient had been saved by his prowess.

"Are you absolutely certain that I'm not going crazy?" I said, almost a bit sad.

He glanced down at my lab results, EEG, EKG, and other tests that had been performed last week. His lips receded until I could see both rows of his pearly white squared teeth. The kind of teeth that chew sideways, like a herbivore. He made little *shush-shush-shush* sounds as he studied the printouts.

Then he clicked his jaw together a couple times and smiled, his lips hiding his big cow teeth. "Jack, I think you're fit as a fiddle."

I uncrossed my hands from behind my head and folded them over my chest, where, for reasons I can't explain, my chest is stinging. Stinging right there where those gatherers cut me. Where I almost fell out of me.

"Fit as a fiddle," I echoed. "Not exactly a medical term."

Dr. Smith laughed, "You're tired. Frustrated. I understand. Hey, I've got two kids in college, so I know all about it . . ."

Really, doc? Do you *know all about it*?

" . . . my son is doing his pre-med with a degree in biology at UT . . ."

How many dead people walk around in your apartment?

" . . . and Sara, my daughter, that's a whole other story. She's dancing at *Julliard*. So you can imagine . . ."

Yeah, Dr. Smith. You and I are just alike. Two peas from the same pod. Two cheerios floating around the cosmic milk, together.

I smiled, nodded, and sat up. "Hey, Dr. Smith?"

"Yes, Jack?" he said, scooting forward, his back straight, giving me his full attention.

I pointed, "There's a spook staring at you."

"A what?" he said, his eyebrows folding in as he looked around the desk.

"A little creature that climbs out of shadows and looks at things that are dead or dying."

He half laughed at me, turning from side to side, trying to figure out what the heck I was talking about.

"Just kidding," I laughed. And I winked at him.

He pointed at me, a big smile forming on his face, “*Youuuuuu* got me, Jack. Nice one.” He laughed, “Shadow creature, that's *good*.”

“I'll see you Tuesday, Dr. Smith,” I said, remembering not to shake his right hand. And then I stood up and headed out of his office.

Two more spooks ran past me, towards his desk. And I had this funny feeling that Dr. Smith might not be my caseworker much longer.

## CHAPTER 17

### *SOUTHBOUND ON CENTRAL EXPRESSWAY.*

#### *SATURDAY AFTERNOON . . .*

I swear that when Ricky is driving, it's like he's just stolen the vehicle. Like we just did a bank job. Like there are naked girls waiting at the finish line of a race he's imagining in his head. The other cars are so slow, relative to us, that they look like fixtures on the road. Obstacles we have to weave in and out of to avoid.

We're heading to the Aquarium, in downtown Dallas, near where the old Reunion Arena was. I don't know what that means, but Ricky explained it to me with a sad air of nostalgia attached to it, so it must have been a landmark.

Why are we violating the laws of velocity in physics to get to the aquarium? Because Rupert called Ricky on his cell phone, sounding like some CIA spy with his cover blown. He told us that we *had* to meet him, and the location *had* to be somewhere public and innocuous. Ricky said that he once made out with this girl at the Aquarium, and that it was a nice place for a quiet discussion. Why those two things fit together I'm not exactly sure.

Anyway, we have to meet Rupert. He wouldn't say what it was he needed to discuss, because they were on, and I quote, “. . . non-secure lines.” So this is just like that Robert Ludlum book that I read, where they're all super-secret agents, and everybody does everything cloak-n-dagger. It was kind of exciting, but also a bit unsettling.

Obviously, it had something to do with the book.

While we drove, I tried to explain what had happened last night and earlier that morning. Ricky mostly nodded while I mostly talked. It was hard to describe all of it, but he got the gist. I outlined my evaporating sanity for him.

“That's insane, Jack,” was all he said.

“I think I'm on the verge of a mental breakdown,” I offered, without emotion. More as an afterthought.

“I don't know, dude,” he said as we weaved around a small *Honda* something-or-other. “Go green, bitches!” he muttered under his breath. “Thirty-five miles a gallon . . . but at what price? Those cars are designed by emasculated Japanese men with no testosterone.”

“They seem like a nice choice, based on gas prices.”

He glanced at me sideways, like I'd just burped up a gallon of earthworms. “We, me and you, have *drive*. Ambition. Guys that design and drive cars like that—environmentally friendly cars—they've never seen a ghost. They've never seen a two-thousand year-old book that may parallel Christianity. And they've never, in all their years, seen monsters clawing at their soul through their chest.”

“I guess,” I shrugged.

“We're living, Jack. Good or bad, our adventures here and now . . . they will mean something, someday. People will look back on all of this, and think, *hey, that's where it all started. That's* when the legend began.”

“You really think all this amounts to something?” I asked, turning to face him. And it was difficult because my body was pinned, by acceleration, to the front seat.

He nodded, “This ain't band camp, bucko. We're not exploring our feelings. This is serious, life changing shit, here. It's our quest.”

I had never thought of it like that.

Now, in addition to being nut-bag crazy, my wingman has handed in his share of grey matter. This should be fun.

### ***DALLAS AQUARIUM . . .***

Six minutes and eighteen seconds later we were heading down a hallway that led to the shark tank. Rupert surprised us from behind, saying, “Gentlemen,” very softly.

He was wearing a long, brown trench coat. I was waiting for him to mention James Bond, even if only peripherally, but he was much less jovial. He had this air of uneasiness about him that made me a bit nervous, myself. His eyes were darting around suspiciously.

“Are you kidding me?” I said. But neither he nor Ricky smiled. I shrugged and we kept walking.

When we got to the shark tank, we were surrounded on all sides by crystal blue water. The glass walls of the tank ascended several stories high, and encircled you so that we might have been trapped thousands of feet underwater, in some special government facility where secret things are going on. Experiments maybe, with nano-stuff and alien stem-cells. Sci-Fi Channel stuff.

Out in the water, cruising slowly back and forth were several different species of sharks. There were placards all around the area, showing small pictures of each shark, and their characteristics. But you could learn so much more by just watching them.

Rupert's looking like he either needs to tell us something important, or he's got to use the bathroom. All of this water is giving me the same urge—to discuss important things, I mean.

“Sharks,” Rupert said grimly, “. . . are the last creatures on the earth that are a predator, but not a prey. They're prehistoric, nearly unchanged by time. Sex and hunger drives them.”

“Is it true they never sleep?” Ricky asked.

Rupert nodded, “In a manner of speaking, yes. They sleep one hemisphere of their brain at a time. That way, they are always active, constantly fanning their gills with fresh water and oxygen.” English guys tend to preface important things with segue material. This is that, I guess.

The sharks really are amazing, though. Magazines don't do them justice. You suddenly feel very helpless in a place like this. I noticed that this blue—the color of the water in the tanks—that it was the same as the the color of my dreams. The same blue as the time between dogs and wolves. I hope that this glass doesn't break.

Ricky took a half step forward and looked at the placard marked 'Blue Shark', glancing up at the tank trying to spot one. “*Prionace glauca*, also called the Great Blue shark. Found in all ocean waters, from warm temperature to tropical waters. Also known as the Blue Whaler. It has attractive, deep-blue coloring contrasting with a pure-white belly.”

Rupert pointed, “Right there, over to the left is a Blue.”

We raced all this way to talk about sharks?

We watch this long, slim shark with a pointed snout, teeth that looked sharp enough to split hydrogen atoms, and long slim pectoral fins. This one was about 10 or 11 feet long.

“She likes to feed on the carcasses of slaughtered whales,” Rupert said as we watched her swim by. She's a bit of a scavenger in that aspect. But don't be fooled, she'll eat a man just as well.”

Sharks, they probably fall in my list of horrible ways to die, right around the number two spot—right behind drowning. They bother me, these sharks, because they don't look the least bit afraid of their predicament. It's as if they know that, at any time, if they chose to, they could blast on through the glass walls and gobble us up in the confusion.

