

See Jack Die

(Part 4 of 5)

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

PART IV: CHAPTER 42

AMC THEATER, EARTH PLANE.

8:19 PM...

Climbing back into my body is like climbing into a freezer and covering yourself with semi-cubed ice. Like swimming from the icy waters of the North Atlantic and into the center of a glacier. It's so cold I can't take full breaths. So chilling that my back aches from the pain of constantly shivering. Intense, pulsating pain.

I don't know if Ricky had to zap me again, but I assume from the stinging on my chest and stomach that he did. That means he probably had to kill me with the hydrogen sulfide, again. We're way past experimental, now.

My throat is dry, and with each difficult inhale and exhale of my lungs this gritty stinging sensation cuts at the inside of my windpipe as if I'm being forced to aspirate shards of glass and sandpaper. This really, really sucks.

I need to stop dying so often. This death-twice-a-day thing, it's killing me. Everything around me is dark and blurred, and I feel two distinct sensations. There's a sharp, jabbing pain in my left wrist, where Ricky—or some thin image that I assume to be him—is kneading a bag full of saline water, forcing the liquid into my body.

On my right side, I feel two hands carefully massaging my right hand and wrist. The good on one side . . . the bad on the other. And they are both kind of canceling each other out. Everything in my life right now seems to be a combination of ups and downs, light and dark, good and evil.

Oh yeah, and let's not forget dead and alive.

And I'm not really sure, at this moment, which one of the two is worse.

I start to lift my head, but the pain is so intense that I feel crippled. Paralyzed, almost. And then, like the warm blanket somebody is placing across my chest . . . the darkness begins to take me in, choking away my consciousness.

The last thing I hear is Ricky saying, “. . . it's better if you just pass out, Jack. This movie sucks anyway. And I have to take your core temperature one more time.”

Lights out, before I get violated, *again*.

CHAPTER 43

AMC THEATER.

9:34 PM . . .

" . . . 'e's comin' back now," Ms. Josephine said as my eyes fought their way open.

"Two full bags," Ricky says as he flashes a small pen-light into my left eye. It might as well have been a police spotlight it was so damn bright. A miniature nuclear explosion. It felt the same as looking directly at the sun . . . through binoculars.

I squinted, saying, "You're going to burn out my retinas. Stop that."

"I need to check the dilation and make sure your eyes still track correctly." Then he did the same test on my right eye. "Okay, buddy. You're going to live."

Thanks Doctor Kevorkian.

"You wake somebody up from the dead and this is the thanks you get? And besides, you're too young to know who Jack Kevorkian is," Ricky joked.

Death makes a man grouchy, I say as I clear my throat. I read about the good doctor in *Science Digest*. Hey, how long have I been out?

Ricky looks at his watch, touching a button that illuminates the time, "You passed-out an hour or so ago. The time is nine thirty-five."

I still see forms and shapes racing around in front of me. What's going on? I asked.

" . . . dat movie is still goin', child," Ms. Josephine said quietly.

That . . . is a long movie.

"Yeah," Ricky added, " . . . and there's still fifteen or twenty minutes left. As long as this film has been on, and as many people as this queen has slept with, you'd think she'd already be showing signs of pregnancy. This movie makes me want to take the pill myself."

Then he pointed towards a blurry image, "Look, everyone in the royal court has a smile on their face."

I look over at the large tub of popcorn and it's nearly empty. I can see the bottom of the bucket through the few kernels that remain. My eyes look uncomprehendingly at Ricky.

"Hungry, dude," was his explanation. I wonder how that is even possible.

"You got down to ninety-three-point-one!" he warned as he looked over his notepad. "That's not as cold as before, but you were only under for forty-three minutes."

93.1.

"That's alright," I say. I'm sitting up and reaching for what's left of my Dr. Pepper. I need liquid, any liquid.

Ricky continues, "Well, no. Medically speaking, it's not as bad as this morning. But you're still in the range of clinical hypothermia." He shakes his head, "This is dangerous stuff, Jack. Your body wasn't designed for these kinds of up and down temperature changes. You can't keep doing this."

How long do I have to wait, I ask, until my next crossover?

His eyebrows raise, his right thumb and forefinger rubbing the top of his head as he considers. I can see years of med-school passing by, just under the surface of his head, like he's reading it by braille or something.

Chewing a bit on the inside of his lip, he says, "I'm not absolutely certain. I mean, you need a couple of days just to recover from today. Maybe as much as a week. Your body's internal thermometer is messed-up. *Warm-blooded*, Jack. We're not reptiles. Our body needs time to thermo-regulate. And let's not forget that you've died, chemically, more than your fair share. Most people take months to recover from having their heart turned on and off."

I have a meeting scheduled for tomorrow, I say.

They both look at me like my hair is on fire. Like an alien just popped out of my chest.

I decide to drop another bomb. "Oh, and Rupert's alive . . . well, dead. But, I mean, alive on the Deadside." I turned to Ricky, "They killed him to get the book. Turns out it *is* priceless."

"Do *they* know who we are?" he asks nervously.

No, I said. We're cool. The trail died with him. Matter of fact, he's supposed to be meeting me tomorrow . . . at dusk.

Ms. Josephine is still sitting on my right, and she doesn't look so comfortable with this, ". . . you need to take some time to t'ink about everything dat's 'appenin' lately. You been pushin' it pretty 'ard, child. Give yourself a rest and clear your thoughts . . ."

And then, some guy—probably the only other person in the theater—he yells up from about 15 rows down, for us to *keep it quiet*. Seems we're ruining his *AMC* experience.

Ms. Josephine is about to apologize to him when Ricky pipes in, "My bad, man. I don't want you to miss the queen . . . oh, look . . . she's lifting up her skirt again!" Sarcastically, Ricky adds, "Looks like the court jester is going to get a piece of that."

And then Ricky's face gets stern and serious, "Turn around, watch your shitty period piece, and shut your pansy ass!"

The guy, he pretty much turns around without another word, quiet as instructed. Ricky can be intense at times. I am used to this side of his personality. Ms. Josephine is not, and she and I give

him the *stare*. You know, the accusatory one where we shovel a fresh pile of *how-dare-you* all over him with our eyes.

But he just looks at the both of us and says, "What?" And then he shrugs the whole incident off. Under his breath, as he is gathering up his needles and tubes and thermometers, he says, "We paid our *eight-fifty* just like he did."

I lean over to him, "Don't be so hard on the guy . . . there are three spooks watching the movie with him."

Because he and I are so cavalier about death, and because we are both jerks beyond comprehension, the mention of spooks surrounding this guy brings a grin to our faces. Ricky leaned forward, squinting as if he might be able to see them. Then he laughs to himself and continues to load up the mini Emergency Department he had created.

Somehow, it all fits in Ms. Josephine's purse. That bag must have no bottom. Some kind of magical purse.

I take another sip of my stale, watered-down Dr. Pepper and clear my throat. I'm hungry, I say hoarsely.

"We could hit *Outback*, grab some steaks?" Ricky suggests.

No, no, I say. We need the gold standard. We need McDonald's. Stat!

Ms. Josephine rolls her eyes, "What an unlikely team we all make?"

"Genius, prophets, or madmen . . ." Ricky says nonchalantly, ". . . they're all basically doing the same thing, just from different angles."

And as we're walking slowly down the stairs I see a pile of spooks nearly falling over themselves as they haul-ass up the steps and cut a hard right in front of us. They cruise down the row of chairs, circling the guy who griped at us about the noise.

Ms. Josephine sees me watching the spooks race by.

Thing is, though, when I had told Ricky that there were spooks sitting next to the guy, I was just joking.

Ms. Josephine, her arm holding on mine to support me, she kind of glowers at me from the side and I have a good idea what she is pondering.

To her I say, "I didn't do it. That's just a bit of unfortunate luck on his part." But the way she's still squinting at me, I know she's thinking something different.

The queen, she's about-40 feet tall, and her legs go on forever. While she and somebody are pretending not to be attracted to each other, we are walking down to the floor of the theater. So the queen, she's busy with her stuff. Ricky, he's thinking about medical things. Ms. Josephine, she's trying to figure out how much I've told her and how much I'm hiding.

And me . . . I'm just wondering how far this thing is going to go.

CHAPTER 44

MCDONALD'S, NORTH DALLAS.

TUESDAY EVENING, 10:06 PM . . .

"Alright," I say. "Let's make a rule that for the next hour, we cannot discuss the dead, dying, undead, phantasmal, ghosts, or even monsters."

We're both sitting on the polished black hood of his SUV, our food spread out. And if your wondering why I refer to his truck as an SUV, or vice-versa, that's because we've been arguing about it for weeks, now. When he's in one of his *driving-over-curbs* moods, then it's a truck. So I start calling it a truck. But then he'll see some pick-up, or some other kind of *redneck-ride*—his words—and then it's an SUV, again. I guess a *Land Rover* can be both.

Well, on our way to drop Ms. Josephine off at her shop, we saw two old pick-ups—one actually pulling the other, with sweaty people cussing and everything.

"No supernatural shit," Ricky agrees. "That's a good idea." Again, he has three Double Quarter-pounders . . . with cheese.

I went with the Extra-value Meal, Super-sized, of course. And even though my throat is burning with each bite, the fries and burger are so good that I'm willing to endure the pain in exchange for the pleasure. I try explaining this to Ricky and he tells me that's what S&M is all about.

Pain mixed with sex, to bring out the best in both? I'm not sure I subscribe to that.

"The more you enjoy the first one, the deeper the satisfaction is for the other," he says, chewing.

And while I understand, logically, what he's getting at, I still find it difficult to imagine pain and sex being part of a symbiotic relationship. I ask him, Isn't that just an excuse for neurotic people to abuse their girlfriends?

"No, man." Fries shuffling in and around his mouth like scarecrow teeth, he says, ". . . most times, *she's* the one whose whipping you." He can tell that I obviously don't get it. "Think about it like hot sauce."

Hot sauce?

"Yeah, with chips at a Mexican restaurant?"

I know what hot sauce is, I say. I just don't get the analogy.

“Okay. The chip itself is good. Just salty enough to grab you. Crunchy enough to give you that tactile feel of breaking something between your teeth. But then you dip it into the hot sauce and it really comes alive.”

He nodded as he chewed, “Even though it burns your mouth as you eat it, some part of your brain demands more, releasing tiny amounts of endorphins—which are opiate proteins. They reinforce your desire for more hot sauce. They work together . . . like pain and sex.”

Maybe, I propose, I'm just too old fashioned to mix pain with sex. I'm pretty much just looking for the pleasure part of it. I like the idea of close intimacy with a girl. I think mixing pain and suffering with it would be sicko.

“Jack,” he said with a laugh, “. . . you have the hots for a dead chick.”

Kristen, you mean. Kristen.

“Whatever,” he says. “Point is, you're in love with a girl that has probably been dead for some time. That, my memory-challenged friend, is the very definition of sicko.”

You don't know her. She's a part of my past. She might be the key to all of this.

And right as he was about to unload a whole mess of psychological explanations for how screwed up my love life with a deceased girl truly is, he stopped himself, “Wait! No dead talk. Remember. My bad.”

Fair enough, I said. What about you?

“What about me?”

I asked him if he had a girlfriend.

“A few, I guess.” Picking through his fries to find the crunchiest ones—which are always a little browner than the others—he is thinking about my question.

Anything serious? I ask him as I take a bite of my burger. They definitely don't have Quarter-pounders in Deadside. A guy could make a fortune by opening up a McDonald's there.

He leans back, considering my query still. “I did,” he says slowly. But he doesn't seem sure of his answer. “. . . I, sort of, do. It's complicated.”

What's complicated about it? You either have deep feelings for her or you don't. So what's the prognosis doctor?

He looks down at his fries, as if they'll hold the answers he's jockeying for. His fingers are mindlessly playing with the fries. “I guess . . . yeah. I like her a lot.” He nods to himself. “She's into law and stuff. An entertainment lawyer. Well, that's what she wants to do after law school.”

How often do you see her? I ask, kind of curious how this whole dating thing really plays out in real life. *People* magazine is too confusing for me to use as reference material on the subject of love.

“I used to see her almost every night, but she's going away to school, now. In Los Angeles. So it's pretty difficult.” Then he shrugged, took another sip of his drink, and added, “If it's meant to be . . . it's meant to be.”

And that's it? You just let her go to L.A.?

“Life ain't that simple, Jack. You can be right for a person . . . at the wrong time.”

And after that neither of us said much. We just ate quietly, him thinking of this girl who went to L.A. Me thinking of Kristen, the girl I can't remember, yet.

And I'm not sure which side is more complicated—here or *over there*?

Somewhere inside my convoluted mind is a brick full of colorful memories that Kristen charged me with. I want them so bad I can feel it tearing at me from within. The thought is only now crossing my mind, that my mistrust of her, it might push her away. She could lose faith in me.

But then, I have to put things in perspective. I met a ghost. She may be from my past, or I may just have a huge crush on her. As sicko as that sounds, it is what it is. I like her. I feel for her. I want to help her so that I can help myself find out the answers to any or all of these questions.

If, as an added bonus, it turns out that I can be a saint or a savior, that would be fine. But I'm really only interested in her. The thought of leaving her, over there, alone, to fight whatever it is might be hunting her . . . that just kills me.

I don't understand love, but I think I'm stuck in the middle of it. Like quicksand.

