

See Jack Die

(Part 3 of 5)

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

PART III: CHAPTER 26

JACK'S APARTMENT.

MONDAY EVENING . . .

We walk into my apartment and right off the bat, the very second we open the door, I know something is not right. I stop in my kitchen, and Ricky can sense that I'm picking-up on something.

“What is it, Jack?”

I don't know, I tell him. I look around my kitchen, then my eyes focus farther out into my small apartment living area, and beyond. At first glance everything seems fine. But I have a feeling otherwise.

Ricky whispers, “Spooks?”

No, I say as I take a step forward. I think somebody has been in here. Looking around.

Then we both glance at each other and simultaneously we say, “The book!”

Quickly we both race into the living room, and over to the shelves near my bed where our fake bookshelf is hiding in plain sight. It's still there, not moved an inch.

Ricky bends down, looking back and forth over his shoulder before he does the combination.

“Maybe we should search the rest of the apartment before we check.”

Good idea, I nod to him.

Then, like super-silent ninjas we both creep our way over to the short hallway leading to my bathroom and washroom. Like stealth secret agents we line-up on both sides of the bathroom door. We trade nods.

On 3, I mouth to him.

1 . . .

2 . . .

3! Both of us spring into action, me turning the door knob, and him kicking it open. “Freeze!” I yell, feeling just like *Horatio* on *CSI: Miami*. But there's nobody in the bathroom except us two dumbasses.

Ricky and I laugh at our over-paranoid reactions and I notice him looking down at my sink basin. His eyes, they go back and forth between my two soaps.

My aromatherapy soaps.

“Jack . . . what are those?”

What?

“Those.”

Never mind all that, I say, trying to get him the hell out of there before he starts asking questions that my masculinity may not be able to answer.

He leans his head back, looking at the soaps one last time, and I know that there is a question forming in his mind.

Let's check on the book, I say.

He nods slowly, and I'm certain that this won't be the last of the *aromatherapy soap inquisition*.

We head back into the living room, and over near my bed. He unlocks the safe and, cozy as can be, the *Book of Sighs* is sitting there with several pages of my handwritten notes on top. He takes out the notes and closes the safe.

“So, what have we got?” Ricky says as he sits down on the bed and shuffles through the pages. “Where is this *Book of Sorrows*?”

Last few pages in the pile, I instruct him.

And then I watch as he finds the pages and sets the others aside. He leans forward and begins reading, whispering as he goes through each verse. Occasionally he looks up at me, as I pace back and forth. But mostly he's just mouthing the text.

While he's reading, I walk slowly from the living room, down the short hallway, make a slow 3-point turn, and then amble back. I'm taking those elongated steps where you let the weight of your body shift at its own pace from left to right. I feel like a soldier marching in one of those parades, although much slower. My left foot falls to the carpet, then my right.

Left, plop.

Right, plop.

And I continued doing this as I think about everything that's happened in the last few hours. Ricky and I, neither of us has discussed the death of my caseworker. It's a taboo subject for the meantime. I think we'll probably talk about it after he finishes reading my notes. As a matter of fact, I'm certain we will.

The chapter—I'm sorry, the *book* of Sorrows—deals with the other side, and the kinds of things you will encounter when you get there. It's like being at a museum and getting a pamphlet that describes the interior of some old battlefield. Or, at the aquarium, where they have all those placards about the different sharks you may see.

The *book of Sorrows*, it must have been something that Constantine and his people wanted kept secret, because it's not the kind of thing a religious person would expect to be presented with. I'm not even religious, and it rocks my faith a little.

To be honest, I'm not really sure about the whole *God* thing. I hope there is a God. I like the concept and the moral principles involved. But I'm just not convinced beyond a reasonable doubt. I don't think I could find the universe *guilty* of being run by God. At least, not enough to convict.

Back in the day—in 325—when Constantine and his *Council of Nicaea* were meeting in secret to decide what religion would keep Rome from being ripped apart, they made all of these decisions. Negotiated deals, really.

Rupert told us how they took a vote with a majority show of hands (161-157) and that effectively merged the Druid god, *Hesus*, with the Eastern Savior-god, *Krishna* (Krishna is Sanskrit for *Christ*). They merged the names, and then you had *Hesus Krishna*. Because there was no “J” letter in alphabets until around the ninth century, the name Hesus Krishna evolved into “Jesus Christ.”

So, when I think about the historical underpinnings of religion, it makes me a bit skeptical. Now, I'm not well versed in these things, but I just have a problem with believing in a legislated deity.

But then there is another side of me. A spiritual side that yearns for something bigger than just what I see. And I also know that just because there isn't *proof* for something, that doesn't mean it can't exist. I've never seen a black hole, but I believe they are there because I've seen enough in *Popular Science* to feel confident in this choice. In that sense, I can relate to people with faith.

The part of me that wants to believe in God, that part is constantly looking through newspapers and magazines and seeing horrible catastrophes all around the world. And I can't imagine why a God would let all of that occur.

If God just sits back and watches us suffer, I'm not sure that's somebody I can love. I hate to see people in pain, and I'm not even part-God.

Rupert said that God has his hands tied because he gives us free will. That clever librarian, he supposes that God would like to help, by performing miracles and the like, but he can't because that would cause a moment in time where the laws of physics—the underlying laws of the universe—are inconsistent. That *moment*, it would spell disaster.

I told Rupert that he needed to start dating.

Anyway, as I walk slowly up and down my hallway, I'm thinking of all these things. I don't even notice that it's way past dark outside. Me doing my walking, and Ricky doing his reading, we could be in two different worlds. We're both in the same place, but it's like neither of us knows where the other is.

The whole time I've been walking back and forth, my eyes have been numbly focused down on the blue carpet. And when I get to the end of the hallway again to make my 3-point turn, I notice there is no color in the walls.

The normally egg-shell painted hallway is a dull grey. I turn slowly around, 60 degrees . . . step, 60 degrees . . . step, 60 degrees . . . *whoa!*

I look back across my apartment, and I'm stuck in that other place. The melted, stretched place of twisted reality and blue skies. I'm between dogs and wolves and sharks, and as I glance over at the bed I notice Ricky, looking colorful and vibrant in this colorless reality. He's still there, just reading like nothing is happening.

Is everything alright? I say delicately, not completely sure he can hear me.

“Yeah,” Ricky says, not looking up. “Why do you ask?”

No reason, I say as the dead girl walks past him.

CHAPTER 27

5 LONG SECONDS LATER . . .

This is the first time that the dead girl has been in my presence at the same time as somebody else. I want to say something to Ricky, but I don't want to spook her. She's walking nervously, as if somebody may be following her.

There are no spooks to be found measuring Ricky, and I find myself relieved by this.

"This is insane, Jack."

I know, I say softly.

She looks at me and I nod, motioning her into the hallway where we can have more privacy. I feel like I'm cheating on Ricky, not telling him she's here. But I know he'd understand.

" . . . keep reading," I tell him calmly. And then I slowly make my way down my colorless hallway.

She follows me, taking small, careful steps. I want to get a warm blanket to cover her. She looks cold and her clothes are all ripped to shreds. Her eyes are so sad and wanting that I wish I could keep her here. Cook her a warm meal or something.

I wish she could explain everything to me. Tell me if she is real, or just a phantom memory from my lost past. We go into the bathroom and I carefully shut the door, trying not to scare her. Imagine that, me trying not to scare the ghost of a dead chick.

Even though the light is not on, there is a blue glow between us, and I can see her very clearly. She wants to tell me something, I can see it in her face. In her body language. We are no more than a foot apart, and this is the closest I've been to any woman, alive or dead, since I woke-up in that hospital bed with those gatherers chopping me apart.

This is the most intimate I've ever been with a woman, as far as I know.

We are studying each other, she and I. She looks like she's in her mid to late twenties. Her skin is smooth and clear—obviously discounting the fact that I know she's dead. Her hair is straight, falling just below her shoulders, and a few strands are in front of her eyes. I have the urge to use my finger and push the hair to the side, but I don't want to make her panic and disappear.

I have this feeling that we're on borrowed time.

The first time I saw her, a few days back, when we were in the kitchen, she didn't move any part of her body. Just her eyes blinking. But now, she's almost alive. A living entity. And in this surreal blue light, I might be the ghost. I could be the phantasm. I might just be the one haunting *her* life.

She looks at me with kind, affectionate eyes. Her gaze takes me in, and infects me. She's still tense, afraid of something. But in this quiet little place, surrounded by only my sink, a mirror, a toilet, and a combination shower and bath . . . the worlds we're from don't even matter. May not even exist.

My heart is beating really fast, and I am trying to understand her. I need to know what she knows of me. To be able to find out who I am; who I was. And I know that I need her for that. She swallows slowly, her thin lips pursed as she considers the me she's looking at. And I see her look at the sink.

I hope that her first question, her first worldly commune with the living, isn't to ask me about the aromatherapy soaps. Because, I still don't have an answer for that.

She looks into the mirror, and there's nothing. Not her, just me. There is no reflected *us*. Whatever the physics of light are in this strange state, they don't allow her to appear in my bathroom mirror. She looks at this blank mirror, the reflection of the bathroom door and me, alone. And her head droops a bit.

She turns her eyes up at me, considering something.

"If you have something to tell me," I whisper, ". . . I'll listen."

She nods. She *can* hear me. This is a breakthrough. I have the ability to communicate with her. Even if it only goes one way. My heart races a bit. I quickly glance around, making sure there are no spooks. That would really kill all of this if she turns out to be a big phantasmal carrot used just to lure me to the gatherers. But I don't think so.

I watch, studying her delicate and considerate movements.

Then, slowly and deliberately, she reaches down and takes my right wrist into her hand. And this beautiful girl that can't talk, this ghost, this dead person, her touch is not what I would expect. I felt a warmth that I cannot explain. Like picking-up something you thought was really scalding hot, only to find out it is cold and safe.

She is warm.

Alive.

She takes my wrist, extending my arm towards one of the aromatherapy soaps. Because of the blue light, I assume she wants me to pick up the Vanilla Bean bar. Good choice.

My hand takes the bar as I look into her face for assurance. She almost smiles, briefly, for just a hint of a flash of a second. Then it's gone. Slowly, she takes my wrist, her fingers closer to my hand now, and stretches my arm towards the mirror.

I have a feeling we are about to communicate the only way she knows how. Or maybe, the only way she's willing to. The last time she made any noise at all, the screaming came. And I have a feeling that this is what she's trying to avoid. Whatever makes those screams, it seems to be trying to keep us from communicating in any way.

I nod, placing the way too expensive bar of Vanilla Bean soap against the mirror. She then nods very slowly, glancing back at me. Her eyes are absolutely hypnotic. There is so much going on inside of them, like small galaxies. Universes.

And then she turns back to the mirror that won't show her image and begins to manipulate the soap, writing letters on the glass. Each letter is thick and slow as her hand presses against mine, pulling and pushing lightly. It's like she's aware of how unique all of this is for both of us, and she's taking her time.

As I read her words I find myself not being able to breathe. There is this kind of vibrating electricity that flows through her hand, into my wrist, up my arm, and into my chest. This is so incredible that it's difficult to describe. Our two different places, they are momentarily connected. Her movements are very slow and thoughtful.

My eyes are frozen on the mirror.

Help us, John.

And when I look back down . . . she's gone.

CHAPTER 28

JACK'S APARTMENT.

17 MINUTES LATER . . .

I left the bathroom, glancing up at the writing several times.

Help us, John.

As I'm making my way down the hallway, back to the living room, I see Ricky looking up at me, his face locked somewhere between amazement and disbelief. The apartment is back to normal, all of the furniture resized for human living. The colors are back too, and I don't mind saying that even though they paint everything with happy tones, and mood enhancing paint, it's a bit of a relief.

"This is incredible, Jack."

"My name is John . . . I think," I say slowly. I explain what just happened for the last who-knows-how-long. My pulse is soaring. So many things are starting to come together. I tell him about her, and how she took my arm and wrote the message on the mirror.

He squints at me, then down at the translations, and then he's up on his feet, fast-marching to the bathroom.

This is the break we've needed in all of this. This girl—my dead companion—she reached out from beyond, and we have finally made a connection. Something nobody can doubt.

Ricky walks into the bathroom and stops in his tracks.

I'm right behind him, feeling like a prophet. Feeling like somebody who has been blessed with this new gift. I have a sense of self, and I think, for the first time since I woke-up in this life, that I may soon have all of my answers.

"*What the fuck?*" Ricky blurts.

He probably thinks I'm messing with him. That this is some game of mine, playing off of the excitement caused by the translation of the *Book of Sorrows*. I enter the bathroom and look up at the mirror. And then I see why he's perplexed.

What had been a simple message to me just seconds ago, is now just a series of squiggles and dots and dashes and incoherent nonsense. The same writing found in the *Book of Sighs*. Damn.

I don't know what happened, I tell him. When she was here she used my hand to write the letters with the aromatherapy soap.

Ricky glances down at the bar of soap, picks it up, sniffs it, and then turns around as if the bar was scented with gasoline. "You better not be going gay on me," Ricky says as he takes one more sniff.

“The writing!” I say, bringing him back to the point of all this. The writing is the same as the *Book of Sighs*. That makes sense. I was on the other side . . . kind of. Somewhere between, I try to explain, not sure about the logistics of it myself.

His eyebrows raise as he takes a whiff of the berry scented bar. “Kind of nice, actually.”

I shrug. I've got taste.

“Hundred-and-ten percent queer,” he adds, “. . . but nice.”

We finally agree that the writing is the same on both the mirror, and in the book. I then tell him everything that happened with *her*. And we find ourselves at a crossroads. One of those what-now moments.

“I need some time to assimilate all of this,” he says as we walk back to the living room and sit down on my bed.

I flip on the television, and we watch the local news as ideas buzz around in our heads.

