

THE STRANDS

BY

BRIAN WHITE

DARK  **REVELATIONS**
Media LLC

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ISBN 978-1-944830-01-4

Published by Dark Revelations Media LLC. For more information about upcoming books visit:

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DEDICATION

To my Holy Trinity: Gabi, Skye and Trinity, always dreaming, always believing.

THE STRANDS

CHAPTER 1

There is a thought that drives man insane;

*A system of logic that attempts to make sense of the
senseless;*

*And there is a strand that binds them, making sense of the
insane.*

Jonathan Romero threw his head back, the three Tylenol capsules sliding to the back of his throat. He gazed out his office window as he brought the tumbler of whisky to his lips to wash the pills down. It was early for a drink but he didn't care. The combination was meant to ease the pounding in the back of his skull that resulted from the frustrations of the past week. The project meeting he'd returned from was simply another example of corporate banality topped by drudgery, making the dark cancerous secret in his brain pulse with black malignancy.

He took another sip, the pleasant burn delectably scorching his throat. The whisky's smoky aroma brought out his contemplative side as he surveyed Philadelphia's historic buildings reflected in the mirrored faces of the skyscrapers that surrounded his office. At the center was the promise and hope of the American rebels that had signed the Declaration of Independence, the hall where the first continental congress had met, where the altruistic citizens had listened to the first ringing of the Liberty Bell. At its edges were the gleaming towers of commercialism that had risen in the wake of revolution, selling

the promise of the American Dream in shrink-wrapped packages for the sheep who could afford to purchase it.

He caught the ghost of his reflection in the window, his vision clouding, the scene changing to an unformed amalgam of images waiting to be formed by the creative instinct of some grand architect. "The strands of life spin and evolve within the infinite carpet of the Self," he whispered into his glass, taking another swallow. He felt the first hint of the warm comfort beginning to deaden the atonal requiem in his skull, caused by the tumor hiding within its depths. The ugly gray growth in his temporal lobe represented the reaper that pursued him, chasing him with scythe raised, and harvest time was coming soon—too soon.

But not yet. For now, the dull throb deep in his cerebral cortex compelled him to examine all he could, question all he could, learn all he could, before it was too late, before it was all over.

There was a knock at the door. He blinked and the city returned to its previous state, bricks and mortar coalescing back to their rightful place, the citadels of industry once again reflecting broken promises, forgotten ideals and lost hope. He sighed and rubbed his temples. "Come in."

The door flung open and Macaria walked briskly into his office. He brightened temporarily as he saw her. She wasn't given to cheerful emotions, but he saw the hint of a smile at the corner of her lips, which in turn made him smile. Then the corners of her mouth turned down as she spotted the glass in his hand. Stupid, he told himself. I shouldn't have let her see me drinking at work. He put the tumbler down on his desk next to the List. The pounding in his skull sent a spasm through his brain, but he pushed back, fighting it.

"I forgot we had a meeting scheduled," he said by way of apology.

Her eyes darkened with concern. Her dilated pupils examined him as if he were one of her targets, searching for a weak point—not to kill, not to exploit, but to assess whether he was all right. That cold and clinical stare sent a shiver down the fault line of his spine, and under her continued scrutiny the initial shiver became a full-on nervous system quake that vibrated through his body.

“I see,” was her only reply, but he could read the subtext in her tone and her body language as she avoided looking at the whisky glass. What she saw, with those keen perceptive eyes, is that he would have put the glass and bottle away if he’d remembered they had an appointment. He would have hidden what he was doing, not changed it.

“I have little to report,” Macaria said. “No updates on the activities of the Conductors. There is one fully dedicated to your research and project, but he’s not uncovered anything yet.”

Romero grunted. He’d not raised his hopes too high that the Conductors could find a cure for his cancer in the Strands, but whenever he heard another negative report he couldn’t help but give some dissatisfied reply.

“The other four are currently working on various other projects that are in their infant phases: a weapon that works by canceling out vibrational frequencies, a communication technology that maps sound waves to brain patterns, and one that I found intriguing, a tone generator that can manipulate emotions using various music scales and chords.” Despite her claim, nothing in her tone indicated any interest at all. This quick status update was delivered like standard corporate chatter, with no obvious sentiment. Is there anything that gives her pleasure? One thing. He cringed at the thought and waved his hand, prompting her to continue.

“These projects are still in the early phases so we are still assessing whether or not patents need to be pursued. Nothing filed with the patent office in the past two weeks.” Another brief

pause to give him a moment to interject if needed; this time she does not need to be prompted to continue.

“The Watcher has reported that he may have observed Alex reaching out to someone through a dream, but he can’t be sure. He caught only a glimpse.”

“Blake William?”

She placed her report on his desk next to the List. Her gaze lingered there for a moment before returning to Romero. “Yes.”

No surprise. No questioning how he knew that. But he felt compelled to explain his seemingly prophetic response.

“William became known to the Board because of his books on mysticism and the occult. He fit the profile of someone Alex might reach out to. To Alex he would be the perfect recruit because his poetry and writing could in turn influence others. Also, their psyche profiles are very similar. They are made for each other, Alex with his theories on mystical physics feeding William’s poetry and occult philosophy. They’d drive each other to madness.”

“You miss Alex”

It wasn’t a question, but Romero took it as such. Did he? Could he be honest even with himself when it came to Alex and their relationship? What it had meant—still meant... he shook it off. “Even if I did, that wouldn’t change anything. William has been placed on the List. That is what matters right now. My feelings towards Alex are irrelevant.”

Macaria’s eyes brightened, the corners of her lips rising ever so slightly. And there was the look Romero dreaded seeing on her features, the one that only arose when they spoke of death or the List. Pleasure and something even deeper—ecstasy? As soon as the topic of assassination was on the table, she began to salivate like a starving tiger that just had meat thrown into its cage.

“I want you only to observe for the moment. I want to see if we can use William to find Alex somehow. Keep the Watcher

focused on William; maybe Alex will try to contact him again. In the mean time you can physically follow William in case Alex tries to contact him by more direct means.”

The emotionless stare was back, the steak temporarily removed from her plate.

That black stare, clinical and calculating, brought forth a paradox of thoughts for Romero. For him the extinction of the Shadows was both a relief and regret. There was relief that he would not have to raise more children to embrace murder and violence as a way of life and regret that such a lineage would end. Strand Corp. was doing away with tradition as quickly as it could, turning away from founding principles to become a monster of industry. The Board, with its myopic wisdom, had decided that the Shadows and the art of assassination were remnants of a bygone era and no longer needed to be maintained. Macaria, the culmination of centuries of breeding and training would be the last and with her death would go the last vestiges of the ancient code of the Strand Society. Contemplating the actions of such a powerful and morally bankrupt corporation made Romero shiver.

But the world was moving on from tradition. The fact that Macaria was the first woman Shadow may have been harbinger to that end. Kevin and Alisha Tully, descendants of the legendary Jonathan Tully, had been capable of having only one child. They had tried unsuccessfully to conceive again, and when the doctor had finally informed them that having another child would be impossible, Macaria became the last Shadow. Romero remembered the first time he had seen Macaria. Kevin and Alisha were each holding one of her hands. He read the pain in their faces and wondered how hard it must be to complete this part of their oath. How heartbreaking. Romero wondered if he could perform his duty and take her from them. Innocent brown eyes stared up at him; she pulled away from her parents and extended a soft delicate hand to him. So soft, so beautiful, could he turn such a thing into a machine of death? Without a word spoken the

transaction was completed, the final Tully oath fulfilled and Romero's soul damned. All that pain and hardship meant something in the context of tradition and purpose but the Board had transformed it all to worthlessness. Now the Tully's pain, his, Macaria's meant next to nothing.

Romero was also the last. The last to give a shit. The last who cared or even remembered the credo of the original Strand Society: "To protect the miracles of the Strands and to enhance and support the spiritual evolution of humanity." The tumor pulsed. Who was he kidding? Even he was more concerned with himself than humanity. The Strands were a tool to the Board, and a tool to him. He'd traded his search for miracles for questing after world power and selfishness. He was now more tool than soul.

The silence had become uncomfortable, his ruminating deadening the air between them. He wanted to say something fatherly, something loving.

"Your father and mother would be proud of you for fulfilling the oath the way you have."