By the way . . . absolutely none of this can come out of my mouth when I meet my new caseworker, tomorrow. They'll label me '*shit-spewing crazy*' right off the bat. And I've got too much going on to be strapped down to a bed in the middle of a cushioned cell while happy music plays in the background—to drown out the screaming and slobbering and aimless pacing.

CHAPTER 45

JACK'S APARTMENT.

11:03 PM . . .

My stomach full of french fries and indecision, I took a hot shower and laid down in my bed. My body was still shivering on and off, and maybe Ricky was on to something when he said my body's internal temperature regulator was on the fritz.

The book is safely locked up, having only a few pages left that I need to read. I've got the important stuff out of the way already. Cross some *I*'s, dot a couple of *T*'s, and that should be that. As I'm lying there, trying to fall asleep, our last moments together keep coming up.

Over and over I see her brilliant eyes welling up. I watch as the tears break through the cold grey of her skin and roll down her cheeks. I feel awful about that. I wonder if she's still over there, crying.

Asshole of the universe, that's me.

Some saint I am.

Really, I'm kind of disgusted in myself. What makes it worse is that I haven't got any answers. Now, in addition to not having any idea what is really going on, I am feeling guilty. More guilty, in fact, as each minute passes.

I close my eyes, not being able to sleep. I considered trying to count sheep in order to fall asleep, but the thought crossed my mind that I might accidentally crossover again . . . get carried away, and freeze to death. Talk about your bad dreams. My sheep have chainsaws and sharp teeth. No thanks.

Instead I just sat there, looking at the bumpy ceiling of my City sponsored apartment. It was like looking at a bone under a microscope, little peaks and sharp valleys with no real order to it. I imagined myself driving some tiny jeep up and down the hills.

An explorer.

A wanderer.

I am the conquistador of my ceiling. The brave explorer of stucco. And after a few minutes of that, my body figured I wasn't doing anything worth staying awake for . . . and I was out.

REM SLEEP, 36 MINUTES LATER . . .

I opened my eyes, and the room looked different. Not *between dogs and wolves* different. Ambiance, furniture, and size different. I wasn't in my apartment. This room was much nicer than my place at the *L.B.J. Health Manor*. This is like a hotel or something fancy.

The comforter on the bed is thick, and shiny burgundy, so soft it might be made of silk. The sheets are off-white, and nearly off the bed. As I look around I notice the furniture, all of it elegant stained wood—maple maybe, or oak. The walls are egg shell colored, with a wonderful table between the bed, and what looks like a real living room. The lamps are brass and heavy-looking. There's a television, and it's as big as the refrigerator in my *L.B.J.* apartment.

On the ceiling, where the Land Rover of my mind was last driving around aimlessly, there are individual tiles. And there's thresholds and finishing all over the place. This has just got to be expensive.

And then I felt the bed shake, just a bit. Sunlight is just starting to creep through the long, dark Venetian blinds. Golden fingers touching the folds and curves of the shiny comforter here and there. It was so warm and peaceful that those little fingers might have been god himself, just making sure I was alright.

The place smelled of fruit, and I notice a bowl on the table that seems to be overflowing with bananas, oranges, and a few other varieties of fruit that I've only ever seen in magazines and *Starburst* commercials.

Again the bed shakes, and I know that it's not me.

I look behind me, and there is a large gathering of pillows and sheets. I very carefully push the corner of the comforter aside and I see a perfect foot, with pink painted toe-nails. My pulse rate is climbing as I crawl toward the perfect, thin foot, following it to the ankle.

As I am about to touch it, it wiggles away like a fish, hiding somewhere farther into the pile of soft sheets. I feel safe. Completely safe in this environment. I even have this wonderful feeling that I belong here.

Me crawling around, looking for the rest of the foot . . . it's alright.

Life forgetting me, in a place that I'll never be able to afford.

Quiet. Serene. Perfect.

As I make my way to the center of the inordinately large bed, I find the foot again. It is connected to a silky calf, that—with perfect curve and proportion—becomes a thigh. I haven't touched her, yet. I don't want this to fall apart.

If this is some dream . . . then it is *some* dream.

Under the sheets it is dark, and the top of her thigh, it is obscured in the shadows. I feel myself starting to shake a bit. I'm not cold, just nervous. I can only imagine what is about to happen. This is a very powerful moment.

And then she sits up, her face so full of color. Her eyes bright blue, with a hint of green in them—just full of life. Her lips are thin, just the lightest shade of pink. Her skin is as glowing and perfect as nature will allow. She's blinking at me, and a smile starts to form on her face.

I don't know whether to crawl forward, or wait for the police to show up. I decide to wait it out.

The sheets, they seem to fall away from her chest, and her bare chest is maybe the most incredible thing I have ever seen. Her breasts are perfect and round, with two tiny pinkish nipples. I feel like a peeping Tom that just got caught.

I wonder how long she'll let me stare at her naked before she screams out something that gets me a special license plate?

And then she extends her arms, cocking her head to the side a bit as she furls her eyebrows. When I don't move, she acts as if she's pouting, her bottom lip thickening as her chin wrinkles.

She opens and closes her hands a few times, her fingers beckoning me in. In the sweetest, most feminine, girly voice she says, "Save me, John . . . pleeeeeeaaase!" And it's so cute and wonderful, and sexy, that I can't breathe at all. No, it's too much.

It's Kristen, as she was. As she had been when we knew each other. And every nuance—the smells, the room, the bed, the sheets, the soft fingers of light—all of it is perfect. And I know, right at that very moment, what it feels like to love somebody. To need them as they need you. To be for them, completely.

And so I crawl forward, reaching to take her into my arms. To finally hold her, and protect her from the horrible world of shadows and people and typhoons and monsters and disease and pain and indifference . . . and loneliness.

And the moment that we finally touch, the exact trillionth of a second that I touch her skin—feeling her warmth—it all goes away.

In the blink of an eye the light is gone. The golden fingers of god have disappeared. The bed is nowhere to be found. No more fruit. No more silk.

No more Kristen.

I am back in my apartment, lying on my back, staring up at the Martian ceiling. I am alone. I am cold. And I am afraid that I have lost something . . . twice.

I sit up in my bed, searching for answers in the darkness. But there are no answers to be found here. The book won't help me. The spooks won't guide me. Ricky can't advise me, and Ms. Josephine can't enlighten me. I have to figure this all out by myself.

Am I my dreams of gold and love and perfection?

Am I my cold, dreary apartment?

Am I a man who is waiting to die, or a hero waiting to be reborn?

I need to find out what the hell is going on in my mind. I must figure out if I can help Kristen and Rupert, and all of those other lost souls. And if I can't, then I need to make an even more penetrating decision. If I cannot be the saint they expect, the savior they are counting on . . . then I must either live or die.

What I cannot do, though, is both. I will either live among the people in this world, or I will crossover, and never return. I belong somewhere . . . but this . . . this isn't right. To be alive waiting to die—even if only for a couple of minutes a day—that is not a life at all. I might as well be dead.

And without her . . . I may already be.

CHAPTER 46

R.H.D. MEMORIAL.

NEUROLOGY DEPARTMENT, WEDNESDAY MORNING . . .

Last night was difficult. I was finally shown just a glimpse of what I shared with Kristen. And although I find myself no closer to what we were, I know it was wonderful. And to know that I lost all of that, it hurts . . . deeply.

Today, I'm lying back in a plush blue chair, in the waiting room of the Neurology Department, waiting to be called in for my weekly meeting. I suspect this will be an awful affair because I'm meeting my new caseworker—seeing as the last one took a dirt nap. I suppose that's a mean thing to say, but the guy seemed to have it coming.

The tanned, quite attractive receptionist raised her eyebrows at me, and I guess that's my signal. For whatever reason, she didn't feel the need to use the microphone this morning. Evolution, I figure. It happens in baby-steps.

I got up, headed past the turtle-shaped table with the two-year old issues of *GQ* and *Esquire* magazine. I pass the pastel-green door that makes me want to set fire to a *Toys-R-Us*, and into the lavender and off-white hallway. This is the quiet hallway where you plan out what your going to say to the shrinks who will be interrogating you. And on the way back you try and figure out what exactly you said wrong.

The nametag on the door, '*Dr. Smith*', was still there. I knocked a few times, hoping nobody would be there and I could ease myself out without the meeting I knew we were about to have.

"Come, please," a woman's voice said politely.

Reluctantly, I pushed open the door and saw a short, older woman doctor. She had a kind of *Dr. Ruth* look about her. Although with longer hair, and thicker glasses. She was probably in her mid to late 50's, wearing a powder blue suit.

"You must be Jack," she said, standing from the desk and walking around to shake my hand. Dr. Smith never did that. "I'm Doctor Evans, but you can just call me Monica. Actually, I would prefer Monica."

Okay . . . Doctor . . . Monica.

We shook hands and she kind of observed me with a motherly smile. "You've been through quite a bit, young man." Then she nodded, as if she was proud of me. "Let's talk."

She glanced around the room, seeing the brown leather chair and the similarly upholstered couch. "You pick one, I'll take the other."

This is odd. Shrinks are supposed to be safely on the other side of the desk. This area over here, this is our territory. This is like when handicapped people park in normal spots. It's alright . . . but it isn't *right*. What's going on here?

She seemed to notice my apprehension. "Jack, I'm a different doctor than some of the neurospecialists that you might have worked with. I'm a psychologist first, and a doctor second. I am intrigued by the mind, and do everything I can to learn about it . . . so we can help it. Now, I didn't say *fix* . . . just help."

She sat down in the chair, willing me to the couch. "You see, I don't think that a brain injury is something as simple as a broken finger. We can't just set it right and let it heal. The process of mental health takes time and effort. It is deep and all encompassing, and too rich a subject to be patched-up in a matter of minutes."

I sat down on the couch. This Doctor Monica, she seems alright. She's different. Open-minded, kind of in your face, but she doesn't crowd you. I ask her, "What do we do now?"

She smiles, "We just talk. Get to know each other. We begin what I hope to be a marvelous friendship. Some of my most interesting and unique friendships have come from people who sat next to me, just like you. Just like this."

And I noticed two things right off. One, she has a wonderfully caring smile. As if she really wants you to be better. Two, she doesn't refer to me as her patient. Not yet. That means she considers me a human being, like herself. And I have to admit, I kind of liked Dr. Monica.

Did I like her enough to start talking about the spooks, my dead girlfriend, and trips to the netherworld? No chance. But I felt comfortable enough to talk to her like a person, instead of guarding my feelings and emotions like a captured enemy spy.

"What would you like to talk about?" she asked softly.

She had no notepad, no folders, nothing. This was definitely the new-school of psychotherapy.

I don't know, I said. I guess I need to tell you that I heard about Dr. Smith's passing.

She nodded, "I know, I know. That was just . . . one of those things that happens, and we all think about it. Death—that is to say, the passing of a person—it is a huge moment for everybody involved. Even if you only knew the man peripherally, you feel this tug on your soul that leaves you curious about your own mortality." She shrugged, "I didn't know Dr. Smith that well, but I felt his passing."

You're a very open minded doctor, I said. Are you religious?

She smiled, "Religion, spirituality, we all have some degree of them inside us. I like to think of myself as thoroughly spiritual. I have a love for science, and the foundations that it provides us, but I would like to think that we—as in our souls and emotional constructs—are more than simply electrical charges that disappear as we fade into death.

"I like to imagine a wonderful place of transition and catharsis beyond this life. Somewhere that we are allowed to take stock of our trials and tribulations here, on earth, and learn from them. Maybe we pass along to some other place, maybe we don't. Perhaps we come right back down and start it all over?"

Until when? I ask.

"... until we get it right." She lifted her hands, her palms open, "... that is the adventure of life, I suppose ... to not be sure. The constant guessing, that makes life interesting. If I knew all of the answers, what fun would that be?"

And what place, I asked, does love stand in the scheme of things?

"Love is the energy that pushes life forward," Dr. Monica said as she leaned back, getting more comfortable. She had on a gold beaded necklace that reflected tiny sparkles of light from the window behind her.

How do you know, I wondered, what love is worth?

"How do you mean?"

Well, I said. How can I tell if a love is worth fighting for? When is it *that* valuable?

She considered my question. "I'd say love is worth fighting for when it helps you to be a better person. A greater being. It has to be positive. There are many, many unhappy people out there that are deeply in love with somebody, but that relationship is detrimental to their psychological, and emotional wellbeing. Take it to the extremes. You'll often see people who are trapped in abusive relationships that they willingly stay in, just because they are in love with their partner. That is not healthy. That is not a love worth fighting for."

But one person's health, I say, could be another's destruction.

She nodded, "... and one man's trash is another man's treasure. That is a relatively semantic argument. I'd say that each of us knows, if we were to do a risk-versus-reward analysis, if the love we have for another is benevolent, or malignant. Because love, it infects you. Leads us to do some very complex things, sometimes dangerous."

So you wouldn't believe in self-sacrifice for the one you love? I posed to her.

She narrowed her eyes at me, "Why Jack, you might just be an undiscovered romantic?" She sat there for a moment, studying me, not like a lab patient, but as maybe a flower that had not yet bloomed. An uncut gemstone.

“So tell me about this girl you can't get out of your mind.”

I told her about Kristen, but not the stuff about her being dead and all that. Just the feelings I had toward her. I said that she was still like a stranger to me.

