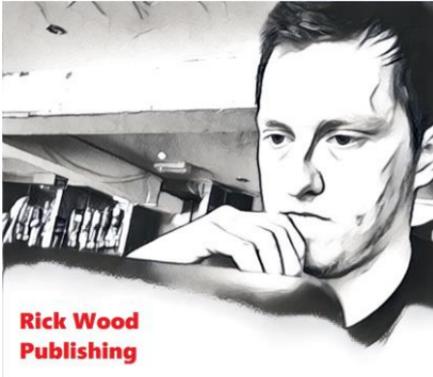


Edward King Book One

I Have the Sight

by Rick Wood

I Have the Sight



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For the ghosts of my mind that proved that demons
can be defeated.

I Have the Sight

1

December 31, 1999

He places a wary step onto the porch, cautiously surveying his surroundings. Taking in a deep breath of the cool night air, he takes his hands out of his pockets and tucks his shirt in.

“One needs to be presentable,” Derek had lectured him. “Whether you are meeting the mother or taking on the very depths of hell, a pulled-up tie and a welcoming smile are essential.”

Weeds entangle other weeds, consuming the cracked wooden beams loosely holding up the porch roof. The light above his head flickers erratically, teasing him with a moment of light then snapping it away. The wooden tiles sink beneath his feet; their strength having aged along with the house before them.

In this house is a girl who needs his help. In this house is a girl named Adeline, who stands no chance without him.

He attempts the doorbell and waits. After hearing nothing – no sound of ringing or footsteps approaching – he decides it is likely that the doorbell doesn’t work. So he knocks on the door instead. Four assertive knocks, equally paced, to announce his

arrival. Knocking in fours comforts him, puts him at ease; makes him feel calm, as even numbers always have.

The sound of shuffling grows from inside the house. He stands patiently as the sound of numerous locks and bolts are unshackled one by one. Once the nuts and bolts quarantining the house from the outside world are completely loosened, the door creaks ajar, revealing the tired eye of a woman. The eye, as small of a glimpse as he gets, appears haggard and downtrodden. There is a pronounced bag underneath it. The eyebrow above is bushy and unkempt, and the wrinkles of the forehead appear defined.

“Good morning,” he greets her, forcing a warm smile to his face. “I’m here for Adeline.”

“Are you... him?” comes the cautious whisper of the woman behind the door. He senses a vague tone of optimism in her voice mixed with its wariness. He recognizes that tone. He has heard it before in many other victims; it is the shaken voice of a woman at the end of her tether.

“Yes. Yes, ma’am, I am,” he assures her, and allows his forced smile to become genuine. Sure, his welcome may not be as welcoming as he would have hoped, but he already knew he could help this woman. He also knew this victim may lead him to the fiend he has been looking for. “May I come in?”

The woman urgently nods. She continuously nods with elation at the prospect of someone here to help her before realizing she actually needs to open the door. She finally tugs the splintered wooden boards inwards, allowing him to step over the threshold and shut the door behind himself for her.

She slouches, hunched over, peering up at him.

They stand in the immediate kitchen, which is a dreadful mess; dirty pots, pans, and mouldy remains of meals have taken over all the surfaces. The blacked-out windows help him realize why the woman was squinting at him as he stood in the doorway at the light that seeped in front behind him. In the corridor beyond the kitchen there is no light, leading him to believe that the blackening of windows must be a consistent feature throughout the house.

He takes hold of her hand in his and shakes it. She flinches at first, cautious as to what he is doing. But his soothing smile calms her and he takes her cold, clammy hand in his and greets her as he would any other human being.

“How have you been?” is the first thing he asks her. Adeline can wait. He will get to her.

“Not... Not so good,” she shakes her head, already welling up.

“I can imagine. The windows – d’you do this?”

“Yes. Yes, I, er... the light. It hurt her. She burned when she was near it.”

“Did she?”

He places his bag on the ground beside the front door and takes off his coat. “Er, may I?” he asks, spotting some unused coat hooks beside the door. She shrugs her shoulders and stutters over a few inaudible sounds. He takes that as a yes and hangs his coat up.

He takes a few steps through the kitchen and into the hallway beside the stairs. She follows behind, scuttling like a beetle, led like a rat to the Pied Piper.

He glances at pictures fastened to the walls. Pictures of a young, healthy, happy girl in her healthy adolescence.

“Is this her?”

“Yes... that was her. Before...” The lady looks away. Her arms quiver of their own accord. He wonders whether she has a condition or whether she is just cold. He can see his breath in the air before him.

He studies the picture for a few moments. The girl in this picture is smiling. She has braces, but they do not detract from how pretty or healthy she appears. It is just a picture but she projects happiness, someone who is not afraid to be noticed.

He looks at the next picture along. It is of the girl again, in a play, whereby she has centre stage. Her mouth is opened wide, as if a wonderful singing voice is coming out of it.

“Does she like performing?”

“Yes... she did...”

He nods. He turns his attention to the lady before him.

“So, Miss Copple. Beatrice. Is it okay if I call you Beatrice?”

She shrugs her shoulders and shakes her head uncaringly. “Call me whatever you like,” she answers, her eyes filling up. “Just please save my daughter.”

He leans toward her with eyes of sheer sincerity, placing a hand upon each of her shoulders.

“I assure you, Beatrice. There is nothing that will defeat me.”

Her hands clasp together as if in jubilant prayer and her face becomes overjoyed, forced through the tears and pain that etches every part of her expression.

“Can I meet Adeline?” he asks, peering upstairs.

“You can. But I assure you. What is up there is not Adeline.”

“I understand. Would it be okay if I were to meet – ‘it’ – alone?”

Beatrice nods weakly. Placing an assuring hand on her shoulder as he takes to the first step, he takes that as his cue to begin his ascension. He takes each step one at a time, slowly, taking in the aura of the house. Not only does it look cold, untidy, and unwelcoming; it feels that way too. It feels like this house does not belong to the people who live there. He feels a surge of evil coming at him, stronger and stronger with every step he takes upstairs.

As he reaches the top, he casts his eyes upon the closed bedroom door in front of him. To his left is what is evidently the mother’s bedroom, home to an unmade bed, evidently unslept in, surrounded by tissues hardened by dried tears. To his right is a bathroom, with a protruding odour that would imply that it has been a long time since it was washed.

Before him is a closed door, surrounded by cold air that makes his breath visible. He hears breathing – deep, sinister breathing. He can feel the hatred, the anger, the terror, all exuding from the exposed crevices of the door.

Without another thought he turns the door handle and opens the door slowly, shutting it behind him.

The room is even colder. Ripped paper lies strewn across the floor, and the table and chairs are broken into pieces on the ground. The wallpaper is ripped and the paint cracked. There is barely a part of the wall not covered in some form of Latin writing or demonic painting.

On the single bed before him, with ripped white

sheets stained in red, lays a girl. The girl's hands and feet are individually buckled to the corners of the bed. The wrists, heavily restrained, are scratched and bleeding. She wears a nighty, but barely; it is ripped and torn, revealing her pale and bruised naked flesh. She lays on the bed with her belly and crotch sticking up in the air.

This is clearly not Adeline. In body, maybe, but not in spirit.

It turns its head and lands its evil eyes upon him. The pupils are fully dilated, her face marked with open wounds and her lips cracked and peeled. It begins laughing. But not the kind of laugh you would expect from a teenage girl, no; it is a deep, crackling laughter that explodes straight through him, reverberating against his bones and sending a freezing chill down his spine.

“Hello, Adeline. Hello, evil spirit that dwells inside. Do you have a name, or should I just continue with ‘evil spirit’?”

The laughter grows louder. It is no longer laughing to disturb him; it is laughing out of genuine humour at the confidence he has brought into the room.

“Laugh all you want, demon, I have faced your brothers, and they were all far worse than you.”

“My brothers?” it speaks slowly, deeply, pronouncing each syllable with particular venom and mocking harshness. “What do you know of my brothers?”

“I know of one I fought in Bath last week, got hold of a nine-year-old girl. It squealed like a pig when I got it out of her.” He takes a step forward, snarling at the creature that does not appear the slightest bit intimidated. “I know of one in Devon a few months

ago. I removed it from a woman and I rebuked it until it cried. Tell me, demon...”

He stands directly over the bed, leaning slightly toward a face full of pure evil.

“What kind of sound will you make when I remove you from this child?”

The creature laughs again. “So you’re the one who’s come to save Adeline?”

“Yes, sir,” he speaks clearly. “Yes I am.”

2

1 May 1984

She was always there. She was there when he slept, she was there when he woke and she was there when he died. There was no escape, and his weakness simply served as encouragement.

Her first appearance occurred when he was eleven. He was riding his bike, chasing his sister through the curving roads of his childhood estate, laughing merrily.

“I’ll catch you!” he teased, eager to play a game with her. Eager to make her like him. But they were moving too fast. They were skidding onto the opposite side of the road as they turned the corners, such was their speed.

“Slow down!” he cried out, but the wind shooting past their ears meant his words were sucked away by the gust before they reached her.

“Cassy, stop!” he bellowed.

Thwack!

It was too late.

Blood splattered across the pavement and her body went rolling in rapid spins over the roof of the car. The last thing Eddie saw before the screeching car hit him was her limp body laid out upon the pavement of the road.

*

Eddie awoke in a state of confusion. He lifted his head up. He was not in the estate. He was not in the road. He was not next to the car.

He was not on earth.

He lifted himself onto his knees, feeling his head for cuts and bruises. Nothing. He had pummelled into a car at full speed and nothing. No pain in his legs, no marks on his skin, no weakness in his bones. In fact, he wasn't breathing at all. His heart wasn't beating and his lungs weren't expanding. He felt as alive as ever, yet there was no blood flowing through his body.

He lifted his head to look around and an overwhelming illumination hit his eyes.

He was in what felt like a box, yet he couldn't see the walls that contained him. His surroundings were white – bright-white, almost blindingly so. It was warm, but there was no sun.

He took one step forward and the surroundings dramatically dropped. The white dropped downwards, transforming into a volcanic pit. Beneath him the ground turned into rock, surrounded by dips of spewing, boiling lava, churning and lashing out at the side of the surface his bare feet strode across.

He edged forward, gaging his surroundings, peering with his head left and right. Stones beneath the soles of his feet burnt him with scalding intensity. He was forced to walk on the tip of his toes to avoid scorching the base of his feet.

His lip quivered, his arms shook, and the pit of his stomach twisted. He could hear cackling rumbling around his ears, yet saw nothing. Nothing was there. He was isolated; all hope had disappeared from the

world with nothing he could do.

The mound of stones fell from beneath his feet, plummeting him into vacant chaos. He flailed his frantic arms, reaching out with stretched fingers to clutch onto something that might save him from falling with the rocks that descended with him.

It was no good.

His scream was silenced by the lashing flames of the spewing lava he fell into. For a moment the heat consumed him and he was in agony, feeling every cell in his body die. The flames latched onto his skin and lingered there unnaturally, burning his arm to steak.

He closed his eyes in an attempt to endure, feeling the heat burn through every part of his body. When he opened his eyes, the lava had gone. He displayed no scars, no marks, no remnants of the fiery pit he had just been plunged through.

Around him was a grey fog, forming misty cloaks over faded grass. Dead trees hung like a mobile over a baby's cot, surrounding the graves, nature at its most sinister. As he lifted his head and his eyes fell on the words upon the gravestone before him, he recoiled in sickening horror.

CASSY KING

1975 – 1984

Gone and forgotten, never to be seen again.

His mouth filled with vomit and he spewed blood onto the hard ground beneath him. His hands instinctively clung onto the headstone, clawing at the words with the dead skin perched on the edge of his

fingers. He shook the headstone as if the words would disappear like an Etch A Sketch, but it was cemented to the ground and would not be moved. He dragged his nails down, hoping to rip it out, ignoring the trails of blood his hands were leaving, praying the eulogy would turn to dust. It didn't. If anything, it seemed to be getting bigger.

Shuffle, shuffle. The scrape of feet across pavement like a spade upon cement crept up behind him. Hugging the tombstone against his body, he twisted his head, turning to ice, his arms pulsating uncontrollably and his stomach churning a sinking feeling. A cold wind accompanied the scrape, flying the stench of death toward him.

He saw the girl.

She shuffled with hunger, feet dragging demise forward like a bullet passing through a chest. Her bare feet scraped the surface with every slow limp, leaving a trail of blood in her wake. Her long, black, greasy hair fell in front of her face. She wore a stale hospital gown painted with red handprints. He could see part of her thigh beneath the gown with finger nail scrapes left scarred upon it.

She stirred slowly. He could outrun her. Yet, he remained stationary, rooted to the spot with feet like lead. He was transfixed. He didn't understand why he wasn't running; somehow, she wouldn't let him.

He scrunched his eyes shut as she loomed ever closer. He felt her shadow engulfing his, struggling breaths hissing like her lungs were being splintered, a growl released with each exhale.

Her hands gripped his face. He flinched away once more. They were damp, cold, like stale ice, sending a shudder down his vertebrae, incapacitating him with

baulking pain, sucking each joyful memory out of him.

“No!” he strained to scream out but could make no sound. His voice abandoned him. Everything became consumed with an overwhelming sense of doom, firing him onto his back, taking the use of his arms, ceasing his grasp on the tombstone and leaving his hand grasping for help.

All he could see was her, over him, snarling at him, dripping on him. Her, her and nothing but her.

She inhaled him, causing uncontrollable convulsions toward her, raising his chest in the air. All senses abandoned him. He was empty. He was done.

He fluttered his eyelids in antagonizing eternity, feeling his hands bound to stone rope protruding out of the ground. His ankles entwined in vines escaping the mouth of the wench before him. She cackled; and to call it a ‘she’ is to use a loose term. Its form was beyond that of a witch; it was that of a demented, indescribable creature echoing the stench of malicious malevolence.

Behind the bitch was a booming laugh reverberating through Eddie’s chest. Its deep cackle penetrated his ribs, firing into his non-beating heart and expanding it against the restraints of his body. His head was hefty from the weight of a heavy headache, his hair turning into black spiralled roots growing into the ground. He put all his force into moving his head fractionally up and strained his eyes to see what was appearing before him.

It was a three-headed creature, exuding more manic and demonic energy than the black-haired beast that took on female form. In fact, that ‘female’

beast fell to its knees and bowed before this other creature, acting as slave to its master.

“My name is Balam,” roared from the head of a man, bearded and scarred with mussy, fiery-red hair, wedged between the head of a bull with blood dripping from its jaw and a ram beating its head violently against his body.

Eddie’s body shook with rapid, sore movements, consuming itself with paralyzing dread. He couldn’t move from his abnormal restraints that bolted him to the surface of rock, pieces of stone imprisoning him through his spine with unbearable pain.

“My name is Balam,” it repeated as Eddie peered up at its muscular, naked torso mounted upon a bear that spilt guts from his sharply fanged jowl. “And I have been waiting for you.”

Eddie’s head was allowed to peer up a fraction more to enable his eyes to fall onto what Balam had in its claws.

Cassy. A face full of tears, in a ripped dress full of blood. Her skin was bruised grey, vulnerably reaching out for her older brother, her arms grasping at nothing.

“Eddie!” her mouth opened to scream, muted by the rawness of her throat, an empty breath of air protruding from her tender lungs.

“No!” Eddie wept, filling his never-ending surroundings with his love for his sister. “Cassy!”

His eyes scrunched as he screamed, heaving on his restraints with everything he had. It wasn’t enough.

It all went blank.

He awoke with a shriek. In a hospital bed, plugged into machines rapidly beeping. A dozen doctors burst

into the room, laying him down, encouraging him to relax. But he couldn't, the image of Cassy was burnt onto the forefront of his mind.

He would soon learn that the coma that felt like minutes had lasted weeks. He would soon find out that his sister was dead. He would soon know that his chase on their bikes through the estate killed her.

He would soon have to grow up with the overwhelming guilt of knowing his sister could have been alive if it weren't for him.

But it would take him far longer to know what happened to her soul.

3

7 December 1987

Eddie sighed at his fumbling hands, feigning sincerity. Another day, another lecture; it got old, and he was tired of it. It was always his fault. It was never them. Never.

“And, you little rat, if I catch you thieving again, I will wallop you so hard you’ll go right through that soddin’ wall, y’hear me?”

He lifted his head up to his father, fractionally raising his eyebrows and keeping his face otherwise blank; purely, as he knew his lack of reaction would incense him. He was far too much of a hypocrite to dare teach him right or wrong.

“Please, just stop fighting,” piped up his mother, cowardly positioning herself at the back of the room.

Eddie snorted. He couldn’t help it. His mum was trying to make it seem like she had the balls to stand up to him, but Eddie wasn’t deaf, nor was he blind. He heard the fights pounding through the walls at 2.00 am as he buried his face into his pillow. He saw the marks on her face that she passed off as “nothing, just a little disagreement.” He saw the look in her eyes, the look that said she wished she loved him enough to stand up to the bastard she shared a bed

with, but was simply too weak.

They weren't the only ones still suffering from Cassy's death. They weren't the only ones who needed support.

"I just can't believe you were so stupid," continued the overbearing, prematurely bald phony towering over him. "To pocket a chocolate bar. A chocolate bar, of all things, you steal."

"It's not about the chocolate bar..." Eddie muttered. He spoke inaudibly, flinching with hope that his dad hadn't fully comprehend that he'd just dared say something to oppose him.

His mother edged closer and took hold of her husband's arm, attempting to edge him away. His face was getting redder and his voice was increasing in pace; in addition to this, he was invading more and more of Eddie's personal space by the second, breathing his alcoholic breath all over him, turning into his natural, intimidating self.

"Please, don't," she requested feebly.

"Get off me," he replied, raising his arm, forcing her off balance and onto her back. As she hit the ground, her head hit the wall. She stayed down, rubbing it, her eyelids fluttering.

"Mum!" Eddie rose to help her, but found himself shoved back down by the bulky fist of his egotistical dad.

"Dad." As if.

Eddie didn't stick around to see what would happen next. As much as he wished he could help his mother, she wouldn't let him; she would succumb to him once more, allow herself to get pushed around. As much as he would love to help, it just hurt more to

watch his mother cower in front of the man who had once been such a devoted father-of-two.

Three years ago, this man was loving. He held Eddie in his arms and Eddie felt secure. No one would harm him. Then, since she died...

Dodging his dad's swipe, he darted through the hallway and out the front door. His bike leant against the garage on the driveway. He leapt upon it and shifted into second gear, spinning the pedals around and around as fast as they would take him.

The wind pounded against Eddie's eyes as he built up speed. His hair was unwashed and unkempt, greased into a firm position, and it felt nice to have a gust flowing through the strands. It was liberating.

Drops of rain flickered in the air. Specks patted his face every few seconds. He stopped pedalling and allowed the downhill tilt to carry him to his destination, enjoying the damp security rain had always given him.

He dismounted and hastily dropped his bike into the hedge. He grabbed the gutter in his hands and shifted his way up the brick wall of a warm, suburban family home, taking the route to the bedroom window he had taken so many times before. All it took was one knock on the window and it opened, allowing Eddie to climb in.

His best friend, Jenny, beheld him, her eyes filled with concern. It was more than he could take. He gave in. Finally. The tears fell from his eyes, drenching his cheeks and dampening his collar.

"It's okay," Jenny assured him, guiding him to the bed. She allowed him to lay himself down, leaning his head on her lap. She stroked his rain-smearred mop with genuine fondness. She didn't care nor complain

about the grease of his hair that came off in her hands, she rubbed his hair back nonetheless.

She let him in the bed with her and kept her arm around his waist as he cried himself to sleep, never questioning or contesting his need for her help.

It didn't mean anything more than a moment of comforted release to either of them. Eddie was the only person in the world Jenny had trusted enough to know that he wasn't of the gender she fancied. It was more than that. It was a silent, mutual understanding that they had an unwritten knowledge of each other's predicaments.

They were outsiders, but they were outsiders together. In Jenny, Eddie found the family he needed. He found the sister he had lost.

4

10 January 1991

Eddie could see the perspiration dripping down Jenny's forehead. He squeezed her hand in his.

"Relax," he urged her, so quietly only they could hear his assurance. He smiled at her, but she couldn't bring herself to reciprocate. Her look was full of dread, her eyes conveying nothing but worry. He noticed her leg shaking and he put his hand on it, trying to steady it.

Her parents came into the living room with a tray and gave Eddie his cup of tea, and Jenny her black coffee with three sugars.

"There you go," her mother spoke gleefully, a smile planted across her face. She reckoned she knew what this was about. She took her place next to Jenny's father and sat on the edge of the seat in anticipation.

"Well?"

Eddie glanced at Jenny and saw her struggling to find the words. She began to stutter, then looked away to the ground, avoiding eye contact.

"Jenny has some news she wants to tell you," Eddie prompted her, doing his best to help, holding her hand in his. "And it's something I'm really proud

of, and she – we – are hoping you will be too.”

“You’re a couple!” the mother declared, clapping her hands together, bursting it out as if she couldn’t hold it in. “We are so pleased for you. We said it, didn’t we say it?” she prodded her father, who wasn’t able to get a word in edgeways. “Ever since you’ve been staying here you’ve been such a calming influence over her, Eddie, and we couldn’t be more thrilled.”

“No,” Eddie shook his head, blushing in embarrassment. “No, that’s not what it is.”

On another occasion he may have found this hilarious, he may have sniggered uncontrollably, told the tale for years. But not this time. It was just too awkward.

“Me and Jenny aren’t together,” Eddie consoled her mother. “Unfortunately, because of reasons you’re about to find out, that would never happen.”

“You’ve found someone else?” the unbearable fool interrupted. “Whoever it is, surely he isn’t as right for you as Eddie?”

“Please.” Eddie closed his eyes and lowered his voice, trying to make himself sound calm. “Please, would you just let her speak?”

Her mother realized what she was doing and nodded, faking a smile.

“Very well,” she confirmed, and turned her head to Jenny. “Jenny?”

Jenny sighed, closing her eyes. She pointed her face away from her parents. She took in a big, deep breath and, keeping her eyes focused on the corner of the door, she let the breath out.

“I’m gay.”

Silence. Vocal blankness so tense Eddie began to fidget, shooting looks between Jenny and her stunned parents.

Jenny changed the focus of her gaze from the door to her mother. She needed to see a reaction. Not knowing what looks were on her parents' faces was getting even worse than looking away.

Then she wished she'd just kept staring at the door.

Her mother was still poised on the edge of the sofa, but not with anticipation; instead, she was frozen there with shock. Tears accumulated in the corners of her eyes that she was clearly fighting, but they were there nonetheless.

Her father sat back in the chair, away from his wife. He looked emotionless. Whilst her mother was staring solemnly at Jenny with a face of hurt, her father was looking away, staring gormlessly at the arm of the sofa beside him, forcing his face to remain vacant.

Jenny urged them to speak. She mentally pushed them, wishing, desiring them to respond. She became envious of the rapid-speaking enthusiasm her mother had shown, just moments ago.

