

# THE DYING SUNRISE

## A NOVEL

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“Terror of civilization, welcome to the world my new creations!”

-Kathetor, *The New Population*

### PART 1: CHANTÉ

#### Chapter 1

Ryan Sanders sat alone at his kitchen table, celebrating his thirtieth birthday with a glass of scotch, a cigar, and a feeling of desperate loneliness. He had spent the last seven years of his life with what he thought was the girl of his dreams, and it had all fallen into despair over the course of the last month.

He had met Emily Freedman in college. They had lived on the same floor of a dormitory at the University of Minnesota. Emily didn't like Ryan at first, and to Ryan it didn't seem like she tried to hide it at all. She was a hippie type. She had auburn hair that cascaded down to the small of her back, and always wore long patchwork skirts and Phish t-shirts and the like. She smelled of clove cigarettes and patchouli, and was exactly the opposite of what Ryan would have considered his “type”.

Ryan was athletic and handsome, had played on the high school football team (albeit without much interest) and had always received good grades. Although he had given up sports for college, he was still a hard academic worker, and was doing well in college.

Ryan met Emily at a “get to know your floor” event, and they had heatedly argued about something, but sitting at his table, remembering Emily over his fourth scotch, Ryan couldn’t remember the subject of that argument for the life of him.

It was later in their freshman year that the rigidity had evaporated from Ryan’s relationship to Emily. They were at a kegger at a frat house, and inhibitions had been shed quickly with the free-flowing beer. Ryan had found himself on a couch talking to Emily, and before long they were laughing and talking and making fun of people that they saw. It wasn’t long after that night that Ryan asked Emily to go out for coffee, and she agreed to the date.

They continued seeing each other throughout college. They moved into an apartment together after their freshman year. They had their little rough patches, as couples always do, but they stuck together. After graduation, Ryan was accepted to the University Of Minnesota Law School, and Emily got a job downtown, working as a manager at a record store.

They talked about getting married, but figured that they would wait until Ryan had finished all of his schooling. Three years went by rather quickly, and before long Ryan was an honest-to-goodness lawyer, working close to 80 hours a week at the large downtown law firm of Beecher, Edwards, and Baxter, doing grunt work for the big shot partners. He and Emily saw each other less and less.

Their relationship became more and more distant, and eventually it all fell apart. There weren’t any of the typical offenses involved with disintegrating relationships. They never cheated on each other. They didn’t have any money problems. They simply started going their separate ways. Ryan was wrapped up in his work, and Emily was

often sitting alone in the condo that they had purchased together, wondering when she would see her boyfriend.

One day, Ryan came home from work around 10:00 PM to find that Emily had packed up all of her things and moved out. She had left a note to Ryan, telling him that she had moved back in with her parents in Watertown, South Dakota, and that it was over between them.

That was on November 5th, one month ago. Now Ryan sat alone at his table, taking big sips of scotch and coming to grips with the fact that he would not have Emily in his life any more.

He got up from the table to pour himself another drink. He stumbled as he walked, and managed to spill some of the brown liquid onto the counter as he poured, but he didn't care. He just wanted to drink this birthday away. He didn't have anything to celebrate.

His parents had both passed away. His father had died of a heart attack back when Ryan was a senior in high school. His mother had discovered that she had lung cancer when he was in college, and had passed away during his second year of law school. He hadn't been remarkably close to his parents, but he still missed them a great deal.

Any friends that Ryan had at this point in his life were also coworkers. The grueling schedule of a burgeoning lawyer didn't allow him a lot of free time, and seeing that most of his friends at the firm were in a similar situation, everyone he knew was too busy to hang out with Ryan on his birthday. So he sat in his condo kitchen, his mind

slowly melting under the buttery warmth of whiskey. Before long, Ryan fell asleep with his head on the table, alone and miserable.

Ryan woke up with what felt like a construction crew jack hammering his head to rubble. He peeled his face from the smooth surface of the kitchen table and tried to clear his blurry vision. It took a moment for Ryan to realize where he was, but eventually his foggy brain pieced together what had happened. His kitchen stank of whiskey and cigar smoke.