Rupert looked nervous. Fidgety. Cautious.

“What's up, Buddy?” Ricky said as he took a step back. He's much more tactful than I am.

Rupert nodded, took a tentative breath, and began, “Yesterday I received a call from some people who claimed to be in Washington. Said they were following up on our request for information about the *Book of Sighs*. I, having already given a name on the request for reference, told them I had been the one to send the query.”

We expected that, I said.

“Yes. Of course we did. Well, they said that they would be making further inquiries into the book, and that if I got another chance to study it I should notify them immediately.”

Ricky crossed his arms, “. . . but, you didn't do that. Right?”

Rupert looked hurt, “Bloody hell, no! But that's not why were talking here in the middle of a fish tank. About an hour before I left the library this afternoon, two men approached the front desk looking for me. As luck would have it, I had already checked out, and the receptionist said as much. They left

their card, after asking several more questions about both myself and the book. When they had gone, I was paged by the receptionist and she seemed unsettled by the entire affair.”

Unsettled, how? I asked.

“Well,” he said, his eyes glancing back and forth around us to make sure nobody was listening, “. . . it seems they made the claim that they were 'Federal Agents.' But their business card only gives a name and number. And it doesn't look very official to me. I believe they want the book, and I don't think it's safe to carry it around, anymore.”

“We're going to keep it locked-up, now,” Ricky assured the nervous librarian. “They're not going to get a chance to put their hands on it.”

I studied Rupert, he looked like he was hanging on by a thread. Strange waves of white and blue light—reflected waves in the water—crossed past his face. “Maybe you should take a few days off, I proposed. Call in sick?”

He tells me, in his stuffy queen's English, “. . . that's exactly what they'd expect. If I don't go to work, they'll think I'm hiding something.”

“Good point,” Ricky agreed. “Just be vague and see if you can figure out who these guys are working for. Probably work for some rich eccentric who wants to talk to his great grandfather, again.”

Do what you think is safe, I tell him. Be careful.

Ricky walked across the room to another placard, “How appropriate . . . the *Mitsukurinidae Lamniformes*. Also known as the Goblin shark. And it says they're nearly extinct.”

Maybe the Goblin shark is near extinction. But here, on the dry side, there are plenty of goblins to be had.

Ricky turns back to the librarian, “Do you have a gun, Rupert?”

“Should I *need* one?” Rupert queries, now more worried than ever. And I'm sighing, wishing that Ricky hadn't brought that up. Guys like Rupert, they obsess about stuff like this.

I tell everybody that we don't need guns, we just need to be careful. Money makes people act nutty sometimes, and we can't predict crazy. I found it ironic that I was giving a speech on how *crazy people* might act.

The sharks swimming quietly around us, they don't look so concerned. They're not scared. Even in their tanks, completely reliant on humans for their sustenance, they're in control. They're still the predators.

Perhaps we're the ones on our way to extinction.



## CHAPTER 18

### *JACK'S APARTMENT.*

### *SATURDAY EVENING . . .*

A lot of very intense things are floating around in my head. Questions were starting to stack on top of other questions. The more we learned about this book, the less we really knew.

What we all assumed—Ricky, Rupert, and I—was that this book was going to cause us problems. So far, only Rupert had been queried as to the whereabouts of the *Book of Sighs*, but it wouldn't take long for our names to come up on somebody's list. One thing I had going for me was the obscurity of my name.

I'm guessing there aren't that many Jack Pagans in the phone book. I checked, there weren't any in the greater Dallas/Ft. Worth area. And since my name was gifted to me by the hospital and their band of lawsuit-conscious lawyers, I think I'm not on the grid, yet.

My theory is that the doctors and caseworkers want to make sure that I don't end up naked, in a shopping mall, all lazy-eyed, with a loaded shotgun. If that *doesn't* happen, they'll take credit for my miraculous recovery.

If I do lose my shit and gun-down half of North Dallas, the hospital will use the whole affair to green-light a bigger budget for the under-funded programs that *failed* me.

Right now, this very second, the *Book of Sighs* is in the refrigerator. There are reasons for this. The first is that, I thought that the refrigerator might be the only place that the people who might bust down my door, and kick my teeth in, might not look. People like that—paid thugs and the like—they're not the sharpest tools in the shed.

Then again, I'm getting my street smarts from a three-year-old *Todd Steele* Detective novel, and reruns of *CSI: Miami*.

The other reason I have the most valuable book in the universe in my refrigerator is because Ricky got me a bunch of frozen pizzas and I had to use the book to carry them all in without having to make two trips. They all got squeezed into my refrigerator, and I had to use the bathroom . . . really bad. I know that makes me a monumentally lazy, short-sighted jerk, but when you have to go . . . you *have* to go!

I'm on the way back to the fridge, right now. We need to protect the book at all costs, so Ricky's bringing me a safe he had at his place. He told me he was using it to keep, “. . . weed and stuff in,” and that it looks, “just like a book shelf.”

With a devilish grin he added, “Cops can search your place and they don't even know what they're looking at.” I'm guessing that he's talking from experience.

When I asked him why he would be willing to lend it to me he said that since all of this started he wasn't smoking any *Columbian Red*. Now, you don't even have to know what he's talking about, but with a name like that you just *know* it's illegal.

“I want to have complete control of my faculties for all of this,” he said. “. . . keep my game face on to fight the undead and shit!”

For the record, I said, we shouldn't assume or ascribe any supernatural side to all of this.

And then he looks at me, narrowing his eyes, “You're the kid who told the rest of us that Santa wasn't real.” He shakes his head, “Wake-up, Jack! Open your mind to what's going on around you. This is for real.”

I reach into the fridge and pry the book out from under the *DiGiorno's* Pepperoni pizzas. They didn't have them with pepperonis and mushrooms the way I'd prefer, so I had to buy just the plain old pepperoni kind. Life is about compromise, Ricky said, like he's some wise sage.

I told him there is a huge demographic that the frozen pizza industry is missing by not offering both the pepperonis and mushrooms on the same pizza, but he said I was obsessing. I told him I wasn't obsessing, seven times in a row.

Oh, I so hope that I wasn't a pizza deliveryman in my forgotten past. That would really be the letdown of the century.

I probably shouldn't be so negligent and careless about how I handle the book, but so far it's been a useless pain in the butt. This Ms. Josephine, I imagine her just rolling on the floor, laughing at my gullible ass as I jump through hoop after hoop.

As I head back to the living room—which might actually be only three-square-feet—I notice that we're back between dogs and wolves. The color of shark tanks. The glow of the haunting place of my living nightmares. I expect the spooks to come crawling around shortly.

And maybe . . . *her*.

The girl from last night. The dead girl. I don't know when I'll see her again. I wish . . . I wish I hadn't closed my eyes and prayed for her to disappear. Part of me—the adventuresome, Todd Steele side—wants to know why she seemed so familiar. Who was she? What did she want to tell me? And why me?

Is she part of my degenerative brain disorder?

Just some intangible construct of my tumor?

Memories burnt into my retinas?

The other part of me—that wants to run from all of these things—it's wrestling with my body's response system. I'm in a perpetual state of both Fight and Flight.

Run and stay.

Stare and look away.

This is clearly something that I need to resolve before I become a quivering pile of indecisiveness. All that'll be left of me, if I don't figure this out, is some guy with bubble gum in his hair, wearing flip-flops, who pisses his pants every time he hears a loud noise. I don't want to be *that* guy.

That grown-up in the back of the school bus licking the windows . . . not him, not me.

*Man up, or back down!* Words of wisdom from my imaginary hero to deal with my invisible monsters. The only reality I have is fiction by comparison.

I toss the cold book onto my bed and climb up, using the edge of the mattress to scrape off my shoes. My socks smell like over-cooked meatloaf, so that's probably not a good sign. In my *Personal Hygiene* class they say to wash your clothes after every use, even if they don't seem soiled. I'm already at two days with this pair of socks, so I'm pushing it. I think I saw a fly with flashlights in his hands warning off other flies from approaching.