She looked at him askance, trying to determine the remark's source. It fit neither the present conversation nor Romero's normal callous, businesslike demeanor.

"You are the only family I have ever known." She turned from his gaze. "Are you proud of me?"

He took a moment to try and frame exactly how he felt. Loving her like a daughter didn't necessarily mean he approved of her actions. She was a gleaming sword that inspired respect but also fear. No matter how he dressed it up, no matter how ornamental he made the hilt, in the end he couldn't change its nature. She was designed to bring death. He couldn't bring himself to accept it.

"I'm in awe of your talents and abilities," he hedged.

"That is not what I asked."

It was Romero's turn to look away. He picked up the tumbler again, swirled the ochre liquid in the glass, and took another sip, avoiding the fire shooting out of her eyes. "I know. I'm not sure how to answer that question."

He pictured her taking out a gun, training it on his forehead, and pulling the trigger, splashing his brains on the office window, a bloody epitaph. He knew what she was capable of. But she only carried out his orders. In that respect he was responsible for the dark being she had become.

"You have done everything I ever asked. If there is any shame in it, it is mine," he finally said.

"That is only another deflection. Would you be proud if I were an artist, a surgeon? Would you be proud if I were the best at what I did regardless of what that was?"

He rubbed his temples. "My head hurts, I'm sorry. I'm not thinking straight right now."

"I would think a reminder of how close death is would bring out your more paternal instincts."

She turned away, clearly aggravated with him. Why? Because I'm drinking before noon? Because I wasn't a good father? I was never meant to be a father. Then just say that. Just tell her. She is the only family you will ever have. But he was too used to living with secrets, living the lie.

"Too true," was all he said, sighing.

Recovering his persona of the director of one of the largest corporations on the planet, he added, "Do not bring my condition up again while in this building. If the Board were to know their response could be catastrophic for both of us."

"Of course."

Without another word she picked up her report from the desk and left the office, closing the door silently behind her as if to prove to him that she had control of her anger and was not going to let his responses affect her.

Romero sat and threw back the last of the whisky. Staring across his desk, he picked out the name Blake William. Number two on the List, only surpassed by Alex Tannersly, who had been number one for some time. Going from Board member to rogue agent gave him the exalted status of terrorist.

“Blake William.” He spoke the name reverentially. This one felt different, felt dangerous. The rest of the List was filled with people whom the Board couldn’t discredit, or who had become a danger to them financially or legally. But William had no financial motives, no disputes over intellectual property that had been pilfered from his dreams or thoughts. He was a man who was comfortable staring into the abyss to see what it offered, seeking a dragon’s lair and hoping to find treasure there. And here was Romero, the dragon, protecting trinkets and gems that had long since ceased to sparkle or offer him any promise. He no longer knew why he was protecting them. It was just instinct. Hide it, protect it, kill it. The new credo of Strand Corporation.

The List grew shorter every year, filling Romero with contradictory emotions. For it meant that few came in search of the dragon’s lair anymore, the world preferring the glossy, neon-glarng constructed reality of commercialism, materialism, and passive consumerisms to the divine light of art, poetry and mysticism. As Thomas Agrippa had stated at the last Board meeting in his characteristically sarcastic tone “You’re a dinosaur, Romero, a relic, as are the Shadows. Strand Corporation is a business and will be run as such. Your contributions were appreciated but are becoming unnecessary and will be sunset upon your retirement.” This was the typical type of response Romero received whenever he inquired about new Shadow recruits.

Macaria’s devotion to Romero was the only thing stopping the Board from putting him on the List, and he knew it. They feared her because they no longer lived in a world governed by violence and killing, and had no idea how to deal with people of

that world. If they were to decide he was going to be “retired” early, they would take her first—if they could.

He looked past the List to the window. The Persian carpet on the floor of his office cast its spectral reflection onto the glass, hovering over the city. His perception shifted and he saw the filaments separating, spreading, and becoming the threads that created the carpet of the city, Independence Hall, Met Life, the cars, the people, all the individual strands that made up a small part of the fabric of reality. Each strand was thousands of threads, each thread millions of molecules, each molecule made of atoms, subatomic particles, on and on. The complexity compounded the deeper one went. Mystics went in search of that one strand that would identify the pattern, that one strand that would explain it all. It was this image, this comparison, that had given rise to the name of the conceptual framework of the universe. It was why when Jonathan Tully, George Mason, and others had come to America in search of religious and ideological tolerance, they had named their small group the Strand Society. It was a society that had existed for centuries in various forms knowing that it must transform and incorporate the ideals of each age in order to be effective. That belief in progress through change could ironically bring about its end.

“Christ,” Romero muttered under his breath, blinking as his vision returned to normal. The dull world came back into focus, replacing the glory of the miraculous. Its glimmering surfaces only hid the rot and decay that were slowly eating at it from the inside. And once the heart was dead, the façade would fall away and all that would be left was ash. The Strand Society had hoped to prevent that condition, when it fled Europe with its revolutionary ideas, and brought them to the philosophically fertile soil of America. But the roots of those ideals had been twisted into the credos and charters of Strand Corporation which strove to create and nurture this slow death.

The ethereal fingers of his tumor spread into his brain, releasing thoughts from dark subterranean parts of his mind that he rarely explored. Reaching down into the gloomy haze, they dug into the deeper tunnels of his cortex to trigger a memory of a concept he read about long ago in a book on comparative mythology, a theory that stated that all stories were one. That like the weave, they might contain seemingly different characters on different stages with different tasks and novel actions, but in the end there was only one story to be told, and that one story was as much a part of humankind as our genes or our blood.

Sages, saviors, seers, and sorcerers had searched the ancient places for this one tale. Fearlessly they went in search of that one strand that would tell the whole story, that would explain the truth. And once it was found, they realized that the truth had been in front of them all along. The story of the shaman, the medieval knight, the buccaneer, and the Jedi was humanity's story—the story of the human quest for meaning. It was this one story that was both the alpha and the omega. It was this archetypal story that took the questing characters from beginning to end only to reveal a new beginning.

Would Romero's slow death, and all it represented, mean nothing in the end? Was that the Reaper's curse, to reveal that his life was only another iteration of a story that spun on forever, heedless of anyone's efforts to understand or halt it?

Romero closed his eyes. The city made of intertwined threads glittered in his inner vision.

He hoped it wasn't true.

He hoped it was.

CHAPTER 2

In a tiny, cluttered room, Blake William tossed and turned, and dreamed of being William Blake.

The wind blew through the tall grasses surrounding him, adding its soft voice to that of the stream that babbled to his left. The two sounds combined into a unified voice that spoke the story of all life. He breathed deeply, momentarily content with the All, wishing he could hold on to that moment and expand it eternally so that the fear would never return. But the feeling was as fleeting as the wind, and the more he struggled to hold on to it, the faster it seemed to disappear.

Heaven was here somewhere. He searched for it in the brook, the grass, the hills, the dandelion seeds that danced in the embrace of the wind. With pen in hand, he tried to capture its beauty, hoping to reveal some deeper light that penetrated and moved throughout all life, but thus far he'd revealed only shadow: ink staining the purity of the white page, thoughts marring the perfection of Being.

The veil of illusion he'd peeled back had been protecting his sanity, and now he saw the world raw and dark, a gloomy, forbidding landscape that was home to demons that poisoned the mind. It was their venomous bite with its power to bring on insanity that he feared.

He closed his eyes, praying for deliverance. The air grew colder around him, pleasant humidity giving way to dampness and the stench of rot, and he knew there would be no deliverance today. "Not again," he begged as a shudder ran up his spine, shaking him to his icy core.

"Hello?" A mere whisper. A sound that could easily be mistaken for wind, grass, or brook and then summarily forgotten. William wished he could fool himself like that. Most men could. They could turn away, swear off drinking, and return to their predictable lives where the dead didn't walk or speak. But William Blake had learned that he was not a man. He was something more, something else; something... other.

"Are you the Blake?" The question held a hint of reverence, as if asking him whether he were the Christ. But the voice was also stronger. More Here than There. He thought the speaker was female but the voice was not yet Here enough for him to tell. In all his encounters with the dead he'd never been able to determine which party was crossing the ethereal line between life and death. Was he stepping into her territory or she into his. Would a spy on the far shore of the brook see her as a living person or would they watch in horror as William slowly became transparent and crossed into the gray limbo of the dead.