"You're..." her Mother tried, but as she went to speak nothing came out and her mouth kept moving like a demented duck.

"She's a lesbian," Eddie interjected boldly and confidently. "And I am so proud of her for having the strength to finally be honest with herself, and with others."

He prayed her parents would agree. He knew how much this meant to her, how much she required their approval. What they did in these moments were vital,

and something Jenny would remember forever, and he was afraid they were abusing that.

Despite giving them the opportunity to agree with him, to say something positive, reassure her, breaking her out of the despair they were causing, they didn't. They just sat there, in the same positions, unmoved.

"Can't you... not be?" her mother finally spoke.

Jenny's eyes filled with rabid tears and she fled out of the room, covering her face. You could hear her sobbing growing vaguely distant as she stormed through the corridor, ending with the slam of the door.

"I hope you're happy," Eddie spat at them as he followed without hesitation. He marched through the hall, out of the front door and found Jenny marginally rocking back and forth on an aged, rusty swing set. Her tears were still flowing and she made no effort to cover them. She never needed to, not in front of Eddie.

Eddie perched on the swing next to her, gazing above him at the evening air. It was chilly, and the hairs on his arms stood on end. He was crying now, hurt at seeing Jenny so distraught, and even more hurt at knowing there was nothing he could do about it. The cold air made his tears harsher on his face and he wiped them off with the shoulder of his t-shirt.

"I'm sorry," he offered. He knew "how are you?" wouldn't cut it, nor would "well that sucks." It was a situation she was so desperate to have go well and he knew how much it meant to her.

She gave him a vague smile of acknowledgement and returned her face to her solace. Her tears subsided and her upset manifested itself into a longing stare at the ground before her.

“I really didn’t think it would go like that,” Eddie admitted. He wasn’t lying, he really didn’t.

“Me either,” she concurred, not breaking her stare or changing the tone of her voice.

“I still love you,” he smiled, this time genuinely. “I know that isn’t the same, and it doesn’t amount to much, but... it’s true.”

She nodded. He reached his hand across to her and stroked her hair lovingly. With how close they were, he wasn’t surprised her mother had thought they were together. It was likely most people did. But in truth, he loved her like a sister. Like the way he had loved his sister before.

“Don’t worry, we’re going to amount to so much more than them,” Eddie announced triumphantly.

“Sure,” she snorted.

“No, we are,” he urged. “I mean, what do they do? Some dead-end job? Forget about it. We are going to do amazing things. I mean that.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Yeah we are. I’m going to get a job that will save millions and change lives. You’re going to, I dunno, become some activist for gay rights. And we are going to stick together throughout all of it.”

“An activist for gay rights?”

“Okay, maybe not... a teacher then. Or a doctor. Or something that matters. And when that happens, they are going to rue the day they didn’t respect you.”

Jenny nodded, gazing him in the eye. She really did love him.

“You’re so sure, huh?”

“No doubt in my mind.”

“Sounds great... though to be honest, I really

would just settle with my parents accepting me for who I am.”

Eddie pulled her swing closer and put his arms around her, holding her tightly.

“I know.”

5

20 July 1993

Derek was so excited he could barely keep his thesis still in his hands. Years of work, an accumulation of study, hard work and, at times, extreme controversy, were summed up in a wad of paper between his fingers.

‘The Relation Between Demonology Theory and the Evil in Modern Europe Today.’ A 119,000-word document containing research, experimentation notes, evidence, his hypotheses, first-person accounts; all together in a fascinating piece of reading he was hoping his mentor would be thrilled with.

When he first said he wanted to look at a strand of parapsychology as his thesis in his psychology master’s degree they had laughed, claiming there was no such area of study; not really, anyway. Now he was stood there, outside the university doors, with the result of his PhD in his hands that had explored the correlation of real-life psychological trauma and the paranormal.

As he began to fill in the cover form, Jonathon Kume walked over to him and gave him a grand pat on his back.

“Well, this is it, is it?” he smirked, feasting his

eyes upon the ring-bound piece of printed work Derek displayed in his hands.

“Yes, sir, it is,” Derek smirked back.

“I read the version you sent me, went through it all in one night... fascinating. Truly fascinating stuff.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I mean, I won’t lie to you, at first I read it out of sheer curiosity for such a bizarre subject matter. But the empirical evidence you have put forward and the depth into which you go, it’s spellbinding stuff.”

“Mr Kume, honestly, I...” He was speechless. He opened his mouth and audibly fidgeted around his words. The dean of the university was stood before him, endorsing the research that had initially been labelled ‘ridiculous hippy bullshit.’

“I can’t believe you even read it, never mind appreciated it; it means so much.”

“In fact, do you have a minute?” He opened his office door and gestured Derek inside.

“Of course, Mr Kume, of course I have a minute.”

“Please, call me Jonathon. It makes sense, seeing as we are going to be working together.”

Derek’s face turned to utter confusion as he slowly lowered himself to the seat beside the desk, watching Jonathon make his way to his side of the desk, returning a knowing smirk in Derek’s direction.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Derek, I want to fund you and your research.”

“Really? You mean you want me to do some tutoring here?”

“Not just tutoring. I am going to fund you in setting up your own parapsychology department. We

will offer it as a course; limited numbers in the first year of course, just as we get it off the ground. You will be able to employ someone else to carry out your research and will be eligible to apply for grants for particularly interesting projects, same way any other department would.”

Derek could barely move, yet was tirelessly giddy at the same time. He was rooted to the spot, yet shaking with delight. His own department? His own students? Funding for his own research? It was beyond a dream, beyond what he had ever aspired to.

“I was just so fascinated with your research, Derek, and I want to see what else you can find. Assuming you’re on board, yes?”

“Why, of course! Not even a question! I can’t believe this, Mr Kume, I –”

“Jonathon.”

“Jonathon, sorry. I can’t believe this.”

Jonathon held out his hand and Derek took it firmly, grasping it in a confident handshake.

“It’s a pleasure, Derek. An absolute pleasure.”

6

1 May 1995

Eddie awoke and instinctively hit an irritating twitch on his face. Looking at the hand he had just swiped himself with, he found that it was ants. He hit his face harder, wiping them away, before looking down and realising his face was plastered against an ant hill. Leaning up, he surveyed the area. The lawn, an open front door to the house behind him.

“Damn it,” he muttered to himself with agitation. He clambered onto his knees and shook his head. Before he could sneak back to his bed, Jenny appeared in the doorway with a huge smirk across her face.

“Sleep-walking again?” she asked, wearing nothing but a shirt that glided off the curves of her body in a goddess-like way.

“Looks like it.” He spoke to the ground as he stood, bashing the dirt off his hands. Still, they remained covered in soil, so he rubbed them against his pyjama shorts; an item of clothing he was glad he chose to wear last night considering where he woke up.

Lacy appeared behind Jenny, slipping her arms around her girlfriend’s waist and giving her a gentle

kiss on the cheek. As soon as she saw Eddie gathering himself in the front garden, she chuckled uncontrollably.

“Yeah, yeah...” Eddie directed to the ground as he wobbled drearily back into the house and sat himself down in the kitchen.

“Don’t know how you did it,” Jenny declared, locking the front door and following Eddie into the kitchen, her hand in Lacy’s. “We had it locked, bolted, everything. How you manage to do that in your sleep...”

Eddie pretended to ignore the ridicule, pouring Coco-Pops into his bowl to find a mere spoonful come falling out.

“Why don’t we have any Coco-Pops?”

“We?” Jenny shot him an inquisitive look.

“Perhaps you can diss our cereal choices when it’s us sleeping on your sofa bed every night,” Lacy backed her partner up. “Speaking of which, not that I know living with lesbians is probably every guy’s deepest fantasy, but we have just moved in together. And you’re kinda shitting on that. When are you getting a job and your own place?”

Jenny and Lacy both shot him the same look. He had gotten used to that look. He grew up with that look. He remembered when they were sixteen years old, suggesting to Jenny they should nick a few beers from the minifridge hidden in her dad’s garage. It was the same look she wore then in 1989 that she wore as she leant against the stove in 1995; and somehow, since meeting Lacy a year ago, she had managed to learn to put the exact same look on her face too.

He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. He repressed a fart, feeling that an unwelcome guest

should not release such a thing.

“Seriously, guys, of all days, why today?” They both looked away uncomfortably. Their breakfast was eaten in silence.

*

The rain hit Eddie’s skin hard, merging into particles of liquid that engulfed his vision until he couldn’t see. He rubbed his eyes, adamantly pushing the water out of his vision. He wasn’t going to let the rain deter him. Not today.

Putting up his hood so as to avoid the weather that attacked him so violently, he slipped his hands into his pockets and traipsed down the path. He knew the route well. Half-way down the path and four graves to his left. That is where he stopped and knelt.

He stroked his hand down the tombstone.

CASSY KING
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN
1976-1984

A tear accumulated in the corner of his eye and got lost in the rain. He closed his eyes and bowed his head. He took a moment of silence.

A moment of silence was never enough.

He lifted the stale flower being destroyed by pelting water and crushed it in his hand, picturing what she would look like now. She’d had long, auburn hair that would have only grown to accentuate her cutely petite facial features so well. She would have been beautiful. Scrap that; she would have been stunning. A knockout.

Now she was just ashes. Dust in your hand.

He felt responsible. He felt guilty. He was the one chasing her on the bike. He was the one who encouraged her to go faster. So much so when he finally realised what could happen, his words got lost in the wind and it was too late.

Eleven years without her. Eleven years that ruined his adolescence, tore apart his family, and left him with an empty space in his heart. Eleven years in which he had become a twenty-year-old without a home and a shitty, meaningless job.

Not only could her life have ended up different, so could his.

After glancing at his watch, he understood his time was up. Another year gone by; another year without her. Time for his doctor's appointment. Time to put on a brave face.

Time to put on the mask the rest of the world sees.

7

Eddie perched blankly on the edge of the chair. With every passing year would come the annual renewal of his antidepressants; it was always the same time of year, and always coincided with the anniversary of his sister's death, which is probably why he always associated such negative feelings with it. They would check his blood pressure, listen to his heart, and talk monotonously at him before signing him off on another year of emotion-killing pills.

It's amazing how they even remember my name, he contemplated, realizing it would appear on the computer screen.

The point of this repetitive check-up was lost on him. What would be the worst that could happen if his blood or heart was affected? He died? So what? Death would be a welcome friend he would greet with a pat on the back.

“And how are you feeling in yourself, Eddie?”

“Oh, fine, Doctor,” he lied, knowing if he said anything different they would likely section him, or increase his medication. As much as he hated them, he still wanted to feel some of his emotions, and if they upped his dose of Prozac any further it would likely numb him completely.

Though maybe that would be nice, to not feel... No shame about living on his friend's sofa, no sense of loss for his missing sister, no overpowering

solitude plaguing his mind night after night.

He trudged away from the health centre, prescription in hand. The rain had subsided and the sun poked between two stingy clouds, almost as if it was Cassy speaking back to him from above. He hadn't even started his day at work and already he was soaked through. His hair turned crispy as the rain-water dried, and his shirt and trousers were heavy with damp.

His foot had barely placed itself over the threshold of the mundane office building when his boss, Larry, requested his presence in his office. Larry stood by the door with the stance he thought was so authoritative; with his arms folded, but with one hand pointed up and resting on his chin, watching over his office of worker bees, thinking he was the big man overseeing a large group of people who all thought he was a God; when in truth, they all thought he was an arsehole.

“Take a seat, Eddie, Edmuno, the Edatron,” Larry instructed as Eddie dragged his feet through the office door and onto the wooden chair sitting opposite Larry's desk. Larry sat back in his large, no-expense-spared leather office seat.

Eddie looked around the office. Trophies adorned the shelves, but no pictures of family. Eddie peered closer at the trophy nearest to him. It was for fourth place in a contest at sports day he had won as a child.

“Is it raining outside then, Eddieboy?” Larry enquired, surveying Eddie's dishevelled appearance.

“Mm.” Eddie nodded, not quite sure how to dignify such a ridiculous question with an answer.

“Listen, I need to talk to you Ed. Can I call you Ed?”

Eddie rubbed his sinus, momentarily closing his eyes, assembling the energy to give a shit. “Sure.”

“Great, Ed.” Larry shifted in his seat, clasping his fingers together and leaning toward Eddie like a bad therapist might. “Listen, we are currently going through some major issueromees in the company, as I am sure you are aware. We’re all here like, oh man, how are we going to fix this cadoodle? Some major overhauls have had to be endured, in order to keep the company above board. We are losing greens, dosh, brass tacks, and, let’s be frank, we are in danger of going under. Undermundo. Underastic. You are aware of this, yes?”

Eddie shrugged. He was sure he’d heard it at one point, he just hadn’t cared. All that filled his mind were the words *my God, you are such a tool*.

“Great, well, you see, as such we are having to cut some losses. Snip -snip, Ed, you see? This involves us having to make some expendable resources expendable. Unfortunately, my friend, you are one of those expendable resources.”

“What?” Eddie rubbed his hand over his forehead and through his hair. It felt like Larry was taking forever to get to his point.

“Ed, we are prepared to offer you a redundancy package that we feel is, well, generous. Unfortunately, that is our only option, and we are going to have to part ways. Apologies.”

Eddie looked back blankly at his poor excuse for a boss. He didn’t react. He knew it was him. He knew if anyone was going to be sacked, it would be him. He was tempted to shout that. Shout out, “Hey, guys, guess what? The biggest asshole here has fired the second-biggest asshole here!”

But he didn't. Instead, he returned a gormless stare back at Larry. He didn't move, he didn't blink, he didn't speak. He just zoned out, numbed all emotions, numbed any panic, numbed his mind. Wished he had been given some more of that Prozac afterall.

Breaking the awkward silence, Eddie stood, picked up his bag and turned on his heel. Without looking back, he exited the office, the room, and then the building. He didn't look back.

As he left the office, he checked his phone. He had a message from his housemates, Jenny and Lacy. They had signed up to adopt a child. They knew it wasn't a complete possibility yet, but they had put their name down. Followed by their new house together, one Eddie would not be able to be a part of.

He conveniently dropped his phone on the ground, followed by his bag, and just began running.

8

It was the bridge Eddie had always imagined ending things on. It was a suspension bridge, adjoining two parts of Bristol. Beneath was a big drop. If he aimed to the side, he could land on the surface, hopefully on his head, severely damaging his brain and snapping his neck, leaving him deceased for definite.

Or, there was the water directly below him. He couldn't swim, so he would surely drown. He wasn't sure which would be most painless. Either way, it would be over in minutes. Everything, all of it, over, done.

The sweet release he craved gawked back at him at the edge of his fingertips. He was so close; his dry mouth could almost taste the end. The sound of cars motoring behind him grew faint beneath the *boom, boom* of his heart thumping at his chest.

His right foot gently pressed itself against the ledge, feeling it buckle slightly. With a few more ascending steps, he found himself hovering on the top of the fence, beholding the deathly drop below him.

He was so close now. Just one movement and that was it, it was done, he would exist no more.

Cars sped past him, a few honking their horns, very few caring enough to stop; though one or two did. From behind him, he heard a woman shout: "What are you doing?"

He didn't care. He let the words get lost. They

couldn't stop him now.

The water that would complete the drop was so distant he couldn't even see the ripples. It was surely freezing. If drowning didn't kill him, the cold would.

His eyes closed.

"Stop!" came from a stranger behind him. A man's voice.

Eddie glanced over his shoulder. He didn't get a good look at the person, but he saw a police uniform. The officer was stood a few metres away, reaching his hand out, edging closer with each precariously placed step.

"Stop moving closer!" Eddie cried out.

How on earth had the police gotten there already? He had planned to be dead and gone before the police had any chance. They must have been driving past.

"Okay, I'll stop. But you've got to come down from there, son."

Son? He was nobody's son.

He vigorously shook his head, taking a deep inhale of breath.

"It's no good. Please don't try to save me. I'm done."

"I'm sure that's not true. Come on, why don't you come on down and we'll talk about it?"

With a longer glance back, he saw the policeman, middle-aged with a moustache, a large crowd of onlookers gathering behind him, watching, hand over their mouths, frozen to the spot, terrified as to what they might see.

"You enjoying what you see?" he shot at them. "You voyeurs, here to watch a man die... You stopped for nothing else!"

“Don’t worry about them, worry about me. Just look into my eyes. That’s it. What’s your name?”

“Eddie.”

He turned his head back to the drop and braced himself.

“Eddie. Nice name. How about you just come down off that ledge and we’ll talk about things, yeah? See if we can figure out what’s troubling you.”

“Issue is, Officer... you seem to be under the impression suicide is something to prevent. Something to discourage. For me, it’s my way out. It’s my salvation.”

He turned his head and looked the officer in the eyes.

“For me, it’s the only opportunity I have.”

He scrunched his eyes tightly, breathed in, and pushed the weight of his body forward, allowing gravity to do the rest.

The sounds of the officer shouting: “No!”; the shocked screams of the onlookers; the shake of the fence... it was all lost in the speed of the wind shooting past his ears. He descended in slow motion. He even smiled.

He enjoyed it. The feeling that it was all nearly over.

With a crash as harsh as a blade against the body, he fired into the water and sank further and further down. He made no attempt to thrash out, no attempt to find the surface. He relaxed his body.

After a minute’s rest, he convulsed. His mouth gaped open in despairing reach for oxygen that didn’t come. By this time, he couldn’t even see the surface of the water above him, let alone get there.

It hurt. It was a stabbing pain that, no matter how much he wheezed inwards, he couldn't fix. The limbs of his body shot in numerous directions, uncontrollably spasming. He felt his arms and his legs lose their function.

Then it went black. He could feel no more.

9

Eddie's eyes startled as if they were brand-new. His vision lacked focus and his head was a haze. He rubbed his eyes in hope that this would fix the problem. It didn't. He tried opening his eyes wide, stretching his eye lids apart. As his vision finally returned to normal he looked back and forth, taking in his surroundings.

He was in a field. The sun was shining, pelting hot rays upon his skin, lighting up the clear, blue sky. It was a perfect day. It was hot, but it didn't burn. It was cool, but without a breeze. As he climbed to his feet he was startled by how light he felt; it was as if gravity was no longer pushing him down, like he could jump up and feel nothing.

He peered into the distance, and all he could see was green grass and blue sky stretching into the landscape. There were no trees, no people, no separating fence, nothing; just fields as far as he could see. He ran his hands back through his hair, pushing strands out of his face. His hair no longer felt like the greasy mess he had let it become; instead it was soft, clean, and left a pleasant smell of lavender on his fingers.

Edging forward on the perfectly groomed grass, soft under his feet, he urged himself to find someone, something, anything that would give him an indication as to where he was.

His memory came back in flickers. The bridge, the police officer, the jump. The last thing he remembered was struggling for oxygen, his body convulsing... He had done it! He had ended everything. He was dead.

And was this heaven?

He remembered this feeling of being so alive, yet having no air passing through you and no beat in your chest; the familiar sensations of lightness, the feeling of resolution, life no longer weighing you down.

“Ahem,” a cough came from behind Eddie and he abruptly spun around. Before him stood an upright man in a white suit checking a few papers on a clipboard he held in front of him. Eddie scoffed at the cliché of it all.

“Of course there’s a guy in a white suit.”

“Edward King?” Eddie nodded. “Excellent. Welcome to the next stage.”

Eddie grinned. This was it. He was going to find out what it was all about. He regretted nothing about the choice he had made.

“I am going to take you to –” The man stopped mid-sentence, distracted by something on the sheet of paper in front of him. He did a double take, making sure he had read it correctly. His expression turned from pleasure to concern. He leered up at Eddie, a curious repulsion drifting to solemn sympathy. “I do apologise, but it says here that you committed suicide.”

“I did.”

“Oh. Well I’m afraid that’s an abomination. The misuse of life. I can’t grant you entry. Sorry.”

The man smiled with empty compassion. Before

Eddie could react or comprehend what that meant, he felt all the weight in his body and the anxiety of his mind return to his veins as his feet were dragged downwards. Glancing at his ankles, he gaped at roots from the ground consuming them, surrounding and encapsulating his legs with twines and weeds.

“What – what’s going on?”

It was no good. The man continued to stand and watch with a vacant expression on his face. Eddie was helpless.

His ankles were now going, intertwined with the roots that tugged him further and further beneath. Eddie thrashed out for something to hold onto, his legs disappearing and his waist following, but it was no good. He was steadily being taken, sinking and sinking and sinking and sinking...

He stuck his arm out and grabbed the man’s ankle, who repulsively flinched away as Eddie was dragged too far down for his arms to be able to find any more movement. He drew one final breath as only his head remained and he was taken under.

As the blue sky faded from above him, he had a feeling that could be the last time he ever saw it.

10

Eddie howled in agony as his back hit the ground with a thud. The bumps and cracks of the stone ground dug into his spine with a sickening crash. He no longer felt light, painless, or content. He felt everything. Every sore reminiscence, every moment of anguish, every illness he had ever suffered, every relative he had ever grieved, all hitting him with one psychological blow.

Once the pain of the harsh landing on the surface subsided and all he had left was the emotional torture, the heat hit him. It was intense, humid, musky; his skin was burning already. Rubbing his hazy head, he propped himself up and beheld his surroundings.

All around him were various mounds of rock bounded by spewing lava. The lava lashed out at the borders of the stone, grasping at the ankles of the suffering victims perched upon them, their screams, whimpers, and begs reverberating around him. He was rested on a rock that meant if he stuck to the dead centre, he would likely be safe from the lava. He had a feeling, however, that it wouldn't be that easy.

Dead ahead of him is where he saw her.

He recognised her instantly. Her face had been etched onto his cranium at eleven years old. He could never forget her. Now there she was, returned to torment, floating on a rock dead ahead of him.

Her long, black, greasy hair dripped in front of her

face, barely showing her cracked, faded lips and her yellow, piercing eyes, her shoulders hunched over her fatal body. She wore a long dress that must have once been white, but had since faded to brown, patched with red remnants he was sure must be blood. Thicker patches of red were surrounded by blots of darker red scattered in splotches.

She was bare-foot. She was still.

“Who are you?” Eddie screamed out. This wasn’t the salvation his suicide had aimed for.

She didn’t reply. She simply took a step forward, remaining hunched, her head pointing downwards, her demented facial features slightly visible through her soggy black mane.

It’s okay, I’m safe on this rock. It’s surrounded by lava, she can’t get to me, Eddie told himself.

He was wrong.

Once she reached the end of the rock, she placed her bare left foot on top of the lava and allowed her right to follow. Eddie could hear the *tssss* of the burning lava inflicting itself upon the soles of her feet, yet she didn’t flinch in the slightest. He could see fire flicking up around her ankles, spewing ash upon them. Still she didn’t react. Still she walked over the lava toward him.

He collapsed backwards onto his hands, looking around frantically. Noticing a vacant rock behind him, he considered for a moment whether he could jump to it. Almost as if the lava was reacting to his optimistic thoughts, it splashed up and ashes landed on his arm, taking with it any hope of survival. The ashes alone caused Eddie such intense pain that he incessantly shrieked out for mercy.