The book just sits there, almost leering at me. This thing, over the past few days, has managed to garner itself a personality. Instead of me watching it, the *Book of Sighs* is watching me. It's the entity, and I'm the object. We've switched places.

I cross my legs, Indian-style, in front of the book. Just us staring at each other. My eyes focus somewhere past the book, through it, like I'm gazing off into the clouds, or blankly focusing out into the murky water. Not really looking at anything in particular.

Knowing it won't make any sense, I lift the cover to the first page, which . . . *da-da!* It still looks like nonsense. They should call this the book of *Letdowns*. Maybe she gave me the wrong book, that Ms. Josephine. I mean, it was dark in that shop of hers, maybe she gave me the book next to the *Book of Sighs*. Honest mistake.

Or, what if there were a couple different versions of similar looking books?

What if the book I got was a knock-off, and I accidentally got the one stamped, 'Made in China.'

My eyes relax and I stare numbly at the dots, squiggles, slashes, and other cute little marks that I have probably seen painted on the sides of circus tents, cheap shirts, and ice-cream trucks. And out of nowhere the deep hum returns. It slowly gains volume—this loud, low roar. I can feel it in my chest, all the way out to my fingers.

All the crazy marks on the first page of the book, they start shaking as if they're not attached to the physical page at all. Like they were all just held there by weak gravity. And as they shake and vibrate, they start to skip around on the page, rearranging themselves into letters I can read.

While these symbols are falling into letters and words all over the page, my tumor is shrinking a bit more.

At the very moment that the impossible is very clearly going on in front of my disbelieving eyes, and the humming has subsided, my degenerative brain disease just lost a little steam.

My advanced schizophrenia . . . it's drying up as we speak.

## CHAPTER 19

### *13 SECONDS LATER . . .*

I look at the words, starting from the bottom right of the page as a few random bits and dashes complete the text. And the words . . . there's something familiar about them.

Line after line I read, there's this kind of *deja-vu* welling up in the front of my mind, as if I've seen all this before. The whole right-to-left thing only bugs me for the first few sentences, then my brain makes the necessary adjustments and I'm rocking and rolling.

I get this gut feeling, as I near the top of the page, that somebody's staring at me. You know that feeling that eyes are focused on only you? And so slowly as to not be perceptible, I raise my eyes. I'm not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.

The clock on the wall is melted and bloated. My lamp is stretched and bent. My wooden chairs are all warped and thin. My refrigerator, it looks so twisted that I'll never get the pizzas out of it.

While I had been zoning out on the book, the world I live in had again been morphed into this other place. This land of grey and blue. Between dogs and wolves and shark-blue waters.

Oh yeah, and there was something else that had me two breaths away from curling up into the fetal position and crapping my pants: The spooks!

So many I can't even count them all. They're everywhere, staring silently at me and the book. And this time, they really *are* looking at me. They look like cavemen gazing at fire for the first time. They're on the floor, in my kitchen, on my counter, on my dresser, and on my bed. It's a crowd. A dark audience of monsters. Everywhere.

*Right . . .*

*next . . .*

*to . . .*

*. . . me!*

These spooks are rocking slowly back and forth like entranced mental patients. The same way I'll be if I ever mention so much as a whisper of this to my caseworker.

I don't want to make them mad, but I don't like them being here. Even though they are just shadows, there's probably enough of them to kick my ass. But I'm fresh out of ideas, here. Clueless.

I decide to close the book before my chest starts hurting and I fall out of myself. Otherworldly concerns, I'm so well traveled, now. Me, the conquistador . . . the explorer of the netherworld.

I carefully lift the cover of the book and toss it closed, and everything in the room starts to shift and shake violently. Every piece of furniture gets blurry and slowly reforms to its original shape. And the

warm colors of my world, they return as if the program that is my reality just switched from black-n-white to color.

The spooks, they all shuffle slowly to the shadows in corners and under tables like drunks being led out of the bar at closing time.

I'm holding my breath the whole time, but they go. Sure enough, they leave.

I throw one of my pillows on top of the book, just so it doesn't accidentally fall open. At this point, even the laws of physics are suspect. I wouldn't be surprised if fish suddenly started swimming by my window.

I crawl to the side of the bed, careful not to step on any lingering spooks as I step down. Two things are rebounding off the insides of my skull. The words I read, and how bad I want some of that pizza.

Are these the proper responses for an event of this magnitude? Probably not, but I'm learning all this as I go. I'll be honest, I'm in kind of a daze, right now. The apogee of my neurosis.

I look for my cordless phone as I head to the fridge. I have to call Ricky and tell him to come back to my apartment. I'm multi-tasking, now. As I open the refrigerator door I find both the pizza, and the cordless phone . . . right next to the milk.

The thought briefly crosses my mind that the spooks are fucking with me.

Little undead pranksters.

Don't have any idea how my head could be stuck that far up my ass, but there you are. I pull out the pizza and hit redial on the chilly cordless phone.

"Did you leave something in my truck?" Ricky answers, and I can hear traffic being narrowly dodged in the background.

No, I tell him. I read the first chapter.

" . . . of the . . . "

Yup.

"Holy shit!" he exploded.

Funny you should mention that, I say. Because that's the feeling I got.

"Yeah, well, this is a big breakthrough! This is—"

Not just that, though. The words . . . they sound familiar.

"Familiar how?" he says with squealing tires and angrily honking horns in the background.

I shrug as I pull the pizza out of its red box and read the instructions. "Grand," I say. Grand.

"Look, don't do anything," Ricky instructs me like he was the operator of a suicide hotline I had just called. "I'll . . . be . . . right . . . over!"

Hurry, I told him . . . before the world melts, again.

## CHAPTER 20

*28 MINUTES LATER . . .*

Ricky called me from the parking lot to inform me that he had the safe with him. I met him out in the hallway where he'd rigged-up one of those little chrome suitcase dollies, and a couple pieces of square-cut plywood. He was struggling, the dolly bent and groaning, as he drug it towards my door. But the scene was priceless.

When I pointed out to him that it looked heavy, he sneered at me, “. . . you think?” Ricky is the kind of tall and lanky guy that would be more suited for golf than, say, basketball. And, not wanting to steal his thunder, I let him curse and spit, saying things that would offend a sailor. He actually referred to my apartment's door threshold as a, “. . . slutty-assed, puke-faced whore!”

Several minutes later the safe was inside, shoved up against a real bookshelf that only had four or five books on it. This safe, the door on it is covered by the backs of fake books. And actually, the fake books look much more interesting than my real ones. That could be problematic.

I hope the thugs don't like *Moby Dick*, I say as I kneel down beside the new altar for the *Book of Sighs*.

“Anybody that would like any of those old books should be pretty easy to whip,” Ricky said glancing around the room. “Where's the book?”

Oh, I say, it's on the bed . . . under that pillow.

He squints his eyes and opens his hands as if to say, *why?* As he approaches it. He looks at the pillow covering the book, then back at me. The book, again. Me.

I ask him if he wants some pizza. I tell him that even without the mushrooms, it is still quite exceptional.

“Fuck the pizza, Jack! What did the book say?”

Oh, that.

I made my way over to the dresser and grabbed a sheet of paper that I had used to write down everything I remembered from my stint.

I cleared my throat and read the first sentence, “The Creation . . .” My eyes glance up and back to the page of scribbled words. My handwriting rivals the *Book of Sighs*, or Doctors' handwriting, for its level of illegibility. My cursive might as well be an ancient codex.

“One,” I continued. “. . . in the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, and the places in between.” I glance up and Ricky's looking at me like something is off kilter. Out of place. Like a puppy does when it hears a noise it can't understand.

“Two . . . and the earth was without form, and void; and darkness and chaos was upon the face of the—”

“Hold on!” Ricky interrupted. “You read it wrong. Read it again. The first one.”