Dr. Monica, she has to have looked over my files, so she knows that I just woke-up about five months ago. Following that, she probably assumes that I just met this girl, and that I am investing way too many emotions in a person that I cannot possibly know. Even if she doesn't say this, I know it's on her mind . . . because it's absolutely right.

She says, “When you're in love, you're in love. There's no explanation for it. Sure, I could give you a whole bunch of fancy psycho-babble about finding synergy with a person of compatible mental state and emotional flexibility. But all of that would be a cookie cutter fix. Love is far too complex an issue for psychology to have solved. We know more about the life and death of the universe than we do of affairs of the heart.

“And I think . . .” she said as she leaned forward, “that's the way it was meant to be. Some things, we just have to take on faith. We must let loose our chains and rise until the heat of the sun burns us.” She folded her hands in front of her. “That is the majesty of true intimacy.”

But it's risky, I propose. I might think I'm in this wonderful kind of love, only to later find out that I was looking through rose-tinted glasses. I might not be healthy enough to make a proper evaluation. Crazy people usually don't know they're crazy, and thus don't think they're being out-of-line in their actions.

She laughed, “You're not crazy, Jack. In fact, you're probably much more grounded and level-headed than I am.” Then she lowers her voice, “In my field . . . I'm considered a bit of a rogue.”

Me too, I thought to myself. Me too.

“Are you in love, Jack?” she asked, sitting up. Her eyes were deep brown, piercing through me.

I shook my head. I don't remember what led to it. How I got there, or even if we were ever there in the first place. But, I said . . . yes. What other answer do I have? These psychologists, they are so clever at getting you to ask yourself the questions that they could never come up with on their own.

Yes.

“Is it something that you think you need to fight for?”

Oh, I'd say that's a fair understatement.

She stood up, suddenly. “Jack, we're done for today. I would like to meet you again on Friday, if that's alright with you?”

Sure, I say. That would be nice. I'm going through a sticky time, right now.

She handed me a business card with her phone number written in blue ink on the back. "That's my cell phone. It's just the cutest little thing, an *i-Phone4Gs*. So don't hesitate to call. And I really mean that. If, for any reason, you want to talk. Even if it's about the color of paint you want on your ceiling, the books you're reading, or the frozen pizzas in your refrigerator . . . I'd love to talk."

That was kind of spooky. I wonder if she could tell I like frozen pizzas, or if she was just making the point that she's available to take my calls? I'm a bit baffled.

Then we shook hands, and she lowered her glasses, leaning forward as she peered into my eyes. "You are so much more than you know, Jack. There is a wonderful power inside of you . . . just waiting to get its chance to shine. Soon, you'll see. I'll see you Friday."

And now I'm whistling the first 8 bars to the *Twilight Zone* in my head, hoping that she can't hear what I'm thinking.

CHAPTER 47

FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST, NORTH DALLAS.

WEDNESDAY LATE-MORNING . . .

On the way back from my meeting with Dr. Monica I had a wild hair to go into this church. It's on the corner of Valley View and Webb Chapel, and I walk by it almost every time I leave my apartment.

This particular church, it's clean and crisp, as if it was made to perfect religious specs. To fit the design of what a church should look like, I guess they have industry standards. The walls of the church are the same reddish brick that they used in the landscaped walkways that lead to the main entrance. There is a large set of steps leading to an even larger set of white painted doors.

These doorways look big enough to drive a tank through without scratching the thresholds, and I can imagine people pouring in on a Sunday morning, all dressed in their finest clothes, trying to impress the big man upstairs.

As I walk towards the church, for reasons I'm not completely sure of, I noticed one of the doors cracked slightly open. Since I'm not well versed in the ways of religion, I'm not sure what the proper etiquette is for entering a place of God.

I'm not trying to buy myself an unexpected bolt of lightning or a freak killer bee attack. Smite, smote, whatever you call it . . . I don't want it.

So I just walk on up and knock a few times. I wait. If anyone is here, they aren't answering the door, or they just can't hear me. I glanced back towards the parking lot, having this eerie feeling that kind of grabs me out of nowhere. I'm wondering if I missed something.

I'm not sure why I was suddenly paranoid like this. This whole *God* thing, it's so new to me that everything is suspect. Like if every nuance, each religious sign I see, is legislated by some group with an agenda. A spiritual Cold War.

Really, I don't know how I feel about the concept of a divine being, or if I'm just searching for another explanation to my situation. On the one hand, I have this *Book of Sighs*—supposedly a secret addition to the bible—telling a dark and sinister story that I know they don't teach in Sunday school. So, at least as far as the book is concerned, there is something biblical going on here.

And if I concede that the book is a legitimate document, then it seems I might have to give God a serious consideration. Whether or not I admit to it, that's probably why I'm standing here in the doorway of a church.

I pry open the heavy door, slipping in under the audible cover of the squeaking hinges. Once inside, I smell incense, but not like at Ms. Josephine's Shop. They're much more corporate, more mandated and uniform. I bet I could find this clean, coffee and Christianity smell all across the country, in every church I enter.

As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I realize I'm in a small lobby. There is dark grey carpet, and several sets of smaller double-doors that appear to lead to the main church area—whatever they call that. Still I see nobody. Still I hear nothing. They say that the House of God is never closed; nor, I suppose, empty.

Count me as *undecided* on that.

I walk to the nearest set of double-doors and give them a gentle nudge. They open quite easily, and there is a dramatic difference in pressure in the main auditorium area as I enter. This is a lot like the stadium seating at the theater we were in last night. Although, with a much shallower angle of decline. And no naked 40-foot queens.

Slowly, I make my way down the pathway between the rows and rows of hard-looking seats. I can picture kids squirming around almost uncontrollably while some preacher goes on and on about things that kids aren't trying to listen to. These chairs, they look so uncomfortable—designed like those chairs in the food court, at the mall—and they are so tightly packed together—like at the theater—that I can't understand how anyone could enjoy this.

But then, here is that *suffering* that Ricky was talking about. Maybe the joy and elation of faith has to be mixed with equal parts discomfort in order to be really appreciated.

Everywhere I go for answers, I end up with bags full of questions. My mind is one tangled question mark with three little dots after it. In progress . . . All solutions are forthcoming, or in flux. It's like a television drama that doesn't ever give you enough information to stop watching it. *Lost*. Yeah, it's a lot like watching *Lost* and trying not to blow your brains out.

I walked about halfway down and then stopped. I guess I was waiting for something extraordinary to suddenly occur. Although my litmus for extraordinary may be skewed by my recently discovered ability to walk among the dead. But, I don't know, I was hoping for a sign. Some divine insight that points me in the right direction. Maybe not a burning bush, but something.

And I got it.

"Sir," a voice beamed from behind me, ". . . we're closed for cleaning, right now."

I turned and nodded, laughing to myself. The House of God is never closed . . . except for cleaning. I had asked for a sign, and I got what I came for. I made my way back up to the small set of double doors and a young man, probably in his late twenties, was holding open the door. His head was cleanly shaved, with the hint of a black mustache starting to show. My guess is that he's been trying desperately to grow the thing for years, but with little success.

He had deep-set blue eyes and a calm, almost meager, manner about him as if he used to be a monk, or an insurance agent. His clothing was modest—jeans and a dark green sweater.

“We have a service at five-thirty, if you'd like to attend,” he said politely, looking me up and down. I guess he's trying to figure out if I'm in the *saved*, or *to-save* category.

I smiled, nodding to him as I walked by, and headed to the tank doors.

Then he followed me, asking, “Sir . . . is there something you would like to talk about? Did you have some questions?”

I turned, studied his face. He looked like a kind and compassionate man. The type of guy who can truly empathize with his congregation. Who really does care about his flock.

“ . . . can I help you get closer to God?” he continued, his words full of tolerance and humility. This guy probably did want to help me.

And I smiled at this nice preacher man, realizing that a sincere, faithful, devoted, unwavering man of God, he wouldn't stand a chance among the monsters that lurk around in my world. Guys like that, they'd never make it past the first spook.

He believes in good because he has learned it in books, and desperately hopes it exists in and around him. His faith is based on words on a page.

I believe in evil because I have seen it.

Ignorance is truly bliss.

“Maybe some other time,” I say as I head out into the bright sun.

This man of the church, I think he was scared of me. I think that he might have seen something that I was only just now realizing. For better or worse . . . I'm a kind of monster, too. The depths of my nature are only now being explored by Ricky, Ms. Josephine, and I.

A bit of humanity.

A splash of divinity.

Standing on the cusp of devastation.

CHAPTER 48

JACK'S APARTMENT.

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON . . .

Ricky and I are engaged in an old-fashioned, wild-west stare-down. Me on the corner of my bed—unwavering, unflinching. Him sitting in one of my wooden chairs in the living room—solid as a rock. Both of our arms are crossed, our eyes narrowed and unblinking.

What we're at a standstill about, that we've been arguing for the last 35 minutes over, is whether or not I can make another crossing to Deadside tonight.

His position—and it's backed by years of medical data and empirical evidence—is that my body can't take repeated flirts with cold hypothermic death. My body will give-up, he says, and no amount of normal saline and hot blankets will keep me from ending up on the autopsy table.

My position—backed mostly by my desire to help Kristen, and live out what just might be my destiny—is that I am getting better at this whole *thing*.

This entire *alive-dead-alive-again* process.

I'm practically an expert.

I tell him that I'm *accidentally* designed for this crossing-over stuff.

To which he wisely counters that, nobody can be *designed* to be repeatedly hit by trucks. Like Ms. Josephine said, “. . . death is death.” His points are mostly valid, while mine are mostly emotional and heartfelt.

And to be honest, I hate admitting that I can be so swayed by my attraction to a girl that I may or may not have been in love with. A woman who is at this moment in time . . . dead. It makes me feel weak and incapable, and I know that I must conquer this or I'll be useless to the living and the dead, both.

“What did Ms. Josephine say?” Ricky asked rhetorically. We both know she was adamant about not going so soon.

You know what she said. But, I countered, we can do it ourselves.

“Without her, you and I can't communicate,” he pointed out. “There aren't cell phones in the Land of Sorrows . . . unless there's something I've missed.”

I still have the necklace, I said. I can just empty it out and eat whatever the hell is in that pouch. And viola, I'm back!

“Jack,” he said frustrated, “you don't have any sense of time over there. What feels like a couple of minutes could be a few hours over here. And then you're finished. What are you going to do . . . use the green ball in the sky to make a Deadside Sundial?”

That's not a bad idea, I agreed.

“I'm fucking kidding, dude!”

And so here we are, arms crossed, staring each other down. I expect tumble weed to go rolling by at any moment. In my imagination old people are closing up small shoppes, the town grocery store, and the barbershop, while the blacksmith is shooin' people away from the main street where Ricky and I are locked into our showdown.

Who will blink first?

Who's going to budge?

I have to do this, Ricky, I say. It's bigger than just me. You've read the book. This is important. We're not the only considerations here.

And he's thinking.

The book must be legitimate, I say. Otherwise, they wouldn't have killed Rupert for it.

And he's considering.

And, I plead, I have to help this girl . . . Kristen. She needs me. And I need to know who she was to me, in order to find out who I was. I must discover who I am, at whatever cost. This is confusing, but it makes sense if you pick it apart. Do an autopsy on my reasoning and you'll see that we have to do this. And I can't do it alone.

And he's staring at me.

Finally, he says, “Okay . . . but this is it, for at least a week. No matter what you hear, or learn, or the enticing things they may try to lay on you, this is it until your body recovers. Your body is going to quit, and then there's nothing I, or anyone else can do to save you. No amount of experimental drugs or defibrillators will be able to bring you back.”

Fair enough, I say.

“I'm not kidding, Jack.”

I know.

“I'll narc you out with so much midazolam that you'll forget that last three weeks of your life, and this whole thing will be finished. For good.”

The thought of hitting the reset button, again. It's enough to make me shudder.

“This,” I say, “is the last time until you say I'm healthy enough to go. I promise.”

He looks at me, trying to judge whether I'm lying or not. And since I am a very poor liar, I think he believes me. Ricky waves a warning finger at me as he looks at his wrist watch.

“... alright, Jack. We'll do this. But the minute you feel yourself shaking and cold, you eat that fucking necklace.”

CHAPTER 49

JACK'S APARTMENT.

WEDNESDAY EVENING, 14 MINUTES UNTIL SUNSET . . .

I'm lying down in the center of my bed, and Ricky has already started an IV in my right arm, just below my wrist. He has an electric heating blanket sandwiched between two blankets, and I'm just sitting here, waiting to die. He's already placed the fast patches on my singed chest.

He's taken my vitals, and noticed that my body temperature didn't come to rest at 98.6, like it's supposed to. He's scribbling things down in his little notebook, and he says "Ninety-eight-point-nine," under his breath.

What? I asked.

He looks up. "You're body . . . I think . . . is trying to up-regulate your core body temperature in order to make-up for the repeated drops of core temperature over the last couple of days. Or you might just be getting some infection that I haven't been able to locate. We probably need to get you in for a full physical tomorrow to make sure we haven't fucked something important up."

Bang, bang, bang!

Somebody is pounding on the door.

He and I freeze. We both glance over at the bookshelf safe. I imagine we're both thinking that the thugs have located us. They'll want the book and probably won't be willing to negotiate. Maybe I should drown myself now, to avoid getting the crap kicked out of me. If I'm already dead, how bad could it really be?