He looked back around. The girl had made it to the

next rock over.

He scampered around. He looked desperately for some form of restitution; something, somewhere, that could help him escape.

All those familiar feelings he had so well repressed as a child returned. The sense of hopelessness, the loss, the despair.

She took her last step off the lava and onto Eddie's rock.

Eddie scrunched up into a ball on the floor, entombing his face in his arms, clenching his eyes shut, declining to concede her perilous proximity. He wasn't sure what he hoped to achieve by this, but he didn't care. He braced himself for whatever came next.

Her presence became cold beside him, her heavy breathing travelling with a repulsive stench through his hair. He could tell she had crouched down in front of him.

His head filled with a thousand migraines, her hands pressurizing against the side of his temples with excruciating force. He opened his eyes for a moment to see her open her mouth and dive at him. Before he could even take in the stale, yellow teeth or the saliva filled with blood, he was knocked onto his back.

The stone of the ground sprang up to wrap around his chest, capturing him and fixing him to the floor. He struggled against it but was unable to move to put up any kind of a fight.

"Eddie..." came the distant voice of a young girl. Eddie recognized it instantly. The pit of his stomach grew nauseous.

It can't be...

Before he could object any further, the soft hand of a young girl traced down his face. His head was bound to the ground but his eyes were not; he strained them to see to the side of him and there, before him, was the face of his younger sister, the age at which she died, a face bursting with endless emotion.

“Cassy...” he sobbed, every feeling he had been repressing since he was a child coming to the forefront of his being. The love he held for his sister, the feeling of protection he'd had over her, the loss and longing he had endured, the empty pit in his stomach that he could never replace with the alcohol and empty sex he tried to fill it with...

“Eddie...” she cried over him. “Please, please save me...”

“Cassy?”

“Eddie... they are hurting me...”

As she climbed over him, her tears pounding his face, he glimpsed her body. She was wearing nothing, yet you could see no skin. Dried blood, old scars, faded marks older than he could place. Every piece of her body was bruised or marked; her eyes were blackened, her hair a matted mess of grease and dried scar tissue.

Before he could react, before he could tell her how much he loved her and how much he missed her, she was gone, and the demon with heads of man, ravenous bull, and aggressive ram was before him. He remembered that beast's name. He remembered it clearly.

Balam.

It roared in his direction, hurling with its roar a

ball of blood and saliva.

“I have your sister’s soul!” it snarled with terror. “Come take it from me! Take it and claim your place!”

The female beast appeared in front of Eddie’s eyes and sank itself into his body. Piece by piece, it placed its hands inside his, its chest inside his, its head inside his.

Every piece of him became consumed by the feeling of dreaded loss and empty soullessness. The thing he had feared when he saw it as a child was now the thing inside of him.

He felt himself lose control in a manic seizure. His body uncontrollably convulsed, and he foamed from his mouth. When the seizure stopped, he looked up.

She was gone.

That’s when he woke up.

11

22 July 1995

Eddie's hospital room became consumed with chaos as doctors and nurses flooded around him. His eyes barely opened and he was highly unaware, but he could still pick up on the shock in the room. The medical staff were so frantic, so unprepared for the unexpected eventuality that he might need help.

Once Eddie had woken up fully, the pandemonium was over. He was alone, with Jenny next to him, sitting on a chair, his hand in hers, looking sincerely distraught.

"Eddie? Can you hear me?"

Eddie turned his head to the side. His neck ached, as if he hadn't used it for a long time.

"Jenny...?" he mustered. "Where did the doctors go?"

"What doctors, Eddie? You woke up last night, the doctors were in here then, they've all gone now. You're okay."

"Jesus..." Eddie attempted to sit up, but Jenny pushed him back down, shaking her head.

"Be careful, you're still weak."

"Was I asleep all night?"

"All night?" Jenny's eyebrows narrowed and her confusion became apparent. "Eddie, you've been

under for three months. The doctors thought you were braindead.”

Braindead? They thought I was braindead?

He remained silent, staring at the ceiling above him, unconsciously organising the tiles above him into various columns and rows. He decided to close his eyes.

“What happened?” he meekly uttered.

“You don’t remember?” Jenny stared at him. Her mouth dropped for a moment, then her expression shielded with sorrowful dread. Her eyes filled with tears.

“What?”

“Don’t you ever do that again, you hear me?” She jabbed her finger at him. “You are my best friend. I’ve known you all my life, I can’t imagine...”

She leant back, biting her finger-nails, turning her head away from Eddie and toward the open door. The light in the corridor went out, then came back on as a nurse walked past.

Eddie closed his eyes and tried to remember. He saw glimpses. He remembered the woman... which must have been a dream. The whole scene of spewing lava and lashing fire, it must have been his unconscious.

“How long have I been out?” Eddie asked.

“A few months,” Jenny answered, keeping her head turned away from him. She was slumped down in her chair, pressing her lips together in an attempt at not letting her emotions get the better of her.

A few months? Had he been dreaming about that vile woman for months? About Balam? About his sister?

A realistic projection of the unconscious, he decided. Just familiar feelings from his experience as a child.

An experience he would never want to relive.

“Is my mum here?”

“Well no she wouldn’t be, would she? She doesn’t give a shit. But I’m here.” Jenny was angry and not afraid to convey it. She spoke with agitation and impatience, whilst doing her best to retain her dignified expression of solidity. But she couldn’t. It broke. And tears fell like rain.

That’s when Eddie remembered. The bridge. The policeman. The water. He had jumped. He had tried to kill himself. He had done his best to withdraw himself from this world and somehow he had been saved; despite being against the odds, despite being braindead, despite being attached to life support, he was saved.

If I was braindead, why didn’t they turn off the life support? he considered. Then he realised. Only his blood relatives could do that, and none of them cared enough to attend.

But Jenny had. Jenny had cared enough. She was there.

Eddie leant out a hand. It took him by surprise how weak that arm felt as he slumped it toward her, but he opened his palm and gestured for her hand nonetheless.

Tearing apart her folded arms, Jenny leant her hand out to reciprocate the gesture. She finally looked to Eddie. Tears filled her eyes, but through her blurred, watery vision, she could see his.

“I’m sorry,” he told her.

“You bloody well better be,” she threw at him through a mouth convulsing in the way it does when you attempt to restrain uncontrollable tears. “You

may not have many people who give a shit, but I am here, and I do give a shit. And I give it enough for all of them. So don't ever do that to me again, you hear? Don't ever do that to me again!"

He rubbed her hand gently with his thumb, back and forth.

"I won't."

12

31 January 1999

“Adeline, if you can hear me – hold on. Hold on sweet girl, I’m coming.”

The creature of filth bellows with laughter. Objects launch themselves careening across the room. Eddie instinctively flinches out of the way, scarcely evading a hardback book from clattering him over the head. The curtains raise and retract against a closed window smothered in condensation.

“You delusional sack of shit,” declares the dirty words from an innocent girl’s mouth. “She should have taken you. She should have taken...”

His eyes widen. This is new. He had faced many demons before, yes, but none that knew anything about him and where he came from. He assumes the creature is bluffing. There is no way.

“Yes, that’s right,” it speaks in a low, croaky voice, smirking at him. “That’s right... Edward... Eddie... Edward King.”

“How –” he stutters. “How do you know my name?”

The belts loosely holding the captive girl’s hands to the bed-post soar from the demon’s wrists and smack into Eddie’s neck, firmly strapping around his

oesophagus, tightening and tightening. He clutches at the belts choking him, clawing at them with his fingers. It is no good. He is wheezing and gasping desperately for air that doesn't come.

Adeline's body rises off of the bed. Through his suffocation he acknowledges a feeling of astonishment; he has not seen this before. He has heard vile words of foreign languages spew out of a homeschool child's mouth; he has seen objects move of their own accord – he has even seen purple vomit float in the air.

But never has he seen a body levitate five feet off the ground.

“How...” he croaks, but can speak no further. The belts closes around his throat, squeezing tightly on his gullet. He becomes faint. He becomes weak.

The demon ascends Adeline's head until it is vertically in front of Eddie, holding her body in the air, looking him directly in the eyes, mocking him with its cackles.

“Eddie...” it whispers, this time in Adeline's faint, pleading voice.

Eddie reaches his hand into his back pocket and tightly grasps his crucifix in his hand. He withdraws it and lurches himself toward the monster, the crucifix held tightly out in front of him. The demon recoils with a yelp that comes out in multiple voices. This is enough for it to lose its grip over the belt suffocating his throat, allowing Eddie to rip it away and throw it to the side.

Dropping to his knees and drawing rapid intakes of breath, he forces himself to regain his senses.

It's funny, really, he tells himself. Five years ago I'd have laughed at someone who had a crucifix. Now

it just saved my life.

After spending more time than he would like gathering himself, he looks up. It's gone quiet. No slain, battered body stands in front of him. He darts his eyes around the room. Then he sees her, in the top right corner of the room above him. Its limbs dislocated from their sockets, pressing against the ceiling and the wall to hold the tormentor in place.

"You are to let the girl go, now," he demands, rising to his feet. "In the name of God, you are to let Adeline go."

"In the name of who?" the creature grins.

Objects circle around the room with more vigour and aggression. Paper slaps against his heels and rotates around his feet in a mini tornado. Broken furniture drags across the floor. Shards of glass nip against his bare skin. The wind the demon conjures batters Eddie's ears, to the point he has to shout to be heard.

"In the name of God, foul creature!" He takes a few steps toward the corner of the room the creature resides in. "I am giving you a chance now to leave. Leave, and no harm will come to you!"

"No harm will come to... me?"

A large claw mark slits across the girl's chest, splashing blood in a curved line across the floor below. For a moment, Eddie can hear Adeline scream from within the body somewhere. The creature just smiles.

"I assure you, Eddie" – it pronounces his name with such emphasis it makes him shiver – "it does not do to dwell on the damned... Adeline is gone. And I can do more to harm her than you can do to harm me."

He holds out the crucifix with a strong grasp.

“You think that will hurt me again you thick cunt?” the demon spits at him. “You used it once to take me by surprise. You’ve used that trick only once.”

“Tell me your name,” Eddie snarls back.

A mixture of thick red-and-green vomit spews out of the demon’s mouth like a canister of toxicity unleashed over the last remaining, unspoilt remnants of earth, boiling and bubbling through the carpet.

“What is your name!?! You have taken this girl, you can at least tell us your name! If only to amuse you, you foul beast.”

“My name,” it chuckles, “is Balam.”

He stumbles back. His knees become weak. It can’t be.

13

2 August 1995

Eddie awoke with a jolt. As he acknowledged the dirt of the grass pressing against his face and the warm rays of the sun above him, he noticed a strange sensation upon his foot. Realising where he was, he leant up and peered across his body.

It was a dog, licking his foot like there was no tomorrow.

“Oy!” came their neighbour, Roger, as he walked past, a middle-aged father with oversized glasses and a bald spot. The dog promptly chased after its owner.

“Hi Roger!” called out Eddie.

“Morning,” he replied with a grin, quite used to the sight of Eddie waking up on his lawn.

Eddie peered around for his crutches. How on earth he’d managed to sleep walk to the middle of the front garden with the pan he was in, he did not know. He noticed one crutch laid on the floor a few paces back and one propped up against the front door. As he dragged himself along the grass to retrieve his crutches, the door opened and Jenny appeared behind him with a cup of coffee.

Eddie used the crutch to help himself onto his feet and limped toward her, grunting at her as a thank you

for the warm, tasty, caffeinated beverage.

“Have a good night last night, Eddie?” she asked sarcastically. The tone of her voice told Eddie that she was unlikely to have had as good a night as he.

“Not sure, don’t remember,” he replied with honesty. “Why?”

“You can barely walk around your sofa bed without banging your toe on a beer bottle.” She stood with her hands on her hips, clearly agitated about her lack of sleep. “We spoke about you moving out and that was delayed and all that after your accident, but if you’re going to be a prick about it, you can be gone.”

Eddie limped his way past Jenny and into the house. As he passed the sofa bed, he almost choked at the sight of bottles, cans and open crisp packets stuck around the place.

“I’m sorry, Jenny,” he blandly told her, with barely any meaning. “I’ll deal with it. I promise. By the time you get home from work...” He trailed off as he stumbled his way into the kitchen and sat at the table. He placed his coffee down and nursed it in front of him, putting his hood up and burying his face. Jenny stood behind him with her arms folded, shaking her head, stumped as to what to say to him.

Lacy broke the uncomfortable silence with her chirpy entrance to the room, jokingly lifting his hood up and switching on the kettle. She was wearing tiny pyjama shorts, and Jenny was incensed even further when she spotted Eddie staring at her dainty backside.

“So how’s your head today?” asked Lacy, filling her cup of coffee and leaning against the sink, turning her inquisitive gaze toward him. She was a lot more relaxed than Jenny, but Jenny was his oldest friend,

and Eddie knew he was letting her down with every day he stayed there, messing up the life they were trying to build as a couple.

“Bad,” he answered. “Hey, can anyone drive me to therapy today?”

Jenny scoffed, loading Eddie’s dishes from the previous night into the sink.

“I can,” Lacy interjected before Jenny could start one of her lectures. “I’m going that way into town, I can drop you off. But you’d need to get the bus back.”

“Sure, thanks. Say, do you got any change for the bus?”

Jenny dropped the dishes in the sink and stood over them, her arms stiff and her fists clenching. She closed her eyes and gathered her thoughts, urging herself not to jump into a rant.

“How about you get a job, then you can pay for it?” Jenny answered, turning toward him, clutching a mug filled with mould that he had left out for weeks. “I understand you tried to harm yourself, I do. I understand you’re on crutches. But welcome to the real world. This is it. And we have to work to make a living.”

Lacy walked over to her girlfriend and put her arm around her. Jenny leant her head against her chest and allowed her to calmly stroke her hair. She always seemed to become calmer when Lacy had her arm around her.

“I’m sorry,” Eddie said, attempting to put some emotion into it. “I am. I’ll be out of here as soon as possible. Maybe there’s a shelter or something.”

“Nonsense, Eddie, you are not staying at a

shelter,” Lacy answered, prompting Jenny to slam the mug down into the sink and storm out of the room. Lacy took a seat opposite Eddie, clasping her mug in her hands.

“But maybe you should think about contributing something here,” she advised. “Or at least cleaning up your shit. I mean, have you seen the living room? You’ve left it looking like town centre on a Saturday night.”

“I know, I know.” He shook his head to himself. He did know and he felt like an arse. “I’ll do it. Got any bin bags?”

“Under the sink, loser. You don’t even know where the bin bags are?”

Eddie laughed. Her voice was playful and bouncy and she was always smiling.

“You know, you’re too hot to be a lesbian,” he told her, instantly regretting it.

“Right, well, don’t tell Jenny that. Or she will kill you. We leave in ten. Get the crap picked up before then.”

She left the room and he sat there, alone. He thought about his mum and his dad. He had no idea where his mother was; she’d left him when he was fourteen, as he was in and out of getting sectioned, claiming she was unable to cope. His father had two years left of a prison sentence for Eddie didn’t know what. He never asked, so was never told. Maybe after his father got out, he could live with him. It would be nice to have some semblance of family.

He was sixteen when all of that happened, at which point Jenny’s family selflessly took him in. She had done far more for him than he had ever acknowledged, and as he realized it, a wave of guilt

came over him. Jenny was fantastic, though understandably irritable; he felt bad for putting so much on her.

Reluctantly, he grabbed a bin bag from under the sink, limped his way to the sofa bed and tidied up his rubbish.

*

It felt weird to be sat on a couch, spilling his guts to a total stranger who just sat there writing it all down. Eddie wasn't sure how this was supposed to help him; surely, she should give him some kind of advice? Not just let him ramble on incessantly and self-indulgently. Was she waiting for him to have an epiphany? Some kind of realisation that meant he wasn't a complete fuck-up anymore? Well, it hadn't happened yet.

He glanced over her credentials, framed proudly on her desk. Doctor Jane Middlemore, first-class honours degree in clinical psychology, master's in mental health research, PhD in some word that sounded way too complicated for him to make out.

“And your father, you said he's in prison?”

Eddie snapped out of his daze and nodded vacantly. He was tired; even though he'd had a full night's sleep, he was up and moving for most of it.

“And how does that make you feel?”

Eddie shrugged. How did it make him feel? He felt nothing. His father had stopped being his father the day Cassy had died. The caring, loving family man he once was had disappeared and a sad, cynical, abusive drunk who spent his time beating on him and his mother took his place.

There was one Christmas when he was very

young, when Jenny's parents took him to visit his father. He was able to look at that day with adult's eyes now, and he was able to tell they only did it for some kind of closure.

"So what does make you angry, Eddie?"

Eddie shrugged again. What kind of question was that?

"Surely there has to be something?"

"I dunno," he mumbled monosyllabically. "Cats."

"Cats?" she replied, a look of confusion etched over her face.

"Sure. Cats, they piss me off when they shit on the lawn and stuff."

It may not have been the kind of answer she was looking for, but honestly, there had been many mornings when he'd woken up on the lawn after a night of sleepwalking to find himself laying in a lump of cat shit. It had taken him around four rounds of lather, rinse, and repeat to shampoo it completely out of his hair.

"Surely there's something that annoys you more than that? Something to do with your family maybe?"

Oh, who cares? he thought to himself. Honestly, so what if he was annoyed his mother disowned him and his father got put away. What was moaning to some sanctimonious doctor going to do about it?

He gazed out of the window. He could see a playground in the distance. Fathers pushed their children on the swings. Mothers sat on the bench gossiping; students played football on the adjoining field. He had never known that. Was he angry about it? Sure. Did he care enough to show it? Probably not.

In the distance, in the wooded area beyond the

playground, he saw something. A figure. A familiar, slouched posture.

Jane began peering over her shoulder to see what he was staring at. He was transfixed, as if in a hypnotic gaze. She couldn't figure it out. She was desperate to, as he was too focused on whatever it was to even notice that Jane was glancing behind herself and back to him in an attempt to understand what he had seen.

The figure moved in an over-exaggerated limp, moving in the shadows that mixed so completely with its darkness that the contours of its body became barely intelligible. Its hair fell over its face, greasy, black and long. Its eyes were black and deadened, its features scarred and broken.

It hit him. This figure... what it was...

The demon woman from his coma.

He backed up in his chair with severe urgency, lifting his feet up and recoiling against the back of the sofa.

Jane peered over her shoulder. She just saw children in the playground.

“What, Eddie? What is it?” she asked, anxious to know.

He couldn't speak. The terrifying vision of his nightmare, the woman who had appeared to him both as a child and as a man. He had only seen her in his unconscious, yet here she was, standing across the playground as clear as Doctor Jane was beside him.

This was the first time he had ever laid open eyes upon her and it sent his blood racing, surging through his veins with rapid urgency.

His legs went numb. All down his body he felt

shivering, coldness, tension. His hands gripped the sides of the sofa and continued to claw at them.

“Eddie?”

His face turned to horror, his skin turned to ice. How was she here? She had only appeared to him when his eyes were closed; how was she here? What was she after? Why now? Why him?

“Eddie?”

Her arm reached out, a stained finger with a broken nail pointing toward him. Her head lifting up, lifting, lifting, her eyes focusing on his. He didn't blink. He couldn't. He was paralysed to the spot.

“Eddie?!” Jane screamed.

Eddie brusquely refocused his eyes on her. He snapped out of whatever daze he was in, his head full of mist, confused, derailed.

“Eddie, what were you staring at?”

He couldn't speak. He couldn't answer. What would he even say?

He turned his head back to the playground, peering at the wooded area beyond. She was gone. He was alone. He couldn't speak or move.

Even though he could no longer see her, he felt her near. Her presence consumed his mind.

14

3 August 1995

Derek stepped out of the car and placed his feet on the gravel beneath him. Clutching the case report in his hand, he took in the beauty of the old, decrepit manor house that stood (barely) in front of him. Pieces were falling off, paint was peeling, and it looked in good need of a fix-up; but it was still a special commodity of a house. Just as you would picture a typical haunted house in a movie, it stood there with character and plenty of shadows.

Levi made his way around the van from the driver's side and stood beside Derek, surveying the house. He was younger and far scruffier than Derek. Derek prided himself on his appearance, making sure he was always dressed in a full suit with a top button done up. Levi was much younger and far 'cooler' than he, dressing with a scruffy plain red t-shirt and baggy jeans with fashionable rips in the knees. Buying jeans with rips in them sounded like a ludicrous idea to Derek, it was like buying a half-eaten apple. Why would you buy something that was already nearly done with?

"Shall I unload the van, like?" he asked.

"Yes please, Levi," Derek answered, gazing at his notes in front of him. Whatever he thought of Levi's

fashion sense or youth sensibilities, he did the job he was employed to do and he did it well. Unfortunately, he had no idea the kind of pressure the department was under having finished its second year at the university.

“I employed you because you showed me results and a fascinating thesis,” Jonathon had ranted at him, having called him to his office. “I expect you to be doing proper research and finding real things to talk about, not loads of failed cases and no grounds for what you are able to teach your students. I mean my God, if I wanted to learn about false claims and how to spot a phony, I’d go to church!”

Derek greatly respected Jonathon and knew he was right. His thesis had been an intriguing piece of writing that had gained more attention than he ever thought it could. But he had not provided results since; every case he’d investigated had been easily explained by other means. He was growing tired. His students weren’t getting the insight they had hoped for, and the dean of the university was growing vastly impatient, and with good cause.

But this could be the one. The things the family had said about this house were so fascinating and unlike any case so far, it had to be true. He had to be getting somewhere with them.

He read of the notes again, written in the case files as bullet points in Levi’s scruffy handwriting.

- *Gargling sounds echoed throughout the house every night*
- *Intermittent flickers of light whenever they walk past*
- *The cross upon the kitchen wall burnt when*

touched

The list went on.

As Levi brought the equipment into the living room, Derek introduced himself to the family living there. They were an ordinary family, though they looked poorer than the grandness of the house would have you believe; a father called Guy who worked in real estate, a mother called Helen who worked part-time as a teaching assistant and two young daughters; Kaley, five, and Yvonne, eight.

“Do you mind if I look around the house?” Derek enquired, taking the cup of tea in his hand they had offered.

“Yes. We don’t leave the living room anymore,” the father admitted. “We get sleeping bags and camp out here, we are too scared.”

“Tell me, has anyone else been in this house recently?”

“No. We had a plumber here, but that was a few weeks ago.”

With a nod, Derek sipped his tea and carried it through the living room. He looked around himself, listening for noises, feeling for a difference in temperatures, smelling for disgusting odours. He noticed nothing to note in his initial assessment, but delayed his scepticism until he had been there a little longer.

He walked into the kitchen and spotted the crucifix on the wall above the oven. He noted that it was made of metal.

As he made his way up the creaking stairs, each step giving a wooden moan beneath his foot, he placed his ear against the wall. He heard a faint

gurgling sound and paused to listen to it for longer.