“You might,” he says slowly, “. . . want to erase that stuff on the mirror.”

But that's proof, I counter. Actual evidence of ghost activity.

“That's nothing but a bunch of lunatic scribbles. Your new caseworker sees that and you'll not only lose your job as a tard-farmer, but they'll have you loaded-up with anti-psychotics until your eyes pop.”

But it *means* something. It's important to me.

“It was a moment you and some poltergeist shared,” he reminds me. “This isn't *Bridges of Madison County*. You can't pine for a dead chick. Unless you want a job in the morgue?”

I realized how others might look at my message on the mirror, and be less understanding than Ricky. Fine, I say. I'll erase it. But we still have problems. This thing is coming to a point somewhere close.

I talk as I'm walking back to the bathroom. I think we need to get professional help. And I want to find out if my name is John.

“Your name is Jack,” Ricky yells, “until we find out otherwise.”

She wrote, *Help us, John*. Not Jack. *John*.

I wet a small cleaning cloth with blue liquid that I use to keep the bath basin free of soap scum. I have cleansing bubbles that do all of the work for me, so that all I have to do is spray and wipe. With no hard scrubbing. I notice, as I'm wiping away the scribbles and markings, that the light is soft yellow, a result of the 75-watt light bulb in the bathroom.

I miss the cool blue.

I miss the girl.

“Jack!” Ricky yells, and I can tell from his voice this isn't a joke. “Get in here, you have to see this!”

So far, all I've really done is to smear the Vanilla Bean soap tracks, making the mirror completely unusable. Frustrated, I toss the rag into the sink and head out to the living room. Ricky, he's sitting

there on the bed, his legs together. He's leaned forward watching the television like it has some hold over him.

I watch him, the lights and colors of the news broadcast reflecting opposite and upside down in his eyes. He's unflinching. Captivated.

What is it? I say.

He doesn't answer, he just points to the screen.

I join him at the edge of the bed, standing beside him and looking at the television. There is footage of a bunch of police officers around a car accident. They're saying something about a hit-and-run accident near the *Dallas Public Library*, just a few minutes ago.

Oh, no. I look at Ricky, his eyes wide and concerned. Then back to the television broadcast. No way this is what I think it is. No way.

“ . . . the driver, Rupert Singleton, was hit from behind in an alleged hit-and-run incident at the northwest corner of . . . ”

What's going on Ricky? I ask under my breath—as if somebody else might be listening. And really, given what all has occurred in the last three or four days, it might not be paranoia.

He takes a big slow breath, standing up. “Jack, we need to get the book and get the hell out of here. My parents have a place outside of Dallas that nobody knows about. We'll be much safer—”

What are you talking about? I counter. We don't know if this has anything to do with the book. This could be some freak accident.

“Are you an idiot?” Ricky asks. “Really, after all of this . . . are you going to tell me that you think this is just part of the mystery of life? Bad luck for old Rupert, it must have been his time? Is that really your position?”

And I know that Ricky's correct. I know that he's being more reasonable about this than me. But, even though I see what is happening, my mind doesn't want to except it. Because if I admit to myself that this is all related, that means we're partly responsible for Rupert's death.

And then, why stop there. I suppose I could have warned my caseworker that the spooks were checking him out. My life—all five months of it—is cascading completely out of control. I'm not sure if I'm a harbinger of life, or a messenger of death. And for me, this is a very difficult pill to swallow.

Okay, Ricky, I say. You're right. Whoever is willing to kill Rupert with a car, is certainly willing to do the same or worse to two deadbeats like us. But I don't think we should go and hide. That will only prolong this. Eventually, they'll find us. We go back to where this all started.

We go back to Ms. Josephine.

I've read the book. I'm ready. It's time that I stopped running from all of this and man up. *Man up, or back down.* That's what Todd Steele says. I'm done running from this thing. There's no more hiding

in my fears, camouflaging them with my neurotic behavior. I've been using my amnesia as a crutch for long enough.

I can see the dead. Big deal. Worse things could happen. So I see shadowy spooks. So what? Some people see things that don't really exist, so who am I to complain. I have a gift, even if it's an accidental one.

It's time to start using it.

I nod to Ricky. He nod's back, saying, "You need to see that translation of the *Book of Sorrows*."

Why? I say, reaching for it.

"That note on the mirror in the bathroom, it called you, John?"

Yeah, and?

"Well," he says tapping the sheet, ". . . that chapter, number twenty-three, it was written by St. John the Divine. I think . . . that is the twenty-third chapter of the *Book of Revelations*. The one we don't read about in Sunday school.

And?

". . . and there aren't 23 chapters of Revelations."

"Oh." Something tells me I need to pay attention for a change.

THE BOOK OF SORROWS

of St. John the Divine

- 23 *1. And I must speak of the land of Sorrows.*
- 2. And I saw a new land between heaven and earth: for this place is unlike the other place of wanting and reflection.*
- 3. And whosoever was wanted by the shadows must fall to their knives and beckoning: for they shall be no stronger than the lamb against the wolves when the collectors return.*
- 4. And the door to this land opens in but one direction: none may leave its walls, but all the chosen must enter.*
- 5. And in this land of Sorrows are the unending times of darkness, for they shall see but little light, and forms both long and twisted from their earthly shape.*
- 6. And I saw the dead, both sad and quiet, stand before its closed doors: their pleas and cries are but silenced.*
- 7. And neither death, nor hell, nor the land of waiting, nor the kingdom of heaven lead to this land of Sorrows.*
- 8. And I saw the beasts with fire for eyes, stalking the living and the dead, as the wolves do the sheep.*
- 9. And I heard a scream that shook this land as it sounded, and all the inhabitants of this dark place stood still and scared.*
- 10. And he saith unto me, take heed the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time of the land of Sorrows is at hand. And when I walk again between the light and this land of darkness, only then will they be put to peace.*
- 11. For the one that walks of both light and dark, living and death, he will be their savior.*
- 12. And the kingdom of heaven should be open to them, those unwanted by Him, but saved now by he who walks between the earth and the land of Sorrows.*
- 13. The grace of our lord Hesus Christ be with you. Amen.*

CHAPTER 29

DEEP ELLUM, DOWNTOWN DALLAS.

TUESDAY MORNING . . .

Neither Ricky or I are saying much as we make our drive through Deep Ellum. We're both locked in our thoughts. For me, I've decided to be proactive about this whole ordeal. No more running. No retreat.

Ricky, I'm not sure what he's feeling. I know he's questioning the things in his life he thought he could count on. For the most part, up to this point, he was just having fun with all of this. To him I was probably some guy, down on his luck, with an interesting delusion to ponder. And he kind of promoted it, let it run wild. But it was just a way to pass the time.

People like him, they have a hard time making friends because others can't think on his wavelength. Ricky is literally a genius. And guys like that, they know pretty much everything. Knowing what's always going to happen next takes the fun out of living. There's no adventure. No surprise. So a guy like me comes along, and his personality feeds off of it.

And I like having him around. He keeps my feet on the ground. If I didn't have somebody to bounce my crazy ideas off of, I would be a card-carrying lunatic by now. I'm not smart like him, but I'm basically sensible. I'd like to think that he sees in me the kind of person who is what he appears to be.

All those times I was staring in the mirror, trying to figure out who I am . . . this is who I am. For whatever reason, I have been chosen to do this sordid task. Whether or not this is fantasy, fiction, delusion, or a miracle, I am very much a part of it. I don't know if there is anything like fate and destiny in this life, but I'm damn sure going to try and find out.

Ricky is driving much more sensibly, as his eyes scan back and forth like those *Blue Sharks* we were watching in the shark tank. I'm seeing a different side of him. The facet of his personality that I realize would have made him a good doctor. Exceptional, even. The funny, yuckster has been replaced with a calculating machine.

The team of Ricky and I, it's a formidable one.

As we're slowing for a red light he says, "I'm rich."

"That's awesome. What do you mean?" I say. "*Rich* . . . is that a trendy expression?"

"No, Jack," he says shaking his head. "I'm loaded. As in, I have lots of money. My dad invented a kind of heart stint that has revolutionized heart surgery."

He explains to me that a heart stint is like a pair of Chinese finger-cuffs, although very small, and it goes into a clogged artery and opens it up. It's made of very fine wire or fabric, or some other kind of space-age material that I'll never comprehend.

But I don't know what Chinese finger-cuffs are.

“Look,” he says, “. . . it's not important. I just wanted you to know that I'm not some drug dealer, or stolen property fence. I'm a trust-fund baby. Every month I get fourteen thousand dollars if I keep a job.”

Any job, I ask. At all?

He nods.

McDonald's? I ask.

“Yes.”

Taco Bell?

“Yes, Jack. Any job.”

Now I don't feel so bad about letting him buy all of those frozen pizzas for me.

“Do you have any idea what we are getting ourselves into?” he asks rhetorically.

And we both sit there, just the sounds of the seedier part of Dallas life resonating around us. I see homeless people walking in no particular direction, wearing torn socks for gloves. There are overflowing trash bins, and bits of paper and trash blowing here and there. All of this—the people and the trash—they're the parts of our lives we no longer need, discarded out of our timelines.

This part of Dallas, Ricky explained to me, was once *the* place to be. All the trendy clubs were located here. The restaurants were top notch. Valet service, the whole 9-yards. But Dallas expanded in every direction. And traffic swelled. And new hot-spots were born. And this place, that was once a mecca of social interaction, it became a forgotten wasteland.

Like a garden, left untended for several years.

A ship left at sea, just rocking back and forth with nobody at the helm.

And now it's this sad, grey part of the city where only people looking for a cheap drink, or a hit of something, come. It is aching, Deep Ellum. Moaning for rebirth. For another chance at greatness. But as we near Ms. Josephine's small shop, I realize that positive growth always leaves somebody behind.

I wonder if my life, and this entire world, if I am about to leave all of it behind. The way that Dallas left this district. Or is it leaving me behind?

Will I be the only living thing in that forgotten garden?

The only one left on that lonely ship at sea?

We pull to a stop at the curb. I see the familiar red neon marijuana plant. *Columbian Red*, I joke to Ricky motioning toward the sign. He nods and then shuts off the truck.

We both sit there, not unhooking our seatbelts. Not opening the doors just yet. It's like we want to savor this last moment. This last quiet time on our planet before our reality forever changes. Once we pull back the curtain, that's it. Nothing will ever look the same.

We both sense each others' apprehension.

“This is what you're supposed to do,” he says, staring out into the traffic.

“I know,” I say, my eyes cast downward. I'm looking at the leather dashboard. Smelling the various scents that make up the interior of Ricky's truck. This is like a safe place. Where nothing can get to us. I slowly reach down and press a button that releases the seatbelt.

He does the same.

I look over at Ricky, and I tell him, if this all goes tits-up, to get out of here. Take off. Don't get caught up in my mess. I never meant to drag him into all of this supernatural crap. It isn't fair of me to ask him to continue. I'm giving him the opportunity to walk away from all of this.

He reaches down and frees his seatbelt, letting the buckle pull violently to the side where some coil is finally at rest. *Thump*. It dangles near his left shoulder. And then he stares at me, the way I stare at myself in the mirror—trying to see what others see.

“This is *our* mess, now, Jack,” he says. “I'm with you to the end.” He shrugs, “. . . hell, maybe this is my destiny, too.”

And I feel pride well-up inside of me. Ricky, he leans toward the radio, which had been set so low that we couldn't hear it when the truck was running. And he half smiles, bobbing his head to the beat. He looks at me and turns it up a bit.

It's the *Rolling Stones*, he tells me. Despite being heterosexually challenged, Ricky says, Mick Jagger is a fucking prophet!

The song that's playing . . . it's called, *Sympathy for the Devil*.

CHAPTER 30

MS. JOSEPHINE'S SHOP.

5 MINUTES, 17 SECONDS LATER . . .

Again, she met us at the door. And she looked bothered, like she'd seen something. "Come in quickly," Ms. Josephine said, glancing out past us, to the street and beyond.

"The cops didn't follow us," Ricky joked.

"Child," she says between clenched teeth, her eyes darting back and forth, ". . . I'm not lookin' for da police."

When we get inside the door she quickly slides the bolt into the metal threshold, shaking the door a couple times just to be sure. It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, but those familiar smells were thick in the air. The jasmine, the cinnamon, it was like we hit the replay button on last week.

Dallas was gone as this room of dark corners and flickering yellow candles illuminated our path to the small round wooden table. Ms. Josephine waddled past Ricky and I, her long black dress fluttering like the candles. About the only thing missing was a spooky soundtrack to finish it all out.

I pointed out the strange books as Ricky and I made our way past the book shelves to the table.

The Living Darkness

Ghosts of the Beloved

Dreams of the Demonic

"Just a bit of light reading, eh?" Ricky mused quietly.

"Different explanations for different people," Ms. Josephine said as she brought out another rickety old chair that looked like it had been constructed from things that washed-up on the shore of the Hudson river. She set the chair near the small round table.

I leaned forward, placing the *Book of Sighs* on the table, and then carefully lowered myself into the chair.

Ricky didn't look too confident in the chair, his eyes glancing down as they measured just how far he was going to fall when the chair collapsed.

"You're way too skinny to break dat chair," Ms. Josephine said, answering Ricky's unasked question. She was good at that. The kind of good that makes you nervous to think around her. I'm glad there are no copies of *Maxim* magazine nearby.

Ricky, hearing her words, started whistling the first 8 bars of the *Twilight Zone*. I rolled my eyes, but Ms. Josephine seemed to find it amusing.

She sat first, her hands resting on the small table. As we all sat, the chairs groaning and squeaking, I noticed that there were now three small ash trays in the center of the table. The first time I came here, there was only one. In each tray there were several burning globs of whatever it is you burn to release the smell of the jungle. Little lines of smoke pointed at the ceiling as they lifted.