"I am," he whispered over his shoulder. Not turning. Not yet. The dead so rarely looked appealing to the living. Seeing past forms was a trick he had yet to master. Until he did there was his sanity to protect. If she did not beg his sight he would not offer it.

"William. If it pleases you?"

"William, then." Definitely more coherent, definitely a young woman's voice. It was tainted with sorrow and regret; perhaps she had died without having had the opportunity to taste much of what life had to offer.

"Names are such a useless convention. I learned that in death." She chuckled. "Or should I say more aptly, on this side of life. Do you want my name, William?"

He shook his head. "As you said—useless."

"I thought not. It must be so difficult for you, seeing both sides, knowing that there is no more hope in death than that offered in life. Makes it all seem so pointless when you think about it. And believe me, in death there is a lot of time to think.

That's part of the irony of the whole thing, you know. Having all the time in the world and yet wanting nothing to do with it. Wishing every moment that time would just end so that you could be released. Don't you think that ironic?" She didn't pause for a response, simply sighed and continued. "But you. You are a prophet without a voice. You can tell no one directly, what you see, because then people would think you insane, making matters that much worse. It's almost—"

He didn't want to hear any more. He'd heard the philosophy of the dead and it was more depressing than that of the uninspired living. He cut her off.

"Your purpose, miss?" He knew he sounded dismissive, but he was aggravated.

"Miss, is it?" She sounded offended, mocking his tone.

"I'll call you dead thing if you wish. Dear, sweetheart, whatever you want, as long as you state your business with me. The dead draw too long a line to my door and as you were so astute in observing, I am alive and for me time is not something to waste." The last cut her. He could hear the hurt in the sharp shocked groan that followed. He didn't care. The business of the dead moved too slowly for one still alive.

There was vehemence in her tone. He could imagine her biting her tongue, wanting to spit back an insult. "I heard you have a temper. Biting wit or sarcasm depending on which side of the insult you are on. So odd in one who has the power to speak with the dead. But I guess—"

He began to rise and her last words caught fearfully in her throat, a whimper of surprise punctuating her sentence.

"I have all the knowledge I can deal with at the moment. Good day."

He began to walk away, conscious that her eyes were burning into his back, sorrow and anger fighting for dominance. The dead could be obstinate, believing for some reason that the

living owed them something. In this case he hoped it was not death that she felt he was owed.

“Please.” A throat-choking whisper on the edge of tears; sorrow taking prevalence.

“What then?”

“I died a young woman. I’ve had more experience on this side of life than on yours, but fear holds me here, a prisoner to what I value. Illusions concern me; demons of my own creation threaten to consume me.”

He sat back down, feeling sorry for her. He felt a cold touch on his shoulder, attempting reconciliation. With her lips so close to his ear he could feel her frozen breath as she continued.

“In all of life I wished only to feel love. I died on a Tuesday thinking that true love would come to me on Wednesday. In every cloud I saw the promise of a tomorrow sun, a tomorrow love. It was always just another heartbeat away, until my heart stopped beating.”

She paused and he could hear the indecision in her silence. She questioned the point of any of this. Was anything real or true? She must have decided because she continued.

“Then I heard the dead whisper of the Blake, the one who sees beyond the grave. I felt hope, wondering if maybe he—you—could help. Certainly one who sees beyond death must know something of love.”

“I have shown you all the love I possess. You are searching for the wrong type of love. I don’t know what—”

“A kiss.”

“A kiss?”

“Yes. Just one kiss, a kiss that would make me believe, even if for only a moment, that love is possible.”

He turned slowly. She was sitting close. His eyes drank her in. She was beautiful in a way that stopped his breath: black hair, brown eyes speckled with almond that sparkled gold in the reflected rays of the sun, full lips. Without verbalizing his answer

he leaned in towards her. Her mouth opened slightly and instead of the rot of the grave he could smell the faint hint of citrus and peppermint. Her lips were even softer than he'd imagined, silkier. He seemed to melt into them, the heat of his passion emanating through every part of him. Leaning in further he felt as if he'd fallen into her; an abyss of passion. A light sparked in his brain and a warm flood of desire washed over him. For the first time in his life he knew what it was to be possessed by desire. He would give all to keep this feeling. All to possess such love.

Suddenly everything changed. There was a cold stabbing pain above the bridge of his nose. He pulled away from her and pressed his index finger to the spot, but there was nothing there, no blade, no hole, no blood. The phantom icy dagger pushed deeper, compressing reality to the tip of the blade. Somewhere far away a bell tolled. There was a fluttering, the sound of a thousand birds taking flight instantaneously, the buzz of flies. The ethereal knife was pulled back with a pop as the pressure was released.

He opened his eyes to see a man retreating slowly from him. The man dragged his left leg slightly as he walked a few paces before stopping and turning to stare back at him. Everything seemed sharp. The hum of the bees was symphonic, the grass bled green, dandelion seeds danced in the wind to the sound of a hummingbird's thunderously flapping wings. Time seemed to compress, the world slowing down, allowing him to observe the dust rising from the grass as the wind blew, the sun heliographing over the surface of the brook, scattered rays caught and expanded in the bird's feathers. Each sound echoed and reverberated as if the world were a concert hall capturing the music of life and replaying it back within the confines of this singular moment. And in the center of it all, out of place yet central to the scene, was the older man, leaning slightly to his right, observing him through light blue eyes. The man squinted

slightly, adopting a shooter's stare, gauging all that surrounded him and calculating its effect on his one perfect shot.

"However much you think you see, Blake William, there is more."

Blake William, not William Blake. He was addressing the dreamer, not the dreamed.

The man began to move, his right hand and fingers twirling within the larger orbit of his circling arm. Blake felt pulled into the gravity of this hypnotic motion, his vision focusing on the display as pinpricks of color began to emerge from the dancing fingers. These dots of color merged to form strings, then bands, and finally a rainbow-rimmed ring. The dark center fluttered open, a dreamer's lids opening from sleep. Within this eye he saw an alien sky, a dark tower, a desert dwelling, the colors dancing before him, unleashing visions of other worlds and other lives. There was another whooshing sound as air from this alien landscape was sucked through the portal into his ordinary world. It carried with it the aroma of hermetic knowledge: musty, aged papyrus and leather from secret tomes hidden from the eyes of normal men. Beyond that was the sour smell of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, and the sweet heady nectar from the tree of immortal life. Underneath it was an alien scent he could not find words to describe. It promised new revelations, a way of seeing the world that was so new one could not comprehend it and then ever look at the world the same way again.

Blake ached to launch himself into the portal. He began to rise from the rock.

The portal winked closed mockingly, as if saying, "You can look but not touch."

For a moment he was angry.

The man spoke again. "Not yet. But soon."

Blake didn't understand. He didn't want to wait. He'd been waiting his whole life for something like this. Now he realized that

in all the things he'd seen and experienced, this was what he was meant to find. And now, once discovered, he was told to wait.

"There is danger. Be careful. I will send you a message."

The man waved his arms again. This time a black hole formed and pushed towards him, engulfing him in its darkness.

Blake sat up in bed. Sweat dripped from his brow, his sheets damp with it. He struggled to control his breathing until his lungs began to find their normal rhythm. He looked around, trying to ground himself to reality, half expecting that he would wake into yet another dream or another room. That surreal feeling enveloped him, the dream clinging to his mind.

He blinked and stared at the clock on his nightstand. It read 5:00 PM in crimson digital. He'd only been asleep for thirty minutes but it felt like hours. For some reason, the time grounded him and he felt like he was back in reality. This was his real room, not a dream version of it.

The recurring dream had started out as usual, where he was the poet William Blake conversing with one dead soul or another. Those dreams often ended with him helping the searching soul with words of wisdom, or sitting and composing a poem based on the conversation. But this time it was different. In fact, the end sequence did not even feel like a dream; it had a much deeper sense of reality, starting with the extreme pain of the knife forced between his eyes. He rubbed at the spot, still feeling the pressure scar of that phantom blade.

He didn't recognize the older man with the limp. But he wanted to travel in the world the man had revealed. All his life he'd been searching for the mystical, had in fact made his living by narrating that search in books and speeches, but of late the journey had become flat, linear, and boring. He'd lost his passion

for the quest, feeling like he was stuck in a rut and could not gain the momentum to escape.

