

# **See Jack Die**

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

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

## CHAPTER 58

### *MS. JOSEPHINE'S SHOP.*

#### *17 SECONDS LATER . . .*

Ms. Josephine already had three chairs set out around the small wooden table of smoking things. She always seems to know what we're up to. No matter how clever and devious we think we are, she's one step ahead of us.

"ello, boys," she says politely, bringing us small cups of something that might or might not be tea.

"Is this going to make me infertile?" Ricky jokes.

"opefully," Ms. Josephine answers as we head back to our rickety thatched seats.

We sit, and for a couple of seconds nobody says anything. I sip at the tea-like substance, wondering what she'll say. She looks across the table at both of us and laughs to herself.

"What kind of mess are we?" And then she smiles. A big, grand, full-on smile. And I realize that I've never actually seen this side of her. She looks so pleasant and nice that I have a hard time connecting this glowing face with the woman who communes with the dead and chops up live animals to make skin paint.

Ms. Josephine, I start, I want to know where you stand on all of this.

"But it ain't my decision, child. Whatever you decide to do, I'll be on your side."

I understand, I tell her. And that is a comfort. But I want to know how *you* feel about all of this. I mean, this is really your field of expertise.

She put her elbows up on the table, her chin sinking into her hands as she contemplated. "I'm worried about all of dis. I'm concerned dat we don't 'ave all of da facts."

This is not what I expected to hear her say. Definitely not what I wanted to hear from her.

"We have the book, we've read it cover-to-cover," Ricky said. "Well, he has."

She nodded, "I understand dat. But, to me, it feels like somethin' is missin'. I can't put my finger on it. I've been listenin' to the other side da last couple days . . . and da voices is quiet, right now. And dey ain't never been quiet before. Dat bothers me."

Yeah, me too. What would put a gag order on the Deadsiders?

" . . . but den," she says, her eyes lighting up, her face softening, " . . . I know you love dis girl, Kristen."

I feel like I have to save her . . . to save all of them. I think this is what I am supposed to do with my life. I try explaining this to them, but I'm sure I butchered it along the way.

"Well, den," Ms. Josephine says, "we just need to be sure we've done everythin' possible to ensure you make a safe trip." She ponders something and then asks me, "Are you absolutely sure dat you 'aven't missed nothin' in dat *Book of Sighs*? Cause, dat's really all we got to go on."

I've read every translated page. I guess we could go back and read it all again. Just to be safe.

"Do dat," she said, "cause tomorrow will be 'ere before you know it. And once you go, dere ain't no turnin' back."

"Do you think this is going to be dangerous?" Ricky asked.

" . . . boys," she said, "every time you step across da plane between da livin' and da dead, you take a chance on never returnin'. Each voyage you make could be for eternity. So dat is somethin' you got to take into consideration when makin' a decision like dis. Eternity."

I'm going to tell them I'll help. I'll do whatever I can. If this is my calling—and I think that it is—then I don't really have a choice in the matter.

" . . . no," Ms. Josephine said, " . . . I don't suppose you do. None of us do."

Then she stood up, and stretched her arms, yawning, "Go on 'ome, boys. Get your rest. Tomorrow is goin' be a big day."

## CHAPTER 59

*JACK'S APARTMENT.*

*WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON . . .*

Ricky says I should carb-load, so we're eating a mixture of frozen pizza, iced milk, and *Taco Bell*—which they may actually have in Deadside. The idea is that my body needs all kinds of things it can burn, while I'm in the process of freezing to death. And sugar—in the form of simple or complex carbohydrates—is the best source for this.

So, we're approaching my death from a nutritionally healthy angle. Ricky spooks me by saying that our hair still grows even after we're dead. Something to do with the hair follicles not knowing the rest of the body is dead while the moisture shrinks your skin.

They debunked that on *Myth-Busters*, Ricky.

"I've seen it happen, dude."

When I ask him how this helps me, he just shrugs and chomps off another bite of pizza.

Ricky and I took Ms. Josephine's advice and went back through the *Book of Sighs*, again. We've read every page in the book. But there was one itsy-bitsy little problem. In the back of the book, it seemed as if a couple of pages might have been removed. Torn or cut out, so close to the binding that you had to really squint to see.

Neither of us know how important, or not, those pages were. But one thing I know from reading Todd Steele novels is that the last couple of pages change everything. All the twists and turns, the peaks and valleys—they're all solved in those last two or three pages. And this leaves me more than a bit suspicious.

Ricky points out that I can just ask the people on the Deadside what was in the back of the book. He figures it's just a bunch of religious scripture and rhetoric anyway. I sure hope he's right.

Ms. Josephine will be over in a few minutes to help us get ready. I'm not really sure what's going to happen on this visit, and don't know if I need to be in *save-the-world* mode, or *compassionate-paying-attention* mode. I hope I don't have to wield a sword, or anything overly heroic like that. I don't know anything about fighting, and the thought of getting my ass kicked in another dimension does not please me. It seems, however, to amuse the crap out of Ricky.

“Just think, Jack,” Ricky says between laughter, “. . . some little monsters might beat you down, and then tie you up, rub pig shit in your hair, or whatever monsters do for a laugh. Oh, man, that would be funny.”

You're a bad wingman, I tell him. You're supposed to be giving me all sorts of advice that I can turn to when there are no other options. Wisdom. You're a genius, not me. I'm just unluckily half-dead.

“Okay, okay,” he says. “Look, the only thing my dad ever taught me about fighting is that all creatures, big and small, animal or otherwise, they have testicles. And if you smash them with sufficient force, they will drop like a sack of potatoes. That and the head butt.”

“So, Ricky's advice for the netherworld is to . . . kick 'em in the nuts?” I ask. “That's it?”

Ricky sat back with a look of pride and satisfaction on his face. Like he just explained quantum physics to me. Like he just worked out all of my life's problems in one fowl swoop.

I ask him if there are any 'medical' tips he can give me. What I should or shouldn't do that might affect my chances back here for staying alive.

He considers my question. “Not that this would ever come up, but,” he chose his words carefully, “. . . I would frown on you having sex while you're over there.”

Sex? What are you talking . . . *oh*.

He raised his eyebrows, almost accusingly, at me. “The girl. You. Nice quiet dark place. Nobody around. Some old feelings begin to—”

*Okay*, Ricky. I see where you're going with this. I'm not going to have sex with a dead girl, I tell him. And, up until that point I hadn't even considered it. I'm way to shy, anyway. I mean, technically I'm a virgin. And saviors aren't allowed to go around knocking-up the local populous. What kind of saint sleeps with a dead girl?

“Just for argument's sake,” I ask him, “. . . why not?”

“Oh my god, dude!” he says, seemingly disgusted by my question, “. . . you *were* thinking about it.”

*No, I wasn't!* I'm just . . . you made me curious, that's all. Why no sex?

His mouth is stuck in a big 'O' as he figures out his theories. “Well, for a couple of reasons. One is that there's a chance of contracting some kind of disease. I mean, she is dead, and all that. Sure, sure, she looks good, compared with other dead people, but . . .you know, she's not of the living. And there's all kinds of diseases and pathogens you might contract.”

Undead herpes and stuff?

He nods, “And two,” he says steeping his hands in front of him, “is that you might suddenly die. Or at least, your Earth body might die, leaving you stuck over there. See, during intimacy . . .”

I'm going to get the *birds and the bees* speech given to me by a 22-year-old stoner. I am the laughing stock of the cosmos.

“... you share part of yourself with a woman...”

This is the ugly side of sainthood.

“... and as you're, uh, becoming one with her, so-to-speak...”

This is my punishment. My torture.

“... at that moment of climax, a part of you is forever connected to her. It's like, at that exact second where you and she are coming, there's this bond between you. And it's forever.”

I'm astonished. “Ricky,” I say delicately, “I think that is the first time you've ever said anything beautiful. Really.” I ask him, “How is it that you know about this sexual bond?”

“Oh, that's easy,” he says as he takes a swig of milk, a white mustache sitting over his top lip. “There isn't a single chick that I've ever banged in the past, that I can't go back and bang right now. Like with my ex-girlfriend, doesn't matter if she's married, or pregnant, even. I could still get some of that.”

The beautiful thing that Ricky had been describing like a wonderful sensual flower, it's petals are now burning to ash. “That's romantic,” I say.

“I didn't say it was romantic, I just said that's the way things work. When a chick gets attached to you, even for that infinitesimally small moment during orgasm... that's it. You two are connected forever.”

Any more pearls of wisdom? I ask him.

“Try not to get eaten by those birds, they sound nasty. Oh,” he adds, “and don't eat anything. Better not to risk it. Those dead, they probably have a different palette than you and I.”

And then I point down at the frozen pizza and the empty pieces of tissue paper with *Taco Bell* stamped about a thousand times on each one.

“Good point,” he concedes. “If we can eat this shit, there's probably nothing on the Deadside that could even give you a stomach ache.”

Ricky sat up, grabbed a napkin and wiped-off his mustache. He lifted his wrist and checked the time. His eyebrows raised.

It was getting to be that time. I glanced out across my living room, to my glass sliding door where I could see half of the sun retreating to the western side of the Earth. The light outside was becoming redder—which Ricky tells me is the *Doppler effect* of red-shifted light waves, elongated by the far angle of the sun in relation to us.

For science questions, Ricky is good. For affairs of the heart, not so much.

I sigh, it's about that time, isn't it?

Ricky nods, "We need to get you juiced-up." That's his cute little way of saying jab a 16-gauge catheter in my arm and forcibly hydrate my body with saline goo. I feel like a pin cushion. I have become the lab rat after all. Maybe I'm not slobbering, wearing pajamas, and being studied by a bunch of nameless doctors, but I'm the test dummy all the same.

I hear a knock at the door. That's Ms. Josephine.

Ricky crossed the dirty kitchen and opened the door, but it wasn't Ms. Josephine. It was a guy in a cheap suit, with a half crown of grey hair that circled his tanned head. He had one of those mustaches that people in the seventies had. And he should give it back.

He introduces himself, "Hi, I'm Detective Gonzalez, I'm with the Dallas Police Department."

Oh, shit! This is about Rupert. This is *not* good. They'll be on to us for sure, now. And I can't be tortured, not tonight. I have to cross over. I have to tell the dead souls that I'm going to save them all. A police line-up is going to ruin everything.

"I'm doing a report on James, ah," he looks down at a small note pad, "... James Mathis. He works for Dallas County Services."