One, I repeat. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, and the places in between.

I glance up, again, my eyebrows raised and waiting.

Ricky started chewing on his bottom lip, his eyes looking up at the Martian landscape of my ceiling. And he's whispering the line I read over and over. And then something seems to click in his head and he points at me, “You got a copy of the bible?”

Somewhere, I said. Since this place is part of the hospital, there would almost have to be one.

Three cabinets later, Ricky's holding up a King James Bible, “Those crafty Gideons. They're so thorough.” He opens the bible, placing it on the dresser next to my chicken scratch. “Look!”

His index finger is on the first page, after the word Creation. I read. Then I shrug. And?

“See that,” he says. “That part about the *places in between*. That's not in the original bible.”

So, I wondered aloud, Constantine has another bible written and he keeps it a secret? And this version, it's got something to do with this *other* place. Why would he do that?

“Could be a million reasons,” Ricky said, falling to my bed to sit. He glanced over at the book. He reached over, knocked off the pillow, and just stared at the *Book of Sighs* for a while.

Another thing you should know, I explain to him, is that the book isn't in the logical order. The verses are all, um, not complete. Like, in that first page, it goes from verse 1 to 2, then to 7, and then to 19, then 30 and 31. Like these are corrections or something.

“Oh, man,” Ricky said softly. He tapped his fingers lightly on the cover. “This book, this is the one we're not supposed to see. The one nobody was supposed to see.”

Should we stop reading it? I ask.

“No,” Ricky says as he slides it towards me. “You need to read every bit of it. Every last word.” He then looks around the room, through my patio door, past my balcony, and beyond.

His eyes searching the darkness, he says, “. . . you *need* to read this book as soon as possible.”

Why, though?

“The world we lived in two hours ago,” he says cryptically, “. . . it no longer exists.”



## CHAPTER 21

*JACK'S APARTMENT.*

*SUNDAY AFTERNOON . . .*

A cold front moved in, making it quite pleasant outside. It was in the lower 60's, which I love. So I'm out on my balcony, sitting back in a reclining green plastic chair that is shaped like a large crocodile. I'm not sure if this kind of furniture is standard in all of the *Lyndon B. Johnson Health Manor* apartments, or if other people have different furniture—like fish and horse chairs.

I even considered asking this nice old man that walks around the parking lot picking up coke cans, but this morning I saw him wearing the crushed cans as a necklace and figured any answers I got out of him would be unreliable at best.

People in a County funded medical environment, like the one I live in, they often have big issues. And most of them look just fine . . . on the outside. But inside their heads, where certain wires are crossed, or uncrossed, there's all sorts of crazy going on. Some of them, I hope, will eventually become useful members of society. But if I was a gambler in a past life, I'd put all my money on powder keg. These broken people, that *look* okay, they're casualties.

Burnouts.

People like that, that are always in need of medical or psychiatric assistance, they don't know it, but their days are numbered. Somewhere there is a truck bumper, or a construction crew, or a baseball bat with their name on it. Because—and I'm only barely 5-months-old here—the world we live in is cruel and indifferent to the class that doesn't fit into any mold.

Take Ricky for example. He's intelligent, with financial means that I dare not question for fear of a felony indictment. But take away the money and the smarts—two things that you'd have to get to know him to learn of—and he's just a stoner with no marketable life skills. Because I know him I see the hidden genius in him. The paradox. But other people, like the doctors he works with at the hospital, they see him as a casualty. Some slacker who couldn't hack it in med-school.

I can only imagine what they *really* think about me.

Who am I?

Am I what I think other people think I am? That is, am I what other people see—a physical image—or is there a hidden beauty and charm that may not have surfaced?

Am I the slight lines on my face, which Ricky says give me character, but which I think make me look old?

Am I my teeth? My lips?

Am I the cross-shaped scar on my head from where they poked and prodded my brain, deciding whether or not there was enough neuronal activity left of me to save?

I go to the bathroom with all of these questions floating around me. I have the overwhelming urge to wash my hands and face. I have several small aromatherapy soap bars.

The red one, it smells like berries, and claims to make you feel *vibrant*. There is a scar on my left hand, just behind my second knuckle. No clue how it got there. I could have fallen through a plate-glass window, or been partially nailed to a cross by religious psychopaths.

I rinse the pink foam off of my hands. Hands of a stranger I don't even know. Next, I pick up the tan-colored bar. *Vanilla bean* scented. It smells so good I'm half tempted to take a bite out of it. Vanilla bean is supposed to, and I'm reading here, “. . . soothe the savage beast.”

So, I guess they wash gorillas and polar bears with the stuff.

I lather up my hands and cover my face in soothing bubbles. Mixing these two soaps, trying to get the best parts of the berry and Vanilla bean, it's about the closest to gay I'll ever get. And still, I hope nobody ever catches me doing it. I'm pretty certain that combining aromatherapy soaps gets you on a first-class flight to kooky town.

I wash the Vanilla bean suds off of my face and look at myself in the mirror. I try to study the characteristics of my face the way other people do. Am I my light brownish-green eyes? Am I my average shaped nose? Am I my short brown hair, sprigs of grey migrating here and there? Am I the puffy bags underneath my eyes?

Am I the dead girl standing behind me in the mirror?

I blink a couple of times to see if my mind is getting squirrely, or if she's actually there, behind me. I take a deep breath, my eyes closed, and slowly open just my right eye. She's gone. But not.

She's still on my mind. This girl, she tugs at me emotionally, and I have no explanation for this.

I dried my face and set the bars of soap in their correct and symmetrical locations around the rim of green marbled sink. In the back of my thoughts, I hear those haunting words, *not yet*.

Not yet . . . what?

I had been reading the *Book of Sighs* on and off all day, writing down everything I could remember. Each time the spooks came around to watch the translator—me—at work. And each time my apartment bent and melted into the place between dogs and wolves. Things vibrated, furniture jiggled; and squiggles, dots, and dashes turned into English. Maybe I was a linguistics expert in my before-life?

A translator, perhaps.

Heck, I might have been a college professor.

Looking at my clean, vibrant, soothed face, I can kind of see an esteemed colleague. A professor emeritus. A Dean Jack, even. With all sorts of initials after my name. I raise my chin a bit, studying my profile. Quite scholarly, if I do say so myself.

“Good day, old chap,” I say in Rupert's voice. “Jolly good. Bloody liberals will be the death of the Queen. Mr. Watson, I presume. Rubbish!” And slowly I lower my chin. I'm a retard.

I left the bathroom, turned to my right and stopped dead in my tracks.

She's right in front of me. I try the eye closing thing, again, but she's not going anywhere. When I get past the sheer terror of it all, I notice she's looking at me like somebody who knows me. Her face is softened. Somber.

But—and I'm not sure about this—it's like she's pleased to see me. Like some part of her horrible suffering is eased, if only for a tiny fraction of a millisecond. This might also be transference on my part. Could be that I'm so desperate for connections that I'm forcing them on ghosts and ghouls. How sad is that.

This girl—once you get past the dead grey tone of her skin, and the wet-black shoulder-length hair—she's attractive. I know that makes me a complete sicko, but I'm serious. This girl must have been quite beautiful when she was alive.

Hello, Thorazine drip.

Nice to meet you Mr. straitjacket.

And is that your friend, electro-shock therapy? Oh, I'm sure we'll all get acquainted shortly.

She blinks her wide, curious eyes and slowly starts glancing from side to side, like somebody might be coming. Her eyes appear anxious and afraid, and she puts her thin finger to her lips and whispers, “Shhhhhhh . . .”

And then I hear this blood-curdling scream that sounds like starving monsters, and children, and trains, and birds all mixed into something truly horrifying. Something is approaching us. She senses it, and so do I. And as this dark force closes in on us she opens her mouth to speak, but doesn't manage to.