Lying back down, he stared at the ceiling, hoping the rainbow portal would suddenly appear and suck him into its vortex of mystery. He needed something to make him believe again. Without it he didn't know whether there was much reason to go on.

He wondered whether his friend Martin had thoughts similar to this right before taking his life.

He shivered in the warmth of the room, picturing his friend's face. No matter how wide the smile, he now sees the sadness in those hazel eyes. Was his destiny to be similar? Would the frustration of always grasping for something slightly out of reach get the better of him, sour into depression and make him consider the suicide option?

He gazed over at the clock. 5:02 PM. The thirty-minute nap hadn't revived him and there was no time to give it a better shot. He needed to get up and start getting ready, or he'd be late for the book signing.

"Time to make the donuts," he told himself as he swung his legs out over the edge of the bed.

What he wouldn't give to be enthused about going to a book signing again. Now it was just something he was expected to do if he wanted to keep those checks rolling in. Somewhere along the way he'd lost his childish pleasure at being a writer. It was a dream he'd had to work very hard to realize. Now that dream, even after its transformation into reality—or maybe because of it—felt dead. He wished it could be different. But that led him to his other favorite saying: "Wishing so won't make it so."

For now he put one foot in front of the other, hoping that the next step would land on new turf. From there a new journey would begin.

He dressed and prepared to leave, all the while remembering the man's final promise: "I will send you a

message.” If there was any truth to dreams (and he believed there was), he hoped the man delivered his message soon, and he further hoped that he was open enough to hear it when it arrived.

If nothing else, he’d had a Blake dream, as he’d come to identify them, and not a nightmare of his mother’s suicide. There was at least that to be thankful for.

Outside in the cold November air, his chariot awaited. New Jersey autumns were not as harsh as some, but Blake disliked the cold. His beat-up brown Toyota Corolla hatchback, sitting in its designated spot, shared its owner’s opinions. Of the many things Blake had become uncertain of recently—career, relationships, life choices—whether the car would start on a cold night could be added to the list.

Putting the key in the ignition, he muttered promises of undying love to the steering wheel, running his hand gently over its gnarled surface as he turned the key. The engine whined, coughed, sputtered, and finally caught. “Attagirl,” he whispered, patting the steering wheel, not feeling the least bit ridiculous in doing any of this, though he would not admit to himself the superstitious quality of the ritual.

He could afford to buy another car, but he took some perverse pleasure from inconsistency and the game itself. More than once he’d used the car as his excuse not to make some engagement or another. As he let the engine warm up, he contemplated that excuse now. He could walk back into the apartment, call Magix, and say his car wouldn’t start— sorry, but no book signing tonight. But the truth was he needed to get out of the apartment, needed to be around other people before he became a real recluse. For being a recluse was one step closer to parting with reality, which was one step closer to full-on insanity.

And he feared that more than he feared the small group of fans that would crowd around a folding table at the Soul Fly and ask him to sign their copies of *The Deeper Dark*.

It was the Mad Poet inside, with the strength of both nurture and nature behind it that he fought against. This dark ethereal persona slashed with razor claws at the deeper parts of his mind, cutting away reason while exposing the dark surrealistic dreams that made him question reality. It forced him to question whether he could differentiate the real from dream anymore. The belief that he could slip into a delusional fantasy world caused the fear he felt upon waking from sleep. Each time there was a moment where he couldn't tell what was real and what was dream, and wondered if he'd ever be able to truly distinguish them.

As he pictured Magix and Alma he realized that he was genuinely looking forward to seeing them. Small gifts. Another cross he could use to keep the demon of insanity at bay.

He shut his eyes for a moment. The rainbow portal winked at him, and he made a wish: "Let me see that other world and know that it is real." With that prayer he backed out of the parking space, turned right on Route 512, and started his journey towards the Soul Fly.

CHAPTER 3

Of all the things Romero hated about his job, the weekly Board meeting was the task he hated the most. It forced him to put on the corporate mask, bite his tongue, and clench his fists beneath the table as he struggled to remain silent despite his desire to add his sarcastic two cents to the conversation. The Board made him feel frustrated and beaten, their goals rarely aligning with his. He gathered up his presentation materials and glanced at the tumbler, tempted. Then he shook his head. You're on your way to becoming an alcoholic. Don't give these assholes the satisfaction. That's all the excuse they'd need to throw your dinosaur ass back to the Jurassic period.

Convinced, he left the office sober and walked down to the service elevator. He put his key in the lock next to the floor selection panel, turned it, and typed in his five-digit code before selecting floor A, the sub-basement. The elevator car lurched and descended. The doors opened into a dark area where storage cages sat full of cleaning supplies, bric-a-brac, the refuse of Strand-stolen inventions, and creations that had died on the vine. He passed these by and went to the end of the row, where another panel demanded his access code.

The door opened into the room Romero had dubbed the Strand Corp. Gift Shop. To him it was the most holy room in all of creation. The room reeked of aging paper, cured leather, dust and damp, combining to form that odor of ancient mysterious knowledge and promised revelation. What he loved most was its sharp contrast to the gleaming, antiseptic modern décor of the floors above. The room was draped in long shadows. A few bare bulbs glowed faintly, hanging from chains screwed into the stone

block of the ceiling. It was not the bright hall of learning one might expect; it looked more like a dungeon or tomb. Shelves were carved into the walls, each stacked with scrolls and leather-bound volumes.

Here were the greatest intellectual and spiritual gifts of humankind. These works were so inspired, so revelatory, that they had transformed Romero's perception of the world, of truth, of reality. Here were the real miracles of creation.

When he'd first been given access to the room as a means of making his way to the lower catacombs, he'd had to get over the initial panic the room and its atmosphere had conjured. Being in the room flicked a switch in his mind that placed him back in the abusive closets of his childhood. He'd kept those memories chained to the darkest parts of his mind, a chasm meant to keep the monster from rising to the level of awareness. No matter how strong those chains were, the beast sometimes managed to scratch the surface of consciousness, unleashing not thoughts or visions—no, that would have been easy to deal with—but the experience of those nightmare worlds, the smell of sweat and fear, convulsion, fever, starvation, the anxious anticipation of humiliation and pain. In that moment he'd been transported back to his younger self: the closet walls closing in on him and choking him, his hands shaking, the distant shouts of his father, approaching footsteps reverberating through the walls of his prison and into his skull. He wanted to scream, to cry out, knowing even as he opened his mouth that there was no one to hear, no one to save him, not even God would protect him.

The first few trips through the room of treasures had him gasping for breath and grasping for the shelves to keep himself from falling. The panic attack was instantaneous, setting his heart pounding. He forced himself to breathe deeply and put the monster back in its cage. He felt sick and dizzy, but gradually the miracles replaced memory and now the atmosphere brought

hope instead of fear—although now that too was beginning to dissipate.

The door at the other end of the room was the only reason most people came here. It was the only reason he was here now and was the only reason he'd been here for the past year. Thinking about that fact made him hate himself even more. Here were the true treasures of the Strands and he'd spent no time with them. Instead he spent all his hours keeping guard over the glitzy trinkets that passed for miracles.

He keyed in his security code a third time and heard the click of the lock. That click, or maybe what it represented, made his headache flare. Behind the steel door lay a dim circular staircase that lead into deeper darkness. "Christ," he muttered. Each step brought a deepening of the pain in his head.

The catacombs of Strand Corporation had been built by the founding members of the Strand Society. Their occult and philosophical treasures had come with them on the journey across the Atlantic. Upon reaching the new world and settling in Philadelphia, they had created an underground system of tunnels and caverns for the secreting away of both their society and what that society deemed important. First had been the library, or what he now called the Gift Shop, but then as war became imminent it was thought that further protection was needed. They had started digging and kept digging for the next fifty-plus years. No one knew all the tunnels. It was impossible. Romero was sure that there were still real treasures hidden in some dark crevice that had yet to be explored.

Next, they tasked Jonathan Tully with creating the Shadows. It was his oath that a person of his bloodline would protect the secrecy and sanctity of the Strand Society for as long as it was in existence. His family had been the spy and assassination arm of the Strand Society ever since.