Bang, bang, bang!

Ricky, he's looking around the room for something he can use to club whoever it is that has come to torture us. He's eying my lamp and I loud whisper, "No!" That's the only nice thing I have in my apartment.

He slinks his way, super-secret-CIA style, into my kitchen, and grabs the biggest knife he can find. It's neither dangerously sharp, nor dangerously long, but it gives him peace of mind.

He then signals me to throw the comforter over my head and hide. Like they won't check the human-shaped form in the middle of the bed.

We're so getting our asses kicked.

Bang, bang!

“ . . . I know you boys are in dere . . . ” Ms. Josephine's familiar voice says, instantly calming us. “ . . . and don't you tink dat I don't know what you's got planned.”

Well, we're probably not going to get tortured for the whereabouts of the *Book of Sighs*, but we still might end up getting our asses handed to us. She doesn't sound too happy.

Ricky relaxes from his *ambush-attack* stance, lying the knife down on the counter by the sink and heads to the door.

As Ms. Josephine comes in, both of our heads lower. For me, my eyes find some low place on the wall to shamefully stare.

“We were only going to—” Ricky tried.

Ms. Josephine held up her hand, “Shush! I know what you was doin'. Dat's why I'm 'ere.”

Ricky, his head down, he just kind of slides himself back to the bed, his feet leaving Ricky-trails in the carpet.

And then she made her way, her large purse nearly dragging her down, to the side of my bed. “You can't do dis wit'out no lifeline. I thought I taught you two better dan dis. We ain't jokin' around 'ere, boys.”

And now she's looking at me, and she's agitated. I try to explain to her how important this is, and she listens. But she's plenty angry at us.

“ . . . honesty is all we got. We must be truthful to each other, if nobody else. Da tings we're doin', dey's much more important dan we know. So from now on, we make every effort to be up front and honest.”

Not waiting for an answer, she looks over at the patio door, and then to Ricky, “ . . . what time is it, now? We ain't got no time.”

7:33 pm . . . Ricky said, as the shadows coming in my window were as long as they'll get before they swallow-up the remaining light.

She nodded, “Get 'im ready, den.” She looked down at me, “You got your necklace on you?”

Yes, ma'am.

She nods, “Do your ting, Ricky.”

The sun was falling. Hiding, really.

CHAPTER 50

JACK'S APARTMENT, DEADSIDE.

6 MINUTES LATER . . .

I drowned again. I swam again. I dove through the giant fissure in my chest, again. Somewhere back there, Ricky's probably injected me with dead fluid. I'm getting used to this dying.

Dying is the new adventure sport.

No longer is it a thrill to parachute. No, the real fun is when the chute doesn't open and you plow into the ground at 190 miles-an-hour. Everything after you smash into a thousand pieces, *that's* the thrill ride.

Out of my body, but in my apartment. This is kind of nostalgic, too, because I remember the first time the spooks were looking at the *Book of Sighs*. How everything was bent and warped and grey. And how scary it all was.

But now, after having seen this dark world several times, it wasn't so frightening. Having had the chance to explore it twice, it was nothing more than a colorless version of the world I know. Different—stretched and gnarled—but the same. The Deadside—or if you prefer, the Land of Sorrows—it's just a cooked and dried-out version of our world.

The Earth plane dehydrated.

Reality, frozen and unplugged.

I think I'm a few minutes early, but I notice the bluish haze outside my sliding glass door. Out in the parking lot, where cars and trucks and trash were . . . now it's just broken concrete, as if the entire thing had been hit with a giant hammer.

I see Ms. Josephine sitting next to my slowly freezing body, her blind eyes wondering what I'm looking at.

"Can you hear me?" I ask her.

" . . . yes, child . . . now find Kristen and ask your questions . . . "

Alright, I say as I walk to the bathroom thinking she may be there waiting for me. It does have a sentimental value for us. But as I turn the corner to the short hallway, I instantly see both Kristen and Rupert leaning against the back wall of the hallway.

"I'm here," I say. "What now?"

"Come with us," Kristen says. "We have to show you something."

I tell them that my time is limited, but they walk past me without a reply. As we're walking out of my apartment, leaving through the front door that is no longer attached, they take me toward the parking lot.

Without a word we continue toward the hospital, and I realize that what they want to show me, is probably not something I am anxious to actually see. I need answers, I tell them.

"You will have your answers very soon," Rupert says in his saucy English accent.

And we continue to walk.

We pass by the entrance to the ED, and carry on around the side of the hospital, still in the parking lot. We walk and walk, the crumbled concrete at our feet. The hidden green sun falling so far away that whatever heat it used to provide is all but gone.

As we're walking Kristen asks, "Did you dream last night?"

Yes, I say emphatically. I dreamed of us. Together. In a luxurious place with color and fruit and everything.

Without stopping to look at me, she asks, "And did that change the way you feel about this place?"

No, I say. It enhanced the way I feel about you.

"How do you feel about me?"

This is a little awkward with Rupert tagging along. It's also not the ideal setting for a discussion about past love and passion. But I continue anyway. Is there some place, I asked, that we can go and talk about this? It's important to me.

She stopped suddenly, "And you don't think it's important to me?"

Whoa . . . where did this come from? She's being particularly short and snappy with me. Are we having our first fight? Here . . . in the Land of Sorrows? What the hell kind of girls am I dating?

Nervously, Rupert's eyes were scanning the sky, looking for something that makes a guy like him fidgety and anxious.

Kristen is just peering at me, with a kind of fire in her vibrant eyes. "Are you in love with me?"

I shrug. I think so, I say. I mean, when I was having that dream you gave me, it felt like we shared something. I wanted to hold you. To feel your touch.

She nodded, turning, and as she began walking, I could see little mice running around in her head as she prepared her thoughts.

Rupert is still walking, rather quickly, and scanning the sky as he does so.

"If you love me," Kristen says without looking at me, ". . . you'll see what we have to show you. And listen to what we have to tell you. Then you can make your decision."

This kind of hurt me. I'm confessing something, that for me is quite difficult, and she's blowing the whole thing off. Like I just told her I thought the movie I saw last night was good.

I said to them, this isn't exactly the response I expected from you.

"What would you like me to say?" she asked as we rounded the side of the building, and headed to an abandoned part of the hospital that doesn't connect to the main hospital anymore.

I remembered Ricky telling me about the old Birthing Unit (Obstetrics). He said that there is no access from the hospital because places like this were haunted. Of course, back then he was just kidding around. We didn't know about the spooks, or Deadside, or the gatherers. We were so blissfully ignorant.

I guess, I say, I thought you still had some kinds of feelings for me. Like, maybe you felt the same way as I did? I thought that's why you were coming to see me. Because we might still share something.

We entered a rough hole in a wall that I know is not there in the Earth plane. And carefully, Rupert—still searching the edges of the horizon—he steps over a few broken cinder blocks and disappears into the darkness.

Kristen and I, we're the only two creatures out here . . . as far as I can see. She softens her expression and looks at me kindly, the way she did that first night she haunted me. "I care about you, John. I have for a long time. Longer than you can imagine. But all of this isn't about us. It's much larger, more grand than you can fathom. So if I seem cold and distant, it is because I want you to succeed. So that we can all be free."

Free from what? I ask.

She reaches out for my hand and leads me into the darkness.

Obstetrics—this is where the babies come out. Well, it used to be. Now it's an empty place, with only the plastic covered remnants left behind. Old birthing equipment that is no longer functional or useful. Rusting tables and sinks. A weathered, empty operating room with several small tables. Old tarnished turquoise tiles along the floor—most of them cracked.

Along the walls are fittings for oxygen and other things I can't even figure out. But I can only barely see any of these things in my mind, because it is pitch dark in here.

I'm just following Kristen's warm touch, trusting that she's not leading me to Hell.

"We're almost there," Rupert whispers from in front of us.

And I feel Kristen's small hand squeeze mine, as if she is now afraid of something. I know I should probably be worried, too. Anything that scares the dead, it should scare the ripe shit out of an Earth-planer like me.

“Don't make a sound,” she whispers as a tiny green glow appears near us. Rupert has somehow fashioned a torch out of bits of ripped nothing. And though it didn't seem to provide much heat, it started to glow brightly green, its flame tips dancing around.

I saw the edges of a tiled wall we were against. There was an opening, which I figured led to the operating room that Ricky had told me about. I could hear his words, “. . . all kinds of ghosts and shit. Crying babies. Stuff that'll give you nightmares forever . . .”

Rupert put his free hand over his mouth signaling me to keep my trap shut. I nodded, and the three of us turned the corner and entered the OR.

Mary mother of spooky shit!

There are spooks everywhere. Thousands of them. They are all over the floors, stacked up on the small tables, in the sinks. All over the place. And they're hunched down, like they're resting. Sleeping, maybe.

If their idea was to scare me . . . mission accomplished. I'm sufficiently horrified. It's like being in the lair of a dragon and all of the babies are sleeping.

But, apparently, I haven't seen anything, yet. Kristen looks at me with worried eyes, and then they lift towards the ceiling.

My jaw, it is probably sitting on the cold tile floor as my eyes try to make sense of what I see. Like a wasp nest, there are Gatherers clinging to the ceiling. I'm thinking bat cave in Africa. I'm thinking hornets' nest. I'm thinking . . . thousands of chest splitting monsters all over the god-damned place!

My chest is burning as I look at these sleeping creatures. There are probably—and this is just a rough estimate—a fucking shitload! Thousands of them. So many they could take all of us. Everybody in Dallas could be wiped out by these bastards in a matter of hours.

And if they have nests like this in every city, on every street corner. Or even if they're just in every hospital, where people come to die? We—as in *humans*—we're finished.

Paralyzed, I feel Kristen's small hands dragging me back out of the nest. We make our way back through the Birthing Unit near the hole in the wall.

Rupert extinguishes the torch and they both look at me, probably seeing if I'm going to pull a runner on them and freak out.

Man up, or back down.

Alright, I say . . . what is going on here?

CHAPTER 51

R.H.D. MEMORIAL, DEADSIDE.

OBSTETRICS . . .

"All of our souls are stuck here when we pass on," Kristen explained. "When we die, if these things select us, we are ripped from our bodies, and brought down to this awful place where we are told we must wait for judgment."

Who's judgment? I ask

"God's," Rupert answers quietly. "All of us, we were chosen, for reasons we can't comprehend. It is said that those of us with 'lukewarm' faith, we were delivered to this place to wait until the *End of Days*. And here, we must wait until he delivers us."

How can faith be *lukewarm*? I asked them. Is there some faith level you have to maintain?

"We don't know for certain, John," Rupert answered. "It's possible there is an evil force at work behind the scenes, controlling the shadow creatures."

"It is said," Kristen began, ". . . in scripture and legend, that one will come who can cross between both places. And that he will deliver us from this place, to the kingdom of heaven."

Well, I wondered, how many souls are here? How many people end up in this place, waiting for God to send his message of, whatever?

They both looked at each other, and Kristen said, "Everyone, John. All of them."

What? That doesn't make any sense. What do you mean *everybody*?

"Your parents. Their parents. All the way up. Your ancestors," Rupert said, "and their families, and their families before them. Every person you've ever known, or ever will know. They are all here, wandering aimlessly, just like us. Waiting for a savior. Waiting for the one who will bring us past the gates of this Land of Sorrows, and deliver us to the golden light of God's kingdom."

So, this is like Purgatory, or something?

"No," Kristen said. "This is another world, sitting just above the Earth plane. Purgatory is some other place."

I'm going to have to start taking notes.

"The distance between the Deadside and the Earth plane is the space of one electron," Rupert said, getting all *sciency* on me. "It is literally right on top of the Earth plane. That is why people sometimes claim to see ghosts and aberrations. Phantasms and the like, they are nothing more

than randomly colliding electrons. When they touch, like mixing fire and gunpowder, there is a brief flash of light. And what you see on the Earth plane is the diffused image of a Deadsider.”

“Which you think is a ghost,” Kristen added, as if I didn't get it at this point. They must really think I'm thick-headed.

So, I asked them, you need me to do this? To be the saint, or something like that?

“We need you to open the gate that will free us, all of us, from this place. You,” Kristen said, “. . . and only you can do it. You are the one they speak of in the prophecies. It is your destiny. And now you must make a choice.”

“Consider,” Rupert said carefully, “. . . you *will* end up here. If you do nothing, then you will be trapped here with us. However, if you live up to your destined fate . . . you will be our savior. You will be the man to free humanity from the confines of this cold hell.”

This is quite a bit to think about, I say. I'll need some time, obviously.

“Time,” Rupert said, “is a luxury we do not have much of.”

I have some questions, I said. First, how many more of those . . . nests are there? And as I'm saying this I'm pointing towards the OR—the spook and gatherer hive that will be the material for many nights of nightmares.

“Oh,” Kristen says, “that's nothing. Those aren't even the worst things down here. There are things that make the shadow creatures look cute and cuddly by comparison.”

I can't wait to see them.

Alright, I said, where is everybody else? The other souls? Shouldn't there be billions of people walking around aimlessly, getting the crap scared out of them like I am?

Rupert shook his head, “I'm afraid we don't know where everyone is. I'm new to all of this. I have heard rumors of mass migrations.”