He stood up and got himself a glass of water from the kitchen sink. He drank it thirstily, and then made a pot of coffee. He looked at the kitchen clock and saw that it was nine thirty-five a.m. He had slept for seven hours on his kitchen table.

His neck ached fiercely from having rested in that awkward position for so long. Coupled with the ache in his head, Ryan felt sore all over. He walked down the hallway and into the bathroom. He pissed a stream that seemed to last ten minutes, and then scrubbed away the last vile remnants of whiskey with his toothbrush. He opened the medicine cabinet, pulled out a bottle of Advil, and took three pills from the bottle. One by one, he popped them into his mouth and swallowed them with water from the bathroom faucet.

His haggard face stared back at him from the bathroom mirror. He was unshaven, and had huge dark bags under his eyes. His left cheek was a rosy red from the surface of the kitchen table. Put simply, he looked like hell. “Happy birthday to me,” he said to his reflection. His voice sounded like he had swallowed a belt sander. “Welcome to your thirties, old man.”

He went to the living room, grabbed a cup of coffee, and sat down in a chair with his laptop. The MacBook gave its familiar chime as he started it up, and he logged into his work email to take a look at what was going on. It was Saturday, so he didn't necessarily have to go into work, but if there were something pressing that might change.

His inbox was full of birthday well wishes, most likely because people had seen it on the calendar from the firm's intranet. He didn't see anything that looked urgent in his inbox, and even if he had, the hangover would have prevented him from thinking in too much detail. He fired up his web browser and started occupying his time with the mind-numbing art of Internet surfing.

He looked out of his fourth floor window at a blanket of snow that had descended on Minneapolis over the course of the night. He loved this city, but December was a damned cold month, followed only by the cruelty of January and February. Still, it was home, and quite Saturday mornings with a couple inches of snow on the ground were part of what he loved about it.

He stepped into his shoes and threw a sweatshirt on. He was still fully clothed from the night before. He opened the sliding glass door and stepped onto his balcony, feeling the brisk morning air enter his nostrils and watching his breath leave in a puff of steam.

Ryan's neighborhood was quiet at this time of the morning. Most of the residents of his building were either of an age with him or elderly folks who kept to themselves. He had seen a couple of kids in the building, but not many. The rest of the neighborhood was populated with other apartment and condominium complexes. There were tracks on

the street from cars that had passed earlier. In the distance, he heard the whine of vehicles traveling on highway 169.

“I need to get out of here,” Ryan proclaimed to the morning air. He didn’t know where the thought had come from, but there it was, sudden and pervasive in his mind. He needed to leave town, just for a week or two. He needed to go someplace warm and sit on a beach, watching scantily clad women stroll in front of him as he sipped a drink with an umbrella in it. He needed to leave this city, his work, the cold, and especially his memory of Emily, behind for a little while. Just a week or two.

Ryan walked back into his condo and started looking for deals on plane tickets and top destinations. He still had to clear the vacation time with his job, but he thought that they would be OK with it. He needed some relaxation, he thought, or he might just snap.

## Chapter 2

The workweek passed by fairly uneventfully. The hours were long as usual, but he made it through them. To his delight, he received an email from his immediate supervisor, which approved his request for a vacation in early January. On Friday evening, he sat down with a cold beer and booked his vacation.

After doing some research and talking it over with a couple of his friends at the firm, Ryan had decided to go to the Dominican Republic. He didn’t have a ton of money to spare, and trips to the Dominican Republic were fairly affordable compared to other destinations. He booked a one-week stay at a resort called the Sea Breeze Inn and Suites.

It was a lesser-known place that had received good reviews online. It was all-inclusive, which meant that food and drinks were included in the resort stay.

The weeklong getaway was scheduled for January 4th. It was only three weeks away. Ryan had to force himself to relax and get through the time at work. Then, he told himself, it would all be better. He would be able to relax in the warm sunshine, and all of his cares would be forgotten.