I wondered if all of this incense is something that I should be alarmed about? Does the amount of burning globs have a proportional correlation to the amount of deep paranormal shit that we are about to get ourselves into?

I feel like a kid at the doctor's office, as we sit here. It's like I'm waiting to get shots. Not that the shots are so painful, just the anxiety leading up to them. In your mind the needle is as big as a pencil. Well, this was just like that. Only, multiplied by about two-thousand.

Like a paranoia soufflé topped with creamed phobia.

If spiders descended from the ceiling wearing blond wigs I would not have been surprised.

“Tell me,” she started, “. . . what you 'ave been seein' lately?”

I look over at Ricky and I can tell he's a bit uncomfortable. The ambiance of this place—the darkness, the smells, the strange voodoo motif that she had going on with all of the symbols and markers on the walls—it all kind of suffocates you at first. He's feeling, now, what I felt last week, when I first came here.

And both of us are staring at Ms. Josephine, and those majestic eyes of hers. Something strikes me, just now. I realize a strange connection.

Her eyes, they're eerily similar to the dead girl's eyes. The girl who, even in death, is beautiful. The ghost who thinks my name is John. The phantom who thinks I can save her, and looks at me with a kind of insightfulness that I don't understand.

Ms. Josephine's fingers are dancing up and down again, doing that imaginary piano thing as she slowly rocks back and forth. Okay, second freaky thing. Her gentle rocking back and forth, it reminds me of the spooks, when they were staring at me in the apartment. She has the same cadence and everything.

If snakes and giant beetles made up the surface of the floor, I wouldn't be shocked right now. If scorpions dance by doing the Tango, I'd barely pay them any attention.

“So . . . dey've seen you, den?” she says. That old parlor trick of hers.

I nod slowly.

“I don't know if Jack told you about me, Ricky,” she says as she reaches for his hands. As they both clasp hands, the burning incense are sending thin, silky fingers of grey smoke around and between their wrists. It's as if the connection between them is burning.

She smiles at Ricky, “. . . I'm a channel. I don't read no futures, or bring pets back to life. I can't make da voices in da attic stop, or keep da walls from bleeding. I just listen. My gift is to communicate wit da other side.”

“The *Land of Sorrows*,” Ricky says carefully.

She smiles, her cheeks lifting near her hypnotic eyes. “I see you two been workin' together.”

He's been helping me a lot, I try to explain. I hope she's not mad.

“No, child,” she assured me. “Dat's good. You need people dat you can trust on dis side.” She turned to Ricky, and then back to me, “. . . *and* on da other side.”

And I kind of knew where she was going with this. Despite what she could extract from my mind, I still hadn't told her everything.

She then let go of Ricky's hands, and turned to me, “Tell me, what 'ave you *seen*?”

I told her about the spooks, and how they had been very interested in the book. She glanced at the book as I outlined the different times they had come and gone. About what they had done at the hospital during our experiment on spook activity.

I tried to explain the gatherers to her, and even though she knew of them in various voodoo texts and artist renderings, she was still quite interested in their physical appearance. First-hand accounts are always better than looking at black and white sketches.

While I watched the doctors trying everything to save Dr. Smith, I said, I also saw the gatherers chopping away at his chest. And I saw them doing the same to me when I first awoke.

“And dat, if you don't already know it, is why you can see both planes. Dey were comin' to take you across. You were in da process of being removed from da Earth plane. But, somehow, you were stuck between both places just long enough to open up a passageway. You are one of da very few who can walk between both planes.”

“Where?” Ricky asked. Even though he had read the stuff at the library that Rupert—rest his soul—had researched for us, and studied my translations of the *Book of Sighs*, he still needed validation from an expert. Or, at least, the closest thing we were going to get to an authority on the subject of the undead.

Or the living dead?

Or those living after death?

Or those that can't die?

I'm confused on the correct terminology. I guess I'm still a rookie spook hunter, just barely scratching the surface of the netherworld.

“Some call it *Ginen*. Descriptions vary depending on who or what you ask, but da basic principles are still da same.”

She leaned forward, her head dipping so that her eyes looked like two black saucers on large white spheres. Lowering her voice she said, “Da other side . . . I been 'eard it called, *Deadside*. Da *Land of Sorrows* . . .

“ . . . dat's a biblical term for da place where da unjudged go.”

I thought that was purgatory.

“Da second hell, dey call it. Much worse dan purgatory,” she answered.

I could feel all kinds of shivers running down my spine. That Ms. Josephine, she knew just how to scare the crap out of a guy. It wasn't so much what she was saying, but the conviction of her words. She wasn't telling us things that *might* be, she was telling us how it really *is*.

To see something frightening is one thing. But to not be able to write it off as a delusion or a hallucination . . . well that's completely horrifying. Full-on, creepy-crawly, unnerving.

That scary world beyond ours is supposed to be the fabrication of writers and story tellers, nothing more. The Land of Sorrows isn't the kind of place that is actually real, except in movies and nightmares. But once you wake-up, or the lights come on, that should be it. A cheap thrill.

Ghosts are just an illusion, swamp gas, bad plumbing, or too much pain medication. Anything but real. Demons and Angels, the undead, all of that stuff is just fantasy. Imagined and pondered and rolled into enchanting stories that make you wonder. But they're not supposed to actually exist.

“Why can't you and I see these things?” Ricky asked, feeling a bit cheated. “Like Jack does?”

“We's all different, child,” she explained. “We all 'ave gifts, just not da same gifts. Me, I can commune wit dose dat pass over to dis other place. With da *Iwa*, and da *Anvizib*. Either dey chose me, or I chose dem, I'm not certain. Jack 'ere, 'e can see dem, talk to dem. And . . . dey can see 'im.”

She patted her hand on the table, “Tiger Woods can play golf better dan anyone else on earth, but 'e can't talk to da dead, or save people from dyin' . . . like you can, Ricky.”

“Huh?” Ricky said, sitting forward.

What?

“Dat's right,” she nodded. “You got a gift, too, Ricky. Every one of us 'as somethin' dat we can tap into. But most of us go our entire lives wit'out every knowin' what it is. You just 'aven't developed your gift, yet. Dat's why you didn't finish becoming a doctor. Your soul wasn't ready. In da same way dat dose collectors steal away da souls, you can keep dem at bay. You're goin' to make a fine medicine man, one day. When de time is right.”

That's a good thing, I said about Ricky becoming a doctor someday. Because I'm going to need gastric-bypass surgery after all of this madness is over. The constant stress of waiting to see the dead, and the monsters in between, is driving me absolutely batty.

I feel like a piñata about to pop. The spooks are like kids at a birthday party, taking random blind swings at my nuts. At any moment, I should be doubling over.

I'm like a blowfish on helium.

Then she turns to me, "For Jack . . . de time is now." She took my hand into hers, slowly rolling it over so she could study my palms.

Do you see something? I ask her. Something bad?

She brings my hand to her face, taking a few sniffs. She raises an eyebrow, "You use aromatherapy soaps."

That's it. Now everybody knows. I'll be the laughing stock of the entire *Deadside*. Spooks and all other little monsters will be snickering behind my back. They'll be making gay jokes in languages I can't understand. When I finally get to Hell they'll make me room with *J. Edgar Hoover*.

"Jack," she said. "You're learnin' to accept your *gifts*. Dis is just like learnin' to ride a bike, or trow a ball. It takes time, and you 'ave to practice."

And I'm not sure why, but at that moment, something clicks in my head. I thought back to our last visit together.

I ask her, how come she said she had been expecting me for *six* months, when we first met last week? But I haven't even been *awake* for six months, yet.

She smiles, "I wondered when you were going to put dat together." She sat back, letting go of my hand. "I don't know da future . . . but dere are other tings, *Iwa*, dat speak of certain prophecy."

"Jack's a prophet?" Ricky blurts.

I'm a prophet? Little old me. Aw shucks.

Ricky was glowering at me, and I can see that he isn't quite sold on the idea.

She laughed, ". . . not in da sense dat 'e can foretell our futures. Nothin' like dat. Jack is a piece of a seventeen-hundred year old puzzle. And only just now is all of dis comin' together."

And, as Ricky sits back to ponder the level of my importance in the universe, Ms. Josephine looks at me and says, "Now tell me about '*er*. Da girl who calls you John . . .

". . . what do you remember?"

CHAPTER 31

MS. JOSEPHINE'S, DEEP ELLUM.

3 VERY TENSE MINUTES LATER . . .

I have no words to describe her. The girl that haunts me. The girl that I have to save. I know that I feel something for her. I don't want to say passion, because I'm not really sure what that means. In the same way I'm just learning about all of this Deadside stuff, I'm also learning how to be a person.

I know a lot of things, processes and social graces. But I have no memories. I know how to count and do math, but I can't tell you why, or who taught me. Did I go to college? Was I a high school dropout? Good arguments could be made for both. Though, probably more for the latter.

I decide the brutal honesty is all I have to offer Ms. Josephine.

"I feel for her," I said, perhaps admitting it to myself for the first time. This girl, I continue to explain, whoever she is, she's gotten to me. I want to talk to her, to figure out where she fits in to my hidden past. I want to know why she needs me to help her.

Why me?

"Do you tink dat you and dis girl were ever in love?" Ms. Josephine says, cutting right through my rationalizations and superfluous ramblings.

I shrug. "I don't know. She's beautiful," I say.

Ricky is staring at me like I'm some creep. I raise my hands in surrender, explaining, I mean, obviously, she is dead. And that is not something that I'm attracted to. Although, for being dead, she is still captivating.

Ricky's glances have turned from indignation, to something between pity and disgust.

"No," I say. "What I mean to say is that she is the kind of girl who, if she was alive, I could find myself attracted to. She's the type of woman I would find myself drawn to."

I then propose the idea that she may have been my girlfriend; wife, even.

"She chose you," Ms. Josephine said delicately. "And she 'as taken great risks to communicate wit you."

"*Risks*," Ricky echoed. "What risks? She's a ghost. She's already dead. What's the worst that could happen?"

Ms. Josephine's eyes seemed to narrow, not in anger, but in caution. "When somebody from da Deadside tries to communicate wit a person from da Earth plane, dere's consequences."

Consequences, I say. Like what?

Ms. Josephine looked bothered for the first time. Scared, even. “De screamers, da ones wit fire in deir eyes. Dey come whenever somebody from da Deadside tries to make contact. Dey've treatened me several times. And all I do is listen. Dem screamers, dey can't come across to da Earth plane. But over dere, you don't 'ave no protection.”

That's a comforting thought.

“Dey can rip a soul apart,” she added, “. . . as if you didn't never exist in da first place.”

Wonderful, I say. Are there any other high-points we need to address before my soul gets ripped apart and the girl of my dreams gets eaten by things that have red eyes and scream for a living?

“er name is Kristen,” Ms. Josephine said. And my heart, it definitely skips a beat or two. “She's been asking about you for six months. Dat's 'ow I knew to expect you. She found me, out of all da other channels. Searched me out. Dat girl, she 'ad traveled a great distance to contact you.”

What does she want? I asked. How do I know her? Does she know me?

Now I have about 2.3 million questions that need answering.

Ms. Josephine held up her hands, “I can't tell you tings I don't know. Da few times we've talked, da screamers were on 'er quickly. I tink dey're 'unting 'er.”

“What do you mean, hunting her?” Ricky asked carefully.

Ms. Josephine took a moment to consider her words. Her eyes moved slowly to each of us, and then along the wall where all of the protective talisman and strange symbols were keeping us supposedly safe. She took several breaths.

“Channels, like me,” she said, “. . . dey call us *watchers*. We can listen, most of us. And a few of us can see into da Deadside. But all we can do is see and listen. Can't none of us interact. And beyond dat, dere 'as not been a person who can walk between da earth plane and da Deadside in several 'undred years.”

She took several more deep breaths, nervous as she continued, “But you see, if da lines of communication between dese two planes are maintained, dat would cause all sorts of problems for both worlds. We're stacked on top of each other, already. Dese screamers, dey'll stop at nothing to assure dat we cannot freely associate wit dem.

“. . . dis girl who's been coming for you . . . she did somethin' to make dem mad. I tink dey want to 'urt 'er.”

“Fire and brimstone kind of hurt?” Ricky asked.

Or, I added, *end of existence* kind of hurt?

“Somethin' dramatic,” she replied, “. . . and permanent.”

We don't have much time, then, I said. I'm ready.

She looked at me, considering our options. “Jack, you 'aven't been at dis very long. Dis is no game. You could die over dere. And if dey get you, you're never comin' back.”

I'm prepared for that.

“Think about what you're saying, Jack,” Ricky said, trying to reason with me.

I *have*, I told them. I woke-up nearly five months ago. Whatever happened before that is gone. There are two things I know for certain. One, that I have to do whatever it takes to find out who I am, and that means knowing who I was. Speculation won't be enough. I *need* to know.

And two, this girl needs me. I've heard those screamers. Their calls are so traumatically frightening that I can only imagine how horrible they must be in the flesh. And if this girl, Kristen, if she searched me out, knowing that those things would be coming after her, then whatever she has to tell me . . . I'm damn sure going to listen.

I can't sit here, being a tard-farmer, eating frozen pizza, while this girl is being hunted down for extermination by monsters. I don't know much about the man I used to be, but the man I am now won't stand by for that.

Ms. Josephine considered my words, my thoughts. My conviction. She leaned back and nodded a few times. “Did you read da book?”

Yes.

“Do you know what you'll be up against?”

As much as any other amnesia patient.

“Are you willin' to cross a line dat you can never return from?”

I kind of already did.

“Okay, den,” she said. I could see her strength gathering. Her posture, her face, they were stronger now. “Alright. You're ready to cross over.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Ricky pleaded, “. . . when is this going down?”

Ms. Josephine looked at both of us, standing from her chair. “Right now, boys. Right now.”