That's not Rupert.

"Seems he got attacked by one of the, what do you call yourselves? *Patients?*"

Ricky smiled, "Oh, the dude who got bit by the retard on the third floor?"

The detective smiles, "That's the guy. Anyway, I'm just following up on it. Seems he's pressing assault charges, trying to sue the city. Normally, some weirdo bites a guy, the black-n-whites that patrol will do the report. But, since it involves an alleged *assault*, and the guy's asking for a bunch of cash, they stuck me with it. My luck, huh?"

"Well," Ricky says, "... we only heard the rumors floating around." Then Ricky kind of pushes his hip out and rests his palm on his side, the elbow cocked in that ambiguously gay way, and he says, "What about you *Sssssteven?* You hear anything *saucy?*" And Ricky, he's talking with a pronounced lisp. Liberace would call him effeminate. Elton John would call him a *fag*.

"Uh, no," I answer.

Ricky waves his limp wrist at me.

The detective laughs to himself as he scribbles some notes down. "Alright ... *fellas,*" he glances up briefly, "... if you hear anything, just give me a call." And he delicately hands Ricky one of his business cards as if he's handling plutonium. As if he might catch something if their fingers were to accidentally touch, even minutely.

Ricky grabs the card and smiles, like a big old drag queen, at the detective. And that cop, he takes no time in getting along to the next door.

Once he's gone I ask, "What ... in the hell are you doing?"

Ricky explains to me that police, especially any of those old school cops, they hate homosexuals. Most of them are uptight and religious. So, if you ever want them to leave, you just act like your a bit light in the loafers and they'll shag ass. He says you can get out of speeding tickets, airport security checks, all sorts of body searches. And I already don't want to hear any more.

Before Ricky gets the door closed, Ms. Josephine waddles-up and stands in the threshold. "ow are my two mislead children doin' dis evenin'?"

Ricky's hand falls away from his hip, as he straightens his posture.

She looks him up and down, a slight grin forming, "Ricky, is dere somethin' you want to tell us?"

But before he could answer, she walks past him. I consider telling her about the detective, but we're pressed for time. "I need to paint you up, again," she says as she lifts her heavy magical purse up to the bed.

Great. The blood of untold insects and animals, large needles in my arm, heating blankets, soothing words, experimental oxygen-starving drugs, and drowning. This is my unlikely sainthood.

"Alright," I say, "... let's kill me."



## CHAPTER 60

*JACK'S APARTMENT, DEADSIDE.*

*WEDNESDAY EVENING, DUSK . . .*

I hit the floor wanting to cough up the water I just drowned myself with. The fact that I'm getting somewhat comfortable with drowning myself, is a bit unsettling. I may need to discuss that with Dr. Monica. But, whatever.

I look at my melted, twisted grey apartment, the sky outside the familiar color of dogs and wolves and sharks and horrible birds. And I'm searching for signs of Kristen and Rupert.

"Welcome back, John," her soft voice says to me. I want to smile, jump up and down, and race over to her. But that might not be appropriate, given the situation we're in.

Hello, Kristen.

She's sitting on my stretched wooden chair, the one the *Book of Sighs* was resting on that night when the spooks were staring at it. Her legs are together, her hands sitting over her knees, as if she's in school, waiting for the teacher to arrive. She looks calm and serene, much more relaxed than I've ever seen her.

I feel a bit awkward as I approach her, sitting on the edge of my bed. Just behind me, my body is lying dormant, mostly obscured by blankets. I glance back at my slowly cooling human form and then to her. And I remember how beautiful she was in the dream that she gave me, and how sad she was the last time I saw her. That moment when we kissed so briefly that it might not have even happened at all.

I take a deep breath and sigh, "I'm ready to help."

She doesn't smile or jump for joy or celebrate, other than to nod a couple of times. "It pleases me to hear that, John."

So, I say, where do we go from here? Do I need to slay a dragon, or solve some deeply philosophical mystery? I mean, how do we proceed?

She leans toward me, lowering her voice—as if the words she's about to speak are so fragile that they might disintegrate in the small space between us. "John, have you ever heard of the word, *Dimashka*?"

No.

" . . . it is a word of pre-semitic etymology."

I have no idea what that means, other than the fact that my otherworldly girlfriend is way smarter than I am. In the future I can see her wearing one of those shirts that says *'I'm with stupid'* and it has an arrow pointing to me.

She continues, "It suggests that the beginnings of a place, called Damascus, go back to a time before recorded history. And it is to this city of Damascus . . . that you must go."

Whoa, wait a minute. I don't know anything about Damascus. Where is that even located? Russia? I don't speak Spanish.

She smiled, "Damascus is the capital city of Syria. It is located in the southwestern part of the country. It has been called the *'Pearl of the East'*. It is the oldest continually inhabited city on earth."

The Middle East? I've read articles about that place. They don't care much for people like me down there. They wear bombs and stuff. Fourteen-year-olds have full beards and machine guns. They *eat* camels!

Ignoring my bigoted statements she continued, "In the old city, there is a wall referred to as the *Old City Wall*. At a point between Herod's Gate, and the Damascus Gate, there is a door. A portal, if you will. And you must unlock that door so that our souls will be freed. It is only you who can do this. Nobody else. Just you."

Supposing I get there, I pose to her, what then? Do I *will* it open? Do I need a spiritual fire ax, or would an earthly fire ax work just as well? What am I getting myself into, here?

She scoots closer, reaching out for me. Just the touch of her warm little hands in mine, it made my body feel so full of energy that my chest might suddenly burst—but in a good way.

"John, you must bring the *Book of Sighs*. That book is the key. You and that book, both of you are connected to this world, and to the Earth plane. The two of you, as prophesied, must open this door. Only you, and only with the book, can the door be opened and our souls freed to the golden light that awaits. That book and you were both destined to be together, and to make this voyage."

And right then I'm thinking that the cover on the *Book of Sighs* is probably something other than leather. Something I probably don't want an explanation for.

This all sounds too grand. Too incredible. Questions are sprouting in my mind. "Are you . . . are you certain that I am who you think I am?"

They looked at me like I was being blasphemous. Rupert nodded, "You are aware that there were originally three copies of the *Book of Sighs*?"

Of course, I told him. You were the one who told us about them. Two of them were destroyed in Italy or somewhere like that.

Rupert smiled, laughing quietly to himself. “My facts were not completely accurate. The other two copies of the book were made to look as though they had been burned. But this, you see, it was a carefully articulated plan. The books were actually separated so that when the reincarnate of St. John the Divine returned he would be able to find the book.”

I understood what he was saying, but not the logic behind it. So I asked him, “Why would you do that . . . hide the books if your only hope is to join them with your saint?”

“The theory,” Rupert explained, “was that the books were quite controversial, and in the wrong hands might have done much damage to the church, which,” he admitted, “. . . might have been the original intent of the books, for some. But the idea was that when St. John returned, over the course of his life, he would naturally come into contact with the book. If it was so destined; it would, after all, be the natural course of his true fate if he was the chosen one.”

I'm guessing, I say to him, that since we're having this conversation, that this plan didn't pan out so well. Otherwise this whole mess would have been resolved some time in the last seventeen-hundred or so years. Am I off base, here?

“On the fourteenth day of November,” Kristen said reverently, “in the year six-hundred and one—the seventh century—a man by the name of Johannes Damascene was born. He was the first of three saints to come to this planet for the purpose of opening the door. He was Saint John Damascene.”

Damascus, I said under my breath.

“Very good,” Rupert said. “He authored a very famous work of literature called the '*Source of Knowledge*.' He was to obtain the copy of the *Book of Sighs* that had been hidden in Damascus. But he met an untimely death at the end of a thief's sword before he could complete this quest. Bad fortune and fate often struggle against each other.”

“On the fourteenth day of November,” Kristen began again, “. . . in the year of sixteen-hundred and one, a *thousand years* later, *John Eudes* came into this world. He was the second reincarnation of St. John the Divine. He, unfortunately, was slowly poisoned by religious fanatics in sixteen-eighty after having come into possession of the book that had originally been hidden in Athens, Greece. Sadly, he never returned from his first crossing to the Land of Sorrows, and was lost. His body was in France at the time of his death.”

“He was our second chance, our second hope,” Rupert said as his eyes looked down, almost paying silent homage to these men.

“You are the third,” Kristen said as her bright eyes studied me. “The only one, in fact, to successfully cross back and forth between both lands. You are St. John the Divine's third reincarnate. And you will be the one to succeed.”

And, I asked them, what happens if I fail . . . like they did?

"You won't," Rupert said confidently.

"You can't," Kristen affirmed.

And the both of them, they were so sure that I could do it, and that I was their saint, that I believed it, too. It all made sense, in a kind of outrageous, sensational way. My accident, and then the book, and now this . . . it all adds up.

"How do I get there?" I ask. "What does the door look like? I still have a lot of questions."

She brought my hands to her chest, just above her breasts. And I'm having a really hard time concentrating on saving the universe.

" . . . you will figure all of this out. It is your destiny to do so. And your reward, it will be your memories. Your past life will be given back to you. And once again you will be complete."

My heart is racing a million miles-an-hour. I then ask her, blood flowing away from my brain at an alarming rate as my hands touch her soft skin, What will happen when I accomplish this?

What happens to us, then?

To you and I?

She smiles that same perfect smile that I glimpsed in my dream. Her eyes, blinking slowly, thoughtfully, she tells me, " . . . that is a bridge that you and I must cross . . . together. When the time comes for us to consider *us*, we will make that decision. But right now, this isn't about you and I. This is about setting our captive souls free so that we are no longer hunted by the monsters in the sky. So that we may feel the grace of God. The warmth of his glorious embrace."

She did make it sound noble.

*I'll do it*, I tell her. *I'll do whatever it takes*.

"You must look at the back cover of the book. There is a rough picture of the area you must search to find the door. It will guide you. And remember, the book is the key. The book, nor you—alone—can open it."

Where will you be during all of this? How will I find you?

Out of the darkness Rupert steps forward, "We will leave for that place, now. When you get there, we will be waiting. This will be our last chance to speak with you until you arrive in Syria. And make haste, John. Time is of the essence. The window of our opportunity is closing quickly."

"How much time do I have? I mean, this isn't just something I can up and do. I need plane tickets, a passport, all kinds of shots. I might even need permission. I've never even been on a plane before. This isn't easy. What's my time frame?"