After he booked the vacation, the weeks at work crawled by. He was working on legal research for a number of cases that were being handled by some partners. “Handled” hardly seemed an appropriate description to Ryan, because all of the work was really done by the underlings – people like Ryan. It seemed to Ryan that the partners spent more of their time on the golf course.

Every day was spent reviewing cases that related to the subject at hand. He used an online law database to do his legal research – the days of sitting in a library surrounded by large tomes were a thing of the past. Still, it was tiring to stare at his laptop screen for hours at a time. To add insult to injury, the cases that he was working on were fairly boring. One was a worker’s compensation case, which seemed to be a definite loser. Another was a property dispute between two companies over which of them owned a driveway that the two shared.

Besides research, Ryan’s days were also filled with things like drafting wills, contracts and other documents, small real estate transactions, and basically every other kind of crap that the people above him didn’t feel like doing. Still, Ryan enjoyed being a lawyer. He couldn’t think of anything else that he would rather do. Well, nothing realistic, anyway. Being a professional golfer sounded like fun to Ryan, but he would

have to find some way to stop being such a terrible golfer in order to make that work. So, Ryan had stuck with law, and it was a good fit for him, even though the hours sucked.

Things started to slow down considerably around Christmas. That week was fairly laid-back, because a lot of people (both clients and coworkers) tended to avoid business-related dealings during that week. Ryan was still stuck at work, but he didn't have to work nearly as many hours.

On Christmas Eve, Ryan got home at a fairly reasonable hour. The firm had closed at 1:00 in the afternoon, but Ryan had stayed until 5:00. He didn't have anywhere to go that evening.

Ryan had spent the last five Christmases with Emily's family. They had filled the position of his dead parents as well as they could, and as he walked through the door of his condo and turned on the TV, he felt a pang of sadness, knowing that Emily was with her family on Christmas Eve, and he would likely never see them again. After all, he had no reason to go to South Dakota in the near future. Loneliness descended on Ryan like a shroud. He was halfway to the liquor cabinet to hit the scotch again, when he was suddenly inspired.

He put his coat and shoes back on and walked out onto the street. The night was crystal clear, with a full moon shining and stars out. Minnesota winter nights always came fast, and as 6:00 approached, it was as dark as midnight.

Ryan walked for a few blocks, into a neighborhood that was mostly houses. The dazzling color of the Christmas lights filled his vision, and he drank it all in warmly. The night air was cold, but Ryan didn't care. He walked through the neighborhood, enjoying the sights of Christmas.



The street opened up ahead, and Ryan saw the silhouette of St. John's Lutheran Church. It was a large and ornate building, and Ryan could see a crowd of churchgoers entering the huge wooden doors on the church's front face. The church bell tolled, and Ryan walked closer. He felt like heading to church on Christmas Eve was the right thing to do.

He took a seat in the back and watched the service. He sang all of the familiar carols and let the feeling of Christmas take over his loneliness. For the first time since Emily had left him, he actually felt good.

The service was over too quickly, though, and after the short walk back to his condo, Ryan was alone again. He turned on the TV for a brief scan of the channels, but decided that he would enjoy watching "It's A Wonderful Life" about as much as a prostate exam. Instead, he turned on his X-box and settled in with a cup of hot chocolate and some video games. Nothing says Christmas Eve like Grand Theft Auto.

The loneliness hit him again as he was falling asleep, but eventually his tiredness took over, and he drifted off. He dreamed that he was a pirate, sailing the crystal blue Caribbean. He woke up briefly and laughed at the lingering dream, but went back to sleep easily, knowing that he would soon see the Caribbean firsthand, and he would probably appreciate it's relaxing qualities much more than any pirate ever had.

The intervening weeks passed, and Ryan was finally able to get his work duties in order and get ready to leave. He even managed to have some fun on New Year's Eve, because he met up with some coworkers at a club in downtown Minneapolis. He tried to take it easy, but still managed to get a healthy drunk on by the end of the night, because a

cute paralegal named Melissa bought the entire table two rounds of Irish Car Bombs, a drink involving Guinness, Irish Cream and Jameson whiskey. The car bombs weren't meant to be sipped, and after gulping two of them and moving on to Miller Lite, he called a cab and crawled into bed, awaiting another hangover. The spinning bed was a price that Ryan was willing to pay to be parted from the specter of loneliness.