After passing through the hallway a few times, he made his way back downstairs and returned to the living room. As he passed the fuse box on the way, he fiddled with the switches a few times. One of the switches fell off and he put it in his pocket.

He closed the living room door behind himself, glancing around at the faces of the terrified family before him and turned to Levi, unpacking equipment.

“Levi, sorry to be a pain, but please, could you stop unpacking and put all of the equipment back in the van?”

“What? You kidding? I just got it all out.”

“I know, and I do apologise, but I’m afraid we won’t be needing it.”

With an agitated huff, Levi shoved the bits and pieces back inside the boxes and began heaving them back to the rear of the van.

“What’s going on?” the father, Guy, enquired.

“You said there was a fault with the electric going on and off?”

“Yes, it keeps flickering.”

“Tell me, was it mainly the hallway landing?”

“Yes!”

Derek took the fuse switch out of his pocket and presented it in his hand.

“This is the fuse switch for the hallway light. It came off when I touched it. It has been loose for a while, I would reckon?”

“I guess...”

“That means that it isn’t secure and it keeps turning the fuse off at random times. You said your

crucifix burnt in your hand?”

“Yes, every time, we can’t even touch it anymore.”

Derek smiled and rubbed his sinus. Another case of clear explanations.

“That is because you have it above the oven and it is on a metal base. Metal conducts heat, therefore every time you cook, you are making the metal hotter.”

“But what about the gargling sounds? Throughout the whole house?”

“Tell me, this plumber who was here a few weeks ago. Was he from an independent business? A small one?”

“Yes, yes he was... Byson or something.”

“Drison – the company is the same as its owner’s last name.”

Derek fumbled in his bag and took out a newspaper report, handing it to Guy. The headline read: “*Drison Plumbing Company shut down after record number of complaints.*”

“You weren’t the only one to report gargling to me, and you weren’t the only one who reported it that used this plumbing company.”

“Oh.” Guy’s mouth dropped as he continued skimming the newspaper article.

“Have a good day,” Derek spoke before anyone could object, leaving the house and making his way hastily to the passenger seat of the van.

“What is it?” Levi enquired.

“Another waste of time, Levi. Another bloody waste of time.”

15

15 August 1995

Jane sat across from Eddie, resting a cup of tea on her lap. She had devil horns on. Eddie wasn't sure why. He was sitting in her office, wearing a suit. He never wore a suit. He couldn't understand where it had come from.

“Do you see her, Eddie? Do you see her?” Jane kept repeating, over and over. “Do you see her, Eddie? Do you see her?”

“Do I see who? I don't understand; do I see who?”

She smiled and continued to ask him. “Do you see her, Eddie? Do you see her?”

Then, as if by cue, the dark figure he had come to dread rose from behind her. It stood over her. Jane just laughed; more than laugh, she guffawed hysterically.

“I am here in Balam's name,” it spoke.

The dark figure grew and grew and grew, ominously lurching over him. As its jaw expanded to the length of his body and slid toward him, he screamed a deafening scream.

“Holy shit, Eddie, wake up!”

Eddie's eyes opened with a start. He immediately jolted upright, looking around. He was on the sofa

bed. In Jenny and Lacy's house. A blanket loosely draped over him, his pyjama shorts sticking to him through the sweat he was seeping. Jenny stood over the couch.

"Jesus, Eddie," she exclaimed. "You were screaming."

"I – I had a bad dream," he stuttered, still gathering his thoughts, still taking in what had happened. He was awake and safe. It wasn't real.

But she was there. She was always there.

"Coffee, Eddie?" Jenny asked, drifting into the kitchen. Eddie followed her in and sat at the table opposite Lacy, who was already half-way through her Bran Flakes covered in pieces of banana. Eddie groaned at the sight of her breakfast. He didn't know how she could eat that stuff.

Jenny placed a coffee in front of Eddie.

"So what was the dream about?"

Eddie sat back in his chair. He really didn't want to have to relive it. It would take so much explanation, which he was not ready for. He didn't want to have to face the questions; who was this woman? Why did he keep seeing her? Why was she in his dreams? All questions he didn't have an answer for.

"I don't remember," he lied, sipping on his coffee.

"You're sweating like crazy, it must have been bad."

"I honestly don't know."

He covered his face with his hands, pressing his fingers against the excessive perspiration accumulated on his forehead. He'd gotten so used to waking up to a hangover he had almost forgotten

what it was like to awaken without a headache.

“Well, don’t forget, it’s my nephew’s christening today. And you’re coming with me?”

Eddie bowed his head. He had forgotten. “Why can’t Lacy go?” he moaned.

“Because I have class, you chirpy thing!” Lacy joked, always bringing a happy edge to whatever tension was between him and Jenny.

Eddie took Lacy’s laptop from the seat beside him. “Mind if I use this for five minutes?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He loaded up Internet Explorer, Google displaying as the home page. He’d had enough of these dreams, these visions, whatever they were. He so adamantly didn’t believe in this stuff; yet there was a niggling doubt in his mind that everything that was going on inside his head, everything that was plaguing him, was true. That the image of his sister he had seen when in a coma was not fake.

He shook his head to himself. It was absurd.

He typed ‘Balam’ into Google and straight away a Wikipedia entry came up. He clicked on it and read:

In demonology, Balam (also Balaam, Balan) is a great and powerful king (to some authors a duke or a prince) of Hell who commands over forty legions of demons.

Balam is depicted as three-headed. One head is the head of a bull, the second of a man, and the third of a ram. He had flaming eyes and the tail of a serpent. At other times he is represented as a naked man riding a bear.

Three headed – the head of a bull, man, and ram. Riding a bear. It felt so familiar. Then the image struck the forefront of his mind; when he had crossed over as a child, he had seen it – a man with the head of a bull, a man, and a ram, claiming to be Balam. He had stood before him holding onto his sister.

Yet he had never heard of this apparent demon before. How could his mind have been so accurate on something he knew nothing about?

And why on earth would a king of hell be interested in him anyway?

Ludicrous.

“Come on, you need to get your suit on. We leave in half an hour.”

He leant his head back and closed his eyes. He couldn't think of anything worse. He had been friends with Jenny for so long, her family all thought of him as family, it would be expected of him to go. He just hated christenings. The whole thing felt like an initiation into a cult to him. He despised religion, and he despised the process of indoctrinating a young child into something they were not old enough to understand yet.

“I'll be ready,” he grunted, rising from his chair and heading into the living room to change, coffee in hand.

*

Jenny glanced at Eddie in the passenger seat beside her. He would actually be quite a good-looking young man if he took care of himself. As it was, his hair was a mess, his facial hair unkempt, and his tidy suit looked like a scruffy mess upon him. He was also as

pale as the moon.

She pulled up in the church car park and they both got out of the car. Eddie flinched at the sun in the sky. He normally sat at home in front of day-time television all day; he wasn't used to the light. Wondering what the theme on Jerry Springer was that afternoon and regretting that he was missing it, he followed Jenny into the church and greeted her family.

He shook hands with Jenny's parents, her sister (and mother of the boy getting christened), and their family friends he knew so well. He knew these people better than his own parents, or even his foster parents. He had spent most of his adolescence in a sleeping bag on their living room floor, or hanging around for their family film nights, not to mention when he lived with them for two years from the age of sixteen. It was the closest thing he'd ever had to a family life.

He stood at the back, his arms folded, squinting in the light and staring at the crowd that gathered around the altar. The vicar held the helpless baby over the water, as Jenny and the other godparents stood on either side.

"Do you promise to guide this child on his voyage to God?" the vicar asked.

"I do," Jenny replied. Eddie scoffed. These were the people Jenny had concealed her sexuality from for so long. The church had been so negative about it, he was surprised they were even letting her do this. Then it occurred to him that the vicar probably didn't even know. He wondered what would happen if he was to burst the information out.

"Will you pray for him, draw him by your example into the community of faith and walk with him in the

way of Christ?”

“I will.”

Eddie turned away and covered his eyes, exhaling with aggravation as he contemplated how much he detested this. When he turned back, the vicar was staring at him.

The vicar didn't move. He remained rooted to the spot, the baby held midair, his eyes glued to Eddie's.

Eddie looked around himself to check if it was someone else that he was staring at. Sure enough, he was the only one in the vicar's eye line. Everyone else began to follow suit, looking between Eddie and the vicar like a tennis match, confused as to why the vicar had abruptly paused the service to stare at this random man. Nobody knew what was going on.

Eddie became uncomfortable. “What?” he whispered, barely able to get his words out. He did not like having this attention.

“Is everything okay, Vicar?” asked Jenny. The vicar slowly handed the baby to her, not taking his eyes from Eddie for a moment. He ambled from behind the altar and the congregation moved aside to allow a clear path between Eddie and him.

“What?” Eddie begged. “I really don't know what's going on.”

With abrupt speed, the vicar marched toward Eddie and stood directly in front of him. He reached his hand out and placed it on Eddie's heart, his eyes turning to stone and his lip raised in a sneer. His face turned red as his body shook.

“You...” he muttered.

“What?” Eddie asked fervently, desperate for an answer as to why he was being singled out. He had

kept all those thoughts inside his head, hadn't he?

"You..." the vicar snarled. "Are not welcome here."

Eddie frowned. He looked around, hoping someone would make some kind of sense of this. No one spoke. Everyone just stared. The entire church froze out of awkwardness and fear.

"Don't look around at them for help!" the vicar spat in Eddie's face. "They won't help you! They are all God's children. You, you foul wench, you are not welcome here."

"I don't know what you are talking ab—"

"Out! Out!" The vicar nudged Eddie backwards toward the door, walking quickly in front of him. "Be gone!"

Eddie glanced toward Jenny and shrugged his shoulders at her. She shook her head in agitation; another family event, another wreckage by Eddie.

Once Eddie had finally been ushered beyond the threshold of the church, he stood there, staring at the vicar in utter confusion.

"And don't ever come back!" bellowed the vicar with extreme hostility in his voice, slamming the door shut in front of him.

A few passers-by looked at him and he glanced toward them awkwardly. He had no idea what had happened. Did the vicar just call him a foul wench?

All he knew was that there was something more to what was happening than he understood.

16

31 December 1999

Eddie rests his head against the wall and lets out a long, deep sigh. His legs are aching, his forehead drips with sweat and his heart beats harder than he can take.

The creature simply rests on the ceiling above, laughing. Cackling at his misfortune. Laughing at the no-hope, defeated arse that sits beneath it.

“Give up yet?” it speaks, in a voice far too deep and sinister to be coming out of the body of a teenage girl.

Eddie closes his eyes and attempts to calm his breathing down. He disregards the demon’s taunts; rising to them only fuels the evil of this sadistic beast. He is up against it and he knows it more now than ever.

He has been fighting this demon for longer than he knows.

“I will not be giving up today,” he mutters, assuring himself more than the possessed girl before him. “You can do all you will to me, I will not leave until I have cast you out of Adeline’s body and returned my sister’s soul to me.”

It booms a deep, grand laugh that echoes against

the walls of the room. It peels itself off the ceiling and floats in the air above him. Items fly around it in a whirlwind; rubbish, paper, fluids, everything in the room is off the floor and floating around it. The bed rattles and the windows furiously open and shut.

Eddie rises to his knees. He prepares himself both physically and mentally to return to battle. He cannot let this thing win. No matter what it costs him.

“The eve of the new millennium,” he states. “It was always said that today is the day hell would attempt to rain down upon us. So many people waiting for the second coming of Christ that they weren’t even aware of the coming of you.”

He spits the final ‘you’ at the demon with venom and gritted teeth. He can feel his body filling with hatred. This is the thing beseeching the form of this guiltless girl.

This is the entity imprisoning his dear, dead, chastised sister.

“And you are the one to stop me?” grins the demon.

“Yes, I am.”

“And why you, Eddie?”

Eddie bows his head, calms himself, clenches his fists and lifts his head again; renewed, prepared.

“Because I have the sight. That is why you are after me, is it not?”

Deep, booming laughter echoes out of the mouth of the innocent young girl.

“So. You’re Balam, huh?”

“The one and only. And you will bow before me.”

“Balam?” he confirms with pure horror, prompting the demon to reveal its deception. Though he knew it

wouldn't. The power of this demon was far more than he'd seen before. It felt right.

The demon nods. It nods as it reads the acknowledgement dawning on Eddie's face.

"You are Balam?" he enquires with disdain. "A great and powerful king of hell, commanding over forty legions of demons. You are three-headed, are you not? A head of a bull, a man and a ram. Flaming eyes and tail of a serpent. Balam, the biblical magician."

"The very one," smiles the demon.

"You are a ruler in hell. Demons are petty thieves who take over people's bodies, you are a ruler of demons. Why on earth would you take one of our girls?"

The creature just smiles. The face of a girl, the mind of the despicable. And it laughs. Eddie puts on a strong façade, but inside, he is cowering.

"Where is my sister?"

Laughter. *More damn laughter.*

"I said, where is my sister?"

"Are you forgetting about how you need to save poor Adeline?"

"Then you do not have her soul. I have freed her."

Laughter turns to smirking. It incenses Eddie.

Enough.

He produces a flask of holy water and flings it upon the demon. It flinches. The sound of burning and singeing arises from Adeline's skin.

"Let this girl go!" he declares in an imposing voice. "Let this child of God return to her rightful body. Be gone, beast!"

He plants his foot against the wall, giving him a push up that he uses to grab the throat of Balam. He brings the demon down and slams it against the floor, mounting it. As he does this, he produces a crucifix that he presses up against the face of the creature; harder and harder, until it writhes in pain.

“The power of Christ compels you! The power of God compels you!” His eyes narrow. “*I* compel you!”

The demon closes its eyes and breathes heavily, soaking up the anger and hostility of its opponent. It holds its arms out and begins to rise. Eddie remains balanced upon its torso as it levitates in midair. Eddie tries to stay still, to not fall off. If he gets knocked unconscious, God knows what the demon would do to him then.

The demon’s head turns. It turns and turns until Eddie is watching the girl’s head turn in a complete three-hundred-sixty-degree rotation. Staring wide-eyed, Eddie watches as it flings its eyelids open to reveal two eyeballs of complete white.

“You do not scare me, beast!”

With a loud scream, in which Eddie is sure he can hear multiple voices, the beast sails across the room and halts beside a wall, sending Eddie flying into the wall and onto the floor.

He feels his forehead. He’s bleeding. He clammers to his knees, shaking the dizziness from in front of his eyes.

The demon sits on the edge of the bed, watching, waiting. It taps its foot and drums its hand on its knee. “Having some trouble?” it enquires.

Eddie lifts his head and brushes a strand of hair out of his eye and back into his perfectly parted haircut. He dabs his lip also, feeling a cut there. He licks his

lip with his tongue as he stands. He sets his feet shoulder-width apart, straightens his legs and regains his perfect posture.

“Adeline, I am talking directly to you now.”

“Adeline isn’t here...”

“You need to be strong. I know it’s hard, but you need to fight too. It’s no good just me fighting from the outside; you’ve got to fight from the inside. I know you can, girl, because you’re strong. I can still feel you there, so you’re strong.”

“You’re a fool.”

17

18th August 1995

Eddie stood on the porch, unable to believe he was about to do what he was about to do. He could see a dreamcatcher floating about above him as numerous cats brushed against his ankles before an unkempt door covered in weeds. He rubbed some sleep out of his eyes and banged on the door.

“Enter,” he heard from inside. He lifted his hand out and turned the door handle, creaking the door ajar. He stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

In front of him was a grand set of marble stairs. To his left, a large living room, and to his right what he assumed was the kitchen. Against the walls were bookcases covered in dust, with tattered, plain-covered books. Eddie picked out a few titles as he walked past: *‘History of the Occult,’ ‘Manipulating the Elements,’ ‘Intermediate Tarot Reading.’*

“In here,” came a voice to his left. He turned and cautiously stepped toward the living room. As he entered, he admired all of the various ornaments around the place. There were grand objects of pottery, paintings older than Eddie could imagine of various people who would be long gone, and a few mirrors with grand, gold frames.

He made his way forward, past an armchair that must have been from the 1920s, covered in rips, and over the dusty, fluff-ridden carpet. Sitting at a rickety, wooden table before him was a woman, smiling.

“Eddie?” she asked. He nodded. She held her hand out for him to take a seat and he placed himself opposite her, sitting awkwardly on the edge of the chair.

She was a rather weighty woman, whose appearance clearly met the stereotype of a psychic. She had her hair tucked back in some kind of purple cloth; her red-and-purple gown hung low off her arms and her body, and her fingers were far bigger than they needed to be. Every time she spoke, Eddie couldn’t help but notice the waddle underneath her chin shaking.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing here,” he admitted. “I’m an atheist.”

“Most don’t,” she smiled grandly. “But there must be a reason you wish to see me.”

“There is...” he began and trailed off. He hadn’t even begun to think about how he was going to put this into words. “There’s a woman. She looks – she has black hair, scarred skin. She’s been following me around since I was a child.”

“Since you were a child, you say?”

“I saw her once when I was in a coma as a kid, then again in a coma a few months ago. Then, I saw...”

He trailed off as he saw the face of Cassy in his mind, her tearful eyes of pain, the scars over her naked body.

“In a coma again?”

“Huh?” He brought himself back into the room, and attempted to recall the last time he’d seen the demonic woman in real life. “Outside my therapist’s window. Pointing at me.”

She studied him carefully, soaking up every word he said, pondering, emulating an air of wisdom that Eddie was quite sure must be fabricated.

“Take my hands, Eddie,” she instructed, and lifted her hands out. With reluctance, Eddie withdrew his hands from his lap and placed them in hers.

“What I’m going to do now,” she explained, “I’m going to read you. I’m going to look at your past, your present and your future.”

Eddie nodded, not completely sure what she was on about.

“It is essential – no, it is *crucial* – that you do not let go of my hands. Whatever happens. Understood?”

Eddie nodded.

“Okay, we shall begin.”

She closed her eyes and wriggled in her chair, getting comfortable. Then she went quiet. Eddie watched her. She just sat there, her eyes closed, completely still. He wasn’t sure what to expect, but he would have thought she would do something more than sit opposite him with her eyes closed and his hands in hers.

He looked around, his eyes wandering out of boredom. He noticed a few more paintings around the house, some antlers off a dead animal, another grand sculpture of –

“Eeeeuuuurrrrggghhhh,” she gargled. Eddie almost jumped out of his skin. He looked at her peculiarly, studying her. Had she just made that sound?

“Aaaaaarrggghhh,” she murmured again. Her eyelids flickered and her head began to shake.

The lights flashed. Eddie looked around himself. Had he just seen that? The lights went dim, then on, he was sure of it. Or had he imagined it?

With an abrupt movement of her head, the psychic’s neck turned and she was facing directly upwards. She screamed. A large, manic scream, indicating someone in complete distress.

“Are you okay?” Eddie whispered.

Her head clamped back into position, facing straight ahead. Her eyes remained completely closed. But she started shaking. Vibrating, like a bubbling pot, pulsating like boiling water, waving Eddie’s hands pugnaciously from side to side. It became more and more violent until her whole body was jerking in a seizure.

Eddie tried to withdraw his hands. He knew he was told not to, but this was too much. It was no good. Her hands were completely gripped to his and he couldn’t get out of it if he wanted to.

“Wake up!” he shouted, continually pulling his hands back, attempting to get them loose.

Eventually, he managed to jerk himself completely out of her grip and fell flat out on his arse. She stood without hesitation and backed up into the corner of the room, staring at him. Her eyes were wide and her expression was one of complete, stiff, terror and bewilderment.

“What?” Eddie asked, feeling like it was a stupid question.

“I...” she tried to speak, but remained rooted to the spot. “I... can’t help you...”

She turned away and buried herself into the corner of the room, shoving her face in her hands and crying. She was rapidly shaking her head, saying, “No, no, no, no,” repeatedly under her voice.

Eddie got to his feet and backed up to the door, deciding this was a good time to go.

She turned around in a sudden movement. “Wait!”

Eddie froze.

She grabbed a piece of paper from a dresser next to her and wrote down a number, cautiously edged toward him and reached it out to him, keeping a safe distance. Once he had taken it, she backed up again.

“That’s the number of a paranormal investigator, maybe he can help you,” she spoke, her eyes still transfixed on him. “But I can’t. Sorry, child, but I can’t... May God be with you.”

With the last, sincere five words she spoke to him she darted out of the room, and Eddie could hear her feet banging against the steps as she rushed upstairs.

Eddie looked at the number in his hand that he had been given, reading the name ‘Derek Landy, PhD, Paranormal Investigator.’ Why had she handed him a number for a paranormal investigator? And what had she seen that had freaked her out so much?

Telling himself it was all an act, he walked out of the house, stuffing the number into his back pocket.

18

24 August 1995

Eddie lay wide awake, gazing at the ceiling. He hadn't called the paranormal investigator; the card he had been given was still slotted into the back pocket of his jeans, untouched. He'd spent the last few days considering calling them, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Every time he did, he reminded himself he didn't believe in that stuff. He was an atheist. Despite what monstrosities his mind had shown him, he was still a rational person who did not let himself get drawn into ridiculous claims.

But there was still that niggling thought at the back of his mind, the thought that reminded him of what he had seen. The accurate description of Balam, the woman in front of him clear as day, the sight of his sister... it all added up to a compelling argument for making a leap of faith.

He retrieved the card and turned it in his fingers, intrigued by Derek Landy's title. Was this guy really in charge of a parapsychology department at a university? And even really have a PhD?

I mean, a PhD? In that? Ridiculous.

He closed his eyes and finally drifted off into a vivid dream. Cassy stood in front of him, but not in a

sinister, captive way; the scene felt pleasant. Sun shined down upon them, red leaves grew on trees and grass bloomed around the path they were on. It was a memory. He was teaching her to ride the bike. The same bike that had smashed... but he banished that thought from his mind and enjoyed the dream.

She was driving down a path without the stabilizers for the first time. His parents were somewhere arguing, but it didn't matter, he was there to enjoy this pivotal moment. He was sharing this experience with her.

The bike wobbled, stumbling from side to side. Eddie's eleven-year-old self ran up to her and caught the bike before she could fall off, but as a result, it meant the bike and Cassy fell on top of him. She found it hilarious. He didn't at first, but he laughed along eventually.

Then she turned to him and smiled.

"I'm sorry for falling on you," she giggled.

"It's okay," Eddie beamed, brushing himself off and helping her to her feet.

"Are you going to save me?"

Eddie turned his head with a start. This wasn't part of the memory.

"What?"

"Are you going to save me, Eddie?"

Her eyes turned to car headlights and her mouth unbolted into a mind-numbing shriek.

CRACK.

Eddie jolted up with a start. He was drenched in sweat and he was panting fast, but the room was still. He was still on the sofa bed, the living room was empty, and the trees stood still through the gap in the

curtains.

To the side of him he saw his glass of water. The top of it had cracked and water had leaked from it, but it still stood motionless on the table beside him.