They looked at each other, and then Kristen turned to me, "Days, John. Not weeks. Days."

Or what?

“Or we all rest here until the End of Days, being attacked, hunted, and eaten. And nobody ever goes to Heaven.”

She sure knows how to lay a guilt trip on a guy. Man, I like her.

Rupert came forward, kneeling between us, his right hand on my shoulder, and it felt a bit creepy—my hands still technically on Kristen's breasts, with Rupert touching me. “Can we count on you to be the saint you are fated to be? It is your destiny. Your whole life was for this very aim. This is your quest. Will you do this, John?”

And you know, gullible old me, I said, “Yes. I'll go as far as it takes. But there's one thing I need to know.”

“Anything,” Kristen said.

There's no other way to put this. “Are you and I in love? I mean, *were* we in love? I need to know. I'll do this, either way. But I have to know.”

She considers my question as Rupert backs away. She stares into my eyes with her intoxicating gaze. And then she leans forward and kisses me, again. And this time, it was a real kiss. Like in those movies where two people really care about each other.

And me, I'm so dizzy I'm about to pass out. Everything is just about as great as I can imagine.

I don't know how long we kissed, but it was epic. And when she pulled away she reached her little fingers up and touched my lips, patting them a few times and said, “Go now, John. Go to Damascus and save us all.”

I stood, nodding. There's nothing I wouldn't do for her. Nothing.

“Hurry, John. Save us.”

I turned and dove back into my body. I had places to go, doors to open, all our souls to save.

## CHAPTER 61

*JACK'S APARTMENT,*

*EARTH PLANE . . .*

I wake-up, back in my bed, shivering and aching and cold . . . but happier than I can ever remember being. I sat up, pushing the heating blanket off of my pale chest and try to steady my vision. My throat, as is typical in my on-again off-again life as a mortal human, is burning something fierce and I know that if I try to talk I'm going to cough my lungs up.

I have to take small breaths, and it is driving me crazy because I have so much to tell Ricky and Ms. Josephine. But I'm a saint now, and I must behave like one. And *this* saint is hungry.

The blurriness starts to fade as the room becomes more clear. Ricky is standing, using the underside of his arm to squish the healing bag of normal saline. I'm feeling these little lines of heat travel through my veins, working their way around my body. He's looking over at Ms. Josephine, who is kneeling down fiddling with something on the kitchen floor.

Finally, I gather enough strength and saliva in my throat to speak, "We have to take the book to Damascus!"

Neither Ricky nor Ms. Josephine responds to me, and I kind of feel robbed of the moment. I just crossed the plane between life and death, conversing with troubled spirits about fulfilling my destiny and saving every soul that has ever lived, and I finally possess the answers that we have been searching for this entire time. You'd think they'd be just a tad bit more enthusiastic.

*Damascus!* I repeat.

*Hidden door!*

Ricky turns his face towards me, his eyes still focused on whatever Ms. Josephine is fooling around with on the floor. I so hope that she didn't drop a jar full of hairy poisonous spiders or snakes, or whatever. Because, even if she assures me that she's recaptured every last one of them, I'll never get a single second of sleep in this apartment, ever again.

Ricky, he speaks out of the side of his mouth, "Yeah, that's awesome, Jack." But he's clearly preoccupied.

So I squint over to where Ms. Josephine is kneeling and I have to blink several times because it sure looks like there is a pair of legs lying across the floor of my kitchen. And since this apartment only came with spooks and ghosts, I know that is one pair of legs too many.

Those aren't spiders, are they? I say slowly as my mind tries to make sense out of what I'm seeing.

"No, dude," he explains. "That detective that came by asking about that toothy retard on the third floor? Turns out he wasn't a detective at all. He was looking for the book, and after you crossed-over he came back with a pistol and an attitude, and he said he wasn't leaving without the book."

That's one of the guys who killed Rupert? One of the goons?

"Maybe," he said speculatively. "Not sure," he shrugs noncommittally, "... could be, I guess."

So, what? I ask. Did Ms. Josephine hit him with some voodoo? A jar full of icky bugs? Some spell to freeze his heart?

Ricky proceeded to explain that with me being on the *other side*, he had to tell the guy some song and dance about us selling the book to a private collector in Houston. Then, when the guy looked thoroughly perplexed, and there was a small window of opportunity,

"... I head-butted him and kicked him in the nuts with my boot! Like a *Chuck Norris* kick. Hit him so hard his kids will feel it. Dropped his thug-ass to the kitchen floor. While he was trying to breathe, I did the *Riverdance* on his face and then hit his ass with a thick rig of a barbiturate cocktail that I like to call, '*sleepy-time*'. He's out for a while."

Ricky laughed, "Funny thing is, I was saving that syringe for you, you know, in case you started freaking-out. But the goon asked for it first."

You killed him? Oh, we're in deep shit, now! They've got institutions for people like us. Not prisons... *institutions* for the mentally deranged!

"e's not dead," Ms. Josephine said from across the apartment. "And da both of you... watch your mouths."

### ***FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER...***

I'm still shaking, nearly uncontrollably, staring at this guy who is narced-out on my floor. Turns out Ricky didn't use the *IK-1009* on him. So that's good. Ms. Josephine did a number on him with a roll of olive-green duct tape.

After the excitement of finding a semi-dead body wore off, I explained to them exactly what I had learned from Rupert and Kristen. How I was the third reincarnation of St. John the Divine, and how the book—like me—is somehow stuck a little bit in both worlds.

"So that book cover might *not* be leather, after all?" Ricky says, rubbing his chin. His eyes were studying the *Book of Sighs*.

“That's the first thing I thought,” I told him. Me and Ricky, we're starting to think alike, and that kind of scares me.

I recounted for them how, in Damascus there is a gateway, or a door, or something, and that only the book—in my saintly hands—can be used to open the passageway and free all the trapped souls.

“And then you'll be, what . . .” Ricky says, “. . . a *savior*?” He says it with wide excited eyes, and I know he's trying to figure out how he can use this whole thing to pick-up on women.

“Den,” Ms. Josephine said, “. . . 'e will learn who 'e really was before 'e got 'it on the 'ead. And 'e'll get to be wit 'is girlfriend.”

She makes it sound kind of trite and pathetic when she says it like that. But, yeah, that's basically the size of it. I save all those souls so that I can learn my past, fulfill my destiny, and get the girl. That sounds like some cheesy movie.

So now, I tell them, I don't know how, but we have to get to Damascus . . . and soon. The window for being a savior is closing quickly.

“Well,” Ms. Josephine said, “. . . we certainly 'ave to leave dis apartment. Whoever sent dis guy, dey'll send more. And dey're not going to be 'appy about what we done.”

I look at the motionless body of the supposed detective, wondering if the two spooks that are looking at him are doing routine work, or just answering some subconscious request of mine. This is something I may need to address.

It's time to go, I say. Now!

“Grab some clothes, and the book,” Ricky barks. “I'll call my dad and ask him for some help with the travel arrangements.”

As I'm packing I hear Ricky talking to his dad while he is circling my kitchen, stepping over the unconscious body. I grab my duffel bag.

“. . . we need to go to Syria, dad . . .”

I pack all of my folded white t-shirts—four of them—sniffing them to make sure they're sanitary.

“. . . well, I guess we need to go tonight . . .”

I grab all of my socks. They're thick tube socks and I like the way they make my toes feel warm and safe.

“. . . no, dad. This has nothing to do with a girl. I mean, there is a girl involved, but it's not like that . . . No, that was a one-time thing . . .”

There are only two pairs of pants in my wardrobe, and they are stone-washed blue jeans. I got them at *Old Navy*, but I was assured that they were new.



“ . . . one good reason? Okay . . . how about saving the fate of all our souls in the afterlife from the overwhelming forces of evil? How about *that*, dad?”

Of the two pairs of shoes I have, I am conflicted. I guess I'll bring both the *Adidas* cross-trainers, and my *Doc Martin's* boots—that Ricky bought me so that I wouldn't look like a *pussy* when I was out on the town.

Ricky's voice, it got considerably more serious, “ . . . yes, dad . . . it's important to me. *For real*, important . . . ”

Looking at my choices, I zip-up the duffel bag. I'm going to look like an escaped mental patient. But then, that's not far from the truth, so . . . whatever.

“ . . . thanks, dad. I owe you one . . . well, okay, I owe you several. Can you call the captain and file the flight plan, we're on our way over, right now.” Ricky's doing a lot of nodding at this point in the conversation with his father. “ . . . alright. Thanks. Later . . . yes, tell mom hugs-n-kisses.”

I walk back into the living room with my bag. “Hugs-n-kisses, Ricky?”

He shrugs, shoving his cell phone into his pocket, “Let's roll, team!”

I ask, where are we going? He says, *Damascus*.

I say, how are we getting there? He replies, *private airplane*.

I ask, how we can do that? He answers, *charter flight*.

Then he smiles, like I'm a little slow, and I need it all filled in for me. “My dad's hooking it all up. We're taking a private flight.”

I tell him that I don't have a passport, and he just smiles like it's no problem. So then I ask him how rich he really is. And you know what he does? He just looks at me with this smug grin on his Cheshire cat face, and he says that he's *rich*.

When you say rich . . .

“*Ugly* rich,” he replies. “We're ugly gross rich?”

Which, I assume, is a lot.

“Now quit jacking around,” he orders, “ . . . we need to burn-off . . . now!”

I couldn't agree more. I grab the book, give my apartment one last look. Time to fulfill the prophecy. My destiny.

## CHAPTER 62

*ADDISON AIRPORT.*

*WEDNESDAY EVENING, 10:26 PM . . .*

Ricky took us by Ms. Josephine's shop so she could grab her passport and some clothes. He asked her—politely—to not bring any insects, arachnids, or snakes due to some obviously strict international flight standards prohibiting such cargo. Reluctantly, she agreed.

Now we're waiting in the front lobby of a private airline company named, *MillionAir*, while he talks with the pilot—a cute girl named Amy—who usually handles Ricky's family's private jet. And by the way they are treating all of us, I'm pretty sure that *ugly gross rich* is probably the same thing as super wealthy.

They ask for all of our travel documents and all I have is my Texas Driver's license—that I just got in the mail two days ago. When they asked about my passport, Ricky got somebody on his cell phone and handed it to the receptionist. She did a lot of nodding and said, “*yes, sir,*” about 15 times. My passport, they informed me, would be waiting at the private airport in Atlanta, Georgia when we arrive there in less than three hours.