On Friday, January 3rd, Ryan got home from work at 6:00 PM and started packing for his trip. His flight was scheduled to leave at 7:35 the next morning. He packed one suitcase, and threw a couple of novels into his laptop bag, which would serve as his carryon. He went to bed early, knowing that he would have to arrive at the airport early for his flight.

His cab came to pick him up at 5:00 AM. The cab was a maroon van with "Airport Taxi" stenciled on the side in bold white characters, and the cab driver was a man who introduced himself as Agwe, and spoke with a thick accent that sounded Caribbean to Ryan. Ryan admitted that that could have easily been in his head, because of his destination. He hopped into the front seat of the cab, next to Agwe, and they headed toward the airport. The meter started ticking away, displaying the cab fare in bright red digital letters.

"So how you doing this morning?" Agwe asked, the word coming out of his mouth like "mwarnin".

"I'm doing ok, man. How about you?" Ryan replied after stifling a large yawn. He had forgotten to brew coffee this morning, and by the time he thought of it, it was too late.

"I'm good, I'm good," replied the cab driver. "So where ya headed?"

“I’m going to the Dominican Republic for a vacation,” replied Ryan. Agwe nodded his head silently for a while before speaking.

“Ahh, well have a good time. Me, I’m from Haiti – real close to the Dominican Republic.”

Ryan didn’t know quite how to respond. Relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic were not good, despite the fact that they shared a small island. Still, Agwe didn’t seem offended. The rest of the short ride to the airport was uneventful.

Agwe pulled the cab up to the terminal doors and helped Ryan get his bag off of the cab. Ryan paid the cab drive thirty dollars, which included a nice tip. Then he turned to go into the airport.

“Hey man,” said Agwe as Ryan turned to leave. “I’ve got something for you.” It sounded to Ryan like, “some-teeng”. He walked up to Ryan, grabbed his hand, and dropped a battered looking coin into it. The coin was large and heavy, bigger than an old silver dollar, and it was ragged around the edges.

“What’s this for?” asked Ryan.

“Protection,” replied Agwe gravely. The word sounded like “Pro-TEC-shi-ahn.” Without another word, Agwe got into his cab and drove away. Ryan looked at the coin in his hand. The engraving was worn almost smooth, but it looked to Ryan to have once had a picture of a woman on one side and a bird on the other. He didn’t know what to make of it. He put it in his pocket, with the rest of his change.

## Chapter 3

Ryan found his flight without any hassle. The coin passed to the side of the TSA-guarded metal detectors in a plastic tray, and didn't get a second glance. He was headed toward his gate in no time, and still had about an hour before boarding began.

He stopped in the bookstore and picked up a copy of Newsweek and a book of crossword puzzles. He flipped idly through the magazine while he waited for his flight, but he was too tired for any of the articles to appeal to him. Instead, he took out his iPod and flicked the wheel until Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* came up, then he leaned his head back and let the strains of "The Song Remains The Same" wash over him.

Soon, his row was called and he boarded the airplane. He took his seat, and ignored the bored-looking stewardess that gave the demonstration of the airplane's seatbelts and emergency exits. Soon the plane taxied onto the runway and took off. He watched the snow-covered buildings of Minneapolis get smaller and smaller as his plane wheeled and began its trek southeast.

An attractive but tired-looking stewardess brought him breakfast consisting of an egg sandwich. He sipped coffee and ate the sandwich, and settled back for a relaxing flight.

He had one two-hour stop in Atlanta, GA, which passed uneventfully. Soon he was on a different airplane bound for the city of Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic.

The stewardess came and asked if Ryan would like anything to drink. He purchased a Budweiser and watched the ocean roll far beneath him from the window of the airplane, sipping the beer and listening to his iPod.

The plane touched down a couple of hours later, and Ryan emerged into the humid air of Punta Cana. The airport was open and had a thatched roof, and he walked with his fellow travelers toward the customs gate.