Eddie couldn't understand how it had done that. He stared and stared at it, completely unsure.

Then it cracked again.

SMASH!

The glass exploded into hundreds of shattered pieces, firing themselves about the room. Eddie shielded himself but it was too late; tiny fragments of glass were in his hair and stuck in his bare torso. He dabbed his face and felt a cut, blood trickling down his chin.

“Shit.”

He got up and brushed his shorts, legs, and chest off. He took his towel off the back of the armchair and brushed the glass from his face before dabbing his cut.

Shuffle.

He hastily turned his head to the sound coming from behind him. Shadows consumed the corners of the room, but he could see no movement in them, no evidence that this sound had come from anywhere but his mind.

He flicked the light switch, but the lights did not come on. Remaining in darkness, he bit his lip; moonlight was the only illumination seeping into the room via in a narrow gap in the curtains.

He continued drying his face off. It was nothing. He was sure of it.

Crunch.

He shot his head around again. It was as if

someone had just stood on a leaf.

Dumping the towel on the floor, he edged his way toward the dark corner across the room where he was sure the sound had come from, peering into the darkness, not removing his eyes for a moment.

“Is anyone there?” he whispered. He wasn’t sure why, as he really didn’t want anyone to answer. Luckily for him, no one did.

Shuffle. Crunch.

The noises came again, from the exact spot he was staring at. It was pure black; he couldn’t be sure there was nothing there. But there couldn’t be. There couldn’t.

“Is anyone there?”

Silence ensued. Then it was broken.

“Eddie,” came a whisper.

He couldn’t tell who it was; the whisper was so faint that all characteristics of the voice had left it.

“Jenny? Lacy? Is that you?”

“Eddie...” came the whisper again, this time a little louder, though still relatively soft. He could decipher that it was a voice in distress.

“Who’s there?” he asked, edging closer to the darkness still. His hand was out and he was now just a few steps away.

“Eddie...” it repeated. He could tell it was a girl’s voice.

He was next to the shadow now. His toe was crossing the threshold to whatever was there, and he was about to face it.

“Eddie... it’s Cassy...”

He froze. Stumped. Rooted to the floor.

Cassy?

Before he could conceive what was happening, he was launched off his feet and across the room, landing on his back. He tried to get up, but couldn't; whatever it was, it was securing him to the floor with more strength than he could fight.

"Cassy? Is that you?" he struggled.

It cackled, and before his face he saw the woman from his mind. The hollow black eyes, the empty mouth, the grey skin, the black greasy hair... it was all there. The beast. The servant of Balam.

The thing that had his sister.

"What do you want, you bitch?"

Mistake.

He was ascended into the air, the pressure of a tight fist wrapping around his neck. He couldn't make out the form before him through the darkness and the dizziness of his vision, but he could feel its cold, clammy hand pressing against his throat.

His feet dangled helplessly. He thrashed out and fought against the black lines that led to his throat, but his hands just went through them. Like it wasn't there.

But it was.

A slicing pain flashed across his arm as he was lunged against the wall, falling on his knees and clutching the bloody mark across his bicep.

The light switched on and Jenny appeared in the doorway.

"Eddie? What the hell?"

Eddie couldn't reply. All he could do was nurse the bleeding wound on his arm.

"What have you done?" Jenny asked, indicating

the blood seeping from his skin.

“You can see it too?” he answered in dumbfounded awe. It was a wound created by this thing. She could see it. He could feel it. What had happened was real.

He needed help.

19

25 August 1995

“So you want to bring some weirdo paranormal dorks into my house and have them watch you sleep?” Jenny exclaimed, her hands on her hips and her patience short.

Lacy sat back in her chair and smirked, finding the whole thing amusing. Eddie glanced at her as he sat forward on his sofa bed, running his hands through his hair.

“I think it would really help me, Jenny,” he claimed. “Something’s going on with me, and maybe they would help me figure it out.”

“Yes, Eddie, something is going on with you, and it is not paranormal – it’s pretty fucking abnormal, but it’s not ghosts.”

“Lacy?” Eddie looked to the voice of reason for help. “Are you okay with this?”

“Hey, don’t ask me, ask the boss,” she retorted, refusing to get involved.

“I’m not having it.” Jenny vigorously shook her head, straightening up coasters and shuffling magazines into a neat pile.

“Jenny, come on, they aren’t even going to bother you,” Eddie pleaded. “They are coming to study me,

see what I do. They won't even be going upstairs."

"But you're still going to have some nuts in my house."

"Jenny, please. They say this is the only way."

Jenny sighed and leant against the armchair, rubbing her sinus between her fingers and shaking her head. She couldn't believe this was even a conversation she was having. He was her oldest friend, but what was wrong with him needed more rational help, rather than a bunch of ghost freaks. Although, as her oldest friend, he had been there in times for her when she needed him. Back when she had revealed her sexuality to her parents, she had spent nights crying into his arms; not once did he falter or question her choices.

"How are they going to help you?" she asked, Eddie sensing he may have a chance.

"They think there is something hanging around me, and they say it may be why I keep sleepwalking and waking up on the lawn. They think if they saw me sleep, when I'm at my most vulnerable, they may be able to get some idea why it is these things keep happening to me."

Jenny shook her head and groaned. "I still think it's total bullshit. If you've got problems, it's 'cause of you, not 'cause of Casper." She sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "But if you really think it's going to help you, then... fine. Whatever."

Eddie jumped forward and gave Jenny a big bear hug.

"Thank you Jenny, you're the best. I love you!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Jenny broke out of Eddie's overeager embrace and

stood back. “So when are they coming?”

“Tonight?”

She turned to Lacy. “Fancy a night out then?”

“What? Screw that!” Lacy exclaimed. “I want to see what these weirdos are going to do to him.”

Eddie snorted. Being honest, he didn’t completely believe he was going through with this himself. But if he had to take another vicar or psychic jumping away from him and recoiling in horror, he would lose it. Even if this was bullshit, at least it would be put to bed.

But Eddie could never have been prepared for the events of that night.

*

The paranormal investigators weren’t at all what Eddie was expecting. Saying that, he wasn’t entirely sure what he *was* expecting; but these two, professional-looking, educated men were not it.

Derek introduced himself first. A tall man, wearing a waistcoat over a smart white shirt, black tie, and black trousers. He had his hair neatly parted, a neat goatee and large, circular, black glasses. He appeared to be a thorough professional; greeting Eddie, then Jenny and Lacy, with a firm shaking of the hand and a welcome smile.

Levi followed Derek in, carrying a bag over his shoulder and two overflowing suit-cases full of equipment in either hand, dumping them down in the living room and shaking Eddie’s hand more loosely than Derek had, but firmly nonetheless. He was dressed less formally, introduced by Derek as his ‘best student,’ prompting Levi to look a little smug as he brushed some of his messy hair out of his face. He

too was wearing a shirt, tie, and trousers, but his top button was undone and his trousers were a little baggy.

“Your best student?” Eddie enquired.

“Yes, my very best,” Derek confirmed, walking past Eddie and examining all corners of the living room.

“He’s my mentor on my degree,” Levi interjected, to clear up the confusion. “I’m currently doing my thesis on sleep paralysis induced by paranormal phenomena.”

“So you work at a university?” Lacy asked Derek, bemused, who nodded in return.

Eddie didn’t need to glance at Jenny in the armchair behind him to know what face she was pulling, most likely turning her head away, covering her face in her hand and rolling her eyes. He could, however, see Lacy perched on the arm of the sofa with a smile; intrigued and fascinated.

“So, Eddie, could you take us to your bedroom?” Derek prompted.

“You’re standing in it.” Eddie chuckled at the awkwardness of the situation. “This is my sofa bed.”

“Ah, I see.”

Lacy jumped off the arm of the sofa bed to allow Derek a closer look. He inspected and scrutinized each crevice and fold of the sofa, not making it at all clear what he was looking in such avid detail for. As he was searching, he continued to ask Eddie questions.

“So, this woman, you say you’ve seen her before?”

“Yeah, I was knocked out and put in a coma as a child, I saw her then. Then I almost drowned and was

put in a coma a few months ago; I saw her again then. I say *coma*... I was technically braindead. Then, in my therapist's office the other day..."

"You were braindead?"

"Yes, they said only one in a billion wake up after being declared braindead."

"Far less than that actually."

"There's also, I mean, I saw this woman... but when I crossed over, I also saw..." he trailed off, unable to say it out loud. Not with Jenny in the room. Saying he may believe a three-headed demon may have his sister's soul was likely more than she would be able to take.

Derek straightened up and began rubbing his chin. "I see. And how long were you in a coma, each time?"

"Er, when I was a kid it was like, a few days. I think the last one it was a few months."

Derek nodded and strode past him to Levi. "I want one here, here, and here," he instructed, pointing at various corners of the room. "Set the EVP microphone by the bed, set the ultraviolet camera here..."

"The ultraviolet camera?" Eddie was fascinated, if not a little freaked out.

"Yes, it takes a picture should anything, 'spooky,' shall we say, presents itself." He gestured at Levi to set the camera up facing the sofa bed. "Then, Eddie, I think we should allow you to go to sleep."

After fifteen minutes, everything was set up, Jenny and Lacy were in their bed, Derek and Levi were in the kitchen staring at various monitors, and Eddie lay in the sofa bed gazing at the ceiling. Glancing at the

clock that read 11.32 p.m., he had no idea how he was going to sleep surrounded by various cameras pointing at him. Yet, after a matter of minutes, he found himself lightly drifting off. His eyes became heavy, rested, and he peacefully floated off to sleep.

Relaxation consumed him, every muscle in his body soft, sinking into a dreamless sleep... a dreamless sleep that became a sleep of pleasant dreams... A sleep of pleasant dreams that turned into nightmares, with her body floating above him, sucking every piece of his life out of his mouth.

He woke up screaming.

He continually screamed and screamed and screamed until he regained his senses. The first thing he saw was the clock showing 2.45 a.m. The next thing he acknowledged was the ultra violet camera flashing recurrently, bright-white lights blinding him every half a second.

He leant forward to grab at it but it fell on the floor; but once he was no longer in the camera's view, it ceased flashing.

Raising his head, he gawped at the state the room was in. The armchair was overturned, light bulbs in the lights were smashed, curtains were torn down and papers were ripped all over the floor. Everyone was there. And they were all staring at Eddie with terrified, bloodshot eyes.

Levi huddled in the corner of the room, panting heavily, shielding his body with his arms. Lacy and Jenny were huddled together against the walls with their arms embracing each other as a form of protection.

Derek was on his knees in the middle of the room. His hair was messy, swept back aerodynamically, as

if he had been caught in the middle of a huge gale. His once neat suit was now scruffy and falling off of him. He held an arm out to Eddie cautiously, keeping his distance.

“Eddie? Is that you?”

“Yes,” Eddie replied with agitation. “Who else would it be?”

“Right, Eddie, we are going to need you to stay as still as you can.”

“Why? What’s happened?”

Everyone’s jaw was dropped. They couldn’t take their eyes off of him. They all kept a safe distance, scared yet fascinated. Eventually, Jenny stepped forward.

“Do you really have no idea?”

20

26 August 1995

Eddie sat at the table opposite Derek and Levi, each of them fidgeting their fingers around a mug of coffee they barely drank. Jenny and Lacy stood in the doorway with their arms around each other, wanting to be there, but not enough to cross the threshold and cease protecting each other.

“Eddie, what I’m about to tell you,” Derek began, fumbling to find the right words, “is hard to take, at first. But I believe it. I believe it one hundred percent, with every bone in my body. In fact, we’ve been waiting for something like this to come along for quite a while.”

“Okay...” Eddie looked weakly from him to Levi, an odd sense of despair overcoming him. People rarely prepared you like this for news if it was good. What made it worse was that, despite his trepidation, Derek looked giddy at the idea there may be something wrong.

“Your dream, when you were in the coma both as a child and the more recent incident,” Derek began, then paused, glancing at his coffee and taking in a big, deep breath. “It wasn’t a coma. There’s a reason you were braindead...”

Derek stopped fumbling his hands around the mug and made his upmost effort to stay still, directing his full focus on Eddie.

“When you were braindead, it’s because... well, you actually died.”

Eddie narrowed his eyebrows and sat back, looking at him oddly. “But I can’t have died. I mean, I’m alive now.”

“Yes, you are alive, I’m not doubting it. What I’m saying is that, for however long you were in the coma for, that wasn’t a coma. You were actually brain-dead, were you not? You, however temporarily, crossed over to, well, I don’t know quite how to put this... the other side.”

Eddie raised his eyebrows and endeavoured to comprehend the notion he had died and somehow come back to life.

“The other side? As in, like, beyond?”

“Exactly! What happened, is – when you crossed over to the other side, you came in contact with something from... the other world. A world where you don’t belong, Eddie, as you are part of the living. But I also believe there is a reason it latched onto you specifically, and why it is that you were able to cross into this other world whilst still live, something I have never known anyone else to be able to do.”

“So I was in heaven?”

“Oh, Lord, no.”

Eddie looked around himself, relaxing a bit, finally seeing a bit of sense creep in.

“Maybe ever so briefly, but... my boy, you were in hell. In a demon world. A world that belongs only to demons, along with the worst souls that have ever

lived, suffering their eternal fate, and the devil himself.”

He froze.

“Eddie, we believe that you are paranormally vulnerable.”

“Paranormally vulnerable?”

“You have a gift, Eddie. A remarkable gift only one in a trillion, to a hundred trillion, people have. You have what we call – ‘the sight.’ It means you have the ability to see things, feel things, that the rest of us cannot.”

Jenny audibly scoffed and turned her face away. “This is bullshit,” she muttered to herself, but loud enough for everyone else to hear.

“So when you crossed over to this demon world,” Derek continued, ignoring Jenny and focusing on Eddie, who was listening attentively with a dropped jaw. “This thing, this entity – it saw that it could latch on to you, and that’s what it did.”

“So this thing has, what, stuck itself to me?”

“Yes, I imagine that would be a good way to put it. You see, when you crossed over the first time, it was only for a few days. It didn’t have nearly enough time to fully attach itself to you. But when you crossed over the second time, it was for months, you properly died, and, well... it had enough time. It had enough time to see you were paranormally gifted, stick its nasty arms around you, hold tight and never let go. And now it’s left the beyond. You have brought it back to our world. And it doesn’t intend to leave.”

Eddie sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. It was 5.00 a.m., far before his normal morning wake-up time, and he was tired. This was a lot to take in.

He truly did not know what to make of it. It would all make a lovely explanation, but rational thought would lead to him believing he just had mental health issues. Psychosis maybe? Schizophrenia? Not that he was some sort of gifted ghost person, crossing over to the other side.

“There’s more,” Eddie admitted. He hadn’t told anyone about what he saw when he was there. Not anything more than the entity. But maybe these guys could offer him some explanation, some hope.

They raised their eyebrows expectantly, yet with an air of patience.

“There was more than just this demon woman entity thing. There was something else. It said its name was Balam.”

Derek exchanged a cold look with Levi, as if sharing an unspoken concern.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, but there’s more... this entity said it was Balam’s slave.”

“Who is Balam?” interjected Lacy.

“Balam,” Derek answered, “is one of the princes of hell. One of the devil’s generals, who commands legions of demons. This entity that has attached itself to you will be but a mere slave to Balam – you see, if it is in fact Balam, that is what you are up against. He has three heads –”

“One of a human, a bull, and a ram,” Eddie finished, nodding. “I know. I saw him.”

“You mean,” Levi’s eyes become wondrous with anticipation, “you actually saw Balam?”

“And he had my sister. My dead sister. He had her and he tormented me with her.”

Jenny exhaled with exasperation, rubbing her sinus and fidgeting uncomfortably. Lacy put her hand on her arm in an attempt to calm her, but even she could feel that she was about to blow.

Derek and Levi leant back in their chairs exchanging apprehensively eager looks. Levi looked to Derek as if in need of guidance as Derek rubbed his beard gently, twisting the end of it with his finger. He loosened his tie and undid the top button on his top, the first sign of willing untidiness he had let himself show in all of the commotion.

He leant forward and looked Eddie directly in the eyes.

“Listen, Eddie, because this is of the utmost importance. We can help drive out this entity. We can help detach it from you. I can’t guarantee anything, but we can certainly try. But as for Balam... for what you saw of your sister...” he glanced at Levi, whose eyes said the same thing. “Well, I imagine if you saw her, it was her soul. And if Balam has her soul, there is little we could do to come up against such a demon as that.”

“But I thought you were a university scholar? A demonologist who’s scared of demons?”

“A lion tamer will still leave be an untamed lion, Eddie. We can help with this entity, the slave of Balam, but as for Balam himself... I’m sorry.”

Eddie looked away. He felt a tear form in the corner of his eye and he used all the force he had in his body to quell it. He longed for his sister. He longed for that empty void, and he was used to that; but to leave his sister being tormented in hell was not an option.

Then he tried to remember that he didn’t believe in

this stuff. Tried to convince himself it wasn't real. But he had seen it.

It's just made-up games. The booygeyman ain't real, he assured himself. They were empty thoughts made from empty words, concealing the true thoughts of his mind that filled with angered confusion.

“One thing I could say, is that you are gifted, Eddie. To have been able to go into the demon world, not once, but twice, and return... it is something no man has ever done. If we can face this entity, maybe I could help you.”

“How?”

“Harness your gift. Teach you how to use it. Then we can see the extent of what this ability can reach. I mean, if we can control your ability to flicker into that world, imagine –” He curtailed his words, getting ahead of himself.

“Is that a promise?”

Derek looked down. His thoughts grounded himself, reigning his ambition back in.

“First, we face a mighty challenge, Eddie. A challenge with this entity that has taken you over. That's new ground for us all, also.”

They shared a few moments of uncomfortable silence, all reflecting on the words that had been left unspoken.

“So, what now?”

“Well, that's where it becomes difficult.” Derek took a long pause, gathering his thoughts, deciding on the best way to articulate what he needed to say. “This thing, this – ‘entity’ – it does not belong in this world. It belongs in the other. And its mere presence here is unnatural, an abomination. Both you, and it,

should technically be dead. And this thing has far less right to be here than you do. So it's going to try and take it from you."

"It's going to take what from me?"

"Neither of you can coexist in this world, I'm afraid. It's stuck itself to you and it wants to take your place. So it's going to make you become weaker, and weaker, and weaker, until it takes the life you have gained back from fate, allowing it your place on this plane of existence."

It wanted to take his life? *Jesus*, he thought. *It can have it.*

"So what can I do?" Eddie asked helplessly.

Derek said nothing. He leant back, putting his hands in his pockets, stuttering on his open mouth, shaking his head in preparation to say something that never came out.

Eddie looked to Levi, who just widened his eyes and lifted his eyebrows. He shook his head hopelessly too. Neither of them had an answer.

"So, what, there's nothing I can do? This thing's just going to latch onto me and take me?"

Derek exhaled and looked above him to the corner of the room. Eddie grew impatient waiting for him to gather his thoughts and folded his arms.

"The only thing I could suggest, is..." he pursed his lips and looked around uncomfortably, "an exorcism."

"An exorcism?"

"Yes. And we will perform it, in return for your permission to fully document it for our university research."

Jenny stood forward. "That's it, I've had enough, I

think it's time you go."

Eddie scowled at her. "Jenny?"

"No, I've had enough. I've entertained this loony idea, I did what you asked – now it's time that we, I don't know, perhaps took some reality on the situation. It's far more likely that you are all nuts."

"Jenny –" Lacy stepped forward to put an arm around her, but Jenny nudged her way out of it.

"No, sorry, but no. It's been very nice you being here, and I hope you enjoyed your coffee, but now it's time to go. It's time to pack up your equipment and crawl back to the university that is far happier entertaining your ridiculous theories than we are."

Sighing with resolve, Derek and Levi rose and began solemnly packing away their equipment.

Eddie turned to Jenny with utter disbelief spread across his face. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" she screeched, her hands on her hips and her face tilted, ready for an argument. "What's wrong with *you*? You need mental help, Eddie, that's what it is – and so do they, being honest. I will help you get your help. I will drive you to therapy. But one thing I will not do is entertain a freak show in my own house. If you want that, you can get your own."

Jenny turned on her heel and stormed out the room, slamming the door behind her, Lacy chasing after her. Eddie heard her feet stomping up the stairs and her bedroom door slamming above him. This was followed by the sound of the front door opening and closing.

Eddie darted to the living room, hoping to catch Derek and Levi before they left, but it was too late.

They were gone. And he stood in the living room, alone.

As he started to make sense of all that had been said, he truly could not decide what to think.

21

31 December 1999

Eddie steps onto the porch, willing the accelerated pace of his breathing to subside. He leans against the door frame, rubs his hand over his head and through his hair. He feels inside his pocket for a cigarette and withdraws it, puts it in his mouth and lights it.

Beatrice, the girl's mother, appears beside him.

"Do you mind?" he asks, indicating his cigarette.

"Not so long as you give me one," she replies, and Eddie obliges. She looks to have aged even more within the last few hours. The bags under her eyes are heavier and the definition of her wrinkles becomes all the more apparent when reflected in the moonlight. Her hair is grey and tatty, almost knotted into a mound. Seeing as she has a sixteen-year-old daughter, Eddie decides she can't be that old.

I suppose this kind of ordeal ages you.

"I can't thank you enough for coming to help her," she mutters quietly in a deadened tone of voice.

"Thank me when it's over," Eddie answers. Although he doesn't admit it to her, or even to himself, this was the first time in almost five years that he's feeling helplessly overcome and despondently overwhelmed. He is losing, and he

knows it.

“Well, whether you help her or not, you believed me. That’s more than anyone else.”

“Ah well, in this day and age, people like to put it down to various mental health diagnoses. And in most cases, you know, they would of course be right.” He takes a deep, inward drag of his cigarette and closes his eyes. He never usually smokes anymore, not regularly anyway; but he always has a packet stashed away for this type of occasion. He always needs it. Especially now, as this demon is one tough son of a bitch.

A huge clash resounds throughout the house. Eddie immediately turns his head. Prematurely stubbing his cigarette out, he gallops up the stairs and bursts into the bedroom.

It is calm. Uncomfortably calm. The demon-infested girl lays on the bed, breathing heavily with a croak on each inward inhale. It gazes at Eddie with a smile.

Eddie stands and watches it. He tries to decide what to make of this new-found lethargy. He knows the demon is clearly playing him, retaining control, mocking him. Still, it takes him by surprise, and he isn’t sure what to do with it.

“You seem calm,” he observes, then calls himself a twat in his mind.

‘You seem calm?’ What the fuck is that meant to do? Prick.

“I was just waiting for you, Eddie ma boy,” comes an unnaturally manly voice for the face of a young girl. It is a unique voice, one that stands apart from the earlier voice coming from the demon.

“Your voice has changed. Am I still talking to Balam?”

“The one and only.”

Eddie leans against a piece of furniture. The drawers from the unit rest in pieces all over the room, as do the previous contents of the drawers; but the dresser itself stands in its place, balanced precariously without the weight holding it down. Eddie uses it to support his tired legs nonetheless.