With the beginning of the 19th century came new members with new ideals, and soon these members found a way

to capitalize and monetize their knowledge of the Strands. Strand Corporation was born. And so began its legacy of exploitation of both the Strands and humanity. Down here, deep below the city that had given birth to democracy, was where Strand Corporation kept its secrets. It was where the true work was done. The shiny, technologically advanced halls and offices above were a façade. Above was where project managers, designers, and engineers built products, software, pharmaceuticals, and weapons. But down here was where the ideas for those were stolen. And now Strand Corp didn't even want to be involved in development. They wanted to steal ideas, patent them, and then sell the rights. They wanted to become a shop of thieves, completely removing any pretense at creation. In business terms they were focusing on their strength, which was theft. The founding fathers of The Strand Society would turn over in their graves if they were to observe the travesty built upon their ideals. It made Romero sick to have a part in such an antithesis. Like the slowly boiled frog, Romero had entered the tepid water of idealism and then the Board had slowly turned up the heat until it boiled with the credos of consumerism. Too late he realized the Board's objectives and by then he was too weak to jump from the roiling pot. He had become just another tool and he hated himself for it.

Romero reached the bottom step at last. His head hurt badly, the constant thump on the steps setting his teeth on edge. He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket, palmed three Tylenol, and slapped them into his mouth, forcing them down his dry throat. Fucking Board meetings.

At the bottom of the steps the worlds started to collide. The Board had had the main hallways of the catacombs tiled, modern lighting installed, and special rooms created for meetings and research. There were a series of clean rooms, surgical rooms, Shadow training facilities including a gun range, and of course the Conductor cube rooms. As he walked down the hallway toward the boardroom, he passed other tunnels that still displayed the

original brick and mortar construction. These tunnels were still mostly unexplored. Any one of them could contain a Strand invention that could undo humanity.

He enjoyed thinking about this for some reason, a perverse thought experiment that ended with him saying, "I told you so!" while holding up his middle finger and waving it at the Board members. Someday some hapless visitor could take a wrong turn and uncover a black hole emitter. The jolly explorer would hit the big red button that says DO NOT TOUCH and the entire Earth would collapse into a singularity. Nothing. Gone.

He smiled at the thought, not really understanding why he found this so funny, especially since he would number among the dead. But he did. Yet even the chance of uncovering such a thing didn't give him the balls to explore. He could only picture a scene in which he was crawling on his hands and knees through the darkness, screaming for help, hopelessly lost. The architects had most likely created the insane complexity with this in mind, knowing that only the truly stout of heart would venture into unknown territory. Therefore, in all probability, the Doomsday Machine or the Kali Dance Disco Disk that lay hiding in this maze would never be uncovered, for the world was no longer producing the adventurer or stout of heart. At least not in his experience.

Two bodyguards stood in front of the boardroom door. They opened it as he approached and Romero could hear the drivel beyond. Christ. There was a time when I was a neuropsychologist searching for the brain origin of spiritual experiences, and now here I am giving presentations on stolen patent ideas. I really do miss Alex. The thought put him in an even fouler mood, if such a thing was possible.

He walked through the door into the Circle of Hell reserved for fools.

“Ah, Romero. Finally.” The voice belonged to Thomas Agrippa, an angry man whose every word dripped sarcasm and venom.

“Hello all. Sorry I’m late.” Even in his foul mood he was not in the mood for Thomas and didn’t rise to his challenge, or rather, stoop to his level. Romero took his seat.

“Certainly is nice of you to join us. Must be difficult for a guy your age to make it down here on time. All those steps and all. Could someone remind me who it was that didn’t want to install an elevator down here, arguing that he was afraid it might disturb some hidden catacombs and erase one of the mysteries of the universe.” Thomas smirked, almost drooling.

There was a collective chuckle at Thomas’s tormenting. All knew it was Romero the Relic who’d argued against the placement of an elevator. It was one of the few arguments he’d won.

Thomas was in the mood for a fight. “Who was it again?”

Romero was about to retort when Tim Farraday saved him. “Not now, Thomas.”

Thomas swiveled to stare in Tim’s direction, weighing him with his eyes. Tim was one of the few members of the board that Romero actually respected: tall and thickly muscled, strong in mind and body, and no pushover in any sense of the word. Even so, Thomas weighed his chances and seemed to decide that he could take the bigger man. His anger seethed, controlling his judgment. It was his Achilles heel and Romero was convinced it would be his eventual downfall.

Jim Farrell then gave himself up as a much easier target. In his nervousness he’d begun his arrhythmic finger tapping on the table, a habit inherited from his father, Jacob. Jim made the tapping even louder and more annoying when he took up his father’s seat on the Board. At times it shook even Romero’s calm. Thomas would tear him to shreds.

“Would you knock that shit off!” Thomas snapped.

Jim's eyes popped wide, his mouth hanging open, fingers pausing in mid tap. "Sorry," he said, shrugging his shoulder while moving his pudgy digits to his lap. A bead of sweat ran from the top of his bald head down the bridge of his nose and stopped on the swell of its bulbous tip, a crystalline pimple of fear waiting to be popped.

Spineless, thought Romero, as he contemplated punching Jim in the nose, his anger seething, needing a target. Blood had obviously not carried the strong character of father to son. Jacob had been courageous and intelligent, seeing quickly to the heart of matters. Jim was book-learned but lacked the passion or courage to do anything with it. If there was a weak member of the Board, he was certainly it. Sometimes appointments made by heredity became disappointments. But as time went on, bloodlines died out. And even those rules were changing, appointments now being made based on perceived wealth, power, and business acumen.

As Romero surveyed the room he assessed each member and decided that only three or four were worth their weight. Even in business, most were stupid, and if they couldn't rely on Strand Corporation they would be out on the street.

Jill Grey, currently the only female member of the board, took advantage of the silence that followed in the wake of Thomas's rebuke. "Could we please finish with status so that we can all get back to work?"

There was a grumble of assent from the other eleven members.

"Jonathan, would you be so kind as to tell us if the Conductors, Watcher, or Shadow have anything new to report?"

She was the only person who called him by his first name. He could not recall when people had begun to call him Romero forsaking the use of his first name but he was convinced it was when the Board members had decided that Romero the Relic was a pithy nickname that conveyed their disdain for both his age and

antiquated ideas. Jill had never stooped to the level of name calling and continued to call him Jonathan.

“Conductors have some projects in the infant phase, none of which are ready for filing.”

Dave Collins interrupted from across the table. “Just to reiterate corporate strategy, projects are only being researched enough to get them to patent. We’re not doing design or engineering research, or going down the path of creating anything, correct?”

Romero nodded.

“Steal it, patent it, and forget it.” Thomas added with his patented sneer.

“The new credo?” Romero said under his breath, barely audible.

But Thomas, still looking for a fight, caught it. “You say something, Romero? Why don’t you share it with the rest of the class so that we can all join in the joke?”

Romero grinned and he could almost see the time bomb in Thomas’s head tick down. It was now one tick from zero. Romero had ordered the deaths of many, but none would please him more than ordering the death of this man.

Jill pushed her way back in. “And what of the Watcher?”

Romero answered without taking his eyes from Thomas. “There is some evidence to suggest that Alex may be helping Blake William.”

That got the desired result. Everyone at the table was now staring at him. Alex, the Strand Corp. terrorist, had reared his infamous head.

“What evidence?”

“The Watcher believes he saw Alex enter one of William’s dreams with the potential purpose of giving him a message or trying to make initial contact.”

"You have sent Macaria to kill him?" Thomas pressed. "By him I mean William. He was put on the List a few weeks ago, if I'm not mistaken, and this further confirms why."

"No. I'm having the Watcher focus on him and have ordered the Shadow to follow him."

"Why?"

"Because William is the perfect recruit for Alex. A kindred spirit he could work with to get his ideas and agenda out there. William is a searcher and therefore doesn't really pose an immediate threat to the corporation. He could aid us in finding someone we have all been seeking for some time."

There was a communal grunt of approval at this.

"Very well. Proceed with your plan," Jill said after the briefest of pauses to assess his logic. "Anyone disagree," silence settled over the board room. "Good. Any last-minute items?"

"I would like to request again that the Board examine my proposal to have a new family take up the oath of the Shadows."

A collective sigh.