He had to fill out a tourist card, which cost him 10 dollars. Then he passed through customs and walked to the baggage claim.

He sat at the baggage claim, waiting for his suitcase to come down the slide and onto the moving conveyor belt. He continued to watch, as one by one all of the suitcases were picked up by the other passengers. Soon, there were no more bags coming. Ryan's suitcase did not arrive.

He found a man at a desk, who explained to Ryan in broken English that his bag must have been lost in transit. They took his hotel information, and assured him that as soon as the suitcase arrived, they would let him know. Ryan was tired from travelling, and the frustration of having his luggage lost was enough to make him cranky, but he still had his wallet and his carryon bag, so things could have been worse. He set off to find the shuttle to his hotel.

A man holding a sign that said "Sea Breeze Resort" directed Ryan to the appropriate bus to take him to the hotel. He realized as he boarded the bus that he was clinging to his laptop bag for dear life. He knew that it was silly, but the bag contained every possession of his that had managed to make the trip with him.

The bus pulled through the gates of his resort, and he walked through and was greeted by a friendly concierge who handed him a bottle of beer called "Presidente" to drink while he waited for his room key. The concierge gave him a plastic bracelet, with the instruction that he was to wear it during his entire stay, and that showing it would get

him all of the food and drinks that he needed. The concierge gave him the key to room 224, and Ryan was all set.

After a few minutes, he walked to his room, which was on the second floor and had an ocean view. He used the key-card in the door and walked in to check the place out. The floors were tile of a rose color. The furniture looked new, and included a king-sized bed, a dresser, a high-def television set, and some chairs and tables. He stopped to use the bathroom, which was immaculately clean and smelled like solvents. Then he walked onto his balcony.

The sea salt hit his nose at the same time that the warm breeze touched his skin. The ocean was to the east, which would allow for a wonderful view of the sunrise. As it was, the sky was fiery red from the sun that was setting behind the building. He saw boats in the water of varying sizes, from small fishing boats to a giant cruise ship. He closed his eyes and listened to the ocean waves, and enjoyed the breeze on his face.

He didn't have any plans for the week, so he decided to take this first night to explore the resort. It wasn't a huge, sprawling affair like some of the places that he had driven by, but it was still very nice. He strolled around the grounds and saw two pools, a hot-tub, a restaurant, and three bars. He stopped at the lobby bar and had another Presidente. Then he went to the concierge and asked if they happened to have a toothbrush.

The concierge desk provided him with a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, shaving cream, and a razor. The toiletries were all packaged in small containers, and were all brands that he'd never heard of with Spanish names. They would last until he got his luggage back, Ryan figured.

He got up and walked down to the beach. The sun had set not long ago, but the sky was still purple with the fading light. There was a bar on the beach, one side of which was stools and swings in the sand, and the other side was a swim-up hot tub. Every seat was filled, so Ryan got himself a rum and Coke (“when in Rome”, he thought) and took it to a patio table not far away. He watched the surf roll in. The wind had picked up, but it wasn’t unbearable. He watched the revelers at the bar while he sipped his drink. At one point, two drunk girls bared their breasts at the bartender. They were thin and cute, not model-gorgeous, but still hard to look away from. Ryan thought they couldn’t have been much older than 20 or 21. He caught a side-view of four pink nipples, and the stirring in his lap reminded him that he hadn’t been laid in a very long time. He looked away from the bar before someone noticed him staring.

He kept his eyes off of the bar, telling himself that those girls were much too young for an old fogey like him and that they wouldn’t have paid any attention even if he had tried to buy them a drink. He looked out at the beach. The occasional couple would stroll by, hand in hand, enjoying an evening walk in the sand. “Fuck this” Ryan thought, looking to the bottle of his empty glass. He got up, went to the bar, and got another drink.

He went into the lobby, where he heard the awful strains of a middle-aged gentleman trying to do a karaoke version of Neil Diamond’s “Sweet Caroline”. Ryan thought that this was just the type of entertainment that he was looking for this evening. He switched from rum to beer and took a seat at a lobby bar table.