“And where did you come from, may I ask?”

“Why do you need to know?”

“As I would like to know where I am sending you back to.”

With a large grin spreading across its face, the demon simultaneously lifts its hands, breaking out of the restraints that had formerly been placed around its wrists. It sits up, opens its mouth and lets out a scream that forces Eddie flying against the back wall, along with various items that rise from the scatterings across the floor.

It reaches out an arm and slashes it like a claw, causing Eddie to fall to his knees. He closes his eyes and winces in pain, feeling his chest, the blood from three slashed claw marks soaking through his shirt.

“That hurt you?” the demon boasts.

Eddie lifts up his shirt, revealing not only the three fresh wounds, but numerous scars painted all over his chest.

“You aren’t the first demon to try to intimidate me.”

“Intimidate you? Maybe I should remind you what I did to your sister.”

“Shut up.”

“She was naked when you saw her last, right? Did you see the scars?”

“*Quiet!*” Eddie throws the holy water at it, smashing the bottle against the wall beside its head. At first it howls in pain, then in masochistic pleasure.

“I raped her. I tortured her. And I ate bits and pieces of her whilst she begged on her knees for me to stop.”

Eddie wipes his eyes.

“I am going to fucking destroy you.”

22

8 September 1995

Eddie sat in the waiting room twiddling his thumbs. Doctors' waiting rooms were always so depressing. The pattern of the wallpaper was that he'd expect from a grandmother's curtains. The toys left there to keep children occupied were usually just wooden blocks dispersed around the floor and the magazines were usually women's magazines dated from around three months prior.

He glanced at the two other people occupying the waiting room. To his left was an old man who kept his walking stick propped up in front of him, resting both hands upon it. He coughed every few seconds; not just a gentle, normal cough, but a dramatic cough that felt as if he was bringing up a dead cat. He wore a flat cap that had more stains on it than Eddie could place.

To his right was a younger lady, heavily pregnant, with vacant eyes. She stared gormlessly at the bottom corner of the room, with grey shading under her eyes and her hair a scraggy mess. Her veins stuck out on her arms, most likely from the use of various narcotics.

Eddie mentally urged the doctor to hurry up, peering down the corridor, anticipating being called

in as soon as possible. He felt awkward and out of place. He usually felt awkward in any given social scenario, but sitting amongst an old man coughing up his lungs and a doped-up mother-to-be, he was worried about what he may catch.

Finally, the doctor came into the waiting room and called his name. He stood slowly, supporting himself against the wall, trying not to fall on his shaking legs. Using the walls and the chairs to keep himself propped up, he made his way into the corridor. He took a moment to rest, catching his breath, allowing the blurs to fade from his eyesight and his dizziness to subside. Leaning against the wall, he made his way into the doctor's room and delicately sat on the chair opposite him.

The doctor was a middle-aged man with a bald patch on his scalp. He wore the normal white lab coat over a shirt and tie. He sat toward Eddie with a large smile, making Eddie feel at ease and comfortable.

"Eddie," the doctor announced, glancing at his notes to make sure of his name. "How are you today?"

"I'm okay," Eddie croaked, forcing the words through his sore throat.

"And what can I help you with?"

Eddie took a deep, wheezing inhale of breath. He was still recovering from the walk from the waiting room. It had really taken it out of him.

"I – I seem to becoming weaker, Doc."

The doctor sat back and placed his pen in his mouth, pondering.

"How so?"

"Two weeks ago I was fine," Eddie explained.

“But now I’m out of breath walking down the corridor, my throat is always dry, and I feel dizzy when I walk. I can’t explain it, but I feel like I’m fifty years older.”

“Okay. I’m going to take your pulse, is that all right?”

Eddie nodded and the doctor withdrew his stethoscope. Lifting Eddie’s shirt up to reveal a thinner body than Eddie was used to, his weak bones clearly visible, the Doctor placed the end of the stethoscope over his heart and listened carefully.

He withdrew and thought for a few moments.

“I’m going to take your blood pressure as well, is that all right?”

Eddie nodded again. The doctor took out a pad and fastened it around Eddie’s bare arm, clasping it together through its Velcro strap. Eddie felt it squeeze against his bicep, making him flinch slightly. After a few moments it retracted, and the doctor looked upon the results.

“Yes, Eddie, okay,” he began, gathering his thoughts. “I am slightly worried. Your heart rate is lower than I’d expect and your blood pressure is too. Have there been any changes to your circumstances, Eddie? Any drugs, new sexual partners, anything?”

“No.”

“I need you to be honest with me, Eddie.”

“I am, Doctor.”

The doctor nodded to himself then began clicking on his computer.

“I’m going to make you an appointment at the hospital, Eddie, so one of my colleagues can give you a more thorough examination, involving x-rays, and

so on. We can do it in about a week's time. Is there any particular day or time that would suit you?"

"Whenever."

"Okay," concluded the doctor as he booked Eddie in an appointment.

*

Eddie slowly trudged home, taking it step by agonizing step, allowing people to barge past him, almost knocking him to the ground a few times. Despite the warm sun of the day shining down, he felt cold, so he wrapped his jacket around himself.

He paused for a moment, leaning against the wall to gather his energy, feeling desperately weak. He was only half way home; he wasn't going to make it without a more substantial recuperation time. Spotting a café a few shops up, he used the wall to support himself as he limped his way along the wall to the entrance and shuffled in.

Standing at the counter, he contemplated the menu displayed above himself. He didn't know why he bothered; coffee shop drink options were always the same: latte, cappuccino, mocha or Americano. He requested an Americano and leant his energy against the counter as he waited. As he bowed his head he found his eyes beginning to close. One moment he was gazing upon the cheesecake behind the counter, the next minute the back of his eyelids were all he saw and he felt his muscles grow weaker. Just before he fell from the counter to the floor, he became alert again to the sound of his Americano being ready.

A few metres away, a baby's eyes were fixated on him. It was having an uncontrollable crying fit, crying and crying and crying, not once averting its glare from Eddie.

Eddie glanced around, unsure what to do, everything about the situation feeling awkward. The mother rushed her baby out. As soon as the baby crossed the doorway into the street, the crying ceased and the baby seemed to find peace.

Eddie frowned, feeling slightly perturbed.

He took a seat next to the window and sipped on his drink. It burned the inside of his mouth and he promptly placed it upon the table to let it cool.

He peeked around the café. It was a nice place, with various older furniture spread around and quotes from various books on the walls. He found the café quite niche, and knew it would undoubtedly be popular with artistic types. Being late in the afternoon, he expected it wasn't the most popular time, which was why there was only a couple across the room and an old man and his dog behind him.

He gazed out of the window at the people passing by. Everyone was always in such a hurry. He saw a few business-men in suits, talking carelessly to their business partners scurrying up beside them. He noticed a jogger on the other side of the road, earphones from their Walkman keeping the world tuned out, drifting happily along in their vest and shorts.

An elderly couple crossed the road and a man got out of his car to help them. Eddie smiled. There was good in this world after all.

That's when he saw her.

Staring back at him from across the street, inside the window of a furniture shop, the ominous figure lurched. Its outlines were unclear due to the reflections in the window; but the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach and the cloudiness filling his mind

indicated to Eddie that there was no doubt her presence had arrived.

“You’re not real,” he whispered.

It didn’t move. It remained completely motionless, not even drawing breath. Its black, greasy hair fell in mounds over its face. Its skin was grey and cracked, scars bled on its arms, and its pupils were completely black. Despite not being able to see it clearly, he could see its eyes.

Those were the eyes that made his blood run cold.

“You are not real,” he spoke again, causing the couple across the room to glance at him oddly before returning to their flirtations.

Eddie dropped his head and tightly closed his eyes. He scrunched his eyelids together, pressing hard, refusing to acknowledge it. He shook his head, squeezing his eyes firmly locked until they hurt.

He lifted his head and opened his eyes. The woman was gone.

He smiled. He was right. It was all part of his mind. A figment of his imagination. Like Jenny had said, he just needed mental health help. Nothing more.

Nothing paranormal about it, just a trick of a weakened mind.

As if in response he was hurled to the floor, sliding across the surface and crashing into a table. His hands went to his head, clutching at his scalp as he writhed in pain. His head had been hit hard and it hurt. He withdrew his fingers and looked at the blood on his hands.

Everyone else in the coffee shop was now looking at him, assuming that in his stupidity he had somehow

fallen off his chair.

He leant up, his eyes darting around the room, scanning the menacingly innocent faces staring at him. He must have just fallen off his chair. The only explanation. He didn't know how he'd done it. But he was growing weaker; maybe he had just given way, or there had been a problem with the chair.

He assured himself there was a rational explanation.

He rose to his feet, brushing himself off, uncomfortably smiling at those around him who stared. No one asked if he was okay, they just acted as obstinate voyeurs.

Without any warning, Eddie was taken off his feet again. This time he was rushed through the air across the room, his back sweeping horizontally airborne and slamming against the wall, held midair, pressed up against a framed quote, seconds before falling flat on his face.

Everyone in the coffee shop was off their seat, straddling the wall furthest away from Eddie. They were agape, aghast, protecting themselves; no thought of helping whatsoever.

Eddie just lay there. Staying down. Maybe if he stayed on the floor, he wouldn't be flung anywhere. It couldn't get to him. His head pounded and every bone in his back ached, his weakened body bruising easily.

His legs cracked. Something was on them. His neck stiffened and he couldn't turn it. His bones curved under the force, such was its magnitude. The feebleness of his bones and his muscles became all the more apparent under the invisible strain.

He knew what it was. He knew what it was doing. But he could do nothing to stop the snap that

resounded around the coffee shop.

No matter how hard he tried, he could not explain that one.

23

Eddie sat in still silence. Lacy glanced a smile at him as she drove, attempting to reassure him with her look.

“So what happened?” she asked, keen to understand.

“I... I don’t even know,” Eddie admitted. In his mind he was torn, struggling to make sense of it all.

Shooting pains continued to race up and down the muscle of his leg. He rubbed it, attempted to soothe the agony. He hadn’t been able to put any pressure on it whatsoever since he had been flung into a wall, but felt too scared to say anything. Not to the judgmental stares that Jenny would give him after Lacy had regaled his story.

So what the hell had happened?

He knew he had been lifted from the floor, into the air and across the room. There were witnesses to it, surely. Not particularly helpful witnesses; witnesses who likely doubted their eyes. Witnesses who were probably in as much denial as Eddie, but witnesses nonetheless.

Then how come no one said anything about it? Had they seen what Eddie thought they had seen? Or had they been freaked out because he did it to himself?

These were traits typical of psychosis. Eddie knew

a little about it, having had doctors talk to him shortly after Cassy had died regarding a potential diagnosis, but had ultimately written it off as post-traumatic stress disorder. People saw and experienced things that were completely true in their eyes, sufferers so often harbouring imperative belief in their disillusionment. Maybe this is what was happening to Eddie.

In that case, how was he so aware of it? If he was the one who'd flung himself across the room to feign some kind of personal haunting, then surely he wouldn't be able to recognize that from being so deep within his disillusionment? From what he had read, people with deep psychosis were not aware that the reality they perceived was potentially not reality.

Maybe he just needed help. Maybe Jenny was right.

"Where is Jenny?" Eddie asked, realising that it was Lacy picking him up from the coffee shop ordeal on her own.

"Oh, you know Jenny," Lacy defiantly answered, doing her best to skirt around the subject of Jenny's latest resentment toward Eddie's disillusionments. "She's... Jenny."

"She hates me, doesn't she? She thinks I'm desperate for attention."

Lacy sighed. She couldn't argue with him, he was right. Jenny had ranted and raved every night as she and Lacy got into bed for the past few weeks, going on and on and on and on. Lacy knew she was far more relaxed than Jenny, that was why they worked so well, because they worked in harmonious contrast; but even Lacy was starting to become frustrated over the constant threats to throw her lifelong best friend

out onto the street.

“He’s full of shit,” she would go on, using a similar pattern of words and meanings each time. “He won’t get proper help. Instead he puts it all to some hocus pocus crap.”

Lacy would put her hand on her back and tell her it was okay, everything would work out. She would hug her and kiss her neck and try to distract her the best way she knew how, but eventually she would give up. If Jenny’s mind wasn’t in it, Lacy didn’t want to have sex. If Jenny would rather go on about Eddie, if that’s really where her thoughts lay, Lacy would go without. She wasn’t interested in laying with a body without a mind.

As they pulled up outside the house, Lacy made her way around the car to Eddie’s door and helped him out. Eddie may be disillusioned, but he was obviously extremely ill. His feebleness was not a lie and Lacy was getting worried. He was constantly pale and struggling to walk more than five metres without his muscles giving out. He acted as her grandma had when she had a terminal illness.

“What did the doctor say?”

“He’s made me an appointment with the hospital. He’s concerned.”

Lacy nodded, unsure what else she could say. What comfort can you give to someone who’s seriously ill? ‘At least you still have a roof over your head’ wouldn’t cut it, seeing as Eddie barely had that.

Once inside, Lacy helped Eddie to the sofa bed and he lay on it. He closed his eyes for a few moments as Lacy went to the kitchen to get him a glass of water. He was so out of breath, despite a small walk from the car to the house.

As Lacy returned with a glass of water, Jenny burst down the stairs and into the room.

“Hey baby, are you –” She stopped in her tracks as she saw Lacy handing Eddie a glass of water. She glared at him, pursing her lips together and folding her arms.

“Please, Jenny, don’t start,” Lacy begged, seeing that look in her eyes.

“How was the doctor?” Jenny asked.

“Eddie said his doctor is concerned.”

“He can answer for himself.”

“Enough, Jenny.” Lacy rushed up to her, putting her hands on her arms, rubbing them and smiling at her with a soothing look. “Whatever you think, he is really, really ill, and he needs our help.”

Jenny’s expression of hostility dropped. She couldn’t help but fall for Lacy’s calmness. She was the only person who was able to affect her so and she loved her dearly.

“Guys, I don’t feel so good...” Eddie mumbled. His eyelids were furiously shaping and his lip intensely quivering. His hands were aimlessly clawing out at the side of the sofa and his legs were shaking.

Lacy ran over to him, followed by Jenny, putting her hands on his shoulder. She placed a hand on his forehead to check his temperature.

“He’s burning up,” she told Jenny, who placed her hand on his forehead in return, feeling the perspiring heat glowing off his temple. The anger she had directed at Eddie turned to worry, immediately fearing the worst. Whatever he had done or had become, he had known her since before they could

talk. He was her best friend, and he needed her.

“Phone an ambulance,” Lacy instructed.

Eddie’s eyes went blank and his whole body convulsed. Lacy stayed with him, her hands pressed over his, as Jenny rushed for the phone. The sound of Jenny talking to the 9-9-9 operator faded into the distance as his mouth filled with foam.

Eddie could tell he was having a seizure. He could feel his muscles shaking uncontrollably but was helpless to stop it. In his eye line he saw a black dot growing bigger. Then he saw her.

She stood over him, smiling, lurking. Lacy was to his side, clasping hold of his hand, completely unaware. Still, she remained.

The last thing he saw before he blacked out was her open her mouth, allowing her jaw to drop unnaturally low. She leapt toward Eddie and into his chest. Eddie’s chest rose up as part of his seizure, reacting to the sudden impact of the entity residing within him.

Then it went black.

He came around in flashes.

Flash one: a man in a green outfit sat over him, reassuring him it was going to be okay. Jenny and Lacy held each other behind him on the far side of the room. He could see Jenny was crying.

Black.

Flash two: he could hear an engine running and sirens wailing. He shook from side to side as he felt himself turn a corner.

“Please...” he began to speak.

Black.

Flash three: he saw tiles and lights above him pass

quickly, all following the same pattern. He saw the underside of a chin, then saw the white coat the owner of the chin was wearing.

“Please don’t let me go into a coma...”

“Okay, Eddie, it’s going to be okay.”

“She’ll come back... don’t let her come back...”

“Relax, please. Where is that damn sedative?”

Black.

Flash four: a lamp light shone on his arms. There was commotion all around him. People in white lab coats and blue scrubs darted around the room.

“If you let me go brain dead she’ll take me...”

“Why is he awake? I thought he was under!”

“She’ll take me...”

“Why the Christ is he awake? Sort it out!”

Black.

Flash five: Jenny sat over him, clutching his hand. He could feel the tightness of her warm grasp resting over his fingers.

“Don’t let her take me...”

Black.

24

10 September 1995

Eddie sat up in his bed, his leg propped up in a cast, his hand dabbing his fork at the miserable hospital food that was placed in front of him. Jenny sat beside him, laughing at how disgusting it was, reassuring Eddie that she would pop to the local and get something substantial as soon as the doctor arrived.

“Thank God,” Eddie responded. “As if I’m not bad enough already, it’s like they are trying to kill me.”

Jenny chuckled and rubbed his arm affectionately. Eddie smiled at her. He felt like he had his best friend back. Despite the whole ordeal he had gone through, he had her back.

He recalled his dreams from the previous night. He’d had two and, although he didn’t often remember his dreams, he recalled them vividly. The first was about him and Jenny opening up a pencil shop in America. He had no idea where this had come from; neither he nor Jenny had expressed a desire to live in America, start a business, or had any kind of inclination whatsoever toward pencils.

The second had been slightly uncomfortable. He had been trapped in a jar of mayonnaise; Eddie knew there was far more to it than that, but that was all that

he could recall.

Either way, he was extremely grateful he had not slipped into another coma or become braindead again, saving him from another ordeal. The last time he had been stuck in a hospital bed, he had found himself haunted with images that had plagued his conscious thoughts since – but not this time. He had not ‘crossed over’ as the paranormal experts had bizarrely put it.

He had stayed on this earth.

As he concluded with Jenny that he would leave the hospital food and rely on her to bring him back something edible, the doctor entered the room. This guy was different to his previous doctor; this one was younger, and far better-looking. Eddie estimated he was in his early thirties and was warmed by his friendly demeanour.

“Hey Eddie, how you doing?”

“I’m alive.”

The doctor smiled and stood beside his bed.

“That you are. Listen, we need to talk about what’s going on. Did you want to talk... alone?” He nodded to indicate Jenny.

“She’s fine here. Just tell me what’s up.”

The doctor took a deep inhale of breath and let it out slowly. He took a few minutes to gather himself, his positive façade dropping and fading into a far darker, unhappy state.

“This isn’t going to be easy news to hear, Eddie.”

“Okay...”

“It appears that your body is failing. We have carried out numerous tests and... your liver isn’t functioning. Your lungs aren’t holding oxygen

properly. Your heart isn't pumping blood around your body with enough pace, and the blood itself is lacking enzymes. You have potentially cancerous lumps growing all over your body, on almost everywhere they could grow."

Eddie's eyes narrowed and he glanced at Jenny. Jenny looked stumped, intently gaping wide-eyed and drop-jawed at the doctor, her hands covering her mouth. Eddie knew her well enough to know this was her trying to keep it together. This was her trying to be strong for Eddie.

"Eddie, you are dying, and, whilst there are some experimental drugs we can try, it is unlikely to do anything. Your body is functioning the same way as a sick ninety-year-old. It is simply not strong enough to withstand what it needs to do to survive."

"Why?"

"We don't know, Eddie, we don't normally see this in a man in his early 20s. There is little we can do."

Eddie didn't quite comprehend it. He knew what was going on, but it wasn't completely sinking in. He just stared to his feet, his mind attempting to make sense of it all, darting the doctor's words around in his head.

"Liver isn't functioning," ... "same as a ninety-year-old," ... "not strong enough to survive," ... "cancerous lumps."

"So what does this mean?" he directed into doctor's eyes. "How long have I got?"

"In my estimation, Eddie, if your body continues to deteriorate at the rate it is, I'd say around two months."

And in that moment his world froze. Everything he had done and lost: his sister, his imprisoned father, his selfish existence. Everything he had not yet done: fall in love, get married, have kids, beat his alcoholism, cease letting Jenny down. Everything ran through his mind, darting in various directions, filling it with chaos.

He couldn't hear Jenny saying his name through his tears. It became an inaudible mess in the background that turned into white noise. He felt like he was floating out of his body, away from the scene, into a world of denial, bargaining, and acceptance.

And as Eddie looked to his reflection in the mirror, he could swear he saw the woman looking back.

25

18 September 1995

Eddie lay in the sofa bed, watching an unattractive female Jerry Springer guest shout at some unattractive man on the television. He was bored. He wanted to be out and about and doing stuff, but he was sick of being pushed around in a wheelchair and he was sick of being too weak to even stay awake for a trip into town.

The alarm on his watch started beeping, indicating that it was 3.00 p.m. With an exasperated slap, he switched it off, leaving his arm poised over it. He dragged his hand to the basket of medication, fumbling to find the correct drugs for the correct time. Eventually he found it and, without bothering to read its ridiculously long name to make sure, he stuffed two of them into his mouth and swallowed them down with a chug of water.

Jenny walked in and handed him a cup of herbal tea. He couldn't stand it, but he had heard that herbal tea is supposed to make people feel better. If anything, it just made him resent people who made herbal tea.

“You know, you really should take our bed and let us sleep on the couch. I know we'd be fine here. You really should –”

“It’s your house. I’m already enough of a burden on you. I’m fine on the sofa bed. Besides,” he continued before she could interject with protest, “I’ve become quite accustomed to it.”

She smiled sympathetically and sat on the arm of the sofa bed beside him, peering at the television as she rubbed his shoulders. The caption read ‘I blame you for making me cheat with your dad.’

“Why on earth do you watch this?”

“Makes me feel so much better about my life,” he joked. “I mean, sure I may be dying, jobless, moneyless, girlfriendless... but at least I didn’t sleep with anyone’s dad.”

Jenny looked at him unsurely, not knowing whether to laugh at his attempt at humour or cry at the morbid nature of his thoughts. She had always been able to read him like a book, but for the first time, he didn’t seem himself. His eyes didn’t look at her like his eyes did, and his smile didn’t feel like his smile.

“I’m going to go make some pancakes, you want some?”

“Go to hell you fucking bitch.”

She froze halfway through the doorway. Had she just heard him right? Turning on her heel, she stared at him, indicating her utter confusion via her astonished face. He looked back at her helplessly, reaching out to her with a pleading expression.

“I’m so sorry,” he pleaded, a look of complete shock taking over him. “I don’t know why I said that, that wasn’t me, I –”

“Maybe it’s the drugs.”

“Maybe...” he said, then became angry. Who was

she to say anything about his treatment? Who was she to say anything about what he was doing? Who was she, a homosexual living with another woman, to cast any kind of opinion on anyone else?

“I doubt it, you ugly dyke.”

Jenny leant toward him, her jaw dropped, mouth agape. Had he just called her a dyke? She couldn't understand it; Eddie was the person who had supported her the most when she came out and announced that she would be living with Lacy. He was the one who stood up to other people for her. And here he was, calling her a dyke?

“What's gotten into you?”