"Romero, we have voted on that," Dave said patiently. "The answer is no. The Shadows are no longer needed given our new corporate strategy."

"Were we not just talking about killing Blake William?"

"Yes, but only because we have a killer to hand. If we didn't have Macaria, we'd discredit him. Have him committed to an insane asylum, have the IRS put him in jail for tax evasion, use the Conductors to infiltrate his dreams and convince him of his own insanity or the stupidity of his ideas. These are much more creative solutions."

Romero did not like the way that Dave used Macaria's name. He always referred to her as the Shadow at times like this. As such, she wasn't the surrogate daughter he loved, the one he had raised, the only person he ever shared any of his thoughts and feeling with now that Alex was gone. But he let it go. Nor did he ask the obvious question: if these other solutions were so

creative, why did they not use them now? For all he knew they were going behind his back, ordering the conductors to secretly run black operations. It would be difficult to run such operations without his knowledge, but not impossible. The Conductors, receiving orders from Jill or Thomas, could storm into his brain and change events or memories that would aid in hiding such activities. Maybe they were working William in parallel, driving him to question himself, driving him towards insanity. To them William was a piece of meat, a number on the List, and therefore deserving of whatever solution was convenient. They might also see him as a guinea pig for their new corporate stratagem, a way to determine whether they really could drive someone to the asylum or suicide. In the end maybe he was the mark, the rest just an elaborate play staged to misdirect him and ultimately lead him to question his sanity.

“Very well. I have nothing further to report.”

He watched the rest of the members file out of the boardroom. Most had a zombie-like expression in their eyes as they calculated the millions they could steal. Just watching them walk down the corridor toward the stairs made his eye twitch. Finally Jill sauntered out. Her features were incapable of that blank look, her brown eyes intelligent and searching.

“Jill, I would just like to reiterate my request to continue the Shadow program.”

“Why bring it up to me, Jonathan? You heard the Board’s decision.”

Romero needed to be careful here. He trusted her only because he had trusted her father, and that might not be reason enough. “Your father and his father had a credo. And that credo stated—”

"I don't want to hear about the credo my father and grandfather enforced as members of the Strand Society. I know about their philosophy, their history, the centuries of secrecy as they protected their hermetic and alchemical work, collecting the spiritual treasures of the ages, coming to this country to hope their enlightened occult ideals could take root in the fertile soil of revolution. I know it. I know—"

"Do you? Do you really know it?"

"The Board is right, Romero. Antiquated ideas for an antiquated age."

He didn't fail to notice the emphasis she placed on addressing him by his last name. She was showing her alignment with the Board and their ideals. The game was lost.

One last chance. "The credo stated that the Strand Society would—"

"I've heard enough, Romero. Please do not bring it up again." With that she turned to leave. Something stopped her and she turned back to him and placed a hand lightly on his shoulder while staring compassionately into his eyes.

"Jonathan, you have been of great service to this corporation throughout the years. That is why you are tolerated. But this is not the society it once was. This Board wants to grow fat on its cows, and if you get caught in their teeth while they are trying to enjoy their meal they will spit you out. Be careful and decide which battles are worth the price you will pay." She squeezed his shoulder gently, turned, and left, her heels clicking on the marble tiles as she made her way back to the circular staircase.

With the death of the last reverberation of those clicking heels the catacombs fell silent. This is when he enjoyed being in the catacombs the most. In a city as large as Philadelphia, with the hustle and bustle of life directly above him, he could stand here in complete silence, removed from it all. It was the only place in the city he knew that could provide the blanket of silence

he'd longed for ever since he'd left the rural New Jersey town where he grew up.

He had only moved to Philadelphia because the Strand Corporation had hired him, in the dark days after he'd lost all hope of research funding by other means. The study of the effects of hallucinogens, particularly N,N-Dimethyltryptamine or DMT, on the pineal gland, and their relationship to spiritual revelation and near death experiences, was not a topic that had wallets flying open. In fact, it had more often than not landed him in hot water. But Strand Corp. was intrigued with his theories and his research and was willing to give him a large budget, private lab facilities, and willing test subjects. It was what he'd wanted at the time, so he thought.

As a new research associate he was not given the details regarding his test subjects or the true objectives of the program. He was told only that they were Strand Corp. employees that were interested in contributing to a study to determine if hallucinogens could increase their creative abilities. With such an unquantifiable goal there was limited success and he hypothesized to the Board that he may achieve better results if he could run employees through a training program that focused the hallucinogenic experience on more specific goals and tasks. He outlined a theoretical model for such training, relying on his previous research with DMT. It was soon after this proposal that the Board brought him into its inner circle, briefing him on the Conductors and their unique role in Strand Corp's business model.

Only the Board, the Shadows, the Conductors, and a few trusted others knew where the Strand Corporation's wealth of creativity originated. At the time Romero became an employee, the company had its hand in seemingly every industry, and analysts frequently tried and failed to learn the secret of its success. Where did it get all these ideas? What corporate culture did it cultivate to seed such a spirit of creativity and innovation?

What Romero learned was that Strand Corp. did not succeed by inspiring creativity in its employees it robbed ideas from the thoughts and dreams of others and then sold them as their own.

There was detachment to his memory of these events now, twenty-five years later, but at the time he was in awe of the library, the catacombs, and the corporation's esoteric roots. He was told the history and given some background about the Strands and what the Strand Corporation did. It seemed surreal, even insane. He didn't believe it. And then he met a Conductor.

He shivered in the warmth of the catacombs, remembering. How wonderful his first experience of the Strands had been. It was so terrifying yet so amazing, similar to the explosive experience of DMT, but beyond it in every way. He remembered the pain of those ethereal fingers thumbing through his mind, the pressure and then the release as one dimension collapsed and another expanded. He was in a darkened room, staring into the eyes of the Conductor, and then he blinked and they stood in a dream world with lush trees and waterfalls and strange creatures drinking from a pool of crystal-clear water. He could hear birdsong in the trees, feel the humidity of the forest on his skin, smell the sweet aroma of fruit. It was as real as anything else he had ever experienced.

"Focus on me," the Conductor said. "Remember the room we left." He began waving his arm, drawing a circle in the air. "Picture the room in the center of this circle. Feel the cool air, the smell of antiseptic. Bring it all back." The circle grew opaque and then a picture of the room appeared. The circle moved closer or he moved closer to it, he couldn't tell, but suddenly it was engulfing his vision, folding around him. And just like that he was back.

"Fuck me."

"Indeed."

That was his first experience with Strand opening and traveling. Over the years he'd learned to travel without the help

of a Conductor, but it was never easy for him. He had to have either drugs or a Conductor cube, and sometimes both. But just to know they existed, to know that what he saw of reality was merely what was contained on the tip of a pin, was epiphany enough. It changed his entire perception of the world.

He'd spent the next ten years training the Conductors, experimenting with various hallucinogens and methods to make their travels easier and loosen the knots of reality so that they could worm their way in and out of the Strands to steal the secrets that all people kept. He'd not thought of it that way then. Back then he had thought of it only as a project, a problem that needed a solution. He'd not thought of what he was providing or for whom, or what they would do with it. He'd forgotten the age-old adage of ethical scientists: "Just because you can doesn't mean you should."

And now, here he was, sitting atop the rotting corpse of the universe, protecting it from the rats and vultures that circled, hungry eyes seeking out a single morsel that once eaten would turn into poison and create an even deeper hunger. It made him wonder who and what he was really protecting. Was he in fact saving the vultures from the poisoned secrets that would ultimately kill them, or was he saving the Strands from the rats that would feed until stuffed with greed, tasting every miracle until there was nothing left but their bloated bellies and the resulting starvation?

He rubbed his temples. "Christ."

A cracking sound reverberated through the tunnels, disturbing his reverie. Was it a gunshot?

As he walked down the hall, he heard another shot and realized it was coming from the Shadow training facility. Macaria was undoubtedly pushing herself through some physical torment, as she often did. He stopped at the steel door and looked through the square window.

There she was. Black hair pulled back tightly in a ponytail, black halter, tight black stretch pants, a dark form moving across the floor. She was a beautiful woman, as she had been a beautiful child. She'd always been so loving towards him. She made him feel special, because to her everyone else in the world was a piece of meat, a potential target, but not him. She reserved any love she had for him and him alone. How could that not make one feel special?