She's too scared to speak.

And I'm thinking maybe I should be, too.

I feel more afraid than I have ever been in my entire short life. The scream sounds again, shaking us. The both of us flinch together, at the same moment. And this is shitting-in-your-pants scary!

This dead girl, she doesn't have time to tell me her secrets. And I find myself wanting to protect her. To shelter her from the screaming, but that's impossible . . . because she's fading.

Because she's gone.

And that scream, it's just an echo in my head, now. The same pounding, hammering noise I've been hearing since I woke-up.

## CHAPTER 22

### *R.H.D. MEMORIAL HOSPITAL.*

#### *MONDAY MORNING . . .*

“The hospital,” Ricky says as we’re walking down a glossy hallway, “. . . it’s like a whole, self-contained city. It could be a country it’s so efficient. It has to be self-sustaining, with every possible event accounted for and figured into the design. And it’s always under construction. There are whole wings that used to be thriving, that are no longer accessible from the main hospital. They’re like ghost towns, now, hidden behind plastic and brick.

“. . . walled off like they never existed,” he says eerily.

I’m dressed in my OR scrubs, again. This time I even have the slippers, the gloves, and a mask around my neck, just in case we enter a restricted *clean* area. Ricky thought that we should tour around the hospital looking at people who are in varying levels of sickness and suffering. You know, to see where the spooks congregate; what turns them on.

Ricky’s ideas, though zany and off-the-wall at times, usually make perfect sense.

The hospital was the ideal place to study the other side. Where better than a miniature city dedicated in handling the transition from the living to the darkness beyond?

Another reason this experiment was coming just at the right time was that my mind was stuck on this dead girl I kept seeing in my apartment. I wonder if she came with the apartment—someone else with problems like mine—or if she and I had some deeper connection.

Was she my own personal baggage, or remnants of the past somehow stuck in this county-funded living situation? I hope I haven’t been dragging her along for years and years. I wonder if I saw her before my life was erased. It’s hard enough for a family member to get to know an amnesia sufferer, so I can only imagine how difficult it could be for a ghost!

And I had another question that needed answering: Where did she figure in with the spooks and the gatherers? I had considered giving Ms. Josephine a visit, but she had been quite specific about finishing the book *before* I returned to see her.

The first stop on our tour was to the chapel, where—no surprise—we didn’t see any spook activity. Just a quiet old guy praying for somebody he knew he’d probably never talk to, again.

As we were walking we discussed the possible scenarios that could be playing out. The first possibility is that the dead girl is from the same place as the spooks.

“That's the most likely,” Ricky says as we follow signs to the PICU (Pediatric Intensive Care Unit) and the NICU (Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit). “The dead chick, the spooks . . . they all seem connected. Elements of the same otherworldly fabric.”

As we enter the PICU I see doctors and nurses tending to sick and broken children, and I feel like a jerk just for being healthy around them. This whole hospital environment gives me the creeps, so I can only imagine how utterly frightening it must be to a 6-year-old.

Here, among these children, there are no spooks.

No gatherers.

No dead people staring at me.

I ask Ricky if we're going to the burn unit. I don't know if I have a strong enough stomach for that, but he assures me we can't. The reason for this is that R.H.D. Memorial is only a class III trauma center. Usually, only hospitals with a class II trauma center rating or better will have full burn units.

Right now, he says, we're on our way to Radiation-Oncology.

The cancer unit, I said.

“That's right,” he replies, “. . . where the lead-lined rooms with x-ray cannons melt away your hair, and teeth, and immune system . . . and sometimes treat cancer.” He whispers, “I don't think you'll see any spooks there, either. Too much hope.”

Ricky has this theory that the different levels of peoples' faith may be a predictor of spook activity. In the cancer ward, people who believe in chemotherapy, those kinds of people are full of desperate hope and unrealistic optimism.

I'm still on the fence on this theory.

But, sure enough, as we walk through the shorter hallways that make up the Radiation-Oncology center, there's not a spook in sight. Not a ghost to be found. At least, not on my frequency. As we walk I consider my second theory.

The girl, I say, she's a ghost from my forgotten past. Somebody I once knew, haunting me for reasons only the cosmos can fathom. The more I see her, the closer I can get to those answers, or to her telling me them.

“So, in this theory,” he says as if we're doing physics equations, “. . . the ghost of this girl is *unrelated* to the spooks?” His voice is rather skeptical.

I nod, Yes.

“So . . . if we subscribe to this theory, we assume that, one or the other—the dead chick, or the spooks—might not actually exist? I mean, one of them could be an illusion of your demented mind?”

I hadn't thought about it *that* way, but he could be right. It's quite possible that I could be hallucinating the girl, and seeing the spooks. Or the reverse. And really, it's a tempting line of thinking, but it also raises too many other questions.

Ms. Josephine said that she knew of the spooks, and of the screamers—that's what I'm calling the things that keep, well . . . screaming their asses off at me. But she—the guru psychic—said she knew *of* them. She hadn't seen them, but she knew enough to warn me about them.

“The logical step, now, is to determine which group of invisible, supernatural entities have more credibility,” he said as he stopped at a water fountain and leaned over for a sip of water. I heard gulping sounds as I considered his words.

“Spooks,” he continued as he came up for air, “. . . more frequently seen, ergo, more credibility.”

Todd Steele would probably agree with Ricky on this one. And, reluctantly, so do I.

“So you could still have a brain tumor,” he said optimistically, knowing that I had so wanted this explanation to sum up all of the things I was seeing.

Thanks, I tell him. But he's right. There would seem to be overwhelming evidence of some mental pathology on my part. At least, from an impartial third-party perspective. My theory of brain tumors and decaying grey matter is a recurring theme. And I had hoped for an answer like this. Something rational.

Me, I'd rather have a reasonable answer that kills me, than something *uber*-natural that I can't wrap my mind around. Call me old fashioned. Or new-fashioned, I'm not exactly sure which.

But then I remind him about all the progress we've made with the *Book of Sighs*, lately. And we agree that, though a convenient fit, the old nutbag-crazy boat just won't float. As unhappy as it makes me admit this, I don't think I'm loco.

At least, not yet.

This whole ordeal may eventually push me right over the edge of sanity.

As we walk past an open room I stop in my tracks holding my arm up. But it's a false alarm. What I thought was a spook turned out to be a Pastor's jacket, thrown over a chair while he counsels a sick woman. How's that for irony.

I remark to Ricky about how quiet this hospital is, and I'm not just talking about spook activity. For a house of death, it's halls and rooms seem calm and tranquil.

He explains that this particular facility is more or less a local hospital that services the communities of Farmer's Branch, and Carrollton—suburbs of Dallas county.

“People who are really messed-up, they get *CareFlighted* to Parkland, where just the Emergency Department is nearly as big as this entire hospital.”

He says that if you scrape your knee, you go to R.H.D. If you have an ax sticking out of your head, you mosey on over to Parkland. And with something as minor as an ax wound, you'll have to wait in line for a couple of hours.

As we make our way through the SNU (Skilled Nursing Unit), Ricky explains, “This is where the hospital makes the lion's share of its money. People here can't live in nursing homes because they're too reliant on medical attention. Really, they cannot leave the hospital at all.”

While he gives me the ins and outs of the SNU, I wonder. I wonder what it would be like to constantly watch people die. If I was a doctor, I don't think that I could deal with the knowledge that hundreds of people's lives were hanging on my decisions. If I have a bad day at work, and I make some rash decisions . . . people die. If I stay up late one night—watching *House* or *ER*, or whatever it is doctors watch—and I neglect one, tiny, little thing . . . people die. Doctors can't have a bad day.

The doctors and nurses and specialists that wield this power, I wonder if they think about it that much? Or does it eventually lose its gravity. Are they so used to seeing death that they get emotionally vaccinated against it? Numb and indifferent. Desensitized to the passing of life that unfolds in front of them on a daily basis.