Kristen didn't have much better of an answer. “I think,” she said looking around, “that most of the souls are hiding. In jungles. Outside of the cities. Most of the shadow creatures, they dwell in the cities, near large populations of humans on the Earth plane. They behave like insects in that way. Perhaps, disease is a better description.”

How many nests? I asked. How many more of these things are there? I need a number.

“Thousands,” Kristen said. She shrugged, “More than enough for everyone on the planet. But for reasons we don't understand, they sleep after dusk. Only for a couple of hours, though. Until the others come.”

Others? I look at both of them, what are the others?

Neither Rupert nor Kristen answer, but they look plenty frightened by the thought.

The things in the sky? I say. The birds?

“Those are not birds, John. Not at all like birds,” Rupert warned. “Stay under cover if they should come. Don't look, just run . . . as fast as you can. Don't stop running.”

“As if your life depended on it,” Kristen said.

Okay. Note to self—the birds are not your friend.

Very clearly, I say to them both, “Are you sure that I am the one who can do this? I mean, am I the only person who can save all of you?”

Kristen stepped closer to me, her breath warm on my face. Looking up at me with those hypnotic eyes of hers, she says, “You are the one that the prophecy spoke of thousands of years ago. Nobody else can save us, but you. It is your destiny, John. You are the only being who can free all of us from this horrible damnation.”

“I don't want to be selfish,” I say, “. . . but this is killing me. Each and every trip I take, I'm losing ground to the reaper. I don't know how many more of these trips I can make.”

Kristen, she places her small hands on my chest. Little warm hands, begging me through her warmth. “John, if you do this, you can get back all of your memories. Your old life, you can get it back. Every tiny bit of it. You will have everything that was taken from you.”

How, I asked, is that possible?

“Because,” she said softly, as quiet as a whisper, “. . . this will be your gift for saving all of us. The light of the open door will free your memories from their hidden place.”

I was starting to feel cold, again. The shivers, the ache, it was coming back, again. Ricky's heat blanket might have bought me a little time, but I'm pushing it, now. I just need more time. A few minutes, that's all.

“. . . we're gettin' close, Jack . . .” Ms. Josephine said carefully. “. . . be careful, somethin' is comin' . . .”

I have no idea what *somethin'* is, but I don't want to meet it.

I tell them that I need a week to think about this, before I can return.

“We don't have much time left, John. A week may be too late.” Rupert says. “After that, we may have lost our window.”

I can't come back so soon. I'll die and all of this will be useless, I explain.

They look at each other, considering. They nod.

“Alright,” Kristen says. “One week from tonight, at dusk. At your apartment.”

And then I heard something in the background. A high-pitched scream that seemed to echo all around us. It wasn't too loud, but you could tell it was approaching.

Both Rupert and Kristen seemed instantly alarmed, their eyes darting around.

“They're coming!” Rupert said, his lip almost quivering.

Aren't we safe in here?

"Are you kidding," he shot back, "... we're at one of their nests."

Great.

And then Kristen grabbed my hand and pulled me outside, through the broken wall, and we began running. I'm talking *Chariots of Fire* running. The *tigers escaped the zoo* running.

Rupert is right on our heels and thrusting his long arms and legs. This feels like some dream. But it wasn't. We were running, and from the way it seemed Kristen was nearly dragging me, this was one of those races where the loser gets eaten.

The screams got closer, the echoes louder and more shrill. The wind started to pick up, blowing intermittently back and forth, as if there was no discernible direction to it. As if the wind just flipped a coin every few seconds to see which direction it would blow.

There were large holes in the concrete and gaping wounds in the side of the hospital that were howling, almost crying. The sounds they made, these broken buildings and structures, it was like the whole entire city was crying out for mercy. Begging to be killed.

And the thought enters my mind that if we don't make it to my apartment, I may have to eat my necklace. I'm not sure how long that might take, but it will be better than whatever these things are about to do to us.

The sky above us, it was that shark-tank blue. And the monsters that had inherited this sky were hungry.

The screaming increased in volume and thickness. As we ran, I could feel the monsters ripping through the air behind us, above us, around us. My apartment was only 30 or 40 meters away.

From the right I saw somebody running in front of us. Some lonely soul that had been caught without a place to hide. Rupert yelled to him that the screamers were coming, but his words were lost in the dense wind between us.

As we ran, I noticed this lonely soul-stop, looking around frantically for somewhere to go. He was in the middle of the parking lot, spinning around without cover.

The thunder of wind and claws and teeth and hunger swelled behind us as we raced into my apartment. And as we dove to the floor of my apartment, I hear the man scream ... just for a moment, and then his cries were muffled and choked until there was nothing left. It was like he never existed.

Just a meal in the netherworld.

A snack for the monsters that own the sky.

On the floor of my apartment, Kristen beside me, I tried to catch my breath long enough to ask one last question. My hand on her cheek, her eyes holding mine, I asked, "Do you love me?"

Without words, I saw the tears start to form around the lower folds of her eyes. I saw her throat try to swallow. Her breath, it was short and difficult.

“Do . . . you . . . love . . . me?” I begged her. I had to know. Yes or no, I needed an answer. From *her* lips.

She leaned her head in, tears rolling down her cheeks, and with the softest touch she kissed me.

Even though I was freezing to death, my human body dying as we lay there on that cold dead floor in the Land of Sorrows, I had the only answer I needed.

“I’ll see you in a week,” I whispered. And without looking back, I turned to climb back into my body. I felt her clinging to my hand, not wanting to let go.

As I got onto my bed I felt her little hands grabbing at my waist, trying to hold my legs. Her small warm hands, they grasped onto my feet as I disappeared into me.

And then . . . we were gone.

CHAPTER 52

JACK'S APARTMENT.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON . . .

I woke-up to the smell of pepperoni and mushroom pizza. And not that frozen stuff either, this was *Dominoes*. My vision was blurry from being asleep, or being dead—still not positive which is more to blame.

My first word was, “Kristen!”

“Easy, buddy,” Ricky said as he blotted my head with a warm cloth. “You've been out for almost twenty hours. Your body had had enough last night when you crossed back. You looked at me, all lazy-eyed, and said, '*she loves me*'. And then you were out.”

“We kissed,” I coughed out. My throat was scratched and burning like never before. Like I'd been gargling razorblades.

Ricky looked at me with pity in his eyes, “I swear, Jack. If I find out you have been risking death for some morose wet dream, I'm going to be pissed.”

No, no, I explain to him. This was all the proof I needed. Whatever these people need done, it's my responsibility to do it. It's my fate. My destiny. I was mumbling at that point, and he just crossed his arms.

“You want some pizza, or you wanna keep talking about some dead chick you've got the hots for?”

I reached for a piece of pizza, opening my hand and fingers.

“You can get up and get it yourself,” Ricky said, walking off towards the kitchen nook. “Damn it, Jim! I'm a witch doctor, not a waiter!”

I looked at him like he's retarded.

“Dude . . . *Star Trek*? Dr. McCoy? Captain Kirk?”

I sit up, shrugging with my eyes. I don't know what he's talking about, but it sounds stupid.

“*Boston Legal*? The guy from the *Priceline* commercials . . . the *Negotiator*?” he tries.

Still nothing.

“You are really starved for good cinema,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “Completely lacking in the finer things. Let's eat.”

And so I made my way over to the kitchen nook and grabbed a warm slice of probably the best tasting thing in two dimensions. Well, a close second to the Quarter-pounder with cheese.

That first bite I took, it was the single most pleasing thing I have ever done. I can't describe it. I guess, since I haven't had sex—ever—I think it would be something comparable to that. And Ricky and I sat there, scarfing down pizza and telling crude jokes until two large pizzas were gone.

We washed it all down with cold milk—not, obviously, the ideal pizza companion, but pretty darn good anyway. It also made my throat not hurt so bad.

After we had finished drinking, and had long since run out of raunchy jokes—which I think Ricky gets in *Maxim* magazine—there was a moment of silent reflection between us. We had grown to be good friends, he and I, in a relatively short period of time.

We'd known each other for nearly my entire remembered life. So for me, it was like he was a brother. For him, I'm not sure, but maybe he thinks of me like a brother, too. We don't have to prove anything to each other. He's not judgmental about the ideas I have. In a way, I'm kind of like the friends he wishes he had in school. If it's true—all that stuff about him being a trust fund baby—then he probably had a hard time with meaningful relationships.

I don't know much about the world today, but what I read about in the magazines and see on television makes me think that having a bunch of money can be just as bad as having no money. Ricky says that rich problems are much easier to deal with than poor problems because you have *means*. You can be rich and unhappy, or poor and unhappy, but if you're in the rich group you can sit around your yacht, sipping expensive Champaign and eating the finest lobster and shrimp while you consider how unhappy you are.

It's that part of Ricky that I like. The logical, if brutal, side to his mind. He is very good at cutting through the shit and letting you know where he stands. Lots of times he says the things I wish I had the courage to say.

But I wonder what he gets out of our friendship, other than just a companion. So I asked him as we're sitting back, nursing our fat stomachs.

He looked at me, picking his words carefully, "Jack . . . I like you because there is no underbelly to your words. You don't have a hidden agenda. You say what you feel, without thinking about the way I might look at you. You have an honesty about you that makes me want to be a bit less of an asshole in my life."

Surely, I say, you had good friends in the past? Other honest people, I mean.

"Okay," he said, "maybe I'm not being clear enough." He leaned his head back as if the words he needed were on the alien landscape of my ceiling. "You give me humanity. You give me hope."

That's interesting. How so? I wonder.

"Around you there is this seemingly normal-guy aura. But it's more than that. I'm not sure if you even realize it. You have a kind of goodness in you. I don't know if you would call it

tolerance, or altruism, um . . . unselfishness?" He shrugged, his eyes coming back down to meet mine, "You have grace. I can't think of any other way to put it."

"They think I'm their savior, you know?" I said half-heartedly. "Can you believe that? Me, a savior?"

Ricky nodded slowly, "Yes, Jack. I can see that. All of this is just too much for it not to mean something. Me," he said tapping his thin white t-shirt with both hands, "I'm a man of science. I was. But now, seeing all of this, and knowing you . . . I'm not so sure. If there *is* something out there—and I'm convinced that you're not making all of this up—then we need to do whatever it takes to uncover it."

Even, I said, if it means risking our lives?

"*Especially* if it means risking our lives. That is what a journey is all about. This may be our time, Jack. We—you and I—a prodigy burn-out, and a mental patient, this is exactly the way that it should work. You and I have no reason to cook the books. Neither of us needs belief of a deity or faith to survive. Matter of fact, it's something that we don't even bother with. So who better than us to usher in a new era in thinking."

Hold on, I said. They just *think* I am their savior. I ain't done nuthin' yet.

"Do you love that girl, Kristen, you're always talking about?"

Yes, I say without hesitation.

"Do you have anything here worth losing her for?" he asked.

I can't come up with one single thing.

"Then you go back there, Jack, and you find out what you are destined to do."

Geez, Ricky, I say, you are more passionate about this than I am.

"Then maybe you need to wise-up a bit, Jack. You need to take a stand. Do you know what the Romans did at a funeral when somebody they loved had died?"

Gay orgies?

"I'm being serious here."

Sorry, I read about it in *National Geographic*.

"They didn't sit around crying about their loss, dressing in black, and mourning like we do these days. No, they asked one question of that person. They asked, *did he have passion?* Nothing else mattered to them. Only passion."

Ricky was right. I was still trying to sit on the sidelines. I had to get into the game, take a few hits.

I think, I say to him as I straighten up, that I have passion.

Ricky smiled, crossed his arms in front of him and said, "Alright then, what next?"

I briefly recounted what happened, what Kristen and Rupert had said, and our pending meeting a week from now. He thought that would give us enough time to get me back healthy enough for another crossing.

When I told him about the spook hive, he said, "See! I told you that place was haunted."

I also told him that they had offered me a chance at getting my memories back. But oddly, he didn't seem as enthusiastic about this as I thought he'd be. I asked him, "What's wrong?"

His arms still crossed, his eyes curious and speculative, he says, "I don't know, Jack. What if you don't like what you remember?"

What if I do, though? How can I rest knowing that the answers to my forgotten past are just a stone's throw away?

"I just think that's a two-edged sword. On the one hand, you may have a family and a beautiful life waiting for you. But then, where does that leave Kristen?"

What do you mean? I asked. But I knew what he was asking.

"Suppose you have a wonderful wife and kids. Then what about Kristen, are you willing to write her off?"

I don't know.

"And then there's that other razor's edge I was talking about. What if you find out you weren't the man you hoped? What if you were a drunk? Or a wife beater? Or a divorce lawyer? Or some janitor in an insane asylum?" He shuddered as he said the words.

You mean like a tard-farmer?

"You know what I'm getting at. What if the answer to the question isn't nice? It's possible that you might be better off as Jack Pagan, and not the man you once were."

I shook my head. No, I said, I have to know. That's what all of this is about. My quest is to save them, free their souls. And my reward is my memories. Those memories that are hidden away, echoing an eternity in a place I cannot hear, unless I succeed.

"Anyway," Ricky said, "... I just think you should give that some thought."

I looked at him, a slight grin forming on my face, "Would you really put tard-farmer on your list of horrible people?"

He took a breath, relaxed his shoulders, and yawned, "Yup. Probably near the top."

Yeah, that's my best friend.

CHAPTER 53

R.H.D. MEMORIAL, NEUROLOGY DEPARTMENT.