It was time to cross to the place between dogs and wolves . . . and sharks.

CHAPTER 32

MS. JOSEPHINE'S, EARTH PLANE.

TUESDAY AFTERNOON . . .

The first thing we did was to clear out a large area in the middle of Ms. Josephine's shop. We took the round wooden table and moved it to the side of the room. On it, she placed several strange looking clay figurines that looked like they came straight off the set of the *Blair Witch Project*. There were also a bunch of creepy little symbols pressed into pieces of leather—at least, I hope they were made of leather.

The whole time we're moving things around Ms. Josephine is telling me what to do, instructing me on crossing over.

Ricky and I are moving chairs to the sides, and to the back area of the shop, and she's saying, “Dey ting to remember is dat, no matter 'ow tings look dere, strange, unreal, or frightening . . . dey are as real as dis place.”

She brought in a black pot that looked just big enough to cook a human head in. Ricky and I exchanged nervous glances, and then went back to work.

“ . . . dat world is stacked right on top of ours. Dey's only separated by just a fraction. But you, your goin' be in both places . . . ”

We could smell other things burning, now. Strange odors that weren't *comforting jasmine, soothing vanilla, radiant cinnamon, or vibrant berry*. No, these were more like *haunting flesh, and creepy insect*. And, of course, out of the back room she comes with a plastic jar full of spiders.

“What are those for?” Ricky asked.

Ms. Josephine smiled briefly, “Da tarantula has a unique life force. I like to try and borrow some of it.”

I asked her if the *borrowing* happened when the spider was alive or dead.

“ . . . life is a constant cycle,” she answered.

Dead, then.

Wonderful.

Ricky and I were instructed to bring a large chair out of the back. It was under a sheet, and it looked as if it hadn't been moved in thirty or forty years. But as we removed the sheet we noticed that it was an old barber's chair. Chrome metal and red vinyl. Like the ones you see in those 1950's era mob films. The only reason I know this is because there was an old movie marathon playing on *TNT* a few nights ago.

Ricky called the chair, wicked sweet! I just thought it looked like the place where some guy with an Italian sounding name gets his throat slit as he lies back for a 'little off the top'. I asked Ms. Josephine about the chair.

“ . . . it's got a history, dat chair . . . ”

And I realize that, not only do I not need any further explanation, I don't want one.

She smiled as we dragged the heavy thing to the center of the room, where the wooden table had been. All the while, she's over at the small table mixing things together. I expect fog to roll in any minute. I expect lighting and rain, thunder and haunting music. But no, just the quiet mixing as she talks.

“ . . . if you get yourself into trouble, we'll be 'ere. I'll be listening to you, your lifeline so-to-speak. And when you need to come back, you just give me da word.”

How long, I asked her, does it take from the time I yell 'uncle' until I'm safely back on this side?

Ms. Josephine, her lips rescinded a bit as she considered my question, her eyes widening, “Oh, it varies.”

Varies?

“ . . . dis ain't no exact science, child.” Then she shrugs, “ . . . but we'll get you back 'ere as quick as possible. Not to worry.”

“How many times have you done this kind of thing?” Ricky asked as he played with the barber chair. It was making disgusting toilet noises as he worked the chair upwards using the hydrolic pump.

“ . . . you mean 'aving one of us cross over to da other side?” she clarified as she opened up the jar with the big furry spider and dumped it into the pot of unfathomable curiosities.

Yeah, I said.

“ . . . oh,” she laughed to herself. “It's been a while.”

A while, 6-months? A while, 6-years?

She giggled, “Da last *uman* to cross over tried it in da early seventeen-'undreds.”

Yeah, that certainly is funny. Good times. Lots of laughs. Maybe we'll make this thing into a sit-com. That'd be nice.

“How old *are* you?” Ricky said, probably a bit less polite than you're supposed to be when asking that kind of question. He may make a great doctor one day, but his bedside manner needs some work.

She didn't answer. She just continues mixing. “ . . . Jack, why don't you sit down in dat chair and start to relax. Imagine dat you are about to take a test, or watch a television program. Somethin' calmin'.”

I sit in the chair, not caring to argue that neither tests nor television are things that relax me. At the hospital, the word test is synonymous with prickly, cold pain and confusion. And with television—especially late-night, when I watch—it's basically the same. Only with more pain.

I lay my arm on the vinyl arm rests and lean my head back. “Just a little above the ears, please, but I don't want that *new haircut* look,” I say to Ricky.

Then Ms. Josephine takes a large soup ladle and scoops out a fairly big portion of the voodoo soup she had been concocting. She pours it into a small bowl, and makes her way over to me.

“Off with da shirt,” she says. “. . . don't be modest.”

I laugh. I've had doctors looking at every part of me for nearly five-months straight. And I mean *every*. They've seen places on my body I'll never, ever see. I took my shirt off and tossed it to Ricky.

All of the sudden, something seems to spark in his mind. It must be something clever because he has that genius-gloss over his eyes. “Hold on a minute, I need to get something from my truck.”

And then he's gone.

Ms. Josephine looks at me, figuring something out in her head. And while she's doing mental math, or thinking of the President's inaugural speech, I'm looking around the room at all of the strange markings that adorn the walls. These things, the faces, and abstract symbols, I know they all mean something.

“. . . protective talisman, dey are,” she said sweetly. Dey keep you safe and invisible while you are 'ere. Dat's what I'm going to do for you . . . to protect you over dere.”

And right then I realize that Ms. Josephine is probably the closest thing I have to a mother. The way she talks to me, the way she looks at me, it's like I'm her son. Ricky, too. This is our dysfunctional, dimension-transcending, death-chasing family. We're like any other family, I guess. We just celebrate our holidays a bit differently.

“I expected you to bite the head off of a live chicken,” I joke to her.

She laughs, putting her left hand on top of my right. “I did dat in da other room, child. Didn't tink you'd want to see dat.”

I ask her what's in the bowl.

“Dese characters, da glyphs on da walls, dey's all marks, like prayers. Tink of dem as protective prayers, always repeatin' demselves while we are 'ere. It lets us look out, wit'out dem lookin' in. What I'm goin do is paint your body with some of dese talisman . . . to keep you safe while you're dere. On Deadside.”

Alright, I say . . . but what's in the bowl?

“. . . *un peux de tout les chose . . .*”

Great—if I spoke whatever language that is.

She laughed, “. . . I said, '*a little of everything*,' in French.”

Ricky makes his way back to us with a small doctors bag. “I made sure the door was deadbolted,” he said to Ms. Josephine. Then he looked at me as he unzipped the bag.

What's that for? I asked.

“I want to take your vitals,” he explained, “just in case anything medically threatening happens.”

Well, I say, I am going to be walking among the dead. Do they cover that at med-school?

“I saw the movie *Flatliners*, dude. We should be just fine.”

“I haven't seen that movie,” I tell him. “And even if I had, I don't think that would comfort me.”

“Well, do you read medical journals?”

“When I'm done watching paint dry,” I tell him. “When there are no more strands of carpet to count.” And then I see him pull out a small bottle of clear liquid with an orange and white label. It reads: *IK-1009*.

“What's that?”

He doesn't answer as he pulls out a syringe.

“Seriously, Ricky . . . what's that?”

And then he has this mischievous smile that quickly fades. He sucks up almost an entire syringe full of the strange liquid. He takes a breath while he carefully thumps the side of the syringe until all of the little bubbles are purged. “This is an experimental drug.”

“Oh, no . . . I don't know about experimental—”

“You're about to die, Jack. We need some insurance. This stuff is cutting edge. We're talking high-speed.”

I don't follow, I tell him.

Ricky's eyes start searching for veins he can puncture with this needle. “A very intelligent scientist by the name of Mark Roth started a biotech company called IKARIA. They got DARPA funding and everything. This guy thinks outside the box. Like . . . way out.

“Well, he reads about these caves where there's so much hydrogen sulfide that if you took one breath . . . you're dead. It smells like rotten eggs and it's more toxic than carbon monoxide. But it does something quite extraordinary.”

What's so wonderful about this magical poison? I ask.

“It convinces our cells to quit using oxygen. Think of it like suspended animation.”

Oh, shit.

“No, no,” he says, “seriously. It's kind of the same as those people who fall into the icy lakes and get revived several hours later. Our bodies actually make hydrogen sulfide. Early life on earth ate rocks, which were mostly sulfur, in order to survive. This is programmed into our DNA.”

So what will it do?

“It will keep you from using oxygen so that we can bring you back when you get back from wherever it is you're going. But don't worry, I'm only going to hit you with it if it looks like you're crashing. Cause, well . . . it might, technically, kill you. But since you'll be dead, anyway, it shouldn't be much more than a speed-bump in the road.”

“I don't feel comfortable with a drug that will kill me, Ricky,” I tell him, starting to feel a little light headed.

“They're testing this stuff on battlefields, already. In the future, every paramedic and emergency doctor will have it in their shirt pocket. This is the way people will approach immortality.”

“Just make sure I'm really dead before you stab me with that thing.”

“Really dead,” Ricky repeats as he nods. “Got it.”

Seriously, Ricky!

Ricky places the syringe on a small table nearby and grabs an electronic thermometer. He then places a plastic tip in my ear. I have gotten those things in my mouth, in my ear, under my arm . . . and, um, farther down below. The ear one is, thus far, the easiest to stomach.

He waits for a moment, and then we hear a beep sound. He pulls out the probe and makes some notes on a small notepad. He then glances at his watch.

“Body temperature is an important factor in assessing health. Your body temperature is regulated by a thermostatic control center in the hypothalamus. But you, your hypothalamus is messed-up from your injury. Normally, you should keep a temperature of ninety-eight-point-six degrees Fahrenheit, or thirty-seven degrees Celsius.

“A tenth here, or there is nothing to worry about,” he said as he felt my wrist and started counting my pulse, “. . . but any more than that, in either direction could spell trouble. A rise will make you sweat. A drop will make you shiver. I doubt that the last guy who tried this—”

In the *seventeen-hundreds*, I interject.

“. . . yeah. I doubt they checked vitals and stuff like that. And since we're basically breaking new ground with all of this, I'm going to monitor your body while she keeps the monsters from tearing you to pieces.”

That's comforting, Ricky. Thank you.

He shrugs. Makes a few more scribbles on his pad. His final touches are some sticky pads that lead to his Lifepack-10, a cardio defibrillator and monitor that he's got in his bag. He sticks one patch on my upper right chest, and one on my left side, just below my ribs.

“Zap, zap,” Ricky says to himself. In case I die, he'll use these to administer enough electricity to stop my heart so that it can start again. Well, if it starts again. And with a few last adjustments on the patches he seems satisfied, and backs away. “Alright, Ms. Josephine . . . he's all yours.”

She nods and then places her fingers into the bowl of stuff I don't want an answer for. Slowly shaking her hands, she lets thick blackish-colored muck drip off into the bowl—she probably had too many hairy spider appendages stuck to her fingers.

Then she says, “. . . now close your eyes, child. I need to give you your coat of armor.”

Then what? I ask.

“Den . . . you die.”

CHAPTER 33

MS. JOSEPHINE'S SHOP, EARTH PLANE.

TIME TO DIE . . .

“You're ready,” Ms. Josephine says as she steps back. She's been painting on me for 15 minutes. I feel warm creature guts and who knows what else making little warm spots on my body.

“You look cool, Jack,” Ricky says as he studies me like a piece of art. He nods, “That would be a badass tattoo!”

“. . . and safe, too,” Ms. Josephine added as she walked around behind me.

It's a good thing that this chair is vinyl, I said. Because, if not, I would be leaving bug gut stains all over it.

“All dat's just life in different forms,” Ms. Josephine said. “Dem creatures, dey would be 'appy to be a part of all dis. Dey do deir part, just like we do.”

Okay, I say as I lay back, *I'm ready*.

Ricky nods to me, turning to Ms. Josephine. Everybody was ready for me to die. This is my team. My squished bug, blood-painting ethereal family. He glances at his watch again, “The time is eleven-fifty-one.”

And I see him eyeing that syringe of IK-1009 again. The death drug. The thing that will kill me so that he can bring me back. “Not until I'm dead, Ricky.”

“I know,” he says with a grin. “Now shut up and die.”

11:51 AM . . .

Ms. Josephine approaches me, her face becoming much more serious. “I want you to look at my eyes now, Jack. And you just listen to my voice.”

She takes each of my arms, by the wrist, and places them on the armrests of the barber chair. “Dere, now. Close your eyes . . . and just tink of mine. Nothin' else in dis world matters now but da color of my eyes. You focus on dat. Just dem eyes.”

And so that's what I did. Nothing else. It's actually quite difficult to think of nothing. But, lucky for me her eyes were so unique, and similar to the dead girl's eyes, that I had plenty to take my mind off of what I know is about to be the most horrible experience of my life.

This is like knowing you are about to get eaten by a pile of giant ants, nice and slow, bit by bit. Like treading water in a pool of hungry sharks. Like being the next in line to get clubbed in the head by a pissed-off caveman.

But all I think about are their eyes. Ms. Josephine's, and Kristen's. The only two women in my life—and one of them *is* dead, the other *speaks to the* dead. Oh the stories I'll be able to tell.

“ . . . just listen to my voice, child. We're establishing a lifeline, right now. You and me, we'll be connected when you cross. And don't be afraid to talk to me. I won't be able to see you, but I'll surely be able to communicate wit you.”

I wanted to ask her just how sure she actually was. I mean, I don't think she was the same person performing this gig 300 years ago. And if she was, I'm not sure how much of it she remembers. Three centuries is a lot of time for forgetting! I've forgotten things from three weeks ago.

“ . . . keep your mind on my eyes,” she warned. “And don't worry, I ain't forgot nothin'!”

By now I should expect that. And I've got a theory about it. I think that, because she is somehow connected to the other side—Deadside, or the Land of Sorrows, or whatever it's called—she can use that to connect with my mind. Thus, she can hear what I'm thinking sometimes.