Ryan sat for two hours watching people get on the stage and sing their songs with conviction, even if they had no talent. He sat and sipped beer until he felt a pleasant buzz, then walked back up to his room.

He turned off the lights and went to bed, listening to the sounds of the ocean as he lay on his back.

## Chapter 4

Blinding light blazed through the sliding glass doors of the balcony as the sun crested the horizon. Ryan blinked his eyes against the angry sunrise, and shook his head to clear the fuzz. He was mildly hung over – nothing like his birthday, but still fairly unpleasant. He remembered that he had a small jar of Advil in his carryon bag, and found it quickly.

He grabbed one of the complimentary plastic bottles of water from the mini-bar in the room. He popped the Advil into his mouth and swilled the water, after which he thirstily drank the rest of the bottle. Then he rummaged around the mini-bar for one of the packets of coffee. He opened up the pack; the coffee was held within its own filter, which he dropped into the small coffee maker. He filled the machine with water from the remaining bottles, and soon the pleasant aroma of coffee filled the room.

He checked his watch. It was 6:49 AM. That was nothing out of the ordinary for a workweek, but hardly the time that he should be waking up on vacation, especially on a vacation with no agenda. He made a mental note to close the curtains when he went to sleep, so as not to wake up to the sunrise tomorrow.



He walked out onto his balcony with his cup of coffee in hand. People were already strolling along the beach, and the weather was already warm. This is paradise, he thought to himself. There's no place that I would rather be.

Idly, he wondered to himself whether the girls from the hot-tub were awake at this hour. More than likely, he thought, they were crashed out in their bed or in someone else's, and when they woke up their heads would pound much harder than his own. Serves them right, he thought, then laughed at what an old man he was becoming.

He slowly got himself together and walked down to breakfast. He had to wear the same clothes that he had been wearing the day before, but he didn't care and knew that no one would notice anyway. He walked toward the restaurant, after checking to make sure his plastic bracelet was still in place.

As he walked by the concierge desk, he heard a voice. "Mr. Sanders?" the man behind the desk asked.

"Yes?" said Ryan, turning to look at the man. His name tag said "Miguel", and he was tall with short black hair and a youthful face.

"Good morning, sir. We received word from the airport that your luggage was found. Apparently it had been placed on the wrong flight in Atlanta, but it made it here eventually." The man had a thick Spanish accent, but he spoke fluent English, which gave him a sophisticated and exotic sound.

"That's great news!" Ryan said enthusiastically, "What do I have to do to get it?"

"Oh, I took the liberty of having our shuttle driver pick it up. It should be here within an hour or two, and I'll have it delivered to your room."

“Fantastic,” said Ryan. Finally, things were going his way. He walked into the restaurant and loaded up a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, and fruit from the buffet table. He poured himself a large glass of mango juice, and sat at a table to enjoy the meal.

After breakfast, Ryan went for a walk down the beach. The sun climbed into the sky quickly, and the promise of a hot day crept into the air. Ryan looked at the palm trees, at the ocean, at the fine white sand beneath his feet.

He was happy for the news about his suitcase. He had been planning to head to the local shopping mall to purchase some hideous Hawaiian shirts if the bag hadn't arrived. He laughed at the thought of himself in a Hawaiian shirt, and decided that he might buy a couple anyway.

The clothes on his back were starting to stink, Ryan admitted. He needed a shower. He thought that he detected a hint of rum in the thin layer of sweat that had popped out onto his skin when the morning sun hit it. He wanted to get out of the dirty pair of jeans that he was wearing and throw on some nice shorts.

He took the long way back to his room, exploring the hotel a little bit more. The building was low-rise, only three floors high, and it covered quite a bit of ground. The walls were white stucco, and near the pool area there was a large courtyard with paved paths, palm trees, and even the occasional parrot. Ryan strolled through the courtyard on the way back to his room.

He opened the door with the plastic key card, and smiled when he saw his suitcase sitting in the middle of the entryway. He brought the bag over and put it on the bed, and started unpacking the suitcase and putting the clothes into the dresser.