FRIDAY, MID-MORNING . . .

I'm in Dr. Monica Evan's office—which used to be Dr. Robert Smith's—and she's going over some notes she had written at our last meeting. She seems to be in a pleasant mood, wearing a pair of slacks and a flowery orange shirt. She could be on the way to a flea market, or to a carnival.

She's actually sitting on her desk, right now, her legs dangling over the sides like a child might. And I realized that her sense of self is so low-key and relaxed that it makes me want to talk to her more. Like she's some old chum of mine from school. Or a neighbor.

She definitely doesn't come across like a woman neurologist who has authored 11 books on subjects from *Stress & Anxiety*, to *Mental Health in African Jungle Cultures*.

“So, Jack,” she starts as she lays a manila folder down on her desk. She gives me this toothy, half-smile, like she's got some complicated thought on the tip of her tongue. “The last time we met, you and I were discussing love . . . and just how far somebody should be willing to go to keep that love alive.”

I'm on the couch again, just lying lazily back. I'm not too concerned that this might speak volumes about my personality, because I'm at such an incredibly unpredictable time in my life that nothing is really that important to hide. If she sees me as a lush, that's fine. If she—with her heightened sense of intuition and mental assessment capabilities—looks at me as a hopeless romantic with loss issues . . . whatever.

I'm not, nor have I really been, overly concerned with what people think about me. My main focus is to find out who *I* am, for *me*. I thought that the only way to figure this out was by trying to view myself from other peoples frames of reference. But that, as I have recently learned, is just as misleading as lying to yourself.

People tell me what they think I am, and it's never what I think about myself. So, apparently, there is no consensus about who exactly a person is. You see yourself as something, and everyone else has their own version of you. Maybe it's something close to your own personal image of yourself . . . but maybe it's a million miles off base.

“Love,” I say to her, “. . . that's a consistently sticky subject for me.”

“Oh,” Dr. Monica says as she scoots across the desk towards me, “that’s a barrage of imagery. Do go on . . .”

I lick the back side of my teeth—the side only dentists see—and I consider my words. “My friend Ricky and I, we were talking yesterday about this subject. And he told me about how in the times of the Romans the only important thing was if a person lived with passion. I think that maybe love is wrapped up in your passion. For all things.”

“Hmm,” she said as her feet kicked gently back and forth. “Passion is a wonderful word. Because it entails so much. It’s a word that gets thrown around in cheesy romance novels all the time. I should know,” she said with an embarrassed smile, “. . . I read about four a week.”

She leaned back, using her hands as supports behind her. “Look at some of the words that correspond with love. On the positive side there are enthusiasm, crush, involvement, interest, absorption, lust, thirst, and my favorite . . . *dedication*.”

Those sound so noble, I say. So grand.

“But then,” she says, her tone lowering, “you have all sorts of powerful aspects to passion, like rage, fit, anger, temper, convulsion, storm.”

Now I’m the one saying, hmm.

“. . . frenzy, wrath, fury, hot-blood, fire, vehemence . . . indignation, even.” She leans forward, “What do some of these words do to you? Do you relate? Are you perplexed?”

I laugh. No, no, I tell her. These words are exactly what I expected to hear. That’s the thing . . . a thousand facets to every diamond.

She nods, “That’s the way I look at it, too. One tiny word those wise Romans would say. The great censor. Everyone, good and evil, they can have passion. And, under those parameters, both *Superman* and his arch nemesis, *Lex Luthor*, can be passionate men. If we get past the morality questions—which I leave for God and Federal judges—what we’re left with is degrees of passion.”

I like this Dr. Monica. She’s really way too cool to be a shrink. But I’m not going to tell her this because I don’t want her pursuing her writing career instead of talking to me about my broken head.

She hopped down off of the desk and sat in the chair across from me and my squeaky couch. And she’s a small woman, so she looks like a child pretending. Albeit a very adept and intelligent child.

Dr. Monica stares at me for a moment and asks, “Jack . . . what is it that you want to ask me?”

I don’t know, I say. What do you mean? I’m just doing the counseling thing, right?

She cocks her head slightly to the side, giving me that *I know more than you* glare. “Jack?”

Can everybody see right through me? Gee-whiz, already. I sit up, so that we're eye to eye. I'm in a strange place right now, in my life, I tell her. I guess you could say I'm in a transitional phase.

She nods, collecting each and every one of my words as if they were valuable.

I continue, At this point in my five months of new life, I think a lot about what kind of person I might have been before my accident.

"Is it important for you to know about your life, before your injury?" she asked delicately.

"Yes," I say, "... I mean, I think so. I'm not sure." I'm as whimsical as a Democratic Senator. And I realize, as I'm talking to her, that I have no absolute position on my past. What I thought I wanted may not really be as wonderful and fulfilling as I used to believe.

So I explain this to her. I tell her how important it was, when I first awoke, to be able to get my prior memories back. And how I would have done anything to get them. It was such an obsession of mine that it evolved into a quest. All of my drive and ambition—my passion—has been dedicated to this aim. But while I pushed forward with this clearly unobtainable desire, I never left room for failure or defeat.

"When you say *defeat*, what do you mean? Are you referring to a sense of personal culpability, or just the feeling of *losing* after a hard-fought game?" She crossed her arms, and seemed to be very interested in my response.

Even though I realize that I am probably a patient to her, like the many others she must counsel, I feel alright airing these things out with her. It's like I'm just talking to myself. I suppose that's the mark of a good therapist.

"Let me make this simpler," I say. "I'm in a position where I could do something positive for other people, but for rather selfish reasons. Doesn't that take away from the deed itself?"

She laughs, "Rich people give money to charities all the time for perfectly selfish motivations. They want to be recognized in the media, or to raise their status as philanthropists among their peers. Anything other than to actually help humanity.

"But," she said as her face softened, "... that doesn't mean that people did not eventually benefit from their aid. If somebody eats, who might not have—it's worth it. If some child gets the medicine he needs, then the change has been positive. The motive of the giver doesn't diminish from the benefits of the gift itself. Do you see where I'm coming from?"

I nod slowly, my eyes searching the different colors of the office, not looking for anything in particular. I realize how much I enjoy color. And I start to miss Kristen. I have been trying to forget our kiss, but it's impossible. It's replaying over and over in my mind.

"Does this positive thing you are talking about, does it have to do with a woman?"

I look at her, my mouth half open in a suspicious smile. No point lying to her. Yes, I say. It does have to do with a woman.

“What's her name?”

Kristen.

Dr. Monica's face lights up, “My daughter's name is Kristen. How wonderful. Tell me about *your* Kristen.”

I try to use words that will make me look sensitive and worthy. The kinds of descriptions that might be used in one of her romance novels. But I'm not a brilliant novelist with hours on end to come up with the perfect description for my love.

“She's just . . .” I say, stumbling for words, “. . . she's the most beautiful thing I've ever come into contact with, and the closer I get to her, the more vanishing she becomes. Does that make sense?”

“Are you scared you'll lose her by inaction?”

I'm scared, I explain to her, that I'm going to lose her . . . period. I want to protect her from the terrifying world she lives in. I realized that I have been, at least at some point, cold and bitter to her, and I don't know if she's gone . . . or going.

“And you think you may have lost her, already.”

“I believe that I lost her a long time ago,” I say. And as the words are escaping my mouth I regret saying them. I sound like a nut-bag for sure.

But that Dr. Monica, she's a sly one. She doesn't change her posture, or question my words. She extends her hands and asks, “Do you trust me enough to indulge my experiment?”

Sure.

She flattened her hands and turned them palm-up. “Lay your hands on top of mine, and try and touch them as lightly as possible, as if only one tiny atom of your hands is in contact with mine, lighter than air.”

What the hell, I figured. This is not even in the top-ten list of goofy things I've done with shrinks. I placed my hands over hers, hovering, coming into contact only barely. So gently we could have almost slid a sheet of paper between our hands.

“Alright, now . . . close your eyes and I want you to describe what you feel.”

I close my eyes, take a breath and slowly exhale. Okay, I say, I'm feeling the warmth from your hands in my palms.

“What colors do you see?”

Yellow, I suppose. Maybe yellow and gold.

“And inside these colors what can you see? Look really close,” she says, her words soft and subtle. “You're looking three . . . looking two . . . looking one . . .”

And then there is this spark, this bright bolt of electricity.

“Just relax and tell me what you see inside the wonderful yellow and shimmering gold.”

All the sudden I get hit with a flash of Kristen in trouble. It scares me. All the yellow and gold has been tainted with blackness and drought, awful noises exploding around me.

“What did you see, Jack?” Dr. Monica says, obviously noticing something behind my eyes, or the reaction of my body.

And then another flash. And I see Rupert, and the others. They're running from something. Things are crashing all around them. Creatures with fiery eyes are chasing them.

“Jack, take it easy and breathe. Tell me what you're seeing.”

I open my eyes and my hands are shaking erratically. My teeth are chattering. My body is shivering and cold. My chest, where that giant gash was, it's burning as if the incision was fresh. As if those gatherers had just dug into me.

And I look at Dr. Monica without words to describe what's happening.

“Can you save her, Jack?”

I nod slowly, numbly. Yes.

“Then you go and save her. You do whatever it takes, but you save her.” She takes hold of my trembling hands and she lowers her voice to just above a whisper, “You are more than the sum of your parts. You have no idea how important you are. What you see in the mirror, and in your dreams, it isn't fair.”

This Dr. Monica seems to have faith in me, and I wonder how that can be. How can she be so sure that I am a good person? How can any of us be sure about ourselves? Or anyone else for that matter?

“You go and you save her. And you help anyone else you can along the way. Let your passion be your weapon. Because, Jack, if you don't do this, you will not only never forgive yourself, but you will die inside. Maybe only a tiny bit right now. But there will be other times, other opportunities lost.

“Doorways,” she said, “. . . once closed, are impossible to open.”

I asked, What if it means sacrificing my past?

“If you love Kristen, then it's not a sacrifice at all. It's fate. And to turn a blind eye on fate, either because you are scared, or negligent . . . that is the only sin in the universe. Because all you'll ever have left are the deafening echoes of regret.”

And then she stood up, lifting me by my arms. Slowly she brought my hands together so that they were touching, and she smiled. "We all need a savior, Jack. Be one."

CHAPTER 54

LAS COLINAS.

SATURDAY NIGHT . . .

Ricky told me about this cool part of Las Colinas that had these big bronze horse statues in the middle of this business park. Under the horses there is a small fountain, with all these little rivers that run along near the horses' feet and it looks like they're running across the water. Ricky says that he comes here when he wants to just sit back and think about life-n-shit.

So, we're reflecting. He's kneeling down near the edge of the glowing water, wiggling his fingers on the surface. People are walking around, looking at the statues, talking on cell phones, or courting young lovers. This is a pretty cool place.

I'm sitting about halfway up this stepped wall with water trickling around me. The architects who designed this, they must have taken a bunch of old pictures of the Wild West and then hit a bunch of acid. It's a mixture of new and old, techno and nostalgia, and it's just noisy enough to be comfortable. You can get lost in the ambiance of cascading water and people's laughing.

In my mind, I'm deciding how far I'm willing to go to save Kristen. I feel that I owe her. I believe that we shared something in our pasts, and I have to know what that was. I don't think that I'll learn anything so horrible about myself that I'll regret my vigilance in remembering. But I know that I will regret not helping Kristen, and Rupert, and the rest of the trapped souls—living out a life of constantly being hunted by hungry creatures in the darkness.

While Ricky and I are here, just relaxing, they are here too, separated by just the tiniest space. But they are scared, cold, and fighting for their lives. I'm ashamed at myself for not being more noble and courageous when I met them Wednesday. I'm not behaving in a savior-like fashion, that's for sure.

So basically, that's going on in my mind. That Dr. Monica, my new caseworker with a keen—if not suspicious—ability to understand what is going on in my head, she said I should do it. I should stop at nothing to save Kristen if I possibly could. She said, to not do so would basically begin a downward spin that would destroy my ability to be a decent person, and to ever have a meaningful life. This is what I took from our meeting, anyway.

If I love Kristen, she told me, I must do everything in my power to save her.

As I sit here watching Ricky make an interference pattern in the lighted water, I wonder if it would have been better if my brain was just boiling.

What about that degenerative brain disease?

Where is that malignant tumor I needed?

What ever happened to my decaying cortex?

The spooks. That's where it all started. Those shadow hopping little bastards of my sleep and dreary awakenings. And then the *Book of Sighs*. And then the gatherers. And then Kristen. Then Rupert. And then I'm looking at a room full of scared souls who think I'm some kind of savior to the world.

Maybe I am Saint John the Divine. Perhaps I did reincarnate, or whatever it is saints do when they die and reappear centuries later. But so what? If I don't have what it takes to be a hero, then what difference does it make?

But I do have something. I have love. I know I love Kristen, because it destroys me to think that I left her alone. Because I need to feel her touch more than I need to eat. I need her eyes looking at me more than I need to breathe. So this . . . this *is* passion.

Ricky comes up to me, wiping his hands off on his pants. "That chick is fucking with your head, man."

Which one? I ask him. The girl of my haunted travels, or my new caseworker—who, for reasons I can't explain, seems to know way more about me than she should?

He smiles, "Your life, even though it's been arguably short, seems very complicated."

Oh, I say, just your average everyday problems. No different from the next guy, really. I'm just ambling on by, trying to do the best I can. The day-to-day grind.