Eddie rose to his feet. Jenny pressed herself away from him against the wall; he literally rose from vertical to horizontal without any help from his arms. His torso lifted into the air with his legs remaining straight, turning to her and shaking his head.

“Why would I support a filthy little faggot like you?”

Before Jenny could muster any more shock or disgust, before she could even convey how hurt and offended she was, she was struck in the face by a photo frame that had previously been on the fireplace.

She looked to the fireplace, which was across the room from Eddie. There was no way Eddie could have thrown that. Where did it come from?

“Eddie?” she whimpered, tears filling her eyes. All in a sudden moment, she felt unsafe, like she never had before.

“Eddie's not here right now.”

The ornaments around the room: chairs, tables, photo frames, the television, the locks in the windows

– all of it shook, vibrating with chaotic ferocity. Jenny huddled into a ball in the corner of the room, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her arms shook, fear consuming her, dread taking control.

“Eddie?”

“I don’t know what’s happening...” he softly cried. “Please help me, Jenny, please help me...”

Before Eddie could say another word he rose into the air. His head was forced backwards until his neck was bent at discomfoting, unnatural, obtuse angles. In an abrupt, unexpected movement, he was flung across the room and into the wall, falling flat out on his back. He cried and begged for it to stop.

Jenny crawled over to him. She took his hand in hers and kissed it.

“Eddie, please,” she begged.

With that, the shaking stopped. The room became still until there was nothing but quiet. Nothing but the sound of Eddie sobbing with Jenny.

Had she seen what she had seen? The whole room shaking, a photograph flying on its own accord – then Eddie levitating, without any control, flung across the room, knocking into the wall?

She didn’t believe in the paranormal. She didn’t believe in what you couldn’t see; but she had seen it. She had watched it with her eyes. This wasn’t some kind of shared hallucination; Eddie was in pain, crying, terrified.

“Eddie...” she spoke, stroking back his hair and dabbing gently at a cut that had begun to bleed on his forehead.

“Jenny?” he replied just as helplessly, his eyes groggily blinking.

“I think we need to call back those paranormal friends of yours,” she told him with a mixture of fear and reluctance. “I think we need help.”

26

19 September 1995

Eddie sat at the table in front of a steaming cup of coffee, huddling a blanket around himself. Even though the heating was cranked up and everyone else was having to remove their jackets, he was freezing, shaking, out of both coldness and fear. He couldn't see himself in the mirror because every time he looked he saw her. But he didn't need to see his reflection. He knew he looked awful, because everyone stared.

He was pale. The bags under his eyes were grey. His skin was clung to his bones and his body had grown unhealthily thin. He looked and felt terrible; not just ill from his terminal weakness, but from the energy sucked out of himself by whatever it was that was plaguing him.

Derek and Levi sat across from him at the table, leant forward, concerned, watching Eddie, who was sat between Lacy and Jenny, both of their arms rubbing his back. Derek was still wearing his smart attire; waistcoat, tie, top button done up. Levi was next to him in t-shirt and jeans, playing with what looked like a microphone connected to a tape recorder.

“We appreciate you calling us.” Derek spoke, as

professionally as he could. “I understand why you rejected our ideas, and I’m sorry if we didn’t come across as you would have liked.”

“It’s our fault,” Eddie managed, his nose blocked and his voice coming out faintly. “We are the ones who didn’t listen.”

“Before we resume, I need to ask you some questions to see how far along we are in the process. Eddie, have you looked in the mirror today, or yesterday, or –”

“She’s there.” Eddie knew what he was getting at before he needed to finish the question. “Every time I look in the mirror I don’t see me, I see her.”

Derek bowed his head. His face clenched up, as did his fists, and his leg began wobbling. This news clearly distressed him. He shook his head to himself with frustration.

“I fear it may be too late,” Derek reluctantly announced.

“What?”

“The entity is no longer fighting for your place in this earth – it has taken your place and it is waiting for you to die. Eddie, this entity is now inside you. You are sharing your body with it.”

Eddie was weak, fragile, and helpless, but this was the last kick in the teeth. He was speechless, hopeless, lost. How could he be sharing his body with something else?

“Have you said anything nasty? Anything that you perhaps didn’t know you were saying?”

“Yes,” Jenny answered for him, still wounded from the words that he had unknowingly said to her.

“Okay.” Derek looked to the floor then back to

Eddie. “This is going to be tough and it may not work. You need to understand, Eddie, that you may not survive this, not in your state, not when it’s this late in the game...”

“What are you suggesting?”

“An exorcism. We are going to have to perform an exorcism on you.”

Eddie looked to Jenny, then to Lacy, hoping for some help or indication as to how he should react. They both looked back at him with equally empty faces.

“Like I said before, we have no promises Balam will lose his interest in you. This will not get your sister back. maybe in the future, but... right now, our priority is getting this thing out of you. And it may already be too late.”

Eddie hesitated, despondently sighing.

“Fine. When?”

“We have no time to lose. We will set up now then we will start during the night. At 3.00 a.m.”

“Why 3.00 a.m.?”

“Because that, my boy, is the witching hour. That is when this demon will be at its most present. As will your gift.”

“My gift?”

“You are paranormally vulnerable, Eddie. I stand by what I said. You perhaps don’t realise it now, but you could potentially have the ability to take on hell itself.”

27

1 January 2000

Eddie looks at his watch. It's 2.59 a.m. He has been going all night and he is getting tired; but he is so close. This is the point of the night he has been waiting for. This is the witching hour.

The first thing Derek taught him in mastering his abilities was the advantage he had between the hours of 3.00 a.m. and 4.00 a.m. It is the time the demons came out to play, yes; but it is also the time his powers would match them with the full power he is able to yield. And he feels it. As soon as 3.00 a.m. comes, it's like a surge of electricity fleeting through his body. It's like his vision has an additional layer of infrared over it, like he is the master of all that is malevolent and wicked in this world.

He takes out his cross and stands over the demon lying on the floor in the girl's body. He puts a leg either side of the girl's torso and holds the cross out.

"Enough!" he declares. "Enough, you piece of hell-tainted shit. Leave this girl alone!"

The demon roars at him, a roar with multiple voices that makes the foundations of the room shake.

This time Eddie is not afraid. He knows what he needs to do. He is going to defeat this demon. He is

going to free this girl and liberate his sister's soul after all this time.

This demon is strong, but so is he.

Cassy, hold on. I'm coming.

“Adeline, this is it.” He looks into the beast's eyes. “This is the final push. This is when I need you the most. We are going to fight it.”

His watch beeps, announcing the arrival of 3.00 a.m. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in, his blood heaving like fire through an empty building, consuming everything in its path.

“Help me, God, for I am your servant. Please free this child from this filthy creature.”

“Who you calling filthy?”

The demon rises and pushes Eddie onto his back. Eddie does not stay down for long. He regains his composure and takes a strong posture, holding his cross out forcefully.

“You, you filthy coward!” he bellows, his voice filling the room. “Free this girl, you ugly bastard! Free this girl you disgusting, vile, filth-ridden whore!”

The demon levitates its thieved body a foot off the ground and floats toward Eddie with a sinister swipe. It looks directly into his eyes, no more than inches from his face. They look at each other like two nemesis boxers before a fight, like two lions fighting over territory, two equal armies charging against each other with nuclear power at their fingertips. They look at each other like it is the end.

“Free this girl. In the name of God, I command you, free this girl!”

“I will not yield to your talk of God you foul

human.”

“Free this girl! In the name of God!”
“Kiss my filthy cunt you son of a whore!”

He takes a big, deep breath and projects his words into the face of Balam and the face of all that he stands against. He projects his resentment into the face of evil. In the name of god. In the name of Adeline.

In the name of Cassy.

“Free her! Free her! In the name of God, free her!”

With a humungous growl, the room rumbles. The mouth of the girl widens and a cloud of grey flies out. The girl’s body drops to the floor and the scars instantly fade.

But it is not over.

The grey cloud surrounds Eddie, encircles him, entwines him in its rotation, lifting him off the ground.

“Take me!” Eddie sends his voice out into the whirlwind of the room, objects clattering back and forth, a tornado of destruction in the demon’s wake.

And with that, the grey cloud forces itself into Eddie. It enters through his nose, through his mouth, through his ears; everywhere it is able.

On the floor beneath him, Adeline awakens. She lifts her head up and looks around herself. Fear stings her. The room is in a sick commotion. She is tangled in the hurricane of anarchy, trapped with despair inside the circulating objects.

She looks up at the man held off the ground before her. She looks to the man called Eddie, the man she knows has saved her. She looks to him with admiration at first, then terror as she recognises it is

him no longer.

His eyes burst red. His fingernails turn into claws and his teeth grow sharp. He comes down to the ground with a shuddering halt, not yielding the spinning of chaos in the room that it has created.

“Silly girl,” speak the words of Balam through the body of Eddie. “Silly, silly girl. Now I get to look you in the eyes as I kill you.”

Eddie’s voice becomes deeper and obscured. He is no longer there. Balam has found a new host; and a stronger, more powerful one at that.

28

20 September 1995

Eddie, Jenny, and Lacy watched on in awe as Derek and Levi set up the living room. They had tape recorders stationed around the room, restraints placed in the corners of the sofa bed and crosses placed on multiple parts of the wall.

As Levi set up a video camera, Derek approached Eddie.

“What’s all this for?” Jenny inquisitively enquired.

“The tape recorders are to catch EVP, standing for electronic voice phenomena,” Derek replied with thorough professionalism and authority. “The restraints are to keep Eddie in place when the demon surfaces and the camera – well, the camera partly to capture our findings for the university. But it is also to protect us in a court of law should anything fatal happen.”

“Anything fatal?” Eddie’s eyes widened.

“Yes. In case you die. Shall we start?” Derek turned and prompted them to begin in almost the same breath as the mention of death.

Eddie took a few small steps into the living room, cautiously surveying the gear stationed around the room. His hands fiddled with each other and his head

twitched. He could feel his arms shaking with nerves.

“Come on in, Eddie,” Derek encouraged.

Eddie felt Jenny’s hand on his back, affectionately nursing him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, stepping slowly toward the bed, sitting on the edge of it.

“Lay down for me,” Levi casually requested as he approached. Eddie reluctantly and slowly did as he was asked.

Levi fastened Eddie’s wrists to the corner of the sofa bed, firmly tightening them. He made his way to Eddie’s ankles and secured them with the same strength.

Eddie felt more vulnerable than he had throughout the entirety of this process. He lay there, unable to move if he wanted to, staring at the ceiling. A mouthful of sick came to his mouth and he swallowed it back down. He could feel the belt restraining his wrists, the buckles clattering with the terrified shaking of his arms.

He wanted to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

“Girls, I would like you to stand behind me,” Derek instructed Jenny and Lacy as he stood directly before Eddie, and they obliged.

Derek rolled up his sleeves and produced a book.

“Most glorious prince of the heavenly armies,” Derek whispered faintly, closing his eyes and lifting his head upward toward the heavens. “Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in our battle against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places.”

He softly placed his hand on his forehead, his

chest, then his shoulders, creating the cross upon his body. Eddie weakly gazed at him, feeling no change, transfixed upon what the man was doing.

“Ladies, I have a request,” Derek commanded without taking his eyes away from Eddie’s. “You do not speak or move unless on my instruction. You do not talk to it, you do not listen to it and you do not interact with it. Do you understand?”

Jenny and Lacy nodded.

“Ladies, it is imperative you understand.”

“We understand,” they both mumbled.

“Now to the demon that dwells within.” Derek snarled passionately toward Eddie, clutching a cross in one hand and his book in the other. “I speak directly to you.”

Eddie helplessly gawked back at him. He felt nothing. No change. No presence he had felt previously. Nothing more than his normal weakness. He was numb.

“I don’t know what you’re expecting, mate,” Eddie announced with a peculiarly chirpy voice. “But I don’t got a clue what you are on about.”

“What is your name?” Derek spoke definitely and sincerely.

“My name is Eddie,” he replied. Jenny frowned at the sound of his accent; it didn’t sound like Eddie’s.

“No, it is not. I command you, tell me, what is your name?”

Eddie chuckled. “Eddie, mate. Eddie.”

Eddie’s eyes flickered as he felt himself slip away.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, the God and Lord, strengthened by the Immaculate Virgin Mary, I command you, tell me your name.”

“Fuck you.”

“Mary, Mother of God,” Derek’s voice rose to the point he was now screaming his instructions. “Of blessed Michael the Archangel, of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul and all the saints – I beseech you, tell me your name!”

Eddie screamed multiple screams from multiple voices, his chest raising and his mouth opening wide.

“With the powerful authority of the ministry, with confidence undertaken in repulsing the attacks and deceits of the devil, God arises and commands you – what is your name?!”

Derek took a step forward, reaching out his cross. “In my name, in my Lord’s name and in the name of the child of God you have stolen, tell me your filthy name, demon!”

“My name...” Eddie croaked, his head slowly tilting to the side, “... is Lamashtu. Goddess of death of unborns and newborns, night demon and bringer of disease. And I intend to use my new entity to bring forth death among the endowed!”

“Well, Lamashtu, my name is Derek – and I am here to stop you.”

29

“Ladies, I need you to repeat the words ‘deliver us, oh Lord’ after each time I speak, do you understand?”

Jenny and Lacy frantically nodded, desolately clinging onto each other, digging their fingers into each other’s back, paralysed with fear.

Derek gripped his cross, targeting it toward Eddie’s occupied body.

“Deliver us, oh Lord.”

“Deliver us, oh Lord,” quivered Jenny and Lacy in faint echo, their voices shaking.

“I need you to be stronger! Deliver us, oh Lord!”

“Deliver us, oh Lord!”

“Better.”

Derek clutched his cross, grasped it, tautened it within his grasp, narrowing his eyes and striding forward with repugnance. Eddie’s eyes had fully dilated and his pupils were now fully black. His skin had turned grey, his hair black and greasy. Newly formed scars seeped through his arms, dripping blood upon the sheets below him.

“From all sin.”

“Deliver us, oh Lord!”

Eddie’s voice projected a deep chuckle through the room, consuming it with sinister intent.

“From all your wrath.”

“Deliver us oh Lord!”

Eddie lifted both his arms, snapping out of the restraints, liberating its wrists from its binds. Levi’s eyes widened and he backed up, leaving Derek the only one between the demon and the innocent bystanders constrained against the far wall.

“From sudden and unprovided death!”

“Deliver us, oh Lord!”

The restraints constraining Eddie’s ankles flung off and the demon lay free in his body. His chest rose up, leaving his head and his legs dangling beneath him.

“From the snares of the devil, from anger, hatred and all ill will, and from *all* lewdness!”

“Deliver us, oh Lord!”

Eddie’s chest continued to rise in the air, levitating him above the bed. His head, his arms, his legs, all dangled beneath him, until he was floating half-way between the bed and the ceiling.

Jenny and Lacy’s jaws fell like weights and they wished to be anywhere but in that room at that moment. They feared for their lives and they feared for Eddie’s. They did not take their arms away from each other for a moment, furiously trembling together.

The camera Levi used to film short-circuited and flickers of electric spat at Levi, sending him reeling backwards, clutching his eye.

“From lightning and tempest, from the scourge of earthquakes, from plague, famine, and from war!”

“Deliver us, oh Lord!”

Derek’s mouth turned into a snarl as he compelled his cross at the demon. The room rattled, photo

frames fell over, chairs vibrated across the floor.

“By your birth, by your wondrous ascension, by the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, on our day of judgement. Deliver us!”

“Deliver us, oh Lord!”

Derek placed his book upon the floor and nodded at Jenny and Lacy clinging to each other behind him, as if to signal well done. He stepped toward Eddie’s ascending body and placed his cross upon it. The sound of burning hissed from Eddie’s body as it plummeted back to the bed.

Eddie’s face elevated up, sneered, then roared at Derek. Derek was taken off of his feet and sent soaring backwards across the room. The objects of the room furiously spun and the armchair lifted, causing Derek to flinch out of the way.

Every piece of furniture, every object, every scrap, everything in the room, was a hurricane battering furiously between Derek and Eddie, creating a fatal barrier.

Derek turned to Jenny and Lacy, their despairing eyes full of terror looking back at him, as he bowed his head.

“It’s no good, it’s too late,” he spoke solemnly, shaking his head. “It’s taken him. Eddie is not here anymore. It’s won.”

Jenny’s eyes filled with tears as she turned her head and buried herself into Lacy’s chest, Lacy placing her arms tightly around her and squeezing securely.

Derek peered at Eddie’s body laying still through the chaos of spinning that separated him from the demon-infested form that lay taken. He could not get

through it. It was done. Through a whisper only he could hear, he gave a final prayer.

With a delicacy he had not yet shown, he knelt as close to Eddie's ear as he could without being caught in the debris encompassing the supernatural barrier forced between them and whispered softly:

“Eddie, you need to return home.”

Eddie did not react.

“Eddie, you need to return home. We will save your sister at another time. For now, return; or you will be trapped forever.”

30

Date and Time Non-Existent

Eddie's eyes groggily opened. Every part of him hurt. He could feel his palms against harsh, bumpy stone that left imprints and cuts upon them. He lifted his head and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands.

Taking in his surroundings, he grew fixed to the spot with pure horror. He did not know where he was, though it felt familiar to a place he had been twice before. Yet, this time it was different. It was hot. It was fiery. And he felt no hope.

He sat upon a mound of stone. Chopping at his feet was fervent, spewing lava. Mounds of stone appeared around him, various helpless souls laying upon them, crying out for mercy. Above him to either side were large, rocky cliffs, soaring up into the blackened sky. All around him he heard cries, screams of pain and tears of loss, an ambience of agony encompassing his ears, filling his mind with overwhelmingly grand torture, both inescapable and irrefutably agonising.

Climbing to his knees, clambering back and forth, he strained to find some way off of the rock he had been bound to. It was no good. Every time he even got close to the edge, lava spat out at him, keeping him in inexorable custody.

A few rocks across from him he saw a man in rags, with an overgrown beard, reach out from his rock. The lava flung up and spat fire upon his arm. Before the man could even flinch back, the lava reached out and encapsulated his arm like a fist and pulled him down into the lava. The man's screams did not last long as he disappeared into the volcanic fire that had torn him away from safety.

Am I going to be trapped here forever? Eddie questioned. He was not sure where he was, but he had a feeling it was somewhere 'beyond.' He had crossed over before, but that had felt different. In fact, it had felt indifferent. Then it struck Eddie.

Maybe where he was before was purgatory? A place he was to wait. He was put onto a stone mound with fire when he was rejected from purgatory before. Which would mean this place was...

No. Don't be crazy. It can't be.

Had he died? Not just stuck in a braindead coma floating somewhere between the next stages, but instead ended up fully braindead, ultimately landing in the fiery pit of damned eternity. Could it be?

Would that mean the woman who had stalked him had won? If he was here, then surely that meant she had his body. She had what she had come for.

"Hello?" Eddie shouted out. It was worth a try. Not even all the trapped souls around him reacted, no, they all remained huddled up in screams of horror.

In a sudden movement, the lava lashed out at his feet and he impulsively cringed out of its reach. It was no good, some ash from the lava landed on his ankle and – and, nothing. No pain. No reaction.

How could that be? He had just witnessed a man burnt and pulled into an eternity of agony. How could

he...?

That's when he remembered what Derek had said to him.

"You perhaps don't realise it now, but you could potentially have the ability to take on hell itself."

He was 'paranormally vulnerable,' or 'paranormally gifted,' as they had otherwise stated. What's more, Derek had hypothesised that Eddie could take on hell itself. So if this was the underworld, the eternity of pain, then maybe Eddie could fight it. Maybe he had the ability to be different to the man he saw taken by the fire.

Maybe this was his dominion, and he was able to be here, what he never could be on earth.

He reached out with his hand and held it over the lava. It did not spew at him, it did not grab him, nor did it attempt to burn him. Slowly but surely, he descended his hand until it was placed over the lava. Closing his eyes, he allowed it to be consumed by the orange ash that filled the endless pit beside him.

Nothing. No burning, no lashing out, not even a tinge of discomfort.

He peered downwards at the lava. He wondered. *If Jesus could walk on water...*

Rising to his feet, he lifted his first foot out, away from the rock he had awoken upon. He positioned it carefully upon the lava's surface and found that it remained upon it, securely balanced. He placed his next foot down and stood upon the orange liquid magma.

This was even better walking than water; he was walking on lava.

He took another step forward, then another,

building up tempo, accelerating until he was pacing at speed. All the people trapped on the rocks reached out to him with their feeble hands as they begged. He ignored them. If they were in hell, it was not for him to decide whether they deserved their fate.

His weakness was gone. There were no signs of aching in his legs, shaking in his arms, and no hesitation whatsoever in his gut. He was sprinting over the volcanic lava and it did nothing to stop him.

He looked upwards at the large side of rock ascending in front of him. He had no idea why or how, he just strongly felt he needed to find a way to the top of it. As if by a miraculous answer, he began to float. He rose upwards and upwards, flying into the musky air and landing upon the rock that had previously surrounded him.

Before him were hundreds of figures almost identical to the woman that had stalked his consciousness and plagued him in his coma. Men, women, monsters, creatures; all dark, greasy, and giving off the essence of hate. Eddie could sense it, the evil. He could feel it surging off of them and hitting him like a bucket of boiling water. They weren't all in human form; many of them had parts of animals, some parts Eddie didn't even recognise.

As Eddie stepped forward, they all flinched. They backed away from him, cowering at the sight. A hell full of demons and they were struck with fear by the sight of a simple man.

“Where are you?” he screamed out, hearing his question echo against the walls and back at him numerous times.

Nothing. No demon offered themselves up, no creature stepped forward, no beast dared drop their

cowardice.

“I know you are here!” Eddie commanded strongly. His fists were clenched, his mouth twisted, and he felt his body filling with power. “Come on out!”

He almost got high on the supremacy he felt rushing through his blood. His body heaved with authority, his mind fully ready to reign over these filthy beasts that shrank before him.

He held his hand out and the ground shook. The demons separated, and one of them came floating toward him. It was her. The long, greasy, black hair, the grey skin, the scars, the wounds, the overwhelming aura of evil; it all indicated he had the correct specimen.

He threw his arm downwards and the demon was flung to his feet, like a dirty beggar praying to its master. It cowered before him, shaking, shivering as if frozen cold.

“You dare to take my place on earth?”

It said nothing. It just trembled, its head rested against the floor, hands resting over it, not daring to move or go against the sovereignty and dominion Eddie had over the creatures of hell.

“Now I am going to ask you this one request, and it is your only chance at my mercy.”

He held his hand out and scrunched it up into a fist. The demon’s throat tightened and it clutched at it as it rose into the air, suffocating.

“Where is Balam? Where is my sister?”

Lamashtu shook its wicked head, an etching of fear passing over its face.

“You fear Balam? Well, fear me!” Eddie screamed

with all he had, clenching his fist tighter and tighter, forcing Lamashtu's neck to close up.

"You think Balam will hurt you for betraying him? You fool! You will cower before me before you cower again to Balam!"