So I guess we're going to Atlanta, first.

About 20 minutes later, we are being driven out to a large hangar where a monster-sized plane is waiting. They refer to it as a *G-5*, and I don't know what that stands for. Ricky says something about 47 million. I guess the *G* means something expensive.

This looks like something oil barons would have, I said as we made our way up the steps to the plane.

Ricky replies, “A plane should be like your second home in the sky. It should make you feel as if you're in a lavish luxury suite.” And I know that he must have just read that in some brochure.

Anyway, Ms. Josephine and I, we're almost in shock as we settle into the leather couch in the *living room!* This plane, it has a living room. My apartment barely has one of those. My apartment could fit twice in this plane.

*Yeah*, I think to myself. I'd much rather be depressed and feeling sorry for myself in a plane like this, than in my dumpy old apartment. Ricky's right: rich people problems are much better than poor people problems. I've decided to make sure I'm rich at some point.

Amy—our captain—she has a wonderfully pleasant voice. She instructs us to relax, have a nice flight, and that we should be in Atlanta in a little over two hours. That's depending on a low-pressure system that we may or may not have to fly around.

Oh, in case you're wondering, I've got the *Book of Sighs* sandwiched between my white t-shirt and my stomach. I feel the need to be in close proximity with the book at all times.

As we taxi to the runway, I pull out the book and study the back cover. I'm not relaxed enough to be able to see the map that is supposed to be there, but I do see the squiggles, so that's a good sign.

I don't think I have a degenerative brain disease anymore.

As I feel the book on my body, I realize that there are no signs of advanced schizophrenia.

Most likely, there is no tumor. Never was.

All of this craziness, it's real. It *is* happening. If I was a Rorschach Inkblot, people might see a butterfly, or a tree, or they might see a reincarnated saint.

My hands on the book, I lean back—the leather couch sinking in and hugging me . . . consuming me. I close my eyes as Ms. Josephine stares blankly out of her window. She's probably thinking of her homeland of Haiti—a fact we learned when she gave Ricky her passport.

I look at her, and I'm glad she's here with us. I feel safe and protected by her. As if evil can't conquer us when she's in our corner.

And she says, without turning away from the window, “. . . dere is evil out dere, much stronger dan me, child . . .”

But her words are lost on me as I fade. My eyes close and the picture I see is of a face. Kristen's face. I miss her so bad it hurts. This is the part of love that they don't advertise. The pain of separation. I feel kind of like what I imagine a drug junkie must experience when he can't get his fix. I can still feel her lips on mine as I fade off into the darkness.

And we're flying.

### ***THURSDAY MORNING, 1:06 AM . . .***

I'm startled awake by the announcement that we're landing in Atlanta in the next few minutes. Strangely, I don't feel cold. Usually, after a trip across to the Deadside, I shiver for hours on end. But oddly, I feel quite warm. Hot, even.

Ricky is on a computer, on the Internet, looking-up maps of Damascus, Syria. He looks over at me as I shuffle and yawn. “Might as well go back to sleep, St. Jack. We're going to refuel, get your papers, and haul ass to Madrid.” And then he turns back to his keyboard.

I glance over at Ms. Josephine, who seems to be staring at me through her half-open eyes. I wave to her, but she doesn't respond.

"She's asleep," Ricky says, without looking back. I'm so predictable that he knows I'm waving at her without actually seeing me do it.

That's kind of spooky, I tell him. Sleeping with your eyes open. How is that even possible?

He shrugs. I shrug. He types. I close my eyes, again.

I'm really tired. This destiny stuff will wear a guy out.

### ***THURSDAY MID-MORNING, 10:46 AM . . .***

"Hola! We're in Spain!" Ricky celebrates as he shakes me awake. He hands me a large envelope with tons of papers in it. I look at it, confused.

"Customs," he tells me, ". . . they'll usually do an inspection, ask you some questions and stuff. Just be polite and don't mention anything about opening a doorway to Heaven, or saving the world. That might significantly delay our take-off."

Ms. Josephine, she's the *real* kind of awake now, shuffling through her large purse of curiosities. I cross my fingers that she didn't bring anything creepy, and literally that second she smiles to herself, looks up at me, and then back into her bottomless purse.

### ***THURSDAY AFTERNOON, 2:39 PM . . .***

Since we left Madrid, the three of us have been discussing the location of this hidden doorway in Damascus. We'll be landing in the next few minutes and there's a nervous energy swelling between us.

Ricky's got several pages of maps printed out, thumbing through them as he talks. "The part of the city that we're going to is very old. From what you've said, we're going to be on the northern wall of the Muslim quarter."

"What," I asked as I chewed a bite of chicken breast, "does that mean?"

"Da old city," Ms. Josephine said as she pointed to a printed page, ". . . it's broken into four sections. Quarters. Christian and Muslim quarters are on top, and da Armenian and Jewish quarters are below. Where you describe the door, it's between the north-eastern edge of da Christian quarter and da northern edge of da Muslim quarter."

I've read about the Muslims and the Christians. I wondered, don't they hate each other to death? Seems like a religious powder-keg. Looking at the map, I'm curious how these rival

religious groups have somehow managed to exist in such close proximity, since the beginning of recorded history, when the rest of the world is blowing itself up?

What do these Syrians know that everybody else doesn't?

"Tolerance," Ricky said with a sigh. "They understand the need for religious and spiritual tolerance." That Ricky, every now and then, he'll surprise you.

"Along da northern wall," Ms. Josephine said almost reverently, ". . . da doorway to da other side must reside. Somewhere between Herod's Gate and the Damascus Gate. But I don't know 'ow close we can get."

We both turned to Ricky. He scratched his head, looking at maps of Damascus from every direction. "I pulled it up on *Google Maps*, but you only get an overhead, so it doesn't help us, really. There's a road that runs parallel. Sultan Suleiman. It's not too far from our hotel."

He did some figuring, a lot of squinting, some teeth grinding, and said, "We might be able to get close enough, in a private vehicle, to see it with binoculars. But remember . . . this is still a dangerous place."

"Especially for Americans," Ms. Josephine warned.

I'm not just an American, I told them. I'm a reincarnated saint. I'm going to save all of our waiting souls.

And both Ricky and Ms. Josephine look at me, about the same way a maniac holding a machine gun to my head would if I tried to explain that.

"Yeah," Ricky mused, ". . . you tell *al Qaeda* that, see what kind of response you get. They'll have your ass on *Al Jazeera*, denouncing democracy while some guys in masks salivate behind you."

Ms. Josephine mentioned something about some bodyguards. Ricky nodded, "Yeah, I've got two Syrian military dudes that are going to be our private chauffeurs for the next couple of days."

Then he turns to me, "How long is this saving the world thing going to take?"

I glance at the book, itself an individual on our team. I look over the pages of maps, at Ms. Josephine, and back to Ricky. Whether or not I should be, I'm confident.

I tell them, "All I have to do is open an invisible door, or whatever . . . not too difficult. The book is the key. I use the key and that's that." I shrugged. "Easy day."

"Tings ain't never as simple as dey seem," Ms. Josephine said eerily. She could read a recipe for pecan pie and make it sound spooky.

Maybe, I propose to them, we've already done all of the heavy lifting. We found the book. We translated it. I met the spooks. I met the ghost. I crossed over to the Land of Sorrows—several

times, in fact. We chatted with the Deadsiders. They told us what has to happen. Now we just open the door.

That didn't seem to ease their tension.

Ricky glanced at his watch, "We'll be on the ground soon. Let's gather up all of our stuff and get ready to save the world." And he says it like we're just stopping off at a friend's house to help him clean out a garage.

As we were getting our things together, finishing off a glass of Dr. Pepper, he nudges me, "Hey, you know the difference between a friend and a *real* friend?"

No, I shrug.

Friends help you move.

*Real* friends help you move dead bodies.

I don't know, but I'm fairly certain that Ricky and Ms. Josephine are *real* friends.

## CHAPTER 63

*DAMASCUS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, SYRIA.*

*THURSDAY AFTERNOON, 4:12 PM . . .*

When we made our final approach to Damascus International Airport, I was just overwhelmed by it all. Buildings as far as the eye can see. It's like this oasis in the middle of the desert. It looks surreal when compared to the pictures we had printed off of the Internet. We're about 20 miles east of the city.

The Old City, where we're going, is a rough oblong shape spanning 1,640 yards long, and 1,100 yards wide. It is defined by its historic walls—the northeastern section of which the doorway is silently residing.

I wonder if the people who live there have any idea what is right under their noses?

The long axis of this Old City runs east and west. Ricky told me that the city was designed in the early Hellenistic times and that the Roman builders deserve most of the credit. All roads, as they say, lead to Rome.

Most of the city's original streets are buried 15 feet below the present street level, due to the fact that Damascus was captured by Muslim armies and most of the original remains were obscured or destroyed.

In our bullet proof *Land Rovers*, driven by two Syrian military officers—mercenaries—we found ourselves cruising down wide boulevards where all sorts of new development seems to have taken place. In their broken English, our minders explain to us that the French came in during the 1960s and devised several plans to modernize the city. The houses are mostly concrete blocks of flats. But it's much more modern that I had expected.

Most of the wealthy families moved to the area northwest of the Old City in the 1930's. As the city grew, more and more of the gardens and farming areas were converted to residential living districts. This place was an oasis in early times.

In his thick accent, one of our minders—Nasser—explains, “The local government has tried to keep areas of green, and areas of factories, zoned. We try to, ah, preserve the old beauty, you know.”

Ms. Josephine, Ricky, and me, we aren't saying much. Nasser and Hassim gave us press badges that have our names and the logo for *CNN* on them. If we get into any trouble, we are to lower our

heads and say, "We are with the European Press corp. We want protection given by the Geneva Convention."

But when they were telling us that, Ricky nudged me and said, "... that Geneva Convention shit's going to get us shot." Thing is though, we don't really have any better excuse to be bumbling around their historical sites. So, *CNN* it is.

We head to the hotel, which is just on the western end of the Christian Quarter, near the *Notre-Dame-De-France Hostel*. We pulled around the back of the hotel, and several men met us, to get us inside and settled. I guess Ricky's money does buy us a few luxuries more than your average tourist.