“ . . . most times, child. Most times.”

See, there it is again. We'd make a good gambling couple, her and I. If this whole walking on the Deadside thing falls apart, we'll always have Vegas.

“ . . . okay, child. Slowly, I want you to open your eyes.”

As I did I noticed that there were considerably more candles flickering. Lots of them—maybe hundreds.

And Ms. Josephine looks different. Her eyes, they look brighter, and almost . . . hollow. She looks blind, like someone who has been born without sight looks. And I don't move a muscle.

“ . . . now listen,” she says, and her voice is clear and cautious, “ . . . I'm goin' to be countin' down some numbers. You will be walkin', wit each number, down into a dark pool of water. Imagine yourself surrounded by trees, but it's so dark dat you can't tell what kind of trees. Da only smell you know is pine smell.”

Like the car deodorizer Ricky has hanging from his rearview mirror.

“ush!” she scolded me. “Just da smell of pine and dem trees is all dat's around you. And you're totally safe. Nobody can touch you 'ere. So now, all you got to do is walk down into dat calm pool of dark water.”

“ . . . black as da bottom of da ocean,” she says, her words becoming longer and stretched. Her pauses pregnant and elongated.

“ . . . black as da space between da stars.”

And I start to feel the hum coming.

“ . . . and you goin' step down towards da water wit each step . . . tirteen . . . twelve . . . ”

The hum is growin, pressing me from every direction.

“ . . . eleven . . . ten . . . your feet enter da water . . . ”

The hum is becoming a roar, now. And I can feel pressure on my face, my ears feel like I'm descending under water. My arms are so heavy I couldn't lift them if I had to.

“ . . . wit each step, da warm water raises 'igher . . . nine . . . da water is to your knees . . . eight . . . you feel it on your waist . . . ”

And I'm actually feeling the water. It's warm on my skin. And it lifts as her words seem to shift in pitch and tone, lowering. She's Ms. Josephine, but through some spiritual synthesizer. I think this is how I felt when I was coming back from my neurosurgery.

The world falling away.

Reality becoming the only true fiction.

“ . . . da warm water, it's up to your stomach as you lower yourself into da pool. . . seven . . . it's at your chest . . . ”

6 . . .

My neck is just inches from the surface. I trust her, I believe in this . . . but I'm scared. The water, even though it's warm and comfortable, I know it's going to drown me at some point. My transition is going to be through my worst fear.

My nightmare is my portal.

5 . . .

“ . . . you're goin' be fine, child . . . keep moving down into da water . . . ”

4 . . .

The water is touching my lips, and it's all I can do to breathe. And now I'm sinking, and I don't think I have the power to turn back. Something is dragging me deeper. It's like gravity is in control now, and I can't fight back. I have no choice.

This quicksand of my worst phobia.

My escape from life, through an imagined death.

I'm being killed to be alive . . . among the dead.

3 . . .

“ . . . don't 'old your breath, child. Dere's nothin' to fear . . . ”

And though her words are soothing, I am totally and completely terrified. Scared stiff, *peeling-my-fucking-skin-off* panicked!

I see nothing but murky blackness in front of me. My lips are closed, not letting the water in, and I feel my body getting warm. My chest and lungs are burning, and I need air. *Need* air.

And distorted, calming words aren't going to help me.

2 . . .

“ . . . breathe in da water, child . . . don't fight dis . . . dis is exactly the way it's supposed to be . . . ”

I feel this dizziness, as my lungs fight for a breath. I know that the second I part my lips, that's when the real nightmare begins. My mouth opens, I'm dead . . . end of story.

Period.

Full stop.

“ . . . quit strugglin' wit dis . . . ”

My air is gone. The fire in my chest has grown epic. I don't have a choice, now. I can't fight it. I'm shaking and quivering, and in so much pain that I can't feel the roar anymore. I lose. That's it. I can't win.

And so I take a breath, and in doing so, the warm water rushes into my mouth, traveling down my throat and into my lungs. I'm drowning now, and the burning has now been replaced with an intense stabbing pain. Like sharp sticks being thrust into my chest and lungs.

Stabbing, stabbing, stabbing!

I try to scream, but nothing comes out of my mouth. This losing battle with life and death, it's in vain. Now comes the truly ghastly part of this . . . while the pain starts to collect each and every cell in my body—like a cancer—all I can do is wait.

I'm watching me die. Full horrifying, tormenting suffering.

This isn't Death Lite, this is the original, with all the original flavors.

And there's no point fighting at all. The pain can't get any worse than this.

So I give up.

1 . . .

“ . . . look for da light in da darkness . . . ” Ms. Josephine's voice says. It's her again. That soft, sweet voice made of honey and flowers. Her comforting words. I trust her. I have to. Because I'm not dead—or I am—but peacefully.

The warm water that was killing me slowly, calculating my worst fears and expanding them to the depths of my madness, that water is like a warm blanket now.

“ . . . find da light, child . . . and swim to it . . . ”

I don't see any light. It's all dark, and I'm alone. Just her words, that's all I've got.

“ . . . find da light!” she said sternly, “ . . . you can do dis, you're da *one*. Find it, now!”

Man up, or back down. Damn this! I'm stronger than this. I have to be.

I start turning around, in every direction. I start swimming, around and around. And then the thought hits me, I don't need the air, anymore. I'm like the sharks. I'm not a victim. And so I begin to change my mindset from that of a helpless human, to something that more resembles a predatory animal.

Side to side I swim, my body gliding along in this darkness, and I am no longer afraid. I have beaten my fear. And the moment that this thought coalesces in my mind, I see a tiny ray of light, filtered from somewhere to my right. I swim towards the specks of light, and they grow brighter and brighter.

They change from little bits of light, to a thin line. And that line becomes brighter and brighter until I can almost reach it.

When I get to the line of light, I notice that it seems like a surface to something. A rip in a large piece of black fabric, maybe. A tear in the dark backdrop of my reality.

“I found it . . .” I say to Ms. Josephine. I hope she can hear me.

“ . . . good, child,” she says, and I can hear the relief in her words. “ . . . now reach through dat tear and into da light . . . ”

CHAPTER 34

MS. JOSEPHINE'S SHOP, DEADSIDE.

MOMENTS LATER . . .

She told me to tear into the light . . . and that is exactly what I do. I reach my arms into the light and pull myself outwards. The bright light, it blinds me at first, but I keep pulling until my head is free. Then my chest and stomach.

Then my hips and thighs are out.

And then my legs escape and I fall to a hard surface. Suddenly, I am embraced by both cold and gravity. This place is so cold I can't explain it.

As my eyes adjust I notice that the bright light is little more than a dim blue glow. I get to my knees, squinting as I look around. I am still in Ms. Josephine's shop, although the colors are gone. The brown and white symbols on the wall are grey and greyer. The candles, they burn a soft greenish-blue.

The furniture, it is twisted and bent. Like her words as I was drowning, chairs and bookshelves are stretched and elongated. Every thing is *off*. There isn't a perfect 90 degree angle to be found. I am the only thing in this place with symmetry—at least, I hope I'm still symmetrical.

I stand, still unsteady from my time in the water, and I look around. I turn and I see the barber chair. And I see . . . *me*.

I'm still sitting in the chair, my arms at the rests, my head lying back with my eyes closed. My shirt is still off, but all is not the same. There is this giant opening in my body, the gash formed by the gatherers as they cut at me, tugging at my soul.

"Ms. Josephine," I say, ". . . where are you?"

". . . I'm 'ere, child. I'm right 'ere . . ." Her words, even though they're clear, it's like they're having a difficult time finding me. Bad reception.

And I don't think *AT&T* gets coverage here.

". . . can you see me?" she asks.

I'm looking around her shop but I can't find her. I can't find Ricky either. Are you still there, I ask.

". . . I'm 'ere, right beside you. Ricky's 'ere, too . . ."

I turn back around, looking at the gaping hole in my body. I have the urge to throw a towel over it so birds don't land in it and build a nest. But then, there probably aren't too many birds in this place.

As I look at me, I notice two faintly glowing orbs, just beside and behind my inanimate head. I squint, blinking several times. "Ms. Josephine, is that you?" I walk closer.

“ . . . yes, child . . . I'm 'ere . . . right beside you . . . ”

I want to touch her, I want to hug her. To feel something warm and alive. Every part of me is saying, *this place is dead*. And always has been.

“ . . . look at your arms . . . are da marks still dere?”

I raise my arms, looking at myself. And those spider-gut, chicken-blood emblems, they're glowing. I turn towards the front of her store, towards her darkened windows, and I see the glowing reflection of me.

I am not my face, or my pasty arms.

I am not the bags under my eyes, or the scar on my head.

No longer am I *that* guy.

“ . . . are da talisman still in place?”

Oh, yeah. They're here, alright. And they're glowing.

As I look at the reflection of the dead me—which is a version of the half-dead me—I notice that I am more solid. My body, this body, is without age and fat. This body is lean and efficient, like a sprinter. This is the best version of me.

The newer edition.

Faster, stronger, better than before.

The glowing symbols and markings all over my arms and chest, they glow a cool bluish-white. My pants are my only clothing. My boots are still on my feet. My skin is dark grey, almost the color of shadows.

And my eyes, they're the only part of me with color. That same brownish-green. I like this me. This me is formidable. I bet I could punt one of those little spooks about 200 yards with this me.

This is a *real* multiple-personality disorder.

“ . . . it's time for you to go outside, John . . . you need to see da world as it is, *there*.”

John. She called me John. Over here, I am John. This could get confusing.

So that's what I did. I walked to the front door of her shop, unlocked the bolt, and pushed open the door. I walked out into the place between dogs and wolves and sharks, and I stood on the sidewalk.

The sun, it was a big dim green ball in the sky. Darker than the moon ever is. There are no cars. No airplanes. And my assumption about there being no birds, it is accurate in that I don't think the things in the air are avian in nature. But large flocks of some kind of creature are gliding through the distant sky. Actually, swarms may be a better description.

The buildings all around, that used to make up Deep Ellum, now they're contorted and off camber. The roofs and windows seem crooked and wrong. But I'm the one who's wrong. My world—the Earth plane—it's long gone, now.

On the streets, there are few things. Some trash bins, though there's nobody to empty them. And there are bits of old rags and paper blowing here and there. This is a ghost town, of the real Deep Ellum—which was a ghost town of its former self.

A skewed copy of an old copy.

The world through death-tinted glasses.

What I don't see are any people. I expected to encounter monsters and goblins, but I see nothing. Just empty streets. The wind is cutting down between the buildings and it's howling as it does so. I wonder if I'm going to suddenly be attacked by a mob of zombies? Or if they're all watching me from a distance?

I wonder if they knew when I was coming? I suppose that if a dead girl named Kristen could hunt me down from this place, then it's possible they could have planned all of this out.

Part of me wants to call out for anyone that can hear me. But another part of me—the part that tells me not to walk into oncoming traffic—it says *keep your trap shut*. When you're taking your first steps in a place called *Deadside*, it's best to err on the side of caution.

The same little voice that says, *don't feed the tigers at the zoo by hand*, it's telling me to get my back to a wall, and carefully observe the scenario. That's the Todd Steele way. So, back-to-a-wall it is.

Ms. Josephine, I whisper . . . there's nobody here. This place is empty.

“ . . . only by comparison,” she answered. “Remember, of da billions of people livin' on da Earth plane, only a tiny fraction of dem will be on Deadside. Only dose dat 'ave been taken.”

More comforting words.

I made my way to the corner, and I had a brief flashback of last week. When some guy in a red truck asked me to please get out of the street. Actually, the words were, “Get out of the way you homeless piece of shit!” But that's neither here nor there. The point is, now I missed that. I missed the energy of the living.

This place, with its cold and bellowing winds. With its infected structures and green sun, it's lonely. It's starved of energy. I bet I couldn't even find a piece of bacteria here. It's been sterilized of humanity.

Of biology.

Of life.

Along with the color, they also sapped this Land of Sorrows of its *lifeforce*. I'm not sure what remains. If it's just an empty wasteland, then I'm not certain where I fit in to all of this.

I look around the street, a couple of blocks in each direction. As I walk the wind is biting at me, and I am starting to feel very cold. Like my fingers are freezing.

I curl my hands into fists as I walk. The next time I come, I'm bringing a coat.

Ms. Josephine, I say, this place is empty.

And then a voice startles me, “*Almost empty, John . . . almost.*”

CHAPTER 35

DEEP ELLUM, DEADSIDE . . .

“Who said that?” I ask calmly, hoping a giant grotesque undead monster is not standing behind me. And if it is, I hope he's not attracted to me. I don't want to even ponder the undead rape angle to all this.

As I slowly turn I notice this thin man—gaunt almost—his skin as grey as dirty ice. He's only about five feet away from me. He has no hair, and his arms are obscured by a tattered poncho that he has draped over his bony shoulders.

“You are him, aren't you? You are . . . *John*?”

“In the flesh,” I say, “. . . I think.”

The thin man, he just stares at me for a moment, looking me up and down. He's looking at me the way Ricky did after I got all these markings painted on my skin. The eyes of this man, they're green. They're the only bit of color on him. If his eyes were closed I would swear I was looking at a cadaver waiting for autopsy.

He could be lying flat on his back, waiting for the linoleum knife, except for those eyes of his. There was still life in this man.

“Who are you?” I ask carefully, not sure about the proper etiquette in this place.

He took a step closer, “My name is Thomas.” And then he lowers his head, almost like he's paying me respect. Reverence, even. I fell awkward.

“Okay, Thomas,” I said, “. . . you know who I am?”

His green eyes lit-up, as his face lifted, “You . . . you are John. We all know who you are.”

Not wanting to look like this is my first supernatural rodeo I said, “And do you know of my last name?”