The absence of culpability.

The transition of life from color to black-n-white.

Death Lite. Same great death, half the emotional calories!

Ricky says we should head on over to the ED (Emergency Department), referred to commonly as the ER. “Let's cut to the chase!”

And then we hear, “Dr. Blue to CCU. Dr. Blue to CCU,” beam over the intercom in a pleasant female voice.

“Somebody's coding,” Ricky said quietly. “*Dr. Blue* is the signal for the Code team to gather.”

On our way we come to a large elevator—big enough for a college football team—I feel this little ping in my chest and then the elevator light blinks several times as the massive steel doors slide apart. Two nurses back quickly out of the elevator, clearing a path for the gurney, and they behave as if like they don't have a lot of time.

As they grabbed onto the hand rails that surrounded the rolling death bed, two spooks scurried out into the hall jumping up and down like they're on crystal-meth. And they're looking up trying to catch a peek at whoever is on the bed.

They're here, I tell Ricky under my breath.

“The spooks?”

Yeah.

The rest of the nurses and several doctors—the Code team—race out of the elevator with the gurney, and my jaw drops nearly to the floor as three or four more spooks run out, trailing behind the bluing, choked body of Dr. Robert “Call me Bob” Smith.

My caseworker, he's dying.

There's a nurse actually kneeling on the gurney doing chest compressions. Another man—the respiratory tech—is intubating Dr. Smith. He's breathing for him using an endotracheal tube, and a bag-valve mask, being his only source of air.

A tall woman is starting an IV while she jogs along.

And all of this is being directed by a doctor who is following ACLS (Advanced Cardiac Life Support) protocols. Ricky says that's very important when it comes time for lawsuits and stuff.

“That's Doctor Smith!” Ricky blurts.

And I have no words.

“Didn't you say the spooks were sizing him up at your meeting the other day?”

I nod slowly, deciding that Ricky and I don't need to entertain any of my other scenarios. The possibility that I'm imagining all of this is all but gone.

This *is* happening.

Ricky nudges me as the doctors, nurses, my suffocating caseworker, and a whole gaggle of spooks run down the hallway towards the CCU (Cardiac Care Unit). He elbows me and says, “Hey, Jack . . . if you *ever* see those spooks fitting me for my death suit, you had better fucking tell me. And I mean, that very second!”

Staring down the hallway watching all the excitement unfold, I tell Ricky, “We need to see this thing play out.” I look at him very seriously, “. . . *all* the way out.”

And though neither of us say it, we were both thinking about the Gatherers.



## CHAPTER 23

### *R.H.D. MEMORIAL*

### *CARDIAC CARE UNIT . . .*

Between the doctors racing around, the nurses taking orders like they were on the battlefield, and the spooks that had gathered in attendance to watch it all unfold, it was hard to see what the Code team was doing to revive Dr. Smith.

But when they all backed off and I saw the defibrillator pads being placed on his chest—one on his upper right pectoral, the other on his lower left ribs—I knew my caseworker was not long for this world.

Ricky's telling me everything that's going on, from the shots of adrenaline, to the joules (the energy released in one second by a current of one ampere through a resistance of one ohm) used on the defibrillator. He's explaining what each of the peoples' jobs are, and who does what, but I can't really focus on any of what he's saying.

“Ventricular fibrillation, most likely . . .”

Even though there is all of this excitement going on around Dr. Smith's oxygen starved body, the rest of the CCU is business as usual. What I'm being explained is that Dr. Smith's heart is misfiring. Normal electrical pathway for the heart is Sinoatrial (SA)—Atrioventricle nodes (AV). But the signals are fibrillating—misfiring.

“If he makes it out of this—” Ricky starts to say.

He won't.

“ . . . well, if he does, he'll probably end up in hospice care. And those patients, they're just waiting to die. All the hospice people do is keep the patients so drugged-up that they don't have to suffer their end.”

We get as close as we can get without being in the way and I just listen.

A thin, black doctor directs the code, “Cardio-vert at two-hundred joules. Head clear, feet clear, all clear!” He touches a button and Dr. Smith's body arches, lifting up off of the gurney, his back curved impossibly.

They all watch the black and green screen, looking at the erratic spikes that seem everywhere on the monitor.

“Still V-fib. Resume CPR.”

They move around quickly, purposefully.

“ . . . administer epinephrine.”

All eyes are on the screen. Small numbers to the right of the numerous green spikes tell the doctors they aren't having success.

“ . . . still V-fib . . . cardio-vert again, three-hundred joules,” and a high-pitched wine sounds as the electricity is building for the shock charge.

“Head clear, feet clear, all clear!”

Again, Dr. Smith's body lifts and drops.

And everybody is silent, waiting, hoping.

Nothing.

More anxious now, “ . . . still V-fib, continue CPR. And give me lidocaine, IV bolus.”

And as sudden as the lidocaine starts to enter his body, there is a change. You could hear a pin drop. All of our eyes, they're all staring at the screen that now shows a pulse.

A cardiologist yells, “We've got V-tac!”

“We've got a pulse,” a nurse confirms.

“Ventricular Tachycardia,” Ricky whispers to me. This is like watching *House*, only . . . in the episode that is my life, the people really die.

Sure enough, the rhythmic spikes come, one after the next.

And then another.

And another.

Ricky slaps me on the shoulder, “*See* . . . have a bit of faith, Jack.” Somehow, at least Dr. Smith's heart is still alive.

I notice a most curious thing, the spooks are acting funny. They are huddling together in little groups and hurrying away to dark areas where they can disappear into the shadows. But they're not leaving . . . they're just hiding. Getting out of the way.

And I have an uneasy feeling about what is probably coming next.

Ricky squeezes my shoulder, “That's modern technology for you. We *cheat* death here, sir.”

I glance cautiously at him, and then back at my caseworker. The spooks are waiting for something to happen. And as far as I can tell, everybody else is all about pats on the back and high-fives. People are smiling, proud that they could save the life of one of their own. But the spooks and I, we know different.

“You're too negative, Jack,” Ricky says. “Lighten-up, buddy.”

And as the word, *buddy*, leaves his mouth I see two of them lumber out of the darkness. I ask Ricky if he still wants to bet, and he looks at me like I'm insane.

“Why . . . what do you see?”

The Gatherers. They are thicker in the trunk than the spooks, with their long spider arms, their thin sharp fingers, and their double-bladed knives. They slowly amble over to the gurney, lurching from side to side, as if they're worn-out from a long day of ripping chests open and sucking out life.

But as the doctors and nurses work to stabilize Dr. Smith, the gatherers are using their long knife-wielding arms to climb up and position themselves on Dr. Smith's body.

For a moment some of the spooks leave their small groups and edge towards the gurney, but one of the gatherers raises up—his arms spreading like an angry bird—and the spooks quickly scurry back to their shadows. Returning to their work, the gatherers seem to be measuring my caseworker's body for something.

Their arms raise slowly upward, their hands high in the air, the knife points facing downwards. This is the part I want to see, and can't bare to watch. I'm squinting, and Ricky doesn't *know* . . . but he knows.

And me and the spooks, we're on the edges of our proverbial seats. Ricky is not convinced until he hears the loud tone.

*Crashed!*

“ . . . we lost his pulse!”

“We have pulseless V-tac!”

“Immediate cardio-vert at three-sixty joules!” the doctor instructs, calm but forcefully.

And at that very moment, when the smiles melt away, when the jubilant attitudes disappear, and the high-fives become nervous hands, again . . . the gatherers strike.

Their arms and knives are so fast and so sharp that they must have cut through him in just three or four seconds. Doctors and nurses are scrambling again. And the gatherers, they're already reaching inside some invisible incision in Dr. Smith's chest.

My chest stings just watching all of this.

Ricky, he's quiet as a light switch, frozen. Searching for words. He's watching me watching the doctors who are trying to revive my caseworker.