She had set up a series of heavy bags, dummies, and paper targets. The heavy bags swiveled easily and had appendages that would whip around and try to attack the attacker. Deftly she moved through her self-designed gauntlet, flipping, punching, ducking, blocking. With each move she transformed herself—the snake, the monkey, the praying mantis—her muscles coiling and uncoiling in ecstatic sequence. It was a dance of violence. A gun appeared from nowhere: six lightning-fast shots downrange, six kills. Romero had barely registered the first shot when the gun was expertly holstered and the final test dummy had its appendages broken, the gauntlet completed.

She was crouching, silent, breathing deeply as if her display was nothing more than a stroll. No sweat, no panting, her heartbeat barely elevated. At that moment Jonathan Romero was proud. Proud of what she had become, proud that she was the best. She was death incarnate, a true shadow to life. She had spent her life in the pursuit of fulfilling the oath of being the best killer the world had ever seen, and she had succeeded. If there was any blame to be placed it was with him, for he'd directed the development and use of those talents. She could have been an athlete, a dancer, anything. And she would have been the best at those too. It was he that had created this shadow to life, just one more thing he'd corrupted as he'd lost his way. He loved her and regretted that he had ruined her life.

CHAPTER 4

The first thing Blake noticed when he walked through the large ironwood doors of what had once been a Catholic Church, was the music. Alma Vida and her band, Dark-Revelations, were on the Soul Fly stage, and the bone-crushing bass resonated in his chest as he made his way towards the back of the church in search of Magix.

The main hall, with its high ceilings, felt cavernous, its true dimensions hiding in dark shadow. Amber light cast from iron sconces danced upon the walls, each stone transformed into a glowing ember that pulsed with the music. This vast tunnel terminated at what had once been an altar but was now a stage. Red, orange and yellow lights played upon the performers rendering each into a twisting fluttering flame. Like many abandoned churches in Northern New Jersey, Saint Cecilia's had a dark past. The legend surrounding this church involved demons, devils, and deals. Magix had purchased it for next to nothing, as few wanted to invest in church property and fewer still wanted a building that was rumored to be haunted or cursed.

He'd named it the Soul Fly because he felt that it was a place where one could observe the soul of the world like a fly on the wall, insignificant but aspiring to be significant. This fly would live off the excrement of deity that the evolved left behind, eating the shit that would eventually allow the soul to fly free.

Magix was a strange man, schooled in many forms of the occult with a flair for the dramatic that at times was dangerous. He was a man without fear, who tempted and played with powers that were sometimes far beyond his understanding or

control. Blake had played the part of savior on more than a few occasions.

Blake had no idea whether Magix was attempting to be trendy or a trend setter, or really didn't give a shit either way and just did what he wanted, but the Soul Fly was a success because of its eclectic feel. Magix often tried to help people he called illuminated artists, whether they were poets, painters, photographers, musicians, or writers. It was not uncommon to walk through the door and find an art exhibit, a local artist selling his work, or a poetry reading. Magix had also started a publishing company. There was an ever growing list of popular poets and novelists who'd started their career here one way or another.

Magix had published Blake's first book, and hosted his first signing at the Soul Fly. Blake would always remember the first time he scrawled his signature under his printed name. The ancient organic smell of the stone walls and the pine floors, the vague fluttering glow of the lights gave flight to mysterious shadows that held secrets creating an atmosphere that encouraged such nostalgia. The environment offered his senses those sights and smells that had been imprinted with so many of his memories that it was impossible to come here without reliving some event. Blake could honestly say that a large part of his identity was tied to the Soul Fly, either directly or through the relationships that had been forged here.

Magix also dabbled in music recording, and Dark-Revelations was the first band he'd worked with. Three of their albums had gone platinum, one of which was a concept album that was based on Blake's book *A Mystic's Journal*. Maybe it was Magix's clever matchmaking or maybe just providence, but Dark-Revelations' music and Blake's writing complemented each other perfectly, and in the process made Soul Fly Publishing and Soul Fly Records a ton of cash. As far as Blake could tell, that had never been Magix's intent. It was just a coincidental miracle. He didn't burn the money, but it never seemed to be all that important to

him. That quality alone endeared him to many and especially to Blake.

There was really no central feature in the club. If anything could be considered central it was the stage. A few walls had been added to create cozy partitions or corners where people could talk intimately. In many cases these walls were specifically engineered to block sound from the stage. Behind the stage, a stained glass window depicted Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music playing a viola. The altar had also been the place where a Catholic priest whose ghost now haunted the place had killed three altar boys before slitting his own throat, nearly decapitating himself in the process. The legends and stories, the play of light and shadow, the mysterious aromas, combined to give the Soul Fly the feel of a place where secret things could be revealed and discovered.

Blake made his way to the right rear of the church where the bar had been constructed. Magix was tending tonight, serving drinks and gossip in equal measure, as was his way.

“Usual, Mags,” Blake yelled down the bar.

Magix turned and smiled. “Blake, my friend.”

A glass of Diet Coke slid across the bar into Blake’s waiting hand.

“That’s it tonight, right, just the soda?”

Blake nodded. “Just the soda.”

Like many artists and writers, Blake had experimented with alcohol to his detriment. He’d found that there was a demon waiting inside him, and once woken it had been difficult to control. At first alcohol had been a tool, but that tool quickly became addiction. It was the worst kind of possession, for there were few ways to exorcise that particular demon and fewer people still who survived the process.

Magix smiled and stretched out his hand. Blake took it, their handshake firm and committal.

“What have you got for me?” Magix asked with a grin.

“The Eye of Man, a little narrow orb closed up and dark, scarcely beholding the great light conversing with the Void.”

“Hmm.” Magix massaged his goatee, thinking. “I like it. Yours?”

“I wish. Nah, it’s the other guy.”

“That bother you? I mean, having that to live up to?”

“It was my father’s idea of a joke. He thought it clever. It doesn’t mean anything. You have a last name like William and your father likes William Blake so he thinks it’s a great idea to name his son Blake. Nothing more than that.”

“You sure? You ever ask him?”

Blake shook his head. “Didn’t need to. My father found his salvation at the bottom of a bottle. He didn’t understand William Blake any more than I do.”

Magix pointed at the glass filled with Diet Coke. “Seems you tried searching in bad places for revelation yourself, if I remember.”

“I know. You’d think after having lived with a schizophrenic mother and an alcoholic father I’d have known better.”

“That wasn’t my point.” Magix paused as if he was waiting to see whether Blake could anticipate his direction. When no reply was forthcoming, he continued, “My point was that you know how it feels to be possessed by that same thing. Maybe you can let it go and give your dad a break.”

“Maybe,” Blake whispered, hoping that would be the end of it, that Magix would stop picking away at that scab and leave it to heal.

But Magix was focused on the stage, waving his hand at the drummer in a let’s-get-it-going gesture and then raising his arms up in the air. There was thunder from the bass drum and then silence.

“Damn,” Blake muttered, seeing Magix’s game.

“Welcome, friends and fiends, lovers and losers, dreamers and despisers to the Soul Fly. Before me sits a great writer,

named in reverse after one of the greatest mystical poets of all time. His songs are not of innocence or experience. He is neither a daughter of Albion or Son of Los. What he is, is the culmination of paradox; he is the marriage of heaven and hell. The wild heart, the crazy mystic, the dark genius, the Mad Poet. Fellow seekers and searchers, I give you—Blake William!”

Magix raised his hands, pumping his fists in the air. Alma screamed from the stage, venting some demon call that only her vocal cords could produce. The world exploded around him. Magix was nuts, crazy, but one thing was certain: he knew how to push people to new heights. If Magix had told him this was how this signing would go down, Blake definitely would have made an excuse for not coming, but as the cheering erupted all around him he felt like a part of a much larger organism. That violent energy tore through his heart and filled him with pride, hope, and love.

Before he even knew what he was doing, as if he’d become infected by the crowd, he stood, raised his arms, and screamed as loudly as he could. It was swallowed by the increase in volume from the crowd. For that one instant he felt like a god.

He signed the last book, looking up at the man he presumed was Seth, since that was the name he had been asked to inscribe. He was probably in his mid-twenties. Long hair, tattooed. “Thanks. I love this stuff. Made me look at life differently, you know. Changed my perspective.”