He smiled, “This is a test. You're testing me?”

Uh, yeah. This is, um, a test.

He nodded, extending his hand, “You are St. John the Divine. I mean, you are his reincarnate. You are the John, prophecized by St. John the Divine. The one that will save us all.”

Well, at least people aren't expecting too much out of me.

“Where is everyone?” I asked. “Where are the rest of you?”

His eyes glance up to the sky, searching it as he moved closer to the wall. And I'm thinking that this is something he had learned from experience, so I follow suit.

“Most of us, at least in this part of the city, are gathered at the church. They are instructing the new ones about this place.”

I asked him what they called it, not wanting to be rude and call it *Deadside* when it's really called *Nightmare World*, or *Horrorville*. I'm sensitive to things like that. Who has glowing symbols all over his body, impeccable social grace, and two thumbs? *This* guy, right here.

“Oh, this is the Deadside. We're Deadsiders. And you,” he said nodding towards me, “well . . . you are the one who walks between, the one who can cross—you're the savior. The Crosser.”

Oh, shit.

I'm way out of my league. I hope he doesn't see that I'm just some washed-up idiot with my memory destroyed. That I was just one interview away from being a tard-farmer who has to wear long-sleeved shirts so that the mentally incompetent don't give him MRSA. I am a hundred things . . . but not a one of them is *savior*.

When they find out about me, the letdown will be of epic proportions. Biblical . . . literally. I cross my arms around my glowing body. I'm really starting to get cold. And, even though my body is not shivering, I'm most certainly feeling it. It's like I'm freezing to death, without the shakes. What the hell is happening to me?

“You have to go and meet everyone,” Thomas said, “. . . at the church.”

Where is that? I ask him. Does this place have road signs? A map? Something I can follow?

“Oh,” he said, “it's too far from here. We won't make it by nightfall.”

You mean it gets darker? I said. Darker than this?

He had a nervous smile on his face—one of those smiles where your mouth curves upwards, but your eyes aren't smiling at all. And it faded quickly as he spoke, “. . . I know that you will figure all of this out, John, but until you do . . . you need to be very careful what you do and where you go. You don't have much time.”

I told him that I already knew about the spooks and the gatherers.

“Oh,” Thomas said quietly, “. . . I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about the *real* dangers of Deadside. You need to avoid the spies. They're everywhere.”

Doesn't that make them difficult to avoid? I asked.

“You just need to stay with one of us. One of the believers.”

My back was aching I was so cold, and I could barely feel my hands and feet anymore. I looked at Thomas, my new dead tour guide.

“There's an old movie theater, it's on a highway road called Northwest.”

Northwest Highway, I repeated. Yeah, I know that road.

“Where it crosses the thirty-five highway.”

I knew what he was talking about. There's an *AMC Theater*, with like 30 different screens and tubs of popcorn as big as a trash dumpster. Ricky took me there to see the new *Jason Bourne* movie.

Out loud I tell him that I know of this place. When, I ask, should I be there?

“Tonight, at precisely sunset,” he said glancing over at the building where the green sun was hovering. “She will meet you there. She will explain everything.”

She who? I asked him.

“The girl who came to you . . . Kristen.”

Alright, I said. What now?

“You must return. Your time here is limited.” He glanced around, his eyes darting nervously, “. . . they'll be along soon. And we don't want to be here when they come.”

They as in *the Screemers*? I said.

He nods his head. “You have to go, now. It has been my honor to meet you, John. Save us. Save us, all.” And then he backs away from me, turns and runs as if his life depends on it.

For a moment I just stand there thinking of everything that just happened, and the sheer weight of all of it. But then that little voice in my head—the one that tells me not to piss on electrical outlets—it instructs me to run. Because, as a general rule, when somebody near you shags-ass like it's the end of the world . . . your best bet is to do the same.

In less than a minute I was bursting through the door of Ms. Josephine's Shop. “It's me,” I say between breaths. “I'm back!”

She instructs me to go back to my body, and her words sound worried and frantic. Something is going on. And I don't need to hear anything else. I know if I stay here any longer I am either going to be attacked by some horrible thing, or frozen too much to move.

I figure that I have to crawl back in through the tear in my chest, so that's what I do, and the second I get my head inside, I feel my body sucked in behind me. It's like I've been shoved into me.

And then there's a bright flash, a loud thumping sound to add to the intense humming, and I open my eyes to Ricky jabbing an IV needle into my arm.

And I'm way beyond shivering cold.

It's hard to breathe and I can't talk. All I can manage is to moan, breathing desperately through my clenched teeth.

“Stay with me, Jack!”

CHAPTER 36

MS. JOSEPHINE'S, EARTH PLANE.

12:58 PM . . .

“Stay with me, Jack,” Ricky says as he squishes a large bag of clear liquid. I feel a warm sting start working its way through my body, from my right wrist upwards. Ms. Josephine places a warm blanket over my body, tucking the sides in around my legs and torso. And my chest is burning near those sticky patches.

“Your core temperature dropped below ninety-degrees. Thirty-two-point-two Celsius, Jack. That's where the shivering reaction ceases. Your pulse, respiration, and blood pressure are dangerously depressed. You're half dead.”

I'm *full* dead . . . just half living.

And as an afterthought he added, “Oh . . . and your heart stopped for a bit, there.”

“We can only bring you up a few degrees an hour, okay. So this is going to suck for a while. Just try and relax.”

That's like saying, *Hey Jack, you're freezing to death, just kick back and relax, buddy.*

I manage to eek out the words, “I'mmmmm . . . c-c-co-ld-d-d-d!”

“I know you are,” Ricky says as he plunges that thermometer into my ear. “But if we heat you up any faster your cardiovascular system will collapse. And that's a decidedly bad thing. Then I'd have to use the syringe on you.”

I notice that the syringe doesn't look full anymore. Either it spilled, or evaporated, or I've been dead recently. And right before I was going to try and curse him out . . . the blackness overcame me.

CHAPTER 37

MS. JOSEPHINE'S SHOP.

3:14 PM . . .

I started to come to, and I was still shivering. “What happened?” I ask, trying to get my bearings. The room looks unsteady and wobbling, but that's most likely me.

Ricky sat down beside me. I was under about 15 blankets, lying on my back in a soft bed that was sucking me downward. Ms. Josephine was at the foot of the bed, cooking something.

“Okay,” Ricky started to explain, “. . . while you were over in the Land of Sorrows, your body temperature was taking a nosedive.”

I felt cold, I tell him. And hungry . . . hungry for McDonald's. But more cold than hungry.

“Well you should have. Your temperature dropped at a rate of about a full degree Fahrenheit every ten minutes. After an hour you were already in hypothermia. I've never seen anything like it. I had to hit you with the stuff and then zap you. Just once though, you came back nicely.”

Like there's a way to die and come back to life, *nicely*.

“But now,” I said, “I guess we learned something valuable.”

“Yeah,” Ricky laughed, “. . . you can only stay over there for an hour. Every second after that is pushing it. Really, half of that's pushing it. And also . . .”

And also, what?

“Well, in order for me to get your *core* temperature, I had to use another type of thermometer. It goes into your . . . ah . . .” and then he makes a circle with the thumb and fingers on his left hand, and used his right index finger to give me a visual about how he stuck something in my . . . well, you know.

Dying, I say under numb lips, is not what it's cracked up to be.

“Do you feel good enough to talk about what happened on the other side?” Ricky asks delicately as if I might crumble into a thousand pieces at any moment.

I shrug, sitting up. Ms. Josephine then stacked several pillows behind my back. “What do you want to know?” I say.

“Once you crossed over,” Ms. Josephine said, “. . . tell me what you seen.”

I cleared my dry throat. I felt like I just got back from climbing Mt. Everest. First thing I encountered, I told them, was the inside of Ms. Josephine's Shop.

“Just like this?” Ricky asked.

Yup. Darker, but the same. So, I recounted, I headed out and everything was empty. Uninhabited and twisted and grey. Oh, and cold. Very cold.

“You was dere, alright,” Ms. Josephine agreed. “Dat's what dey tell me . . . when I commune. Dey say 'ow strange it looks, like dis place, but wit'out da life. Wit'out da colors and da warmth. And everythin's bent funny, like if you was lookin' through some kind of lens.”

The sun is green. The wind cuts down from above and blows right through you. You can feel your body losing heat with every gust.

“Yeah, well,” Ricky added, “that's your body starting to turn into an ice cube. You know what . . . it's like your body was converting into a cadaver. I think, when you're over there, your body here, it quits. It decides that you don't belong here. Maybe a body without a soul is like a building without anyone to keep the lights on. No soul, no purpose.”

And then I told them about the birds. I tried to explain to them the irksome way in which they flew around, off in the distance, as if they were insects. Giant, black birds, but with the flight patterns of a swarm of hornets. I get the heebie-jeebies just thinking about it.

Ricky had an idea about using a heating blanket in the future to keep my body temperature loss more manageable, but Ms. Josephine didn't seem convinced.

“Death is death,” she said. “. . . if da body don't want to stay livin' wit'out the soul, den it don't make a difference whether you are in da refrigerator, or sittin' on da beach in Jamaica. Death is death.”

No soul no purpose.

Death is death.

When did my family become so insightful?

“Well,” I say, “we need to figure something out. And quick.”

“Why?” Ricky said. “We can approach this like scientists. Experiment after experiment. One step at a time.”

Yeah, that sounds wonderful, just so long as the next experiment begins at sunset.

Both of them looked at me like I had eaten the family pet. Like I had been caught fondling a reptile. They peered at me in the way we would all peer at the president if he suddenly pulled off his face to reveal an alien head—although that would certainly explain a lot.

“Tonight?” Ms. Josephine spat.

I nodded. Tonight, indeed. This guy who met me in *Deadside*—Thomas—he said that I needed to meet at the *AMC Theater* today, at sunset. Said I was St. John the Divine.

Ignoring the fact that I am now a saint, Ricky clarified, “The *AMC Theater* where we saw *the Bourne Legacy*?”

That's the one. But did you hear that they say I'm a saint?

“They watch movies?”

No, no. They use it for, like a church or something. Saint . . . anyone?

“Huh?”

Ms. Josephine crossed her arms, her expression somewhere between uncertainty and skepticism.

“Dis all sounds very odd to me.”

All of this, I say, it's all so confusing that I'm not sure what's hard to swallow. I told them about Thomas, and how the only color on him was in his eyes. How his skin was grey like those big-eyed aliens that are always abducting idiots in Iowa. And how he said that my time was limited.

Like he knew I was slowly dying.

“So you need to stay close to your body,” Ricky surmised. “What if they grab you and run off somewhere that's too far for you to get back?”

We both turned to Ms. Josephine.

She didn't look too certain. “Dis is a problem I 'ave been considerin' for da last couple of 'ours. Some of dis is new to me too, boys. I'm learnin' a bit myself.”

Shit.

“Watch your mouth, child,” she chastised.

Sorry. But seriously, Ricky had a good point. Suppose a bunch of envious little monsters throw me in the back of a carriage—or whatever it is they drive—and haul me more than thirty three minutes away from my slowly freezing body? This would be a problem, no?

She bit her bottom lip as she considered the scenario. “I'll need to give dis some tinkin'.” Then she glanced across the room, at the *Book of Sighs* “And da book don't say nothin' about dis problem?”

Oh, well, I mean, no.

What I don't say, and avoid even considering is that I may not have finished the *entire* book. I mean, I've basically covered it all, but there may have been a couple pages in the back that I didn't get to. But, I've definitely covered all of the broad strokes. For sure.

“And deir ain't no mention of any of dis in dere?”

The problem, I explain, is that it's all so convoluted. Since I never really studied the bible, I'm not sure what the important changes are. It's all just religious mumbo-jumbo to me. I definitely wasn't a preacher in my past life.

Something flashed in my head. “Hey,” I say to Ms. Josephine, “there was something else that I felt when I was there—here—walking around. I had this feeling I was being watched. Like people were hiding, staring at me from the darkness. I was alone, but I didn't feel alone.”

“Dey's da *watchers*, most likely,” she said.

I'm going to have to start writing all of these things down. Spooks, gatherers, screamers, believers, icky birds, and now watchers. They should have a guide book for all of this.

“Watchers are da other psychics, like me, but dey can actually see you. Me, I can only listen and talk. I'm blind over dere. But some of dem, monks in China and India, mostly, dey can actually *see*.”

“Are they good or bad?” Ricky asked.

“Ain't no concept of good or bad,” she answered quietly. “You boys need to understand dat dese is just 'uman concepts. Evil and good, dat's just labels. Tings we say to put people into sides. And den we choose one, call it good, and da other is evil. Just concepts.”

Well, I say, we need to figure this out, and quick. Because in—I looked at my watch that I am not wearing—Ricky, what time is sunset?

“Seven-thirty-something,” he shrugged.

Right, well, by seven-thirty-something I need to be diving out of my chest. I don't want to screw this up. They say I'm a savior. That I'm St. John the Divine. Saints, I say, they're *never* late for appointments.

“You two rest a bit,” Ms. Josephine said. “I got to do my own research. Look at da book,” she said as she put her hand on my forehead. “I 'ave a feelin' you might see somethin' you missed before.”

That was her nice way of calling me a stinking liar. She has good bedside manner.

CHAPTER 38

MS. JOSEPHINE'S SHOP.

4:52 PM . . .

Ricky and I decided to take another look at the book. I wanted to go back over that *Book of Sorrows* part, which Ricky thinks is the 23rd book of Revelations. So we took each verse, line by line, and looked for any hidden meaning. At the same time, Ms. Josephine was pouring over books that look older than the dinosaurs. The kind of books that cough up dust when you open or close them.

“First three talk about getting dragged over there,” Ricky said as he read. We were both sitting on the edge of the bed, him holding my chicken-scratch translations.