"You have a girlfriend who is stuck in some cold, starless hell with all sorts of shit trying to tear her to ribbons."

True.

" . . . she is the most wonderful woman in your life. But, unfortunately, she's in the precarious position of being clinically dead."

Also true.

"Your new shrink seems to be a psychic."

Disconcertingly true.

" . . . to add to the other psychic, Ms. Josephine, in your life. Who, by the way, can speak with the dead. And with you, when you yourself are dead."

Yes, yes.

"And in the last week you have been traipsing around a place referred to as the Land of Sorrows . . . as a half-dead saint."

Well, there is that.

“And the topping on this paranormal cake. The real zinger,” Ricky says with a laugh, “is that you lost all your memory five months ago, and think you can get it back by playing super-savior on the Deadside.”

When you put it like that, I said, it might seem odd. I mean, to the casual observer.

“Me and you, Jack, we need to get out more. Because, from the outside looking in, we're *stone-cold, shithouse rat in a rubber factory* crazy. Two loony tunes stuck in *Whackoville*, you and I.”

Amen to that.

He stood up, “Let's go get something to eat before the world falls apart.”

As I stood up I assured him, “But Ricky, we're going to *save* the world. Remember?”

“No,” he corrected me, “. . . we're going to save the dead.”

We headed across the street, down a flight of steps, to a river walk that reminded me of pictures of Venice, Italy I had seen in *National Geographic*. We joked about life and death, as if it was something sophomoric and we had now grown much too wise and enlightened to be bothered by it. But really, we were both scared shitless.

As we walked by the different restaurants, the canal beside us with little gondolas going back and forth, we had a feeling that innocent times like these were numbered.

We knew, Ricky and I, that there was a good chance that one or the both of us might not come out of all of this the same. We didn't say it, but there was that unspoken realization that I was going to freeze to death by the time all of this was over. He knew, as did I, that my body couldn't keep taking this repeated hypothermia. We had just chosen not to talk about it.

He knew I was going to do this, whatever it meant risking.

And I knew that he was with me, no matter how far I pushed it.

And the reason that both of us knew these unspoken things between us is that we believed, maybe for the first time in our lives, that we had a purpose. A destiny. And neither of us would let the other turn their backs on that.

Pursuing your destiny . . . that's a form of passion, too.

But like Dr. Monica said, passion isn't always positive.

CHAPTER 55

FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST, NORTH DALLAS.

SUNDAY MORNING . . .

It was getting closer to Wednesday, and I had some things on my mind. I was trying to get every perspective I could. Ricky and Dr. Monica, they both were of the mind that I must pursue my fated task, at all costs. Me, I think that whatever I have to do to help Kristen and Rupert and the others, it's probably the only chance I'll ever get to do something truly great in my life. But there was still one perspective I hadn't entertained.

I didn't tell Ricky that I was going. I just got up early Sunday morning and headed out of my apartment. Eerily enough I walked, almost to the step, the exact same path around the hospital as I had with Kristen and Rupert—over *there*.

This time the parking lot wasn't cracked and broken. Instead it was full of cars of different makes and models, all of them with a small fortune in gas sitting inside of them. When I look at cars now, I see giant machines for taking your money. Even Ricky's *Land Rover*, it sucks down gas at an alarming rate. You have to be rich twice to have a truck like that.

I walk around the side of the hospital, the windows that were dark and broken are clean and shiny. The wall in the abandoned Obstetrics Department, there's no hole in it. I have this sneaking suspicion that I don't want to peek in through the boarded-up windows though. I fear that I will see the spook hive and pull a complete freak-out.

My security necklace—the one Ms. Josephine gave me—it's sitting underneath my shirt. At this point, if I had a choice between carrying a gun, or wearing this necklace . . . I'd chose the necklace hands down.

The marks on my skin, they've faded considerably, and I'm not sure how much they're still glowing. But I haven't seen spooks in a couple days. It's almost like all of that might just be some fantasy that I have unknowingly walked away from. Maybe the me of last week has been replaced by a more normal, much more rational and grounded me of now.

But I still miss Kristen like I lost one of my arms. I see her when my eyes are closed. I see her every time I walk through my apartment . . . especially near my bed, where we kissed. And that is a strange swap. When she was first haunting me, I was scared out of my skin to see her. Now that I've grown to care for her, I'd give anything for her to come back . . . and she won't.

But I'm trying not to think about her, if only just for a couple of hours. And I decided I'd try my hand at church.

I made my way down Webbs Chapel road, to the corner of Valley View, and crossed the street. Some guy honked at me from a *Honda Accord*, flipped me off, and said something about shoving my feet up my ass if I didn't get out of his way.

And, like, I know that he had to be seeing the church silhouetting me as he yelled these things. People in Dallas are mean to pedestrians. Even right in front of God's house. I wonder if religion is dead?

I made a mental note that if I ever saw him on the other side, I would make sure some spooks tormented him like it was their only mission in life.

I finally got to the church parking lot, and it was absolutely full. Not a parking space in sight. I made my way to the red brick walkway and followed the stream of church-looking people inside.

I crossed through the large tank doors, which were propped open for ease of entry. I'm accidentally eaves-dropping on the people walking ahead of me and they're talking about a food drive they are going to participate in. They look similar, all of them—two attractive parents, with two DNA matched twins. They look like they were designed for this very moment.

This perfect family, they do not say one selfish thing for the three minutes I'm walking behind them, and this makes me feel as though a buzzer is probably going to go off when I sit down in the church. Like, somehow they'll know that I eat pizza and study voodoo, and kiss dead people.

I guess, though I'm not a man of faith or anything close to it, I'm still as scared of God as the next guy. All of this stuff that's been happening to me has changed the way I look at religion. I don't know which particular god might be in charge of things, but I'm pretty sure it's one of them. I mean, somebody has to be calling the shots for there to even be a *Deadside*. All those souls, waiting for the End of Days, that seems to point to the notion of a war between good and evil.

Who's on which side, I don't know.

But I'm going to keep my eyes peeled.

As we get into the lobby area, I notice the young preacher guy from the other day. He has on a nice blue suit, with a name tag that says, 'hello, I'm Edward'.

As the *X-Files* family and I make our way past him, his eyes light up, "It's you!"

It is me, I say politely. Who else were you expecting?

"This is great," Edward says as he pulls me away from the automatons. "I had this gut feeling that you would return to us. That's the grace of God," he says, his eyes looking magically past us as if there was something glimmering on the wall.

I looked over there to make sure there wasn't. This guy was, in a word, pious. He smiles at everyone, and people seemed to be infected by him. Maybe he was like that guy seeded into the crowds at infomercials to clap all the time, and laugh at everything the host says. That's just me being cynical, I suppose. I have a tendency to assume people are disingenuous, and I should really stop doing that.

Todd Steele says, "Suspect the worst, and you'll never be surprised by a bullet." But I don't think I'm going to get shot at during church—although, he did have an attempt on his life in his latest novel, *Chemical Sundown*. It's about this group of eco-terrorists . . . oh, never mind.

This nice young, morally upright, devout man of God, he says, "Sit anywhere you'd like and I would love to speak with you later on, after the service. We try to get to know each and every one of our congregation. We're a big family, here."

Okay . . . Edward, I said. I'm going to find a seat and see what God has to tell me.

He shook my hand again, almost pulling my shoulder out of socket, and I headed into the bowels of the church. I found a seat off to the center, right, a few places from the isle. It's been a long time since I've been around this many people in such close proximity, and I'm feeling a bit claustrophobic. Not that I think anything untoward is going to happen, I just feel cramped-in.

A few minutes go by, people get seated, and some young kids, probably in their early teens, they walk down the isles passing out little pamphlets. I take one and pass the pile to my left. On it is the name of today's service, as well as the words to the different songs we will be singing.

Correction . . . songs they will be singing. I absolutely don't sing. Not now. Not ever. Not for all the tea in China. I'm one of those rare people who knows I sound bad, even in the shower. My voice, it makes the dead cringe. Glass breaks even if I whistle. If I hum, even so much as a few notes to a popular song, somewhere an Angel is getting set on fire. It's that bad.

I read the title of today's sermon,

'Dangers of the Desire to Succeed!'

Everything gets quiet, and Edward comes walking down the isle. As he's walking he smiles here, nods there. Every now and again he'll mouth a *hi* or a *hello*. A wink or two. People like this guy. He has a nice candor about him. Polite. Respectful.

He seems pleasant enough, but something irks me about him. I can't put my finger on it, but I'm bothered by something. Maybe I'm just overly skeptical of people.

He goes to an oak podium and taps a microphone a few times, smiling to the congregation. There's probably seven or eight hundred of us in here. All eyes on him. I hear a whisper here and there. A random cough. A child being muffled by upwardly-mobile parents.

Edward leans in with the softest, most kind voice, "Praise the Lord."

And everyone says it back to him. It's almost shocking how many people just said the same exact words. It even startled me a bit.

"... our God, he is a good and kind God. So generous to us that we can all be here, together, on a wonderful day like today. All of us, a family of friends." He nodded, "... here, in this house," he slowly raised his arms upwards, "... there are no strangers. Right now ... right here ... we are all brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons ..."

I look around and everybody's eyes have all but glossed over. I know this is going to earn me a hot seat in Hell, but these people, they seem like zombies to me. Like their souls have been possessed. I feel really awkward. The nice clothes—relatively speaking—that I'm wearing, they suddenly feel hot and itchy.

I have this creeping feeling that I don't belong here. That I am tainting this group with my poison. I listen to him begin his sermon and talk about the dangers of wanting to be *too* successful. Of thinking that you must get the better job, or the nicer house, or send your children to a more prestigious university.

He's telling these people, in churchspeak ... to lower their ambitions. He says that evil lurks in our aspirations. He's selling mediocre, and they're gobbling it up. He's telling them to be happy with what they have—which is a good message—but to not strive too hard to have more—which is not. I understand not wanting to crush people's dreams. But, not wanting them to have dreams, that's awful.

This Edward, in his nice way, he's corrupting these people in the other direction. He's sucking their ambitions out and replacing them with a bleak reality. I think, especially for those younger people in the audience, that's a horrible message.

It's uncomfortable, and I am regretting making this trip. I don't know what I expected, but this isn't it. Maybe I'm not taking the message the way he's meaning it. Perhaps I am not letting him make his points, and jumping to conclusions, or being too judgmental?

"Satan," Edward says, making his voice sinister and menacing, "... he's lurking under the hood of that new car. He's racing around in the attic of that expensive house. He wants you to start putting material possession over the love you have for your fellow man ... and for yourself."

I squint at Edward, trying to see if there are any spooks tying his shoe laces together in knots. I look around for gatherers in the corners. But not here, not in this place. While the House of God might not always be open—like when they're cleaning—they are free of shadow creatures.

I sit through another 30 minutes of Edward's sermon, and I'll have to give it to him, he's a good orator. It's just that, everything he has talked about, you have to take his word on it. There's no

proof, here. There's no pictures of God, or maps to Heaven or Hell. Everything he's telling you, it's from a book that was written by the same people that wrote my book.

Half of me wants to believe that it could all be glory and shimmering loveliness, but the other half—that has walked among the souls trapped right on top of us—that part of me wants to scream at the top of my lungs that nobody is going to Heaven!

That nobody has ever *gone* to Heaven.

That we're all going to be ripped out of our bodies and left in this cold Land of Sorrows until the End of Days . . . whenever that may be. But, of course, I don't say anything. I just wait until it's over, and try to make my way out as inconspicuously as possible while people are flowing back towards the parking lot.

I cruise up the isle, out into the lobby, seeing the sunlight up ahead. I can see the finish line. But that Edward, he's a crafty one indeed. He cuts me off on my way out the tank doors.

"Hey there, friend," Edward says as people pat him on the back and hit him with a staccato of, '*thank yous*', and, '*great sermons*'.

I considered head butting him, but decided that would not be the appropriate response to his sermon on mediocrity. Ricky always tells me that a good head butt will get you out of almost anything—including first dates. I'm not sure what Ricky's talking about half the time, but I file it away as information for later use.

Edward has perfect teeth. He says, "What did you think about today's service?"

It was, uh, very good. Enlightening. Informative, I say.

His eyebrows ruffle a bit, his face almost sad, "You didn't like it, did you?"

I don't want to be mean to Edward, especially if he's a sales rep for the supreme being in the universe. But I don't want to lie to him either, because that's probably just as bad. I look at him, and I can see that he is truly concerned with my thoughts. Why, I don't know . . . but he seems interested in my reaction.

"Look," I say to him, ". . . I don't know anything about religion. I'm just some guy talking, right. I'm sure a lot of people really enjoyed your message."

"But you didn't agree with it?" he said, nodding as if I'd already answered.

I look at him and say, "I don't think that you should tell a bunch of struggling families that average is good enough. Or that having a run-of-the-mill or garden-variety life is okay. Because it isn't. Telling people that hang on your every word that ordinariness and adequateness are qualities they should be proud of, that's more than a disservice . . . it's dangerous."

"Dangerous? How so?" Edward asked, now more curious about my position.

And really, I am not trying to get into a semantic argument with a preacher. These guys go to school, and learn all sorts of rebuttals—like car salesman—and I know he'll just slaughter me in a battle of wits. But he asked, so I'm going to answer.