“ . . . head clear, feet clear, all clear!”

Up he goes, down he goes.

And the gatherers, they don't like this little carnival ride the humans are putting them through. Both of them spread their arms seeming to hiss at all of the doctors and nurses that are only prolonging their visit. I don't think that they like this place.

Now it's become a tug-of-war for Dr. Smith's soul. The doctors in this world, using all the drugs and technology that evolution provides them, trying to keep him alive. The gatherers, clawing and pulling at Dr. Smith's soul, freeing it of its worldly moorings.

Frustrated, one of the doctors says, “. . . we've got asystole,” and he shakes his head, sweat turning his light green scrubs a dark forest green. “. . . no activity.”

With each thing the Code team tries, the gatherers efforts are frustrated, but only momentarily. And with every pause in the doctor's fight, the gatherers pull at the man's soul, again.

Still no heartbeat.

No pulse.

The gatherers are winning. They're good at their job. And as I watch them, I realize that they were designed for this one purpose. They're emotionally inert and impassive about their work. They might as well be honey bees or something equally as apathetic to their chores.

These well-intentioned human doctors . . . they never had a chance.

Searching for a miracle, the black doctor offers, “. . . we could try trans-cutaneous pacing?” He looks at the cardiologist.

“We've been working this for nearly forty-five minutes,” the cardiologist sighed, catching his breath, his arms crossing loosely in front of his chest. “He's got a history of heart complications. Eats sausage like it's going out of style . . .” He shakes his head.

“Fine . . .” the doctor says, rubbing his forehead. “Let's call it.”

And that, I say sadly, is that.

The gatherers pull Robert “Call me Bob” Smith out of his own body, right through the opening in his chest and he looks like a crash-test dummy. He's a dimly glowing tan-grey outline of a person. A faceless form—a grey skin sack, with large scared eyes as wide as saucers.

The spooks all rush to the side of the gurney and the gatherers toss the panicked form down at the very moment one of the doctors say, “. . . what's the time?”

The spooks haul off their newly harvested soul. And the gatherers, after a thorough inspection of the insides of Dr. Smith's corpse, crawl back down and follow the spooks into the darkness.

Ricky turns around, all the color in his face flushed away. He's as white as a bleached sheet, and he looks sick.

Sorry, I tell him. I didn't want it to happen.

“But . . . you never had any doubts, either, did you?”

I shrugged as we walked down the hallway.

*Nope.*

## CHAPTER 24

### *7-11 CONVENIENCE STORE.*

#### *MONDAY EVENING . . .*

I'm trying to decide what would sate my stomach grumbling. Ricky is two rows over, shuffling through cold medicines looking for something for his sniffles. Seems, after the whole Dr. Smith incident, he's a little health paranoid right now. So, while I'm looking for something that falls between a *Twinkie* and a *Ding-Dong*, he's trying to find the magical cure for creatures that come from the shadows.

I told him he should just get something from the hospital, but he's a bit freaked out about being there, right now. Even told me he wanted to take a few days off. I guess my caseworker's passing was less of a shock to me because I'd seen the spooks measuring him for his trip across the void, at our last meeting. That made it easier to accept.

Death Lite. Same great death, half the calories.

But for Ricky, most likely a more rational person than myself, he's having a hard time with all of this. See, when this all started a few weeks back, he didn't really have much invested in my little bug hunt. But as things began to get spooky—no pun intended—I think he realized that there was more to this than paranoid delusions and fugue states.

After Dr. Smith was ripped out of this world, and carted off into the whatever, Ricky had some pondering to do. And right now, I don't think he wants to concentrate about anything other than keeping the spooks at bay. Really, he's taking all of this pretty well.

“What's better between *Sudafed* and *ColdAway*?” he says, as he reads the ingredients.

“How should I know, I'm still technically an infant,” I say looking at a clear plastic bag of *Choco-Kakes*, looking for an expiration date. I can't find any numbers that make any sense. I don't think there's a born-on date, either. On the one hand, they look absolutely delicious. But then, there is no way of telling if they got here yesterday, or have been here since the 70's—constantly overlooked by the underachieving staff.

“I'm just saying,” Ricky says frustratingly, “. . . if you *had* to choose?”

I ask if he even has a cold.

“Not really, but I've been under-the-weather.”

I shrug, Maybe you should just take the one with the most ingredients listed on the back. Look for the most variety in your pharmaceutical because maybe that will ward off the monsters.

“That's real funny, Jack. You sure are cavalier about death, lately. This shit is serious.”

Lose your memory and wake-up to a world full of shadowy monsters and it opens your horizons, I explain. I might have been a conservative Republican when I blinked out. But when I woke up, I was a liberal Democrat. Maybe even . . . gulp . . . a libertarian?

“So you'd tax the spooks, then?”

That's not what I meant with the analogy. Anyway, I tell him, he'll get use to it, too. Our adventure has only just begun. I still haven't finished the book. Once I do, we'll be in a much better position to deal with all of this. To make a difference.

“A difference in what?”

I don't know. I don't even want to talk about any of this. I just want a sweet, delicious, yummy snack that's packed with enough trans fat that my arteries make an audible wheezing sound.

Ricky approaches me with about seven different boxes of cold and allergy medicine. I see he chose the old, '*one of each*' approach. He nods, then looks at my snack choices.

“You're going to kill yourself eating that shit. It turns your body into plastic.” He then taps on the deluxe box of *Fluffy-Doves*, “There's more fat in one of those, than in five *Snickers* bars.”

So I should put this back and grab five *Snickers* bars, I ask.

He reached over and grabs my *Fluffy-Doves*, squishing them in his hand, sending pink cream-filling all over the place.

I look at him like he just killed one of my children.

“I just saved a day of your life,” he says.

*Yeah*, I reply, those really good times when I'm 96, on every type of medication, and my body's falling apart like a cheap suit. Thanks for the favor.

We head to the counter to pay for our gobs full of snacks and medicines, and the cashier—a Mexican kid with a name tag that says, Victor—looks at us funny.

“You have drug problems?” Victor asks suspiciously as he slides the different packages over a small piece of glass near the register. His accent is thick and Latino. With each swipe we hear a beep, and the price on the screen facing us doubles, triples, exponentially climbing.

Ricky cocks his head to the side, staring at Victor narrowly, “What do you mean, drug problem?”

Victor points to the cold medicines, “The peoples who is usually buying these medicines, they make the Meth. You know, like for *speed*?”

Ricky laughs, “Oh, no, man. We're not speed freaks.”

“That's what a junkie would say,” Victor counters, looking at a printed list of things methamphetamine cooks might say to buy any drug that has ephedrine in it. This printed list is published by the DEA, and there's probably a copy of it in every *7-11* on the planet.

This, I say to them, is the War on Drugs I keep reading about. I guess it has finally made it to the checkout counter.

Ricky says that the Drug War is only *really* profitable to the drug dealers, and the government agencies that enforce it. Everybody else seems to take it right up the tailpipe. His exact words were, “. . . since the Government's apparently bankrupt, that's just the kind of shit they'd try to pull.”

And me, I'm still trying to figure out why cold pills are illegal in quantity.

Victor looks down at the DEA's rebuttal list, then to us, the list, us. I'm sure there's a big bold phone number at the bottom of the sheet. “You can only have two boxes, or I have to call the Federales.”

The veins on Ricky's neck are visibly throbbing. “One,” Ricky said sternly, “. . . we don't have *Fede-rales*, here. Two, we're not junkies or meth-heads, or anything like that. Three, none of these are controlled substances. If they were, you'd have to have them in a protected case where people couldn't just go through grabbing whatever they wanted. I work at a hospital, *Vic-tor*. I know this shit.”

Victor grits his teeth, “Two boxes . . . *on-ly!*”

Sensing this silliness spiraling out of control, I say, “Look, I'll take two, and he'll take two. That way, everybody is happy. And nobody needs the Federales.”