As he pulled a pair of shorts from the suitcase, he heard a muffled thunk as something heavy hit the bed. He glanced down and saw what looked like a large clam shell.

He picked the shell up. It was hanging on a leather cord that had an assortment of beads near the shell. It was a large necklace, almost a medallion, Ryan realized. The clam shell had markings on it that almost looked like a skull. Ryan thought that the necklace was hideous, but he was still strangely drawn to it. He was mystified as to how it ended up in his suitcase, however. There were no locks on the suitcase, of course... anyone could have put it in the bag. He suddenly worried that it contained drugs or something illegal.

Ryan checked the clamshell, and sure enough it opened easily. It was completely empty. He decided to keep it. He put it in the top drawer of the dresser.

## Chapter 5

Ryan had a long and relaxing shower, washing off not only the grime, but all of the stress of his life at home. He realized that he was finally starting to relax, now that he had been reunited with his belongings. He got out of the shower and wrapped a white hotel towel around his waist, and shaved in front of the mirror. Then he pulled on his bathing suit, a T-shirt, and some flip-flops, and headed down to the pool area.

He smeared on some suntan lotion and reclined in a plastic pool chair, soaking in the rays of the sun and immersing himself in a spy thriller novel by some author he'd never heard of. The plot was weak, filled with improbable adventures and unlikely characters, but Ryan enjoyed it. Every once in a while he'd glance up from the book and check out each bikini-clad sun worshipper that walked by.

It wasn't noon yet, and as a general principle Ryan didn't like to drink before noon. He didn't like to drink alone, either, but some sacrifices needed to be made since he was on vacation without a significant other or any friends. He ordered a bottle of Coke from the pool waitress when she came by.

The sun started getting to him, and he realized just how hot the weather was here, compared to Minnesota. He took a quick swim in the pool to cool off a bit, then headed back to his room. He wanted to take a walk down the beach – he had heard that there was an area within easy walking distance that had a lot of shops and tourist-type places, and he wanted to check it out.

He put on a pair of cargo shorts and a plain blue t-shirt. His flip-flops were the perfect footwear for the beach, as he could easily remove them when the sand made it hard to walk, so he didn't put on tennis shoes.

He stopped at the concierge desk and exchanged \$100 for Dominican Pesos. The exchange rate wasn't very favorable, but he told himself that he was paying for convenience. Then he walked through the lobby, across the pool area, past the beachside bar (already filling up with revelers) and onto the sandy shore. He kicked off his sandals and picked them up in his left hand.

He strolled northward along the beach, walking at a leisurely pace, past a couple of other resorts that were similar to the Sea Breeze. Eventually he came across an area of pink stucco shops, just off of the sand. There were some small walking streets that made up a couple of blocks worth of storefronts, and tourists were meandering up and down through the area. Ryan didn't know if this place were part of any particular resort, or if it just happened to be here, nudged in between some of the larger buildings, but it was fairly busy and each store seemed independently owned.

All of the typical tourist-type stores were readily available. There was a shop selling sunglasses, one that dealt in bathing suits, and all manner of other places.

Somewhere along the twisted streets he could hear a steel drum band playing a Caribbean tune. He followed the music, and walked into a square of sorts, with a number of merchants standing behind tables, selling other merchandise.

He looked at a table containing a number of cigars, and bought a fairly inexpensive Dominican cigar. He thought to himself how nice it would be to smoke it out on the balcony, as the fiery sunset blazed in the sky over his head and the sea breezes whispered around him. The cigar was in a plastic tube, so he stuck it in his pocket and continued on his way.

He couldn't make out the shriveled, hairy things hanging on racks in front of a small table, but when he got closer, he realized that they were shrunken heads, grey in the face, with long, straight black hair. They hung from cords on hooks. Ryan knew that they couldn't be real, but they were incredibly lifelike. He walked over to the racks and looked at the heads. They all had their eye sockets and mouths stitched shut. They were

rather gruesome, and they made Ryan laugh. He contemplated buying one, but realized that he really wouldn't do anything with a fake shrunken head.