We took back stairways to our rooms, and were quickly ushered back out after leaving our bags. The book, of course, was still physically touching me. When I asked why we were leaving the hotel so quickly, they said that if we wanted to take our pictures of the Old City Wall, that now would be the best time of day.

"The sun," Nasser said, "... it throw the gold of Allah across the wonder of man." And if he hadn't been packing a pistol big enough to bring down an airplane, I might have found his words rather enchanting.

So out we go, bumping around through the streets in our bullet-proof trucks. Ricky, he's all business now, making sure there is a full 'jump bag' with all of the necessary medical equipment. "We're good, Jack," he said, nodding to Ms. Josephine and I.

Nasser and Hassim, they know this city quite well because they pretty much go wherever they please and nobody stops them. Police and military vehicles just wave at them. Who knows, maybe Ricky's paying them off, too?

As they drive they're pointing things out to us, giving it a shot in English, and then reverting to Arabic to share their own conversation. They both have on dark, black-tinted glasses and khaki pants. Pistols, boots, vests. And teeth yellowed from years of tea and cigarettes. These guys will shoot you with no questions asked. That makes me feel safe, but not completely comfortable. Like having pet tigers.

We near a traffic jam and Nasser turns his head, "Have you heard of Saul of Tarsus?"

We all shrug like dumb Americans typically do. Not that we haven't heard the story, but that it's best to just sit back and listen to the locals.

He grinned, "You probably know of him by name, Apostle St. Paul. The Hanani Chapel," he said pointing across the street, "is meant to commemorate the conversion, in Damascus, of Saul. New testament of your Christian bible speak very much of Paul. He was bitter enemy of Christianity in first century. And bad man, very bad. He hurt many people."



“He was Jew,” Hassim added, just to make sure we knew.

“Yes,” Nasser agreed. “Jew. But after death of the prophet, Jesus, he become missionary. His writings, they are earliest Christian writings. This is wonderful story, no?”

I found it hauntingly interesting. “Mr. Nasser,” I said carefully, “. . . what do you get from that story? I mean, what is the moral of the conversion from Saul, to Paul?” I had read a bit about this on the Internet, and I was curious what real Muslims thought of it.

“This moral,” Nasser said as we began to creep forward towards the traffic light, “it say that a man can be monster, and then change his way . . . if he truly have desire to be good.”

“He can change for bad, too,” Hassim interjected. “Is not only good conversion. But one can become evil, too.”

I sat back. The buildings and structures slowly floated by us, as if we weren't moving and everything else in the world was. I noticed the tall, aged wall on our right.

“This is Old City Wall,” Nasser pointed as we sped through the light.

Ricky leans forward, “Gentlemen, can we find a place and park?” He glances at his watch, and then back at the sun on the horizon.

Then he looks at me with curious eyes. “You ready for this?”

“Now? As in, *this second*? Are we really doing this right now?” My heart is starting to race.

“Well, we'll go and take a look—” Ricky started to say.

“No, no,” Hassim warned. “We stay in car for now. Once we find location you need, we will all go together and you take your pictures.

“My friend,” Ricky explained to them. “He is sick, sometimes. So if I see him in pain, I will give him special medical assistance.” Ricky was giving them some reason for me needing to get plugged into the IV and carp out for a couple of hours.

I'm not sure, but I think they all believe that I am the rich guy, here.

They spoke to each other in rapid-fire Arabic and then nodded. “Yes, this is good. Very safe.” Nasser then squinted toward the wall, “We will start at Damascus Gate and drive slowly. If you see spot, we will stop. But, you know, this is still city. Anything can happen.”

I hope this doesn't all go tits-up. Ms. Josephine, she's been quiet the entire time, just staring out the window, just like she had been on the plane. I think travel is very difficult for her.

Nasser slowed us down to about 25 miles-an-hour as we crept northeast. Ricky was looking through binoculars, and I was just scanning the wall for something that looked grand.

We traveled all the way past Herod's Gate, on to Yeriho road, and then turned around. We did this little trip down Sultan Suleiman Road at least four times. But nothing looked right.

I told Ricky that I didn't think we were going to find the door on this side, otherwise somebody would have made some mention of it in the last thousand years or so.

Ms. Josephine agreed, "Dis door is on da other side." She looked at me, glancing back at the position of the sun. "You need to cross over, child. Soon. Da shadows, dey's getting' long and curious."

Ricky nodded, "Time to act sick, Jack."

"Oh, boy," I said nervously. I've never crossed with strangers around. I feel a bit vulnerable. Like a stripper, kind of. But then, I've never been out of the country, or talked to the dead, or seen shadows chop people to bits, either. So, what the hell.

I started to breathe deeply and slowly, putting my hand on my head. "I'm not feeling so good."

Nasser looked back, trying to figure out what was going on. "This is what you mean for sick?"

Ricky started pulling out the normal saline, "Oh, he's just having a dizzy spell. He should be fine. Maybe he's just a little dehydrated."

In goes the pencil-sized needle in my left wrist. I feel my right forearm being massaged. Time to die. Ms. Josephine is whispering in my ear. I'm feeling drowsy. Everything is starting to get dark.

Like drowning.

Again

## CHAPTER 64

*OLD CITY, DAMASCUS,*

*DEADSIDE . . .*

Swimming through the dark abyss of my drowning nightmare only to end up in the back seat of a large truck was a disconcerting experience. I fell to the floor noticing the sun's green beams of light crossing the car at abstract angles. The vehicle was empty except for Ms. Josephine's blind eyes, my dormant body, and the *Book of Sighs*.

No doors.

No windows.

Lifeless.

"Can you 'ear me, Ms. Josephine?" I asked as I leaned over my soulless shell of a human form.

" . . . yes, child . . ." she whispered lightly. She probably didn't want to spook our bodyguards. " . . . take da book and go find da gate . . . before da dark sets in . . . somethin' bad is commin' . . . "

She is always so comforting. Her words were kind of uneven, spaced strangely, with sporadic pronunciation. I think she was communicating to me straight from her mind. Her thoughts were words to me. I wondered if it went both ways, this inter-dimensional line between us?

I reached for the *Book of Sighs*, hoping that it would let me move it. I don't know why I hadn't experimented with this before now. Maybe a trial run should have been in order. Although, given the fact that there don't seem to be doors or windows in this Land of Sorrows, I'm rather glad I didn't attempt crossing over while inside the plane.

G-5 or not, my Deadside ass would have most likely plummeted several tens of thousands of feet, and no amount of necklace swallowing would have saved me from becoming a cold splat on the desert floor.

My fingers round the edges of the *Book of Sighs* and the moment that I touch it, it starts to vibrate and blur like the wings of a hummingbird. Just like all my furniture did that first time in my apartment.

I start to pull it upwards, but it's holding on. It's trying to resist. This book, I don't think it wants to crossover with me. Maybe it has to go through its own version of drowning. Live out its worst mortal fear in order to walk among the dead. I don't know what the equivalent would be for an old religious book, but it must be horrible.

I consider that, perhaps it isn't that the book doesn't want to cross over, but that it doesn't want to cross *back*? This book, it may have come from the Deadsider in the first place. It may be covered with the skin of a Deadsider, or something even more unnerving. So, maybe it just doesn't like the idea of returning.

I'm going to have to put my back into this. I pull even harder, struggling with every one of my new muscles. The new and improved me, it's straining like never before.

And finally, when I'm at the end of my strength, it breaks free, stretching like taffy, or gum. I pull at it and it stretches to three or four times its original length before it suddenly gives up and releases its grip on the Earth plane.

"... da book is wit you now, child..." Ms. Josephine's calming voice tells me.

And as I turn around I notice them.

Everywhere. There must be thousands of souls, all around me, watching every move I make. They are giving me a wide area to maneuver, as if I'm off-limits. As if I'm giving off some energy that would burn them, or infect them.

They might just be giving me space so they can watch this moment. I assume that it is as important to them, as to me. It's not every day you see St. John in the flesh.

Or... am I *typhoid Jack* to these people?

None of them speak. There are whispers, but nothing that I can make sense of. Every word is hushed and hidden behind grey hands and suspicious eyes.

These souls here, watching me carry the book that must be the source of so much legend and lore, I notice that their eyes are not quite as bright and glowing as Kristen's, Rupert's, nor the rest of the Deadsiders I met before. Could be some regional difference, I suppose.

And almost as if she read my mind I feel a touch on my shoulder. Startled, I jerk away only to see Kristen and Rupert, and several others behind me. They are inside my sphere of emptiness. This is so surreal and beautiful and haunting all at the same time. I wish I had a video camera.

I lift the *Book of Sighs*. "I have it."

Rupert nods, almost bowing to the book.

Kristen, she smiles, looking on me with proud eyes. "You are the one, John. You shall set us free. And then you will have the answers that we both seek."

Kristen and Rupert line-up on either side of me and they begin to walk toward the stoned wall. I can only assume they know where the door is.

As we walk, the quiet souls give us plenty of space, shuffling so as not to get too close to us. I ask Rupert, why are their eyes so dim compared to yours?

“Many,” Rupert explains, “. . . most, in fact, don't believe in the prophecy of St. John. They don't want to hope only to have their hopes shattered. They don't—”

A scream ripped through the tranquility!

Rupert stopped mid-sentence. We heard them again. The screams were echoing throughout this old city as if it was a giant amplifier. All the souls, thousands of them, lowered their bodies, all eyes searching the dangerous blue sky.

“We must hurry, John!” Kristen warned. “The screamers are coming. They will stop at nothing to kill us all!”

And now we're running at a full-on sprint.

“Where is the gate?” I yell. Where?

I feel Kristen's hand pulling me towards the wall, and I start to see a small green rectangle illuminated by the thin streaks of light that are left as the sun races to the west.

“The book must go into the recess in the wall, and you must be the one to press it into place,” Rupert instructs as we run.

Between the screams from the quickly fading sky, I noticed several other familiar souls running along with us. Stewart is hobbling his nervous tail along. Thomas—the first man I ever met in Deadside—he is with us. My familiar dead friends. Stupid as it sounds, I actually felt slightly relieved to see them around me. I don't know them that well, but anything familiar is a blessing in a place like this. Under circumstances such as these.

The screams grew louder as I approach the small recess in the wall. It looks to be the exact same size as the book.

“Quickly!” Rupert yells as they circle around me for protection.

The sky is black now, but not from the setting sun. It has grown dark from the wings of monsters with sharp teeth, and talons, and black eyes . . . designed for killing.