Blake nodded. What could he add to that? Staring into Seth’s eyes he saw himself ten years ago: searching for something, grasping for it. He’d left his father’s house at 24, soon after finishing college. He just needed to get away. Get away from the memory of his mother and the alcohol-poisoned mind of his father. What he was looking for and what he would find, he had

no idea, but he went searching. No matter where he went, what he learned, what guru or master he entrusted his spiritual growth to, there was something missing. It just didn't feel real for some reason. So he returned to New Jersey and took odd jobs just waiting for that something. That something that would make it all real.

The search and the questions it raised plagued him day and night. Not knowing what else to do, he attempted a form of literary exorcism. He wrote his journeys down, analyzing them in the context of his overall experience. Telling his own story of his travels and initiation into various occult groups seemed to lend a purpose to the quest. He began to add references and comments from other mystical, philosophical, or scientific works, as if he were commenting on the experiences of some other great mystic and savior and not himself. It helped him to concretize what he had felt, believed, and experienced. In the end the exercise aided him in elucidating what was important about what he'd learned from the various mystics and spiritual gurus he'd traveled with. Putting it all down on paper had a way of making it real, making it feel more important than it had before.

And that had been enough. At least that was what he told himself. But there was always something missing. It was that one missed spot on a painted wall, that glaring white swatch within a realm of relative perfection that caught your eyes every time you looked at it. No matter where it was, you found your eye seeking it out, honing in on it until it became the only thing that mattered. Why didn't someone cover it up, finish it? Take five fucking minutes and paint over it? Because it was the only important part of the wall, it was in fact what gave the wall any meaning at all. Yet at the same time focusing on that small imperfection caused increasing frustration and sadness, feelings that continued to build until they became overwhelming.

He continued to write, not knowing what else to do, and in these attempts he gained a new understanding of the insanity of

artists and poets, for he felt the depression that came with frustration. Having visions, feelings, and experiences that spoke of a better and more beautiful world, but finding the tools he'd been born with were inadequate to express and share them, led him to a state of despair. Those rapturous experiences could not be framed or saved; they could be experienced for one holy instant and then were gone, their gossamer clouds evaporating slowly, haunting the mind of he who tried to give it form. As hard as an artist tried with paint or verse or song, they could not relive that moment. When reading the page, studying the painting, hearing the verse, one could only see, hear, and feel the lack, what was missing, the unspoken word that trailed each stanza, the empty space behind each oily figure, the silence shadowing each refrain.

That was the ache of the artists, their burden, the talisman and curse that hung from their necks every day of their lives, making them weary: seeing a world they could only vaguely share with others through their chosen art, knowing that even at the height of their greatness they offered the world only a mere phantom of the experience that inspired it. And Blake came to believe that the ineffectiveness of the body and its talents was part of the answer he sought; those eyes, those hands, had caged him. The tools that had forged his art at the same time forged the bars of his prison.

Seth pulled the book from Blake's grasp. He blinked. "Sorry. Spaced out for a minute." Blake shook his head to clear the cobwebs of memory.

"No worries. Thanks."

Blake watched Seth walk away, stretched his arms and legs, and decided to move to one of the central tables to listen to *Dark-Revelations*. They were probably a few songs from the end of the set and he wanted to talk with Alma before he left.

The stage was wrapped in darkness and silence for a moment. Then the bass drums beat softly, a tambourine came

ever so soft, high hat, snare. A sitar crying for a lost lover, bass the thunderous heavenly reply, and finally the peal of lightning from the screaming six string guitar. And finally, when the crowd begged for it and the music would die without its contribution, there was the voice. It was at once angelic and demonic, speaking in the tongues of all men, a cacophony outside of this one ecstatic moment where all understood, where all were one, a slave to the primordial beat that resounded in each soul, engrained in one's being like spiritual DNA. In that moment, out of this disparate patchwork of styles and tones, the world was made whole. The music called the stars into alignment, angels bowed their heads, demons cried at the memory of the face of God, and humans—caught somewhere in between—aspired to reach the heavens.

Blake was drawn to its spell, the music touching him in a way few things could. It worked a special magic, a release, a spiritual evolution, filling his mind with bliss, tearing away at layers of illusions till it revealed the secret face beneath. The rhythm pulsed in his brain, his blood, his heart, making him feel electric. Its prophetic promise of secrets revealed and truths uncovered made him shiver.

The first time he'd ever heard technical or doom metal, he'd hated it. And then he'd met Alma and she had changed his entire outlook.

Their relationship had begun with them in awe of each other's abilities. When they met she'd told him that she loved the way he could put words together to form a picture in her mind or make her feel some emotion so strongly. He in turn could not comprehend her ability to make music. Blake had always loved classic rock and 80s metal, but Alma had given him deeper insight into what music was. When he listened to her he exploded with violent emotion and he learned the beauty of subtlety. Alma hammered the listener with dark booming minor-scale rhythms that at first he didn't understand. It all sounded the same to

him—machine-gun double bass drum, power chord progressions, grunting, screaming—but Alma showed him that the genre’s formula was only the base layer, the foundation for intricacies. Once she explained how to listen, the music opened up, and he found subtext and deeper meaning in each song and its various layers. She opened his ears and his heart to new ways of seeing and listening.

Alma had a way of always doing this for him, constantly challenging what he saw as ordinary, peeling back the layers and exposing the beautiful intricacies beneath. No other person had ever influenced him as deeply. Of course she said similar things about him, although he didn’t see it. But they worked as best friends, finding something beautiful in each other that they could not see in themselves.

The song that roared from the stage now was titled “Neural Fire,” and was one Blake knew well; it recounted the story of how he and Alma had met. Alma had a special form of synesthesia in which words or language formed tones in her mind. A story would then become a song. Her songs reversed this process and told a story. “Every song is a story that flashes images in my mind,” she told him once. “It’s like a movie going on behind my eyes. It’s not exactly like that but that’s the best I can describe it in words. That’s why I’m a musician. Words only make sense to me in music and music tells the story of my life and experiences.”

Blake sat back, allowing the music to form images in his head. Dark-Revelations spun a magic spell that pulled the listener into the world they created. Blake closed his eyes, listening to each nuance, the sweeping arpeggio followed by a high-pitched harmonic scream, again, again, in rhythm, the music drawing him in. A void, an empty space, the world around him disappeared... and then came a soft whisper hidden within the shadow of the refrain. “Blake, listen carefully. We must meet.”

A new world rose in front of him. He was standing in a desert and before him was the limping man from his dream.

Behind him, far in the distance, a black tower loomed. “Blake, there is something I must show you before it’s too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“There is no time. Please trust me. What I have to show you you’ll want to see.” The man began to draw circles in the air with his arm again. Blake easily fell into the motion’s hypnotic spell. “Meet me at the Haunted Peapack Monastery tomorrow at noon.” With that a portal opened in the vortex created by his swinging arm and the darkness reached out and pulled him in.

The world slowly came back into focus as though Blake were a diver coming up from the ocean floor: the filtered light growing brighter, the aqueous haze transforming to clarity and bright sky. Blake shook his head slightly as if shaking water from his ears. Alma’s voice bellowed the last lines of “Neural Fire” in Portuguese and then there was silence, the lights over the stage extinguished. Darkness.

Blake sat up in his seat. Did that just happen? Did it really happen? What the fuck is going on? Am I going crazy? Is this what happened to my mother? I can’t tell what’s real right now. Where my dreams end and where reality begins.

Alma came over to Blake’s table and sat across from him.

“What did ya think?”

“Great.”

“You don’t look as if it was great. Your skin looks like ash. You OK?”

“Not sure. I’ve been having these weird dreams and visions recently.” There was no one else he could share this with. Alma knew the story of his mother and the fear he had of becoming psychotic. For that reason, she was the only empathetic ear he had. They shared the bond of those who had stepped to the edge, nearly fallen, and somehow been pulled back.

He recounted the dream that he had had just hours before, and the experience that had occurred during “Neural Fire.”

“Fucked up. But fucked up in a good way,” Alma blurted.

“How do you figure?” he asked.

“There’s an easy way to find out if it’s real or not.”

Blake just stared at her, waiting.

“You don’t see it.”

He shook his head.

“We just show up tomorrow at the fucking church. If he’s
there he’s real. Pretty simple.