Without warning, a gust of wind threw itself over him, bringing the whisper of Derek's voice with it.

"Eddie you need to return home," it spoke delicately.

"No!" he bellowed with all his might. "Lamashtu, you will bring forth Balam. *Bring him to me now!*"

Lamashtu shook its head vigorously, its body convulsing under the strain Eddie's tightly scrunched fist was causing. Eddie could feel his nails digging into his palm, the bones in his fingers shaking under the strain from which he clenched.

"I will not leave here without her!"

Then Derek's voice came again through the wind, floating through him like a ghost through a body.

"Eddie, you need to return home."

"No, I will not leave Cassy here!"

"We will save your sister at another time. For now, return; or you will be trapped forever."

Eddie's gut wrenched itself into knots, his mind torn in this dilemma, his tearful eyes fixated on the suffocating body he held in the air before him.

I love you so much, Cassy.

He knew he needed to leave. Derek was right; he would be trapped forever.

I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.

Eddie threw his fist to the side, sending Lamashtu over the edge of the rocky cliff and straight down

beneath him into the spewing lava.

With a disapproving look over the demented fiends that backed up away from him, he dropped his head and closed his eyes.

31

Eddie opened his eyes with a start. He lifted up, withdrawing a sudden intake of breath, sucking in every bit of oxygen he was able. He saw a mass of objects swirling around the room drop to the floor, then before him, Derek stood clutching a cross, Levi backed up into the corner, and Jenny and Lacy clung to each other on the ground.

“Guys?” he offered.

“Eddie? Is that you?” Derek held his arm out cautiously.

“Yes. It’s me. It’s gone. I did it. You were right.”

Without a moment of hesitation, Jenny and Lacy ran up to him and flung their arms around him, hugging him so tightly he could barely breathe.

“Are you okay?” Jenny asked with a face full of concern.

“I’d murder a cup of tea,” Eddie smirked.

“I’m on it,” Lacy answered, and rushed into the kitchen.

Eddie looked over at Derek and Levi. They lay against the far side of the room, willing their heavy breathing to subside. Eddie could tell by looking at them that they had been through an ordeal. They lifted their heads back and closed their eyes, enjoying the success of the moment.

Then Eddie turned to Jenny. She was still welling

up, tears filling up the base of her eyes. She smiled sadly at him, then looked to the ground.

“I thought I’d lost you,” she admitted.

“Hey.” Eddie lifted her chin up. “You didn’t. We won.”

Jenny nodded, her face welling up. She clung herself to him, throwing her arms around him and holding on for dear life. Eddie put his arms around her in return and smiled triumphantly.

Jenny abruptly leant back. “Oh, sorry, am I hurting you? I forgot.”

“Jenny, I feel fine. I don’t feel weak or anything anymore. You can hug all you want.”

With a sincere smile that sent away the tears from her eyes, she flung her arms back around Eddie and continued to hold him close for dear life.

“I’m so sorry, Eddie. I’m so sorry.”

Eddie said nothing. He just embraced her, enjoying having a friend that cared so much.

32

1 January 2000

Adeline sits over the body of her saviour and watches him grow lifeless. Balam has taken him; she is saved, but at his expense. She shakes him and shakes him but he does not move.

Eddie looks down upon her. He sees his body lying motionless. He sees her crying over it. He sees her desperately shaking him. He floats over the body, watching her think he is dead.

He is far from it.

To his left he sees his enemy, floating with him. It has three heads; one a bull, one a man, one a ram. The bull aggressively puffs air out of its nostrils. The ram sneers and the man snarls. Together, they growl, facing Eddie with eyes of pure evil and animalistic faces of angered hostility. Its horns shake and its fists clench, its body scarred with marks of war.

“Balam,” Eddie utters, as if as an ironic greeting. His fists clench and he shakes with power.

“It is you,” announces the man head of the demon before Eddie. “Commander of hell, he who attempts to take his throne.”

“And you’re a king of hell, commanding over forty legions of demons, all of which cower before me. I

have grown even stronger since I defeated your slave, Lamashtu. Do you dare take me on?"

Balam opens the mouth of each of its heads and roars toward Eddie, sending him floating back against the wall of the room. He remains planted against it, flattened out, held back by the air of evil.

"Give me my sister!" Eddie commands with all the authority he can force into his voice.

Balam's fists clench and vibrate, opening and surging red flames toward Eddie. Eddie lifts his hands and the flames lick against them, halting before reaching his body in a devastating blow.

"That the best you got?" Eddie taunts the demon before him.

Balam growls again, this time not to intimidate, but to show his aggressive displeasure at being well-matched. He throws forward more flames.

Eddie lifts his arm and swipes, causing the flames to cease. He throws his arms forward and Balam thwacks against the far wall, dropping to the floor pathetically.

Balam raises its heads and looks to Eddie.

"Free my sister!"

Eddie raises his arms, forcing Balam into midair, rotating and rotating, faster and faster, till the ram screams, the bull snorts and the face begs for mercy.

"Free my sister!"

Balam's body turns to a blur, bashing against the wall with each vastly accelerated turn, its body accumulating the aerodynamic pain of aging wind.

"I command you, bitch of hell. Release her!"

Balam screams out, its voice getting caught on the wind of its spin. The room turns into a tornado of

chaos, objects turning to weapons against Balam as they get caught in the circle of the whirlwind it creates.

Eddie even chuckles a little as the ram head squeals in agony.

“It is done!” Balam replies, and Eddie drops its body to the floor.

From within it, a body rises. It is translucent, vacantly existential, a bare form of a spirit. But to Eddie, whatever form it is, it is instantly recognizable.

“Eddie...” speaks the voice of his sister, still the age she has been kept at for her eternity of suffering.

Eddie wipes his tears and holds them out in his hand. Cassy put hers on his, but her spiritual form falls through it, unable to clasp his affection in hers.

“Thank you...” she whispers.

Tears fall down his face like upturned buckets; the emotion accumulated throughout his childhood, his adolescence, and his adult years turn into one solitary look of bare love.

With a stare and a smile, Cassy evaporates upwards, transported to the comfort of heaven; or so Eddie hopes.

You're free.

“This is not over,” Balam informs him, clambering to its knees. “I will return. I will return with armies and we will take you down.”

“I look forward to it,” answers Eddie.

Balam drops its heads and goes up in flames; and with that, it is no more. It has disappeared. And the room is still. The objects remain floored and Eddie can return to his body.

Adeline whimpers and cries over Eddie. Eddie

slowly lifts his head.

“Don’t cry for me, Adeline,” he softly instructs her.

Adeline’s eyes open. She clings to him, hugging him tightly and gratefully, thanking him repeatedly.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! You saved my life!”

Eddie leans up, propping himself against the wall. He runs his hands backwards through his hair and over his face, gathering himself.

“Oh, it was...” Eddie goes to say ‘a piece of cake,’ then recalls it wasn’t quite that simple. “It was my pleasure,” he completes the sentence with instead.

“Thank you,” Adeline continues to urgently show her gratitude.

“Oh stop it,” Eddie smiles warmly. “Your mum’s downstairs.”

Her face lights up and she bursts out from the room. Eddie hears the rumble of quick paces down the stairs and a door open as she bursts into the living room, followed by the loud happy tears of the girl’s rejoicing mother.

He uses the wall to drag himself to his feet. He rests a hand over his back as he leans over slightly, rubbing the aching pain. He looks over the room; the mess, the chaos, the destruction. He would hate to be the one paying that bill.

He heads out of the room and slowly makes his way downstairs. He opens the door to the living room and peers in.

Beatrice clings to her daughter as if she is never letting go. Tears furiously protrude from her eyes as she hugs her daughter to her chest with sheer delight.

She is too caught up in her passionate pleasure at her daughter's safety and doesn't even notice Eddie peering in.

Eddie decides it's best to leave quietly. Beatrice will want to thank him, and he doesn't do well with gratitude. He slowly opens the front door so as to be as quiet as possible and makes his way out into the morning sun.

A new year, a new millennium, the rain dripping from the sky, landing in sparse drops upon Eddie's head. He takes a moment to breathe in the fresh morning air, to smell the rain hitting the ground all around him.

Cassy is free.

He straightens up his tie and takes it one foot at a time.

33

1 May 1996

Eddie stood over his sister's grave with his hands in the pocket of his trench coat. He hadn't long until Derek needed to take him back to the university for his afternoon classes, but he would never miss his annual visit. This was the first time he had visited her with a clear mind. His hair was neatly parted, his top button done up beneath his tie and he could still smell his fresh new flat on his clothes.

"I love you, sis," he told the headstone, laying his flowers down and walking away.

In the car park, his red Nissan Micra sat perfectly in the space where he had left it. He loved his car. It wasn't much, but it was his.

Before he got into his car, he paused. He closed his eyes and took in the moment. He was about to go back to university to complete his demonology degree. After that, he had a very pressing commitment; dinner with his best friend and her girlfriend. It had taken him a long time, but he was there. He was happy.

"Eddie?" came a voice from behind him. He turned around to see Derek approaching.

"Derek?" he enquired, confused. "I was just on my

way back now.”

“I needed to speak to you away from the university. What I’m about to say has not been sanctioned.”

Eddie’s eyebrows narrowed. He was confused. What on earth could he need to talk to him about?

As if answering his thoughts, Derek handed Eddie a newspaper, instructing him to turn to page nine. Eddie did so and, at the bottom of the page, he read the headline:

‘CRAZED MOTHER BECOMES LAUGHING STOCK OF TOWN AS SHE CLAIMS HER DAUGHTER IS POSSESSED.’

“Has anyone investigated?” Eddie asked.

“Oh yeah, the church has been, they say she’s full of it.” Derek nodded, leaning against the car next to Eddie. “They haven’t sanctioned it.”

“Well if the Church hasn’t sanctioned it –”

“I never told you this, but the Church didn’t sanction you, either.”

Eddie let this sink in.

“So why are you telling me this?”

Derek ceased leaning against the car and looked around, gathering his thoughts. He stroked his neat goatee, his mouth open about to speak for a good few seconds before he actually began talking.

“I think it’s time we stopped sticking you with books to pass a degree, Eddie.”

“What? But I’ve been working so hard.”

“Books are for people who can’t do it. We both

know that's not you."

"You mean... you want me to come watch this girl's exorcism?"

Derek smirked and chuckled to himself slightly.

"No, Eddie. I want you to *perform* this girl's exorcism."

Eddie's jaw dropped. He froze. Him? Performing an exorcism? He had no field experience; besides the one occasion he was involved and ended up in hell.

"I don't know..."

"Yes you do," Derek assertively instructed him. "You have a gift, Eddie. And it is time we started exploring it."

Eddie smiled. Derek was right. He did have a gift. If he could help people, he surely had an obligation to do so. No, more than an obligation; he had a desire to.

"Where do I start?"

MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hi, Rick here!

Thank you so, so much for reading my novel. I love horror and it was a great experience putting together this story.

Book 2/5 in this series is out now – entitled Descendant of Hell, available on Amazon. Eddie’s story continues, and we find out more about where this mysterious ‘gift’ is coming from...

If you enjoyed this book, please please please leave me an Amazon customer review. It makes such a difference for other customers to see that you liked it yourself.

Meanwhile, to keep up-to-date with all things Rick Wood you can like me on Facebook @rickwoodthewriter and follow me on Twitter @rickwoodwriter – and you could even join my Reader’s Group at www.rickwoodwriter.com

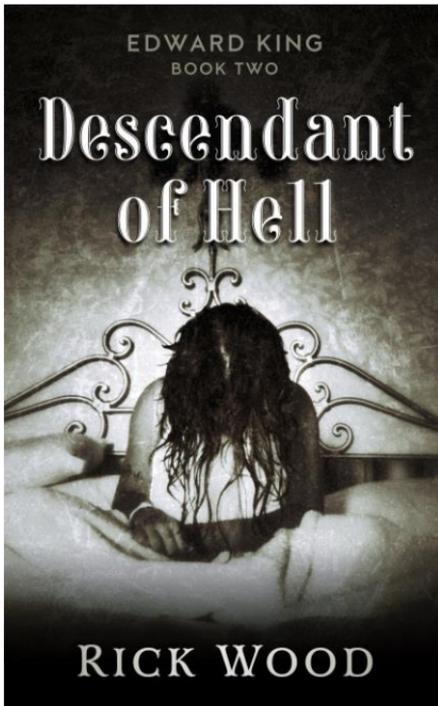
What’s more, there is a prequel to The Edward King Series free and exclusive to my Reader’s Group...

Again, thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed!

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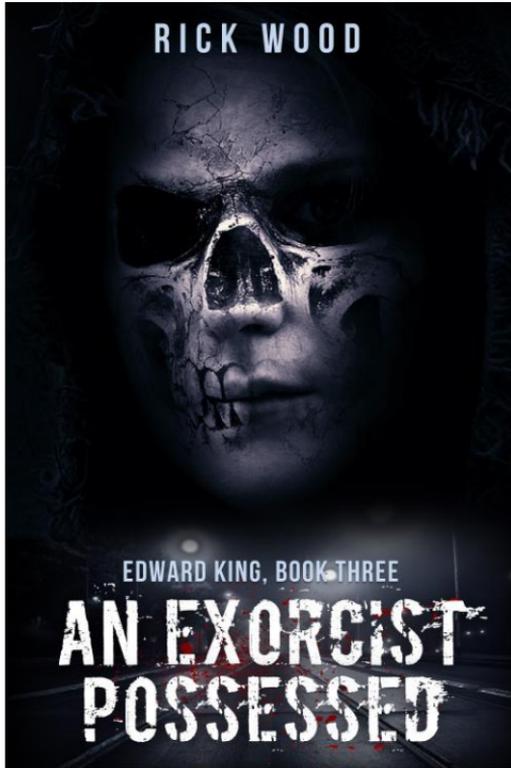
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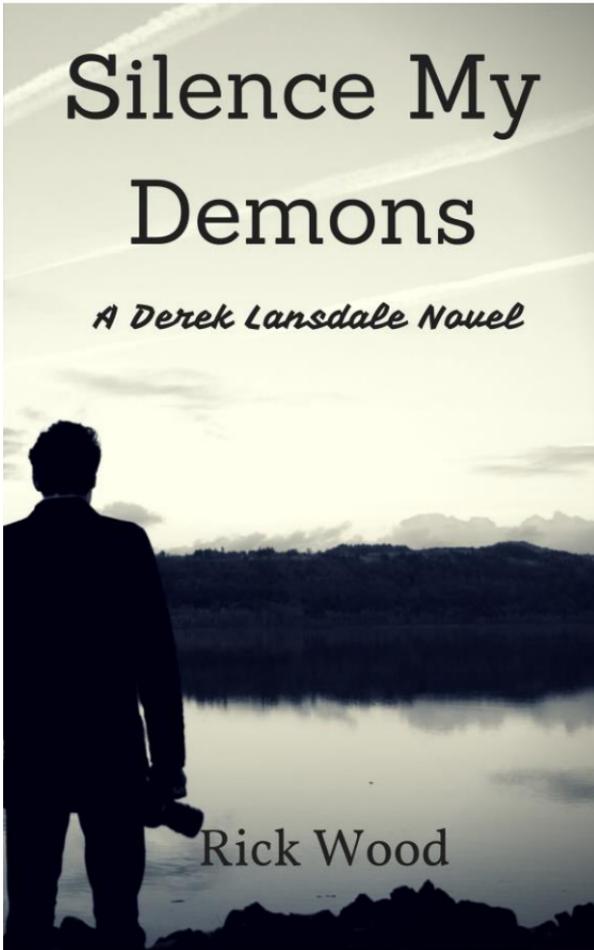
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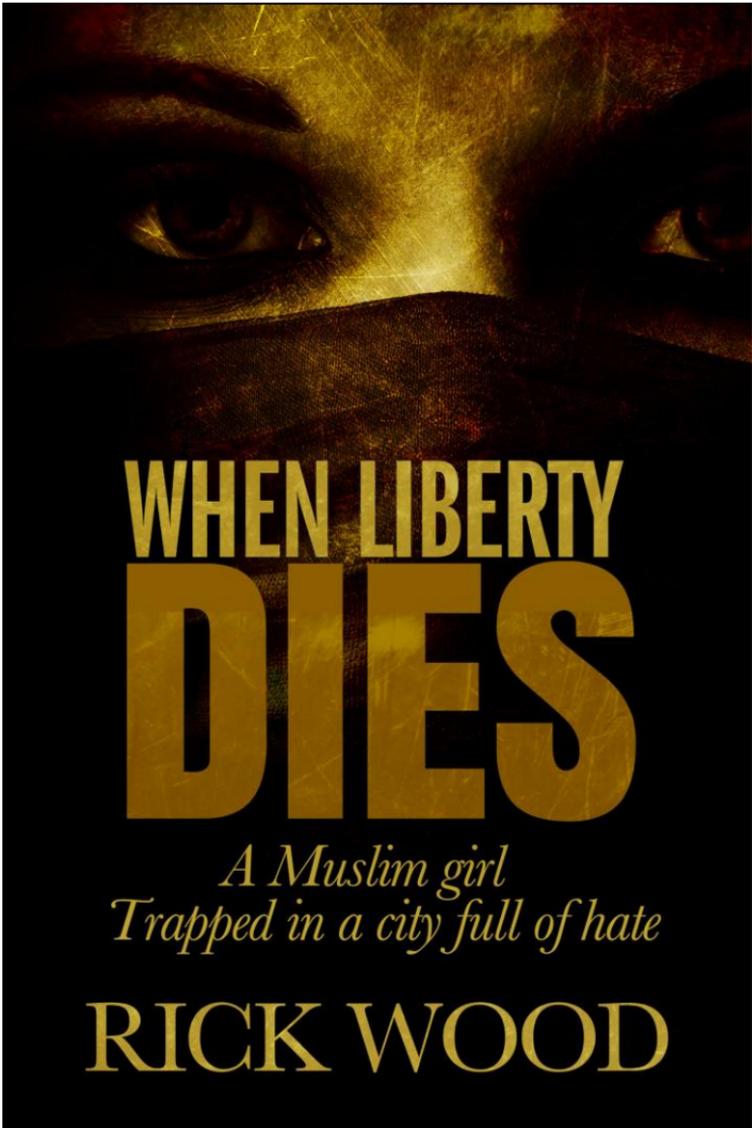
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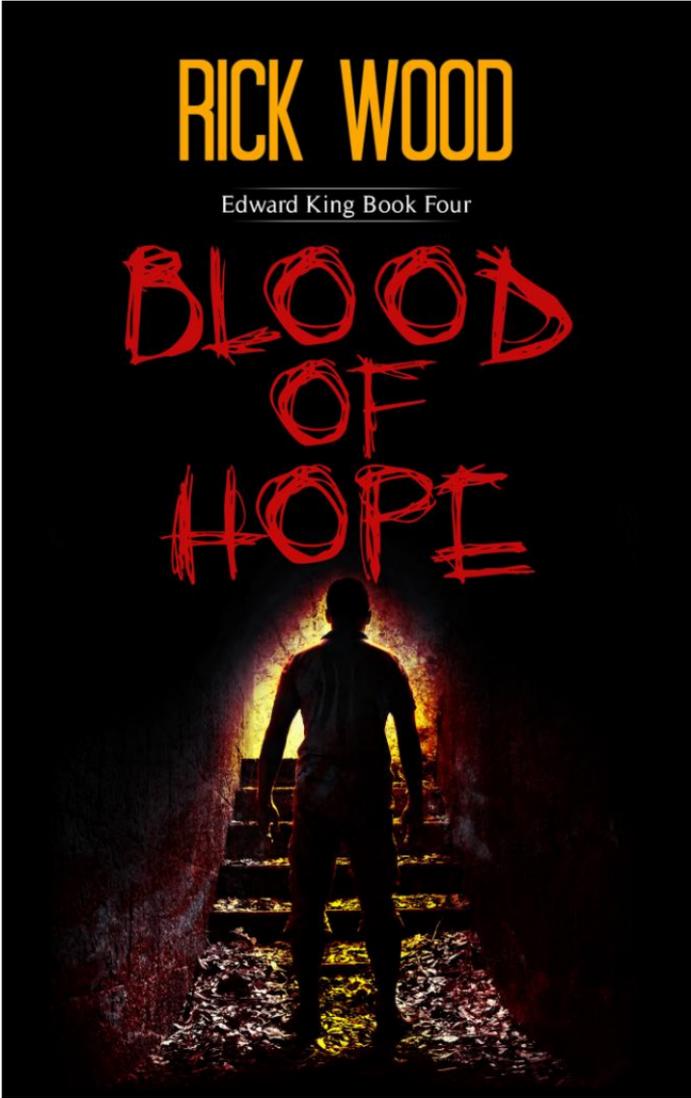
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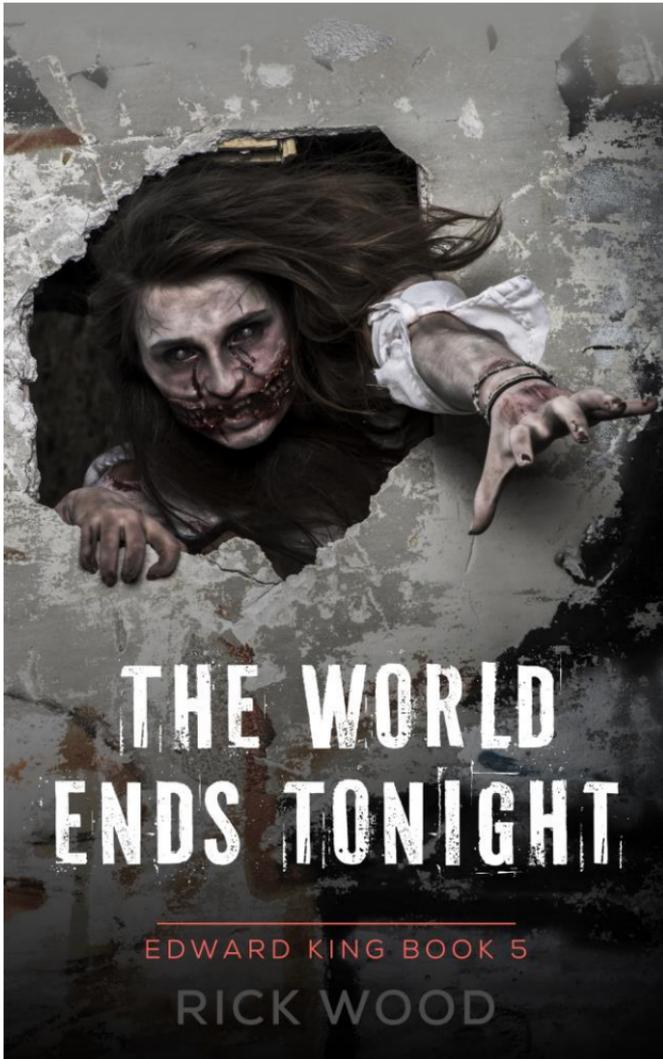
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