As I lift the book, Kristen releases her tight grip on my hand. I glance back at her and she nods anxiously, “Now, John! Fulfill your destiny. Save us all.”

And as I raise the *Book of Sighs*, it grows heavier and heavier with each inch. It's as if it's trying to resist being placed in its keyhole. I strain and struggle, again, grunting as I lift. The book, it starts to vibrate again. It's really an ornery son-of-a-gun.

I feel this energy surging through my body, then through my arms, and out from my fingertips into the book as I press it home. This is the opposite of the normal saline sensation. This is me giving my energy to the book. Encouraging it to succeed. The book and I, a supernatural team.

And as it finally slides into place, at that exact moment, there is a loud, thunderous eruption. It sounds like mountains being moved. Like thousands of sticks of dynamite going off at the same time. The noise is so deafening that I have to cover my ears with my hands. We all do.

The ground begins to shake, and I think I may have done something wrong. I pray that there aren't several slots. I hope I didn't accidentally push the book into the slot marked 'Earthquake'.

Everything around us is rumbling and rattling, and suddenly I see the golden bits of light start to sparkle around the wall. They are those same wonderful flashes of light that I see when I'm submerged in my drowning journey across from the Earth plane.

Tiny specs of hope.

Glimmers of a chance.

The light, it grows stronger in the outline of a large door—much wider than the tank-sized doors of the church I attended last weekend. Those growing beacons of light, they are the same golden color of the dream that Kristen gave me.

And suddenly . . .

## CHAPTER 65

*OLD CITY, DAMASCUS, DEADSIDE.*

*DOORWAY OF SIGHS . . .*

. . . And suddenly everything was silent. The ground stopped shaking. The rumbling ceased. The screamers were even quiet, now. A dusty haze, that had come from what I thought was an earthquake, it made everything look hazy and distorted . . . like a Ridley Scott film. There was a rose tint to the air. What I'm seeing is what it looks like right after a tornado.

As this dust started to settle, I noticed Kristen and Rupert. I saw their friends and comrades picking each other up off of the ground. And beyond them, I could see the tens of thousands of desperate souls.

Seconds were beating by like hours.

Time wasn't linear.

All of them, their curious wanting eyes, staring past me. For the first time in this cold dead world, I felt heat on my back. That golden heat that was only small fragments of choked light, now I was being bathed in it. I looked at my shadow, cast hundreds of feet across the darkness.

And as the souls looked past me, squinting at the blindingly bright light, I turned to see what I had accomplished. The giant door was open, the wall having slid to the side. It was magnificent, and it took a minute for my brain to process what I was seeing.

This door wasn't just an opening in an old wall. This was a passageway cut out of their world. All around the passageway, the color of the time between dogs and wolves and sharks and prophets still prevailed.

But in that section of wall where the door was, it was different. Where the door was pushed aside it revealed a sky of red and purple and gold streaks. Beyond our cold Land of Sorrows were fields of brilliant orange and violet flowers. Green grasses so vibrant it looked like oil paint.

The colors were too perfect.

Overwhelming in their intensity.

And as I sat there in awe of this, they began to walk by me, into the light. Into this new freedom. This land of light and life. And I realized that I had given this to them. One by one they passed me, quietly nodding as they approached the line between our frozen oblivion and this new perfection.

I wondered to myself if that was Heaven. If that was the dream that we are all chasing throughout our lives. The magical land of hopes and joy and eternal bliss. There was a sweet smell coming from that place—way better than my aromatherapy soaps, even.

And, as I am lost in the emotion of this wonderful moment, I see Kristen and Rupert walk by, heading into the light. And now, I want to know my forgotten past. I want to remember my life with Kristen. It is time for my enlightenment. All of it.

Once past the threshold of our grey and blue, her skin became full of life and color again. She is the girl in my dreams, now. The girl I'm in love with. The beautiful soul that I risked everything for.

Kristen, she turns and looks at me, Rupert and 21 others behind her. But something is strange. I feel like I'm the only one who's not in on it. Whatever *it* is?

I look back at the other souls. For some reason, they're not following us into the light of the passageway. Instead, they are retreating, looking for cover as fast as they possibly can.

“Are they . . . scared?” I say under my breath. “Why don't they want their freedom?”

“What were you expecting, Jack?” she asks.

Jack? She called me Jack. Why would she do that? And her tone, it's no longer one of passion and understanding. She is cold and distant . . . indifferent.

Where she was the only bit of warmth in this cold dead place, now she is in a land of golden heat . . . and her words are like ice, frozen and empty. I don't understand this metamorphosis.

“What's going on?” I say. What is this? Why are they afraid to be set free? Why do the slaves not want to leave their dungeon?

These 23 souls, they just stare back at me. Their eyes, there's something peculiar about them. A kind of sinister quality. I look to Kristen and to Rupert. To Thomas and Stewart, and all the others.

Kristen, her face is full of life and energy, but she is not the girl that I remember in my dream. Something about her face is suffering and there is contempt in her eyes.

I ask her, “Weren't we in love?”

She reaches to Rupert and they lock hands. “We were, Jack . . . but you destroyed it.”

What do you mean by that? I destroyed it? That doesn't make any sense. I opened the door. I freed all of the trapped souls. What do you mean, I destroyed it?

And all at once I get this overwhelming feeling that I have done something monumentally wrong. I'm no genius, but I know when I've been duped.



"The other souls are not leaving," Rupert says lightly, "... because they are scared of an uncertain future. They would rather live there, in the place of constant fear and decay because they are worried about what *He* might think. His judgment is what they are all waiting for."

He snorted, "Those of lukewarm faith." His words, he was almost spitting them out, as if they disgusted him. "We write our own destiny. Not god, nor anyone else. We chose our path."

Rupert is no longer the nice English librarian I remember. He's gotten a real mean streak about him. Borderline evil.

And then it all hits me like a load of bowling balls. "... I'm not a savior, am I?"

Kristen laughed like I'm just the most pathetic thing on the planet, "You? Saint Jack? Divine? No. Not even close."

I look at all these faces, seeing something in them that I probably should have noticed from the start.

*Motive.*

My heart is being stomped on by a giant golf cleat as we speak. "Kristen, I thought we were in love. The dream? The kiss? That was love ... wasn't it?"

Her voice, it seemed to soften, her words much calmer and compassionate. "I did love you ..." and then I see tears gathering in her eyes, welling up with each word she speaks, "... but you killed me."

*You killed me, she whispers again.*

What is she talking about? I saw the dream. The way we touched each other. That was real. "I would never hurt you. I risked my life for you."

And now, as she's speaking, I'm numb to her words. As if they're not even in a language that I can understand.

"... you killed me when I was so young. I had my whole life in front of me. You robbed me of that. You stole my life away from me, Jack. And then I was sent to the Land of Sorrows. Why? Because my faith was not *strong* enough?! I was twenty-three years old!"

I'm not hearing this. This can't be real. It's a tumor and schizophrenia and degenerative brain decay all at once. All rolled into a big mental meltdown. I'm going to wake-up and Dr. Monica is going to be fanning my face with my psychological profile folder.

She continues, tears rolling down her cheeks, "What kind of jealous god ... what kind of monsters would allow my life to be snatched away so soon and then condemn me to the place of forever night? That is no god I can ever love. That is your god."

I think I have done something more than wrong. This is colossal. This is the blunder to end all galactic blunders. I am the king of the tards.

The group of souls—escapees, as it now seems—they backed away from the door and I had this feeling that there was something closing in on me. The girl I love, she's walking away and I begin to shiver. Never mind the warm golden heat. Forget the awe of the moment. I'm cold like a lonely dead planet in the farthest reaches of the universe.

And Kristen is leaving.

The girl I loved.

The girl I killed.

I yell to her, "I am not that man! The one that hurt you, that's not me! I can't be the kind of . . ." And as the words escape my lips I remember our driver, Nasser, and his story about Saul of Tarsus. And I'm not sure which one I am.

Saul, or Paul.

I am the *me* of now, not the *me* that died.

As the 23 souls turn and walk off into their colorful new world of opportunity and life, I look around and see *them* everywhere. The screamers—the flying monsters—they are much bigger up close. They might be dinosaurs or creatures designed and bred on the Deadside. Their eyes are liquidy black. Their teeth translucent and sharp as razors. Their claws as jagged as shards of broken glass.

They're as big as cars, and they are perched on the Old City Wall like gargoyles. But they're no longer screaming or attacking. They just sit there, shuffling and fidgeting about, studying me. Only me.

And then I realize, they're not even the ones that I should be afraid of.

Kristen and the others are gone.

These giant monsters, they're waiting quietly.

All the other souls are watching this unfold from the safety of the hiding spots in the darkness.

And then this deep voice calls to me, "Jack."

And all of these tall black figures, they surround me. And I know that what must follow can't be good for me.

## CHAPTER 66

*DOORWAY OF SIGHS.*

*MOMENTS LATER . . .*

These shadowy forms, they walk closer and closer to me, and for a moment I consider running through the passageway. I don't know where that will lead me, but it might be better than what I have coming. I feel like I'm about to get mugged. Mugged by shadowy dead beasts . . . great.

A large figure approaches me. These things are taller than me. With red eyes to accent their black forms. I can't see through them, like with the gatherers. These shadow creatures, they're dense.

This is going to hurt, I just know it. I'll try to head butt as many of them as I can, but I don't like my chances. Kicking them in the nuts is out of the question because I don't have the faintest idea where to aim. The smart bet is on me getting my ass kicked.

One of them, the one directly in front of me, he looks down on me with his fiery red eyes, and then his arm lifts to his head as he pulls his face off. And right about the moment I'm ready to scream like a girl, they all begin to remove their hoods.

Their faces are like, perfect. Smooth, symmetrical. Angelic, even. They look like monks, with their shaved heads. Their eyes are brilliant blue, with golden specs—like glitter, almost. And . . . they have color in their skin. They look human. More human than I do in this place.

The one in front of me, he shakes his head slowly. "Jack Pagan."

Yes, sir, I said. I couldn't think of anything better.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" he said flatly, but with a kind of force behind his words. He looked back at the door, and at the *Book of Sighs* sitting in the center of it.

"Close it!" he ordered.

When a big human-like cloaked guy asks you to do something, you pretty much do it. I carefully walked by, letting them see my hands were empty. I don't know why, but I'm doing what Ricky says I should do when being interrogated by the police. No furtive gestures—that's what gets you shot. Let 'um see your hands.