Number four, I point out, that's about some door. Although, it could be something proverbial. Those religious types, they always want you to *interpret* things. A cat next to a box is never just a cat next to a box. It has to do with some country falling into ruin after a war. Something completely loose and unreliable.

“Verse five, it's dark. Verse six, everybody's sad. Bla, bla, bla. People standing near a gate. There may actually be a gate, somewhere.” He looked over at me, “. . . you might want to ask about that, tonight.”

Seven. Once you're there, you can't go to heaven. That's kind of scary.

“I don't know,” he said, “. . . would you want to spend eternity with all of your ex-girlfriends?”

I don't know any of my ex-girlfriends, I reminded him. He told me I was blessed. I thought I was cursed. This is all getting confusing.

“Eight . . . that's about those *Screamer* things. Probably want to stay away from them. Verse nine says you need to really pay attention to the screamers. Two verses. Okay, then . . . screamers are *bad*.”

Ten, I say. Ten seems to fall in line with what that Thomas guy was saying. It says that *he*—who I assume is St. John—will walk again. And that he will put the Land of Sorrows to peace. So I'm him. Or, at least, they think I am.

Ricky continued reading, “. . . for the one that walks of both light and dark, living and death, he will be their savior.” He sat back, glancing around the room. Reverently he echoed, “savior . . .”

Then he slaps me on the back, “Big shoes to fill, Jackie boy! And I thought med-school at nineteen was rough. You had better nut-up. We don't need the next savior being a pussy.”

“*Ricky!*” Ms. Josephine barked from the other room.

“Sorry,” he apologized. To me he whispered, “How does she do that?”

I shrugged, shaking my head.

Basically, we surmised, I am supposed to make it where these souls can go to heaven. Oh, that should be as easy as beating God at a game of chess.

Ricky laughed, “Jack, you were born for this. Think about it. You lost all of your memory. That means you don't have anything holding you back. You are a fresh, new soul . . . kind of.”

Well, I said, they *kind of* think I'm a savior. They will *kind of* be expecting a great deal from me. I'm *kind of* out of my league, here.

Then Ms. Josephine appears, right before I start cursing, again. Right before I try and talk myself out of this whole mess. She's carrying what looks like a necklace, with a small pouch attached.

She walks around the bed and then tells me to stand up. I still don't have a shirt on, and you can see bleached outlines from where she had painted me up for my first crossing to Deadside. Those voodoo symbols of protection and stuff, they're etched into my skin. I will never, ever, get a date. Ever.

“Dat's just protection for a couple of weeks. Da ingredients, dey leave deir mark on da skin for a while,” she explained. And the entire time she's telling me this, I have this feeling that spider guts and chicken blood, and whatever else was in that paint, has probably scarred me for life.

Then, giving me that knowing glance that the doctors always give me, she said, “Trust me, child. I'm only tryin' to keep you safe . . . and livin'!”

Good, I say. Because I like both of those, a lot. She then places the necklace over my neck. The band was made out of some kind of black, fiber—maybe hair, maybe not. When I looked up at her she said, “Don't ask.”

Then I felt the weight of the pouch that is hanging down, tugging at my neck, and I touch it with my fingers. There's something inside the pouch, and I start to ask about the contents.

She shakes her index finger at me, “Now you really don't want to know what's in dere. Just remember dis, if you get separated, too far from your body, you open dat bag, and you eat everything dat comes out of it.”

I know this will just be horrible, so I try not to ponder the ingredients.

“How will he have the necklace once he crosses?” Ricky asks.

“e will 'ave a necklace exactly like dat one,” she promised. “It will cross over wit' 'im.”

Ricky then asks her if we could just make a bigger pouch, and pack a pistol in it. That would take care of a bunch of problems.

“Why is it your generation want to shoot everythin'? Nothin' but kill, kill, kill.”

Ricky laughed, “Turn-key parenting, Playstations, Ritalin, and lead-based paints.”

That actually got a laugh out of her.

“Anyway, Jack . . . don't you never take dat off. It gives you *Anvizib*. Invisibility.”

When you say *never*, do you mean—

“Never, ever, for any reason at all.”

Very well, then. I'm a savior. Wear the necklace. Stay away from the screamers, and set all of the Land of Sorrows free. And to think I was worried that this would be difficult.

“Now, since we only got a couple of 'ours, why don't da two of you go and get cleaned-up.” She looked down at me, smudged bug goo all over my body. “You need a bath, child. We're goin' to da movies later.”

“You're coming with us?” Ricky asked, surprised.

“What,” Ms. Josephine said, looking almost offended, “. . . you don't tink Ms. Josephine like to watch a good film every now and den?”

CHAPTER 39

JACK'S APARTMENT.

6:21 PM . . .

After taking a long, hot shower, I found myself standing in front of the mirror, again. The same mirror where this mysterious girl—Kristen—first touched me. Where she spoke to me through my aromatherapy soap. I can still see faint smudges from where I did a poor job of cleaning off the markings.

There is a warm fog all around me, hazing up the edges of the mirror, from the shower. I feel like I'm in a cloud. After using a painful dried-up vegetable—what Ricky calls a *loofah*—most of the voodoo ink is gone from my body.

What is not gone, however, are all of the burn marks that the stuff left. All over my arms and chest and back are the faint images of the markings which were used to protect me. Every now and then I find myself shivering, partly from being cold, and partly from thinking about my little sunset voyage to the movie theater.

And partly, thinking about her. Kristen. I haven't seen her in a while, and I find myself worried she might not be there tonight. I'm afraid that I might get stood up by some dead chick that I barely know. Odd thing is . . . I'm starting to miss her. I have a crush on a zombie. That might get me kicked off of *e-harmony.com*.

Now I'm washing my hands with the vanilla bean soap bar—the one Kristen chose. And smelling it, it's like the closest thing I can get to smelling her. To touching her.

I wonder, as I lather up my hands, if she sees all of these impossible things in me. Does she see a saint?

A savior?

The man who will free them all?

I don't know. I'm worried that maybe she sees what I see. An accidental savior. A reluctant saint. An unlikely prophet of neurotic behavior and non-sequitur thoughts.

Let's face it, I am the guy voted *least likely to save the Netherworld*. I don't even watch monster movies. I haven't celebrated one single Halloween—that I can remember. And until last week, the mere mention of ghosts and phantoms was enough to get me rolling my eyes. Ghosts, space aliens, and male multiple-orgasms—impossibilities.

I would be a good scientist because I am a natural born skeptic. Maybe that's a lack of imagination on my part? I don't know. But this, and me, they don't seem to go together. Maybe I'm the wrong guy. Sure, I managed to crossover to the Deadside. But all of that could have been a dream. A vivid, intense dream—just the way my caseworker explained, just before the badness happened.

I still could be that guy with a developing tumor.

The patient with a degenerative brain disease.

The nut-bag with advanced schizophrenia.

Those things could all, any one of them, be blossoming in the windmill that is my brain. I might be locked-up, this very second, being pumped full of Thorazine while doctors figure out what went wrong.

Maybe, in my head, there is too much devastation—like in Burma where those kids were covered in mud, their lives crushed, staring blankly.

Or, maybe my injury, it was so bad that I lost all of my humanity. I can't relate. I don't have the capacity to empathize.

Because, I don't have divinity in me. And no matter what anyone says, I don't feel like any prophet, or saint, or savior. Those things, they aren't me. I don't know what I am, but I know what I'm not. And I don't think it is fair to lay that load on somebody.

As we speak, I might have my hands strapped behind my back, waiting for another round of electro-shock therapy. I might be—

“Hurry up,” Ricky yelled, interrupting my pity party. “I need to back one out before we go!”

What? I say, as I rinse my hands off.

I can hear him sigh, “I've got one honking for right-of-way!”

Gross.

“I'm prarie-dogging, here,” he further explains.

Yeah, I beg him, please . . . no more metaphors. I get it.

When I opened the door, he is holding his stomach. He pushes by me grumbling something about how long I've had that pizza in the refrigerator.

The green parts, I say as the bathroom door slams in my face, those weren't peppers. But he doesn't reply. He's doubled over in pain, most likely. And I realize that keeping pizza in the refrigerator for more than a week is not a healthy idea.

It's time to get dressed. I have a date with death.

CHAPTER 40

AMC THEATERS, NORTHWEST HIGHWAY AND I-35.

TUESDAY EVENING, 7:26 PM . . .

We're in the back row, at the very top of a stadium theater. This was not our plan. However, nothing after me seeing the spooks has been following any kind of a plan. So this is par for the course.

The original idea was that we'd stay in Ricky's truck and I'd lay down in the back, do my little self-drowning thing, and viola! But, as we realized upon pulling into the crowded parking lot, that was not going to be an option. They have full-time security vehicles patrolling the parking lot.

So, we piled an IV bag full of normal saline, some needles, a thermometer, a few *insta-heat* packs, and a flashlight, into Ms. Josephine's large purse. Ricky didn't say it, but I know his hydrogen sulfide syringe is hiding around here somewhere. I so hope they don't check her things, otherwise they'll think we're into some really kinky stuff. And there's no way we would ever be able to explain this.

Ricky decided that we needed to find a movie that nobody would be watching. Cartoons are full of inquisitive kids. Action flicks are packed with people. Comedies are filled to the rim with goof balls yucking it up. So I recommended a romance film.

"*The Queen's Affair* it is, then," Ricky said as he purchased us three tickets. It's supposed to be some English film about a queen who sleeps with just about everyone in tights. It is 157 minutes long, and should have everyone bored to tears by about the third minute. I have to crossover, now, just to avoid this movie.

Luckily, as we get there, the theater is relatively empty. So, here we are in the very top, back row, preparing for me to die for a little while. And why not. This is good Tuesday night fun. Ricky checked the *Weather Channel* and found out that sunset was at 7:39 pm. Knowing this, he had a few minutes to spare, so he raced off to the concession stand and came back with a bucket full of popcorn, several drinks, and a fat green pickle.

I looked at him, shaking my head.

"What? Just because you're racing off to hang out with the dead, doesn't mean I can't eat. While you're conquering the mysteries of the universe, I'm going to watch some British chick bang the royal court." And then he turned instantly to Ms. Josephine and apologized.

He took a sip of his drink, "I got Dr. Pepper for everyone."

I took my drink, swigged the sweet brown liquid, and took a deep breath. The book is nearby?

"Right here, child," Ms. Josephine says, patting her purse.

I feel my neck for the reassuring necklace of curious ingredients. “Okay,” I say to them, “time to die.”

“Hopefully not,” Ricky said, shuffling through Ms. Josephine's purse. He pulled out the saline bag, the tubes already attached. He then attached the fast patches from the cardiac defibrillator. He was careful not to attach them to the burn marks from the last time he jump-started my heart. “You want me to start the IV now, or wait until you're a quivering mess?”

I wasn't keen on having him stick me with a large bore needle in the dark, but even less appealing was the thought of him doing it after I start to die—the *for real* die.

Apparently he could sense my apprehension, and comforted me by saying, “Dude, as many of these as I've done, I could probably hit you from across the room with a sixteen-gauge catheter. With one eye closed.”

Please don't do that.

“Drunk and dizzy, even,” he added.

No, that's fine. Maybe now is a good time, I said.

So now he's on my left, shoving a needle that is bigger than a piece of industrial pipe into my wrist, while Ms. Josephine is on my right, gently stroking my other wrist. She's talking to me about keeping my mind open, and my heart free of doubt.

She's saying how proud she is of me, and how I was meant for all of this—as if she had been reading my thoughts all along. She lowers her voice, still reassuring me and I hear Ricky say, “Okay, little pinch.” And then something that feels like a garden hose is inserted into one of my veins.

“First time, every time,” he says smugly to himself. Then he nods to himself, turns to me and whispers, “Kick rocks, Saint Jack.”

Ms. Josephine, she's still talking to me, her voice nice and soothing, but not even in English, anymore. It's French, I think. And it's creepy, yet calming . . . like French people.

Now my eyes are closed, and I'm walking back down towards the dark water. Instead of messing with the countdown, she's talking to me in some kind of cadence that locks me in. Before I know it, I'm falling deeper and deeper. The warm water is up to my waist.

My chest.

My neck.

And that's that. I'm drowning. I initially hold my breath for a few moments, then I force myself to let go. No point fighting it. Besides, I need to get used to this. So I summon all of my courage and open my mouth, taking a big breath of water.

I cough and fidget for a few seconds, but this time around, dying isn't quite as painful. It's Death Lite, again. And before I know it, I'm swimming around, looking for sparkles of light that I know are the boundaries of my supernatural chest wound.

My otherworldly autopsy.

My horrifying rebirth.

I cast my hands forward to reach the light, getting a good hold of the edges of my skin. And I pull myself towards the Deadside. The Land of Sorrows.

Oh, the things you can get used to.

CHAPTER 41

AMC THEATER, DEADSIDE

7:36 PM . . .

I fall to the floor, and am hugged by the frigid cold. Not as bad as before, but bone chilling none the less. I see the familiar glow of the markings on my chest and arms, but this time they are relatively obscured by the shirt that Ms. Josephine gave me. On the living side it looked like something out of the 60s—blue with small amoeba's all over it—but here, it's a ripped-to-shreds old rag. And I like it. It's very . . . me.

Can't have a saint running around the Deadside half naked. The neighbors would talk.

I pick myself up, still feeling weak from my first sortie into the Land of Sorrows. Again, everything is warped and melted. Uneven and curved where it should be flat and straight. Gnarled instead of symmetrical. But I expect it, now.

There is little, as a matter of fact, that I wouldn't expect.

Still, there is no real color, only the different hints at color through the various grey and blue tones. I look around, and the theater that was filled with plush velvet seat cushions and reclining armrests . . . it's like something out of the apocalypse. The chairs are bent at odd directions, as if a bomb went off. The screen—where I just know some early Victorian Royalty is blinking seductively at somebody she shouldn't be, back on the Earth plane—it's torn to shreds as if it had been exposed to the elements for a thousand years.