I say, "You want people to have a better life, then you need to prepare them for the afterlife. Preach the glory of God, or whatever is your main message. Tell people to be devout in their beliefs. Something like that. But don't tell people to settle for *alright*. Because on the other side, that will end them up in a place you don't want to imagine, padre."

"You are speaking about going to Hell?"

No, Edward, I say. I'm talking about somewhere much worse than the bible's version of hell. A place of cold, violent, pain and suffering. A place where we'll all end up when it's over.

And then I just stop, knowing the futility in my point of view. "Oh," I tell him, "what's the difference? You have your way. If it makes your life better, and theirs, I guess that's fine. To each his own. I guess if they keep coming back . . ." And I walk on past him.

I realize that I'm not really arguing with him, anymore. I'm arguing with myself. I'm the one who needs a reality check. Edward, he's just helping a bunch of people who need his words to make it. Because life is basically cruel and unforgiving.

He calls out from behind me, "I'm sorry if you did not receive my—"

I spin on my heel, "It's not you, Edward. You're a good man. It's me. I'm the virus. "But," I say, just for the record, " . . . I'd start telling these people to leave a light on."

And I turn and go before the spooks, that are sitting just outside this old lady's *Suburban*, see me.

I have a physical tomorrow, and after that I think I need to speak with Ms. Josephine.

On my way back to my apartment I see that same *Honda Accord*—with the guy that flipped me off earlier—and it's crashed into a ditch beside the road. Paramedics are slowly pulling him out of the car, trying to figure out if he had a heart attack and then crashed, or the other way around. I hope I didn't cause that.

I sense that I haven't got much time left.

CHAPTER 56

R.H.D. MEMORIAL.

PHYSICAL EXAM, MONDAY MORNING . . .

In the last two hours I have had many invasive procedures performed on me. I've had needles jabbed into my arms. Lights shined in my eyes. Probes in my ears. And fingers up my . . . never mind. Point is, I feel medically violated.

I picture myself on an episode of *CSI*, curled-up in the fetal position, explaining how the bad man touched me.

Right at this very moment, I am naked under a tissue paper thin hospital gown with the same crappy little designs you'd find on cheap kitchen ware—something between *yodas* and bacterium. This gown, it ties impossibly in the back, where no human can reach, so there's more than enough space for anyone to stare at my nakedness.

I'm sitting on butcher paper waiting for another doctor to ask me a battery of questions that I can't possibly answer. And in walks a doctor with enough white hair to be in a George Washington look-alike contest.

"Hello, there. Let's see," he glances down at his clipboard. "Gonna ask you a few questions. Do you have a history of allergic reactions to . . . prescription medicines?"

I don't know.

He nods and skips to the next question. "Have you ever been treated for a sexually transmitted disease?"

I sure hope so . . . but I don't know.

"History of heart complications?"

Don't remember.

"What *do* you remember about your medical history?" he says, looking up from the clipboard.

Nothing, I told him. I'm barely five-months old.

"Oh," he said, a look of recognition in his eyes, ". . . you're *that* guy, with the localized bilateral lesions of the limbic system, notably in the hippocampus and medial side of the temporal lobe . . ."

Huh?

"The amnesia guy. You're the guy who lost all his marbles . . . so to speak."

Yeah. That's me. Funny amnesia guy.

“Have you been experiencing any thoughts about harming yourself or others, *or* of committing suicide?”

Is that a trick question?

“What?” he said with more than a hint of alarm on his face.

Just kidding. No. No thoughts of hurting myself, or taking my own life.

“Okay, then,” the doctor says as he gets to mark one box out of a hundred on his printed checklist. “Now we're getting somewhere.”

He tells me they're going to run an ECG (electrocardiogram) to check out my heart. An EEG (electroencephalogram) to look in my brain for signs of epilepsy, brain tumors, and sleep disorders. MRI (Magnetic resonance image) to look for any abnormalities of my spine, any signs of early-stage cancer, or cerebral edema—which is swelling in my brain.

“None of these will tell us if you're suffering from psychiatric illness,” he said, then shrugged. “So we'll let your friends in Neurology determine that.” And the way he says it, I can tell he's skeptical of the Neurology Department. They're probably like the dentists of the medical field, looked down upon like low-level scourge by the other doctors.

Well, that's a vote of confidence. I tell him that all of those tests sound terribly expensive. And then he leans forward, putting his hand near his face like he's going to tell me a little secret.

“We're billing the government for all your medical examinations . . .”

And I'm thinking that there is probably a Russian boxcar full of money that just gets *lost* in the hospital's bureaucratic shuffle.

So, I say to him, I guess it's best to test for everything possible . . . on earth.

“You betcha!”

“Why,” I ask, “do we need all of those fancy tests, though?” And really, I'm just asking for the fun of it. See, each doctor has a different programmed response to this question, and I like to hear them talk. When smart people explain things to me it makes me feel like I'm a tiny percent more intelligent. And at the pace we're going, I should be performing surgery in the next six months.

“These tests give us a picture of your body's overall level of health and immune efficiency. When we have all of the results we will have a profound understanding of how you have managed to get past your unfortunate trauma so amazingly. As well as your body's coping mechanisms.”

Nice one. I'm going to remember that.

“By the way,” he adds, “. . . do you have any hallucinations?”

No, sir, I answer proudly. All the monsters I see are real.

That elicits the condescending, patronizing doctor's laugh. And with each smileless *ha, ha, ha* you can almost see the words *moron, moron, moron* coming out of his mouth.

“Do bright lights give you headaches, or make you feel nauseous?”

No. *What makes me sick are the faceless creatures that sit on peoples' chests, carving out their souls.*

“Excuse me?”

No. No headaches.

Anyway, this goes on for a couple of hours. Doctors come, doctors go. At one point, a cute nurse named, Becky, comments on my higher than normal body temperature. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, with honey-brown eyes. She says that I might be, “. . . hot-blooded,” and then she giggles.

I'm not sure if she's hitting on me, humoring the retard, or playing with the circus freak, but I like it. As she's checking me, she touches me just a little longer than normal. She's examining my knees with that small hammer, and then playing with my feet to check for feeling and *sensitivity*.

Uh, yeah, there's plenty of that.

And as she's doing this she looks up at me, “You have a kind face.”

Thank you.

“But, you look tired. Really tired,” she adds as she runs a ball point pen along the bottom of my foot.

That tired look, I say, it's from being so kind all the time.

She giggles again and stands up, circling the exam table I'm still stuck to. She's wearing the thinnest green scrubs, and her body . . . it's exquisitely proportioned.

This nurse Becky, she smells wonderful—like all kinds of expensive flowers and other girly spices that I'll never understand. And as she makes her way to my side, she puts her hands on my shoulder, looking at the scar on my head. Being naked, with this tiny gown thing on, I am hoping that it's cold enough in this examination room to keep me from showing signs of excitement.

Nurse Becky, I can feel her warm breath on my neck. And she's standing on her tippy-toes saying, “And you don't remember anything at all?”

Well, there goes that chubby. The blood that was gathering below my waist is now pumping upward towards my brain as I realize she, too, was just interested in the tragedy that is *amnesia guy*. I think the nurses and orderlies have a running bet that I'm faking the whole thing. Ricky's gonna make a fortune.

I kind of feel like the guy in the booth at a circus. Like the *Wolfman*. Or maybe that chick with gills—the mermaid. Come see Jack, the guy with four arms and lizard scales. Good thing they don't know what's really going on with me. Then I'd really be a freak show.

So, the hours drag on. About three more nurses come in to study this, or scrape off a piece of that. And finally, a young doctor from the Neurology Department comes in to see me. I've only seen him a few times, but he had that familiar passing-doctor look about him. Like one of the extras on *ER*.

"Hey there, Jack. I'm Dr. Salter. We've done every test on the planet, and you can put your clothes back on and go."

When do you think I will get the results?

He looks up, like the answers are written on the ceiling, "Well, we should get the blood results tomorrow sometime. As far as the MRI, that will take a few days, to get the images processed and whatnot. The EEG, the ECG, we'll study those up at our department, but I didn't see anything I was too worried about. You look tired, though."

It's from being so kind all the time.

"Huh?"

Never mind.

"I noticed," he said as he chewed on the end of an ink pen, "that your core temperature is running a fraction high. That's usually the early sign of an infection, or sickness. So pay attention to how you're feeling. Don't sleep with the air-conditioning too high. And eat your vegetables."

But, other than that . . . I'm healthy?

"You're doing really good, Jack." Then he crossed his arms, "Your head trauma, it was obviously horrible, but some very positive things have come out of it."

How so?

"Well, you were just moments from being dead. Actually, you were dead, on and off several times, for a period of just over an hour. Sixty-seven minutes to be exact . . ."

67 minutes? That's the same amount of time Ricky told me I had before I froze to death.

" . . . it was definitely a tug-of-war to keep you from the abyss. Alive, dead, alive, dead. But we tried some experimental new procedures, figuring we'd lost you . . . and here you are, alive and well. It's amazing. Miraculous, really."

Yeah, I say, but I don't remember anything.

"That's one way to look at it."

I raised my eyebrows at him, waiting for the other way I should be looking at my complete long-term memory loss. So optimistic, these doctors.

"You get to do something that almost every person on this planet would love to do . . . you get to start over. To begin again. You have a new life, and you can do anything with it you want. You can achieve great things, if you have the desire to."

“Could I become an astronaut?” I ask. Of course I'm joking, but he doesn't get it.

“Well,” he says, his teeth together as his bottom lip recedes a bit, “. . . probably not an astronaut. But there are a million other things just as noble and lofty.”

“These procedures you did to keep me alive,” I ask to him carefully, “. . . would they affect the way I see the world?”

He explains to me, in a mixture of doctor-speak and layman's terms, that the different emergency procedures that were done, were designed to be utilized in the most dire of circumstances. He mentions something about stem-cells—which I've been reading about in *Popular Science* and *Wired*—as well as some electrical neuron stimulation techniques that I have never heard of, and imagine that I never will, again.

“. . . if everything continues as we think it will,” he surmised, “you'll be an example for the emergency treatment of near-fatal head and cerebral trauma. You could think of yourself as a pioneer, Jack. You might accidentally usher in a new era in our understanding of the brain.”

Like a saint? I say.

He smiles, “Not a bad way to look at it, at all.”

If it looks like a saint, and acts like a saint, and talks like a saint . . . it just might be.

I put on my clothes and slip on my shoes before people with needles come back needing more of my insides.

CHAPTER 57

I-75, SOUTH.

TUESDAY AFTERNOON . . .

Ricky and I are dodging cars as we make our way to Deep Ellum to visit with Ms. Josephine. I had spoken to everyone else—Dr. Monica, preacher Edward, a few doctors, and Ricky. And even though they didn't all have the complete story, they got a good enough sense of where I was at in my life to nudge me in one direction or another.

All of them had differing degrees of the same concept . . . follow your heart, but be careful. The doctors and preacher Edward, they said to err on the side of caution. Ricky and Dr. Monica, they said to head into the fray with reckless abandon. So, I figured I needed some perspective from the only resident expert we had on the world of darkness and shadows.

“Think Ms. Josephine has any kids?” Ricky says as he weaves in and out between the far left and the center lanes of traffic. Other drivers are squinting, white-knuckled, noticeably flinching as we pass.

“I've never seen any pictures of her family at the shop,” I tell him. “But then, maybe they're all grown up, with jobs and stuff.” I equate being an adult to holding consistent employment. Ricky tells me that is an antiquated view of the social paradigm. I wonder what he reads.

“Maybe they've passed away, and she doesn't want to drudge-up bad memories?”

But she talks to the dead, like . . . all the time.

Ricky just shrugs to this as he heads for the exit. I see a small German automobile scramble for safety as we come across the lanes towards the exit ramp. My feet are pressing against the floor mats as if there might be a passenger's side brake buried underneath.

“Fucking imports!” he says as we slow ourselves for the quickly approaching merger with slower vehicles. Insurance companies probably play Russian roulette to see who gets stuck with Ricky's policy.

Aren't *Land Rovers* considered imports, too? I ask.

“This is different.”

How so?

He sneers at me as he forces his way into the river of creeping traffic, “Because it's a *Land Rover*. It's imported by *Rolls Royce* . . . that means luxury, Jack. Luxury!”

I ask him how many of those cold and allergy pills he's taken today and his eyes narrow at me. I decide that now is not a good time to ask about such silly things.

A few red lights later, we are pulling to a stop in front of Ms. Josephine's Shop. Same old spooky little place as ever. We get out, and make our way to the door. Just before we enter, I turn around and take a look at the buildings, in their Earthy non-melted and unbent shapes. All of the subtle colors that I take for granted, they look absolutely brilliant. My own personal photograph of this world.

The sun, it's not a murky green ball, but a bright orange orb, sitting behind several grey clouds that break-up it's powerful beams into strings of light that shine through the interspersed white clouds like bright white strings from the sky.

“What are you looking at?”

I shrug, “All the stuff that we see all the time, but that the Deadsiders would trade their lives for.”

“Dude,” he says, “. . . don't wig out on me, now. We're close to greatness, here.”

I'm not losing my shit, I tell him. I just think we should stop and smell the proverbial roses every now and then.

He looks at me suspiciously as he removes the key from the ignition, “You've been watching that goddamn *Lifetime Channel*, haven't you?”

No! I say, pushing the door open.

I'm lying, of course.

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