I went to the section of the wall where the book was, and I reached into the corners to free the book. And like two oppositely polarized magnets, the book about jumped out of that keyhole. Quickly the large section of wall slid closed with a large explosion of sound.

The *Book of Sighs* in my hands, I walked back to them—these angry men—and extended my arms to offer them the book.

The one who was talking to me, he nods to another large guy who takes the book from me. And then they all stared at me for the longest time. I hope they don't like the flavor of *me*. I do not want to be dinner.

“I think I made a huge mistake, sir,” I try explaining.

Nobody answers. They just keep staring at me. And me, I'm old enough to know when I'm in big trouble. And this is it. This is like being at the principle's office times a million.

And then the leader, he says, “You have been lied to. Played like an instrument from the very beginning.”

Who are you? I ask. My hands are nonchalantly stroking my necklace . . . just in case.

There's no sense cowering down, now. If they're going to rip me to ribbons, there's probably not anything I can say to sway it one way or the other. Todd Steele says to play your cards like they're a winning hand, even if they're not. At the least, Steele says, you'll go down with some dignity.

“My name is Uriel,” he says. “We are all angels . . . and it is our job to keep things like this from happening in the Land of Sorrows. All of these souls here, they are waiting for judgment from God. They will have their time, when the End of Days arrives. And they will have their chance. But not until then. Their choices on Earth led them to this place. They have only to blame themselves.”

I glanced up at the giant flying monsters, “. . . and them?”

“They help us do our job. There aren't many of us in this place. It's not an assignment that many apply for.”

I caught myself almost wanting to smile at that, but quickly straightened-up.

“And the spooks and gatherers . . . what about them?”

He squints at me, not sure what I'm talking about.

“The shadowy things that pull you out of your chest? You know, with the knives and creepy little fingers?”

He nods, now understanding which particular monsters I'm referring to, “They are all parts of an intricate machine.”

This, I realize, is the *darker* side of religion. They don't sing songs about this in Sunday school.

“What you have done, Jack, is to go against the will of God. That door was never to be opened. That you have been continually lied to, and played like a fool, is the only reason your soul still exists.”

Where does it lead, this door?

“ . . . it opens a doorway back to the Earth plane that was not to be opened until the End of Days.”

So, what you're saying is that I've made a super-huge mammoth mistake.

“The other two *saints* who attempted to do this were dealt with by our,” he looked over his shoulder, “ . . . *assistants*.”

“I was told that I was the *chosen* one. That I was St. John the Divine's reincarnate. A savior.” I glanced around the group of perfect faces, “ . . . I'm not a savior, am I.”

Now it was this Angel, Uriel, who was almost smiling. “No, Jack. You are in no danger of ever being anyone's savior.”

They said that I was going to save all of the souls that have ever lived. That nobody had ever gone to Heaven. That's what they told me.

“Jack, look around,” he says. “Do you see billions upon billions of souls, just waiting to be freed?” He extends his arms, “They would be stacked to the sky, standing on each other. When you first crossed, did you not wonder where everyone must be? You're lack of common sense borders on mental retardation.”

*But*, I countered, I read the book. It talks about it in the book. I translated it word for word.

“Not all of it,” he reminded me.

I'm *so* busted.

There were pages cut out of it, I say in defense.

“ . . . and that didn't sound an alarm within you? Did you not feel as though a book with missing pages might be misleading in certain aspects?”

I shrugged. Stupid doesn't often know he's stupid.

“The missing pages spoke of the things one is never to do. And opening the doorway of Sighs, that is the biggest of them all. You were toying with a power you cannot comprehend.”

So, I said, is the *Book of Sighs* real?

Uriel nodded, “Yes. It's real. And there has been an effort to find and secure that copy for many years . . . many centuries. It was something that the original writers scripted at the time of Constantine to destroy the foundations of Christianity. They were bitter and jealous.”

Why would they do that?

“The universe is filled with many wonderful, quite unimaginable, things. And within that there is life. And life gets to make its own choices. Just like you, Jack. They were unhappy. They wanted the course of humanity to go in other directions . . .

“ . . . you make your choices, and you must live with them. Consequences are what guide our lives. This is the universe that you don't know. The magnificence and beauty must be experienced through trial and error. For in failure are the lessons learned.”

Well then, I said, I've certainly learned a lot of lessons. I will *not* open that door ever again. You've got my word on that.

I don't think Uriel finds me the least bit humorous.

“Tell me why you partook upon this journey?”

I thought about his question, and I realized that I needed to be honest with him and with myself. “I did it to find out who I was. I thought that Kristen was a part of that past. My missing memories . . . and I fell in love with her. With the idea that she was a part of me. They promised me my forgotten past if I helped to save them.” And then, lowering my head, I added, “. . . and they said that I was their savior. It felt nice to be special. To have a purpose in life.”

“ . . . you are not the same person you used to be, Jack. And your memories, they cannot be restored. They are gone, save for fleeting pictures here and there. You may stumble upon the occasional glimpse, but nothing more.”

I don't understand.

“Your life led you to your change. Your memories, and the past that went with them, they no longer exist. You are a different person than before. You are not the monster you used to be.”

Monster? What do you mean, monster?

Uriel walked closer to me, his charismatic eyes studying me like a unique object. “Your past is not something I think you should continue to search for. I believe that it is best if you focus on what you must do now.”

Who was I? I need to know.

“What you *need* to do,” he said forcefully, “is listen to my instructions very carefully. You have done a great injustice to the will of God, and to the flow of life through its cycles. Now you must make amends.”

Oh, no. Here comes the fire and brimstone stuff. I'm going to be tied down while little creatures with three eyes rub pig shit in my hair, and stuff pine trees up my . . .

“You are going to be given a second chance. A chance to make things right.”

How can I do that, I'm just a mortal? A mental patient. An anti-saint.

Uriel lowered his face to mine, just inches away, “You are not like them, Jack. While you are not a savior, you are also not average. You are very special. And you must use your gifts to fix what you have done.”

You want me to go and chase them?

“You will hunt each and every one of them down. All twenty-three of the escaped souls. And you will bring them back to the Land of Sorrows.”

How do I do that? Bring them back?

“ . . . you do what you've always been good at, Jack . . . you kill them.”

The shivering is starting to come back. The aches of my freezing body, they're—all of the sudden—starting to drain me. I feel sick to my stomach, and I'm not sure I even have a stomach in this place.

Uriel put his large firm hands on my shoulders, squeezing just enough that I understood that he wasn't *asking* me. He was telling me. “You work for us, now, Jack. You will be our agent on the Earth plane. You can do something that even we are not allowed, you can walk among both the living, and the dead. That is a powerful gift if used with caution and respect.”

I want to tell him that I'm the wrong guy. That I'm only five-months-old. That I'm not even licensed to drive a truck with more than two axles. I want him to realize that I eat frozen pizza and McDonald's, and haven't even got a job. That I'm too lazy to finish crossword puzzles. That I leave my shoes tied and just slip them on and off.

But I don't think he'd care about all that.

“When you need us, we will be there.” He looked at me, up and down, something behind his eyes. “ . . . you need to go, now, Jack. You're not looking so good. A little cold.”

I turned, trying to remember where the truck is with my body in it? “Ms. Josephine?” I call out. “Can you hear me?”

“ . . . back . . . quickly . . . not . . . time . . . left . . . ”

I asked Uriel, as my eyes glanced up at the large winged monsters perched on the wall, “If . . . if I turn around, are those things going to attack me?”

He ignored my question and pointed to my necklace, “You might need that.”

My arms started to pull to my chest and stomach, my legs feeling weak and powerless. I took a few steps and fell to the ground. My body is dying. For real dying.

In front of me was my necklace, dangling back and forth.

Uriel knelt down, “We can't save you, Jack. You have to do this on your own. You must live or die on your own.”

I took the necklace from around my head and tried to steady it in my trembling hands. I was shaking so bad, now, that I was the thing vibrating.

The angels watching me, I emptied the contents of the small pouch into my right hand. There was a large red centipede with about a thousand legs, several curled-up black widow spiders—

their red hourglasses clear to see. Some bits of a shriveled pink something, and a bunch of what look like tiny eyes.

This is, in case you're wondering, not advisable unless you are stuck on Deadside and on the brink of death. Please consult a physician before walking among the dead and eating bags of horrible voodoo shit like this!

I shoved the bugs and bits in to my mouth and found, to my surprise, that they weren't dead. They seemed to come to life, picking and prodding. Stinging and biting the insides of me as I tried to swallow.

And then my throat began to swell as their venom coursed through me. My breathing started to constrict until I got so dizzy I couldn't see straight. I rolled to my back, my hands clasped around my throat.

I'm dead . . . dying, again.

I'm drowning by my body's own defense systems. I'm killing me from inside. And that Ms. Josephine, somehow she's found a way to bring me back. By facing my worst nightmare . . . in reverse.

The burning pain in my lungs can't be sated. I can't breathe, even if I wanted to. My eyes are on fire, my stomach feeling like it's being ripped apart from the inside. This is the most terrifying thing I could never imagine.

I want to scream for them to help me, but I can't. I am silently dying, here on the Deadside. My new dead body is rolling around on the cold ground of the Land of Sorrows, for all to see. The thousands of souls, they're paying attention.

I am their lesson.

Their martyr.

Their constant reminder of what is *not* supposed to happen.

And at the point when it cannot be any more painful and frightening and utterly horrifying . . .

### ***OLD CITY WALL, DAMASCUS, EARTH PLANE . . .***

. . . I open my eyes, and there is Ricky, pressing up and down on my chest to circulate oxygen.

Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation! He's counting to himself, a syringe between his teeth that he looks poised to use. Apparently he's been alternating between shocking my heart and squishing me for the last few minutes. Probably a lot more traumatic from their perspective.

I open my eyes, and between the tears I cough out the words, “. . . it's . . . over . . .”



Ms. Josephine is beside me, rocking back and forth, talking in some language I can't even guess at.

And I realize, that Ms. Josephine beside me, she is the opposite of a spook. Ricky, working furiously on my chest, he is the opposite of a gatherer.

"Welcome back, Jack!" Ricky says, salty beads of sweat dripping off his forehead and chin. "I feel like I'm in some childrens' book," he miffed between breaths. "See Jack run. Run, Jack, run. See Jack die."