And the ceiling, it doesn't exist. Not really. There are giant, gaping holes in the ceiling and roof where the bluish dusk sky is peeking through. And, even though it couldn't really be darker in this place of dogs and wolves, I can actually feel the green sun sinking away. As if, with every inch it drops on the horizon, it takes with it a few degrees of heat.

I turn around, just to make sure my body is still where I left it. Sure enough, there's dying old me, just waiting to turn into an ice cube. Ricky's gone. Ms. Josephine is just a pair of blind-woman's eyes.

Ms. Josephine, I whisper, can you hear me?

“ . . . yes child . . . now go and find out what you must . . . I got a feelin' . . . ”

When somebody who routinely bites the heads off of live chickens and has jars of poisonous insects just hanging around, when they get a *feelin'*, chances are you had better pay attention.

“Half an hour, tops,” I say as I turn and make my way slowly down the steps between the rows of seats. I reach up and feel for my necklace. Thankfully it's there, although I don't relish the idea of

opening it—even in an emergency, the prospect of eating whatever the hell is in the pouch scares the crap out of me.

As I go down the stairs I notice that, as before, there is a forced emptiness about this place. I can feel the presence of something, being watched, waited for . . . something. I just can't put my finger on it. So I continue down. When I get to the bottom, I look up into the sky, partially obscured by the decaying ceiling of the theater, and I see no stars. Not one. And something seems to fly by the left edge of the hole I'm looking through.

Something fleeting and fast.

Dark and foreboding.

I decide to not look outside for fear that something out there might really make me question my decision to crossover. Not that there weren't a bunch of other perfectly good reasons to not leap out of your own chest to chase some phantasm. Geez . . . when I put it like that I feel like a colossal moron for doing any of this.

What kind of loser has two thumbs and a unexplainable crush on a dead woman?

This guy *right* here.

Anyway, I start making my way to the exit that would lead to the interior of the theater—you know, where I would be buying all kinds of sugar-coated loveliness. As I make my way past the threshold, where two double-doors would normally be, I see somebody. A short, fat guy with no hair, no color, and a twitch. He's the kind of nervous where I'd expect to see about 17 cigarette butts on the floor in front of him.

I whisper, *Hey . . . sir.*

And that just startles the shit out of him. He jerks over towards me, half dropping as he does so. “Oh, oh wow!” he says. “It's you. I mean, you're you. You're him. Here. John.”

Very good, I say. That covers all the bases. I asked him if he knew where I could find Kristen.

He jogged toward me, extending his plump little hand. “Stewart, you can call me Stewart.” As we shook he kind of jiggled. The way *Jello* pudding jiggles. I felt like getting on a running machine. I felt like watching my fat intake. Like taking my nutrition class over again.

He leans in, his voice low and furtive, “She's in one of the other theaters, with the new arrivals. They're explaining the way this place works. You need to be in on this. It will make all of this so much easier.”

All of *what*? I ask him. It will make what easier?

He glanced nervously around, his blue eyes looking like two bright marbles jammed into a wax person. His nose was big and bulbous, with large flared nostrils. He looked like a mask of a person, but not a real person. Kind of freaky, really.

He leads me down a hallway, toward another theater, whispering, “We have to be really careful about all this. Don't want to mess it up.”

And that was the last thing he said as he half marched me, tugging gently at my shoulder. We passed by the entrance foyer where the concession stands would have been. They were empty and cold. Where windows would be there were open spaces, where the wind blew past, whistling and howling.

How do you people live here? I asked him.

He just shrugged as we walked. And a few moments later I could see a few other Deadsiders standing at the edge of another small hallway. They all stopped whispering to themselves the second they saw me.

Must be the glowing tattoos, I figure. They probably don't see crossovers that often. I guess I'm a bit of a celebrity around these parts.

Stewart lifted his eyes as we approached. “He's here. He's here. Get Kristen!”

He led me past the gathering at the hallway, and on past the threshold to the next theater. This particular theater was much larger than the one I arrived at. This is the kind of room they would use for blockbuster films. And as I looked around, I saw the faces of 30 or 40 different souls. They all had those characteristic colorful eyes set against their corpse-like gaunt bodies.

Stewart brought me to the front row and asked if I had any questions. When I was about to answer he looked up, “Oh, there's Kristen, right now.”

I glanced over to where I thought he was looking, and I saw her coming down the stairs from above. When I turned back, Stewart was long gone. I guess his part of all of this was finished. He's probably going to find some quiet place to lay down in the fetal position and spaz out.

My eyes raced back to Kristen, who—as she slowly approached—looked beautiful. She didn't have that hurried, they're-chasing-me look from before. Now, instead of haunting me, she was looking at me with these incredibly beautiful eyes.

And even though her body was colorless, like the others, her eyes had enough energy to fill a hundred bodies. You could tell that she radiated. And the other people in there, they all followed her with their eyes, as I was.

She approaches me, stopping just a few feet away. She blinks several times. My heart, it was pounding in my chest like the *Energizer Bunny*. I had thought of all these very clever, very esoteric things to say to her. Words that would befit a saint or a savior. The kind of monumental and epic prose that I could imagine people repeating. You know, future t-shirts and bumper-sticker stuff.

But all I came up with was, “This is way better than my bathroom.”

And for just a fraction of a second, she smiled. And in that tiny moment between the blinks of an eye, I was just captivated.

“Hi, John,” she said softly. Her voice, it was so tender and sweet that I started feeling sorry for her, right then. How could this incredible woman, this beautiful creature, how could she be stuck in this place? This horrible cold place of dying and monsters and whispers?

I have some questions, I said to her. Lots of questions, actually.

Then, instead of answering, she stepped a bit closer, and lifted both of her hands, palms facing me, as if she was pressing against a sheet of glass that was between us. Her hands waited there until I wised-up and lifted mine. Slowly, I placed my hands near hers, leaving them several inches apart until she was ready.

Her eyes studying me, mine trying to understand hers, she touched me. And for this cold, frightening place, her hands were warm and soft. They were actually quite small as they pressed gently against mine. I suddenly wanted to grab her. To protect her from all of this. I didn't care that all of these other souls were watching us. That they were all counting on me.

Nothing else mattered other than protecting her. Because I knew—for reasons I'll never be able to explain—that this girl possessed a part of me. A part of me that I had no access to. I knew that somewhere along the lines of my forgotten past . . . she was important to me. I swallowed. This was the first real intimate contact I've had since I awoke. It felt important.

Significant.

“Welcome to the Land of Sorrows, John,” she said, with her soft delicate voice. Our hands were still touching. She turned to look at the others, all of them staring at us. Apparently, they shared my enthusiasm about this moment in time.

She turned back to me, nodding, “I have been trying to find you for a long time. You are very important. You are the only one who can save us. Will you save us, John?”

Us still touching, me still being half dizzy from this whole moment, I didn't have an answer. “I don't know what you want,” I said. And I didn't.

Sure, Ricky and I had read some prophetic scripture that could be taken a hundred different ways. But we didn't have any idea what we were getting ourselves into.

I need some answers, I told her. I have to know what is going on. In order to help all of you, I need to know what this place is really about.

She nodded, pulling her hands away. The moment we were no longer touching, I started missing her. “There's somebody,” she said as she took a half step back, turning to her left towards the group of gathered Deadsiders, “. . . that I would like you to meet. He's a new arrival . . .”

And without another word a path was opened between the people, and a tall familiar looking man approached. His clothes were in shambles, his head lowered. But it was him. It was my favorite librarian. Rupert!

His face lit up the second I said his name. He quickly walked forward and took me into a bear hug, squeezing the heat right out of me. He backed away, holding me by the shoulders as he studied my glowing talisman and protective markings.

“Bloody hell, you're him!” he said, astounded. “When they told me what was happening, I thought, 'this can't be possible'. But, here you are . . . in the flesh—so to speak, anyway.”

Rupert, I said, what in the hell happened to you? We saw on the news that you got killed in a hit-and-run accident.

“No accident, I'm afraid,” Rupert said as he crossed his arms. “Seems some people were quite interested in your book. So interested that they wouldn't take 'I don't know' for an answer.”

They murdered you? I said. I'm sorry Rupert. I got you all mixed-up in this. This is my fault.

“Nonsense, my dear boy. This is exactly the way it was supposed to happen. The fulfilling of my destiny on earth. We were supposed to meet and everything was fated to happen just as it did. I'm proud to have been a part of all this.”

All what, Rupert? All what?

“You,” he said taking me by the shoulders again, “. . . you are going to save all of us. You are going to be the one to free us into the light. Jack . . .” he suddenly paused, “Sorry, John—that's going to take a bit of getting used to.”

It's kind of weird for me, too, I told him.

“We are the new arrivals here. We are all learning what this Land of Sorrows is about. It's not, at all, what I expected the afterlife to be like. Although . . .” he scratched his chin, a quizzical look on his face, “. . . I can't say as I actually believed in an afterlife until those little buggers were ripping me out of my human form. Quite traumatic, that.”

Yeah, I said. I know what you're talking about. But I never saw the spooks around you. I never knew you were in any danger.

“Oh, it isn't always the monsters that get you. Sometimes, two thugs with a stun gun and a baseball bat is all it takes.”

That's horrible.

“That's the past, John. It doesn't matter.” Then he lowered his voice, glancing at Kristen, then to me, “What is important now is that we help you to fulfill *your* destiny. We are all, each and every one of us, counting on you for salvation.”

That's a tall order.

“Yes, of course it is. But it is what you were born to do. Even the unlikely painter must create his art. And so shall you, create your masterpiece. You will be a hero. More than you can ever imagine. This beautiful young lady, here,” he looked, put his hand on Kristen's bare shoulder, showing through her ripped shirt. “She cares very much about you. She has so much faith in you. As do we all.”

I need answers, Rupert, I said. Then I turned to Kristen. If somebody doesn't tell me what is going on, I can't help anyone.

Kristen nodded, placing her right hand on my left cheek. Her touch was intoxicating. "You're getting cold, John. You need to go back. We'll meet again, tomorrow. You need rest."

I wanted to say a lot of things. I wanted to protest and argue, but I knew—no matter how frustrating this was becoming—that she was right. My minutes were numbered here. I was already starting to feel the cold shivers envelop my body.

"Go back, now, John," she said. And then she took my hand and led me back towards the hallway I had just entered.

I didn't have any idea how much time had elapsed.

Rupert was walking with us, reassuring me, "We'll meet tomorrow. We have something very important to show you. Tomorrow, at dusk, at your apartment. We'll be there."

Her warm little hand in mine, we walked out, leaving Rupert at the threshold. We walked down the hall, past Stewart's nervous wreck of a corpse. And in moments we were back in the theater where I entered, making our way up the stairs.

". . . Ricky says you're pushing it, Jack . . ." Ms. Josephine's voice echoed in the background of my mind.

I wanted to stay, and go. I didn't want Kristen to let go of my hand. Not now, not ever. But I knew that my body was giving-up, bit by bit, while I was here.

"I'll see you tomorrow, John," she said, taking my hand between both of hers. "We'll explain everything then. Tomorrow at dusk."

I started to nod, but then something inside of me was at the end of its rope. This wasn't a sufficient justification for repeated trips to the Deadside.

"Kristen, I don't think that is going to be good enough."

Her face shifted into a frightened stare, "What . . . what do you mean?"

I need to know something, anything. And I need it, now. Not tomorrow, not in some yet to be determined time when the sun sets. No metaphors. No literary license or scripture. I have to have some reason to come back.

"What about me?" she said sadly, as if she was on the verge of crying.

I hate myself for this. But, it's who I am. Every trip over here is one more foot in the grave. So if I do it, there has to be a purpose, even if that makes me cold and calice.

"I don't even know you," I tell her. "I think I care about you. I want to help you, to hold you. But I don't have any idea who you are. This whole thing is one long nightmare. And every time I entertain it, I find myself two breaths from being on the autopsy table."

"So look," I say, "if you want me to trust you, then I need *something*. Now."

She swallowed slowly, her mouth hanging open just a bit. I could feel her warm touch around my hand. Her breath, in little fogged puffs, it touched me ever so gently. And without answering, she started to nod several times.

As she did this, I saw the tears welling-up in her eyes. And right then and there I felt like the ugliest monster in the universe. The most cruel, vile piece of human trash that has ever existed. Who was I, a living being, to give her an ultimatum?

What kind of jerk am I?

She stepped closer, her face just inches from my chest. She then brought my hand up and pressed it to her chest. She closed her eyes, and I could see her glowing perfect eyes dancing around behind her grey eyelids. Kind of like what happens in REM sleep.

And I was instantly bombarded with a flash of memories, seconds or minutes, I'm not sure. But it all kind of raced into my soul, all at once. It's like I was downloaded with memories. And those memories, so fast that I couldn't decipher them, they were full of color and life.

What happened? I said, trying to catch my breath. What was that?

A tear slowly rolled down her cheek as her eyes opened. "Go, now, John. And when you sleep tonight, you will see the gift I have given you."

I opened my mouth to speak but she placed her right hand over my lips, her left hand over her lips, shaking her head as more tears fell from her eyes. And as I backed away, all I saw was her shaking her head.

I turned away from her, more sad than I have ever been. Feeling worse than a person should be allowed to feel. And I reached into the corpse that was the living me, and pulled myself back to Earth side. Everything that I cared about, it was an eternity behind me . . . or a simple death.

I left Kristen there like some object.

Some broken thing.

A piece of cold meat.

Me, the savior. The saint. The one who is fated to save her. To save all of them. I left her there, crying, and I did nothing to help her. She might have been another black-n-white Rorschach inkblot.

Where is my humanity?

Because, I feel no divinity.

*Please look for **Part 4 of 5**, available at free-ebooks.net!*