Neither of them speak. I have become the arbitrator in all this. Ricky raises his eyebrows, glaring at the young Hispanic clerk as if to say, *your move*.

Victor nods slowly, as he starts to scan in the other boxes. More beeps and the dollar amount escalates to something that rivals the national debt.

With a plastic smile, Ricky asks, “Can we have more than two of the snack cakes, or are those on the ban list, too?”

I elbow Ricky in the ribs and apologize to Victor. I then tell Ricky to give me the money and go outside to the truck and wait. He reluctantly does so. A girl behind me is waiting patiently for her turn, so I give him the down payment on a new Porsche, collect about 13 cents change, and take my plastic bag full of frustration and future indictments.

As I head toward the door I hear a girl's voice behind me, “Hal . . . Hal Falter . . . is that you?” I look around and there's nobody else there she could be talking to. I wonder if that's me she's talking to, so I turn around.

Excuse me, I say.

She's short, with long curly auburn hair and rosy cheeks. She has a kind face, and smile. Her clothes are modest: a pair of jeans and a green blouse. She looks like somebody I might know.

“Is it you?” she says, squinting at me. “It's been nearly twenty years. You look a lot different.”

People change a lot in twenty years. I feel my heart rate beating a million beats a second. What if this girl knew me? Knows me? This could be the break I need to get my old life back. All my questions might get answered because of this one, chance encounter.

And I'm thinking, hey, the universe *might* work this way. I saw death earlier, but my old life, perhaps it is about to be reborn.

Then she smiles awkwardly, “You're not Hal, are you.”

I might be.

“No, no,” she says. “Hal moved away a long time ago. And besides, you're too polite to be Hal Falter. He was kind of a . . .”

Kind of a what? I say, stepping closer.

“He was a bit of a womanizer,” she said. And then she looked at my eyes, “And Hal had bluish eyes. You could almost be him. His twin”

Shit.

“I'm sorry, you just looked like a ghost from my past,” she said as she opened her purse to pay. Victor was so caught up in this little soap opera that he hadn't started ringing-up her groceries.

I get that a lot, I say to her. The ghost thing, I mean.

Even though this woman says I'm not who she thought I might be, I keep repeating the name, Hal Falter, over and over in my head as I make my way out.

As the doors open the difference in pressure from outside the *7-11* hits me like a punch in the gut. It's gotten even colder.

Hal Falter.

I wave goodbye to the woman and head out towards Ricky's black gas-guzzler, and make my way around to the passenger side, being blasted by chilling wind. The weather here in Texas seems as unpredictable as the netherworld.

I get in and turn to Ricky, I need you to look-up a name on your Internet for me. He asks, why.

I might be a guy named Hal Falter, I say.

He shrugs, “Well, there shouldn't be more than about two-thousand, Hal Falters on the web. Can you narrow it down a bit?”

Yeah, I say. He's missing. He's got my physical description—well, plus or minus the eye color. And he might have a history of mental illness.

“Is this just the sugar talking?”

Probably, I admit.

“Cool.”



## CHAPTER 25

### *HEADING EAST ON VALLEY VIEW LN.*

#### *4 MINUTES LATER . . .*

Against Ricky's better judgment, I was already unwrapping one of my packages of *Choco-Kakes*. And while I did this, he's unfoiling two yellow antihistamine tablets.

I need sugar.

He needs peace of mind.

We're basically doing the same thing, him and me. Though, from completely different directions.

I figure it's time I told him about the job I was taking. Last week my caseworker—before the soul stealing incident—had called me about a job. I had told him that if nothing else came up, I would consider it. But I have some idea that Ricky will not think highly of my employment decision.

“What, Jack?” Ricky said, seeing me looking at him with that pre-announcement glare.

I, uh, well . . . I think I may have found employment.

“Sweet,” he says as he forces down the second of his two *Sudafed* tablets without the assistance of water. “Did you get a job at the mall? That's a good place to work, with all the chicks and stuff.”

No, I say—my eyes darting around the black and grey leather interior of his truck. I got a job with Dallas County Services.

And now I'm waiting for his response.

“With what?”

Dallas County Services. The people who tend to the *Lyndon B. Johnson Manor*, where I live.

“God-damn, dude!” he barks.

What's the problem? I get to work near my apartment. I have relatively flexible hours. And I get to be a part of my own environment. To help people less fortunate than myself. To be a part of the cure. I'm tired of being a drain on society. I want to make a difference. Be a part of something that can lead to a better tomorrow.

“You're going to be a tard-farmer!”

A what?

“You are going to be the guy that tends to the retards. Thus . . . a tard-farmer. Those people will drive you insane, Jack.” Then he squints at me as he glances from the road to me, and back to the road. Gears are turning inside his head.

What? I ask. What is it?

His eyes all narrow, he says, “How did you get the job?”

I could lie to him about actually applying and going through the interview process. I could make up a bunch of nonsense about being called in for a second interview, and how well the manager liked me. But Ricky, he's grown to know me enough that he'd see I'm lying my ass off. For some reason, the post head-trauma *me* can't lie very convincingly.

“Thing is,” Ricky says conspiratorially, “. . . they don't usually let the tards run the tard-farm.”

Are you saying I'm retarded? I asked. Because, that's what it seems like.

“Jack, you are the rare exception to the kind of people that waste away in County Services care. You're the exception, not the rule. But see, they don't usually let people that are in the *care* of County Services, *work* for them. It's a clear-cut recipe for disaster.”

“Like a conflict of interest,” I add. And maybe he's got a point.

He continues, “. . . so, there must be one hell of a compelling reason they would hire you. Not that you aren't probably perfect for the job. But something more tangible. Why would they risk having you work for them . . . given your questionable mental status?”

That's easy, I explain. The last guy who was working at the *Lyndon B. Johnson Manor* got bitten by a guy who lives on the third floor.

“He got bitten! And that doesn't bother you?”

I shrugged. Not really, I tell him. People have moments of, um, confusion.

“*Confusion?*” Ricky says emphatically. “Confusion is not knowing what door is yours. Or what key to use. Or forgetting which cabinet your medicine is in. Biting . . . that's way past confusion. That's primal. That's your deep-seeded psychopathology.”

The caretaker is fine now, I explain. He just had to get some shots.

“Shot's for what . . . Rabies?”

No, I reassure him. Not Rabies . . . MRSA.

Ricky's face, it turns three different shades of red—like a light machine, or a lava lamp. He eyes me through the changing colors of his skin and says, “Do you have any idea what fucking MRSA is?”

I shrug. Some type of skin rash?

“MRSA is the form of staph infection that they think will kill half of the civilized world. It's unstoppable. Like, in that Dustin Hoffman movie, um . . . *Outbreak!*”

I haven't seen that movie, yet.

“It's old,” he says. “Look, you need to be careful working as a tard-farmer. You don't want to catch some unknown disease because some lip-dragging psycho thinks your arm looks like a *Church's* chicken leg.”

It's fine, I say, calming his nerves. They make all the staff wear long-sleeved shirts, now.

Ricky shakes his head back and forth. “You had better read all about the undead, because if you work there long enough, you're going to be one of them.”

That's another thing, I say. We need to talk about the book. Something has come up and it warrants your point of view.

“What?” he says as we pull into my apartment complex—the aforementioned tard-farm.

I've been reading back and forth between the King James bible, and the revisions in the *Book of Sighs*.

“Yeah?”

And I found a new chapter.

“They don't call them chapters,” Ricky explained. “They refer to them as either books, or gospels. The first four sections of the New Testament, they're the gospels. After that, they're called the books. You know, all the different things that Constantine and his *Council of Nicaea* decided on.”

Right, right. “Well,” I say as I load a *Zinger* into my mouth, “I found a new *book*, then.”

“What's it called?”

*The Book of Sorrows.*

Please look for **Part 3 of 5**, available at [free-ebooks.net!](http://free-ebooks.net)