Ms. Josephine reached down and kissed me on the forehead. "You need to stop dyin' for a while. It really ain't no good for you."

I'm as cold as a body can get, even in the morgue. I don't know who I am. Or who I was. But I have the biggest urge to laugh. Maybe that's better than the other option . . . which is to cry. Really, I'm a total mess.

A real nut-bag loco.

My river of life, it leads to a gutter . . . to the sewer.

I reached out for Ricky's hand, and then took Ms. Josephine's, " . . . I love our dysfunctional family . . ." and then I passed-out.

## EPILOGUE

*MALLON PARK, DALLAS*

*2 WEEKS LATER . . .*

Ricky, Ms. Josephine, and I, we are all sitting at a pinkish purple concrete table that may or may not be a large turtle. We're watching a bunch of Mallard ducks teach their kids how to walk in a straight line. The sun is peaking out from behind these huge cotton candy clouds that are spread across the sky. Since my recent flirts with death in Damascus, I have made it a point to stop and smell the roses.

Ricky says this will most likely get me stung by bees, but I think it's worth the risk.

I haven't crossed over since I ate the contents of that necklace. I'm still a bit unsteady from being dead so much. I look at the world a bit differently than I did before all of this. The question of *is there, or isn't there*, a God . . . that's something I don't have to speculate about.

But as always, questions beget more questions. I find some answers only to be left at the foot of many more empty blanks.

When I told Ricky and Ms. Josephine about my discussion with Uriel, we all looked at each other as if we'd dodged a bullet. Well, considerably more than a bullet. Each of us had our own part in the blunder of universal proportions that we created, but there is no finger pointing. No blame. We are a team, them and I. Now, we look at the future.

The world, I told them, it's a little more evil now than it was before we got involved. Thanks to my incredible level of gullibility, there are 23 trespassing souls who have no business being in the Earth plane.

And they're not here to be good guys, either.

My job, I explained to them, is to hunt them down. All 23 of them. One by one.

Ricky asked me about Kristen, but I haven't yet found a way to tell him about her. I'd rather have him remember her the way I thought she was—this beautiful person from my past that crossed dimensions, fighting against all odds to find me. That's the kind of thing that a true love story would give you. And that's the way I would like to remember her . . . for now.

Because, if I consider what really happened. That I killed this girl I loved more than anything in this world, I have to ponder the kind of monster that I truly was. Maybe Ricky's right? Maybe my lost past is a sword that cuts both ways. I might not like who I was.

I did a little reading last night, about the story of Saul of Tarsus. He was a vile and evil thing until his conversion in Damascus. Saul became Paul, the apostle who made the foundations for a better world. He transformed from a monster, into someone who wanted to make a positive difference. He became good, through choice.

Perhaps I, too, have gone through my own conversion. Mine did not so much happen in Damascus, but culminated with a head wound that caused,

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

That's what those fancy, know-it-all doctors say, anyway. What they mean: my marbles got scrambled. I'm coping with my crooked brain.

I called to ask Dr. Monica about this, but the hospital said that there was no Dr. Monica Evans employed by them. And further, that there never was. I'm not sure what that means about the state of my mental stability. More questions.

Could I still be going crazy?

Doubtful. All my delusions, they're real. The monsters I see, they do exist. Late in the day, in those moments between dogs and wolves, if you think you see the shadows stretching a little more than they normally should... it might *not* be that you're hallucinating.

The spooks, they're for real.

The gatherers, they still do their bidding.

But what is our option? Hide? Pretend the scary things aren't actually walking among us? No. That is an untenable position, now.

Man up, or back down. That's what I say.

So to win back my salvation, I must track down 23 evil souls. This is my only chance at an afterlife. I work for the other side now. I'm not a tard-farmer, I'm a dead-tracker. Think of me as a bounty-hunter, or a skip tracer, or a detective... or even an agent. Yeah, that's it... an Agent of the Dead.

My name is Jack Pagan... I am five months and sixteen days old, and I can promise you: the things you don't want to see... they're watching you.

~ ~ ~

*And their plot to destroy the foundations of Religion, hatched in secret in the year 325 AD, it had not succeeded... not yet. But like all such conspiracies of debauchery and chaos, this story is not over.*

*For what none but a privileged few knew, was that the 23 evils had escaped the Land of Sorrows, exactly as planned. Through their persistence and diabolical dedication, they had crossed back from the land of darkness and shadows, to the Earth, exactly as is had been prophesied.*

*And this dark plot, born the exact same time as our religion was born, it is only just beginning. The days until the End are numbered. Steadily approaching.*

*And only the Pagan can stop them . . .*

*The legend of **Jack Pagan** has only just begun.*

*The 23 evils have been released onto the earth,  
and somebody has to bring them back.*

***Here is a preview of See Jack Hunt.***

A Jack Pagan Adventure

*A novel*

*by*

**Nicholas Black**

## **BONUS: SEE JACK HUNT - PROLOGUE**

*Their plot to destroy the foundations of Religion, hatched in secret in the year 325 AD, it had not succeeded . . . not yet. But like all such conspiracies of debauchery and chaos, this story is not over. Often, what seems like chance and fate, are merely well thought out conspiracies.*

*For what none but a privileged few knew, was that the 23 evils souls had escaped the Land of Sorrows, exactly as planned. Through their persistence and diabolical dedication, they had crossed back from the land of darkness and shadows, to the Earth, exactly as it had been prophesied.*

*And this dark plot, born the exact same time as our religion was born, it is only just beginning. The days until the End are numbered. Steadily approaching. And these 23 evil beings, who chose to go against the will of God, they are walking the Earth. And they are not on a mission of peace. Unstopped, they may bring about the beginning of the end.*

*And only the Pagan can stop them . . .*

***ADDISON CIRCLE, DALLAS, TEXAS.***

***JULY 10<sup>TH</sup> . . .***

My name is Jack Pagan . . . and I am now six months and seventeen days old.

I can tell you one thing for certain. One exquisite promise. The truth of truths. And that is that things *do* go bump in the night. The things you don't want to see . . . they *are* watching you. When people talk about ghosts and goblins, they might be joking with you, but I'm not.

All of that stuff that no right-minded person beyond the age of 12 would believe in . . . it's really there. Not that I'm an expert on this stuff. Hell, you could probably get better information by watching the *Sci-Fi channel* late at night. You know, right after *Lake Placid 7*, or some deadly giant Anaconda movie. That's when you might get to learn something about the dark world beyond ours.

Me, I'm just the biggest dupe in the universe. The most numb-skulled half-wit to ever walk among the dead. But then, I guess that makes me kind of qualified for this. I see things crawling around that most people don't.

Some people, like my friend Ms. Josephine, she can hear them. Voices from another place. Echoes of the dead and what not. She calls it, *communin' wit the dead*. She's kind of creepy most of the time, but she knows things we can't know. Hears things that none of us can hear.

I don't have any idea how she sleeps at night. I have a hard enough time closing my eyes when I know the world could disappear at any moment. But at least I can close out the monsters, if only for a brief while. Ms. Josephine, she hears them whenever they want to talk.

My friend Ricky, he says that we are gifted, Ms. Josephine and I. I lean more towards cursed, but that's a semantic argument. Ricky says that arguments like that are absurd, and just to accept our new roles in this world.

Our new jobs as trackers.

Skip tracers of the darkness.

As hunters of evil.

I'm not really sure what we are, anymore. I'm still learning how to be a functional member of society. And you can't talk about monsters with normal people. Sure, they'll smile and nod their head. You know, trade a story or two about something a friend of a friend of a friend told them. But the second your gone, they laugh to themselves, and you go right on the nutbag crazy list.

Instead of people saying, "Hey, there's Jack," they say things like, "... here comes that lunatic that believes in ghosts."

"... that moron that hallucinates."

"... that dickhead that believes in monsters."

So, Ms. Josephine and Ricky and I, we basically keep our secrets. No need to spook the neighbors. And that is really difficult to do. Especially when I'm looking out across the balcony at a guy a few apartments over who is surrounded by these small, shadowy creatures that I call, *spooks*.

He's just standing there in a pair of shorts and a loose shirt, probably thinking about his taxes, or his girlfriend, or his sports car. Maybe he's happy. Maybe he's sad. I'll never know. The wind is just barely moving, just enough to make it comfortable this morning.

In his left hand is a magazine or journal or something. I can't tell if there's a picture of a yacht on the cover, or if it's a big house. Something expensive, I'm sure. So this guy, this guy I don't even know other than passing him near the elevator a few times, he's just relaxing. Doing pretty good for himself if he lives in this place.

The loft apartments here are super expensive. If Ricky wasn't *ugly rich*, then I wouldn't be living here, for sure. So I just watch this successful guy ponder the fabric of the universe. And even though I don't know anything about him, other than that he lives two floors below me, and four apartments to the right, I know that he's not long for this world.

There are spooks all over the place. They are short and thick, hobbling around, black as the darkest parts of cold space. They're just climbing, bouncing around. They're hanging on his balcony wall, coming in and out of his loft, studying him like he's already dead.

Part of me wants to yell down to this guy; warn him. But it wouldn't make a difference. If the spooks are around, he won't be much longer.

This guy I don't know at all, he's marked for death by the surest thing in the universe: the dark little creatures that work for the other side. Ticket salesmen for the Land of Sorrows.

Otherwise known as *Deadside*.

And they're really excited today. Like they get a bonus for this guy's soul or something.

These are some of the things I get to see during a typical day.

This unsuspecting successful guy, down and to the right of me, he glances around, just enjoying the smell of the different flowers that have blossomed their new life and color this morning.

Crape myrtles, and roses, and morning glories, and plums.

There's even the slightest hint of jasmine in there. At places like this, they spend a lot of money on landscaping. Pretty colors and smells to cover the dirt, and concrete, and jagged metal. Lots of secrets are buried like that.

This guy, he looks up at me and waves. And it's not one of those jerk-off waves. He takes his magazine and just kind of points it out to the world as if to say, look at how good we live.

I wave back, knowing that I probably won't be seeing this guy in the hall too many more times. Judging by the spook activity that's just exploding all around him, he'll be cold as Christmas by the time the sun goes down.

I'll be reheating cold pizza, and this guy will be getting ripped apart by things more horrifying than anything he could ever imagine.

I'm Jack Pagan, and these are a few of the things I see.

Please read *See Jack Hunt* . . . the chilling sequel to *See Jack Die*.

Please leave us a Review for *See Jack Die*.