“You like?” asked a lilting voice from behind him. He turned around to see a stunningly beautiful woman. She had dreadlocked hair and smooth ebony skin. Her large eyes looked at Ryan teasingly, and her lips held the hint of a smile. She was thin and athletic looking, and wore a purple dress that clung to her skin in the breeze, revealing her amazing figure.

“Yeah,” Ryan replied, “They're really cool.”

“Dey only sevan hun' red pesos,” she said in an accent so much like Agwe's that Ryan figured she must be Haitian. “Only twenny dollars US.”

“I'll think about it,” replied Ryan.

“You do that,” she said, smiling. “What's your name?” she asked.

“I'm Ryan,” he replied without thinking.

“Ryan,” she said, “A pleasure to meet you. My name Chanté,” she said, leaning closer and lowering her voice to an almost whisper. Her breath smelled like cinnamon as she leaned toward Ryan, and he could feel his heart beating faster. “I know we gwine see each other again soon.” With that, inexplicably, she kissed his cheek. Her lips were cold to the touch, and he felt dazed. She eased back behind the table and gave him a wink. He realized that he was standing, dumbfounded, in the middle of the small street, so he turned to head back to the hotel. As he walked away he could still feel the place where her lips had touched him.

Ryan shuffled his feet back toward his hotel. As he left the shop area, he felt like he was in a daze. Eventually his head cleared, almost as if he were sobering up. He still felt Chanté's cold lips on his cheek, and couldn't get her face out of his head, but he started to come back to himself. It wasn't like the feeling of love at first sight, where he would do anything just to be with her; this was much different. This was more akin to not being able to get her out of his mind, but not feeling any particular way toward her. It was almost as if she were consuming his thoughts. Eventually, that feeling subsided like the feeling of intoxication had.

He walked back to his room and decided that a nap would do him some good. Then he could get up and start drinking again in earnest. Perhaps, he thought to himself, when night fell he could go to a club and see if he could meet anyone to keep him company. A king sized bed was awfully cold at night with no one to share it with.

Ryan lay in bed for about an hour, staring at the ceiling fan as it lazily spun. Outside his window, he could hear a gaggle of kids playing in the pool, enjoying the hot day. He got up and walked down to the beach bar. He took a seat at one of the swing-chairs and ordered a rum and Coke. Then he spun the seat around and enjoyed his drink, staring at the azure ocean. He wondered to himself if his drinking had become a problem since Emily had left him, but he reminded himself that he was on vacation, and during a normal workweek he didn't have more than one or two drinks.

Well, except his birthday, he thought. But alcohol can be a friend for the lonely. He grinned mirthlessly. Alcohol becomes a horrible bitch the morning after it comforts your loneliness, he thought. He had known girls like that.

He didn't know what compelled him to do so, but he got up, tossed the plastic glass from the empty drink into the garbage can, and walked back toward to the shop area. He got there and walked toward the small street where Chanté had been selling her shrunken heads, but she had packed up and left, perhaps to find a shadier spot during the afternoon heat.

He walked into a beachwear shop called Bonzo's Beach Clothing. The sign out front showed a man made completely of coconuts, wearing what looked like Pirate clothes. He had a striped shirt, an eye patch, and a parrot on his shoulder.

Ryan browsed the clothing for a while, and decided to pick up a Hawaiian shirt. It looked cool and comfortable, and he thought that any vacationer didn't officially look like they were vacationing until they were wearing the proper clothing. Nothing says "tourist" like a Hawaiian shirt, after all.

He went to pay for his shirt. It came to 876 Dominican pesos. He pulled out bills, and then reached into his pocket for change. He felt the heavy coin in his pocket, and suddenly remembered Agwe the cabbie, giving it to him "for protection". Protection from what? Why? Ryan couldn't help but wonder. He left the coin in his right pants pocket and pulled out an assortment of other change, from which he took the proper amount and set it on the counter.

The clerk looked at him with a puzzled expression on his face. He was short and dark haired, and looked to be about 50 years old. He had a white plastic name tag that said "Manuel".

"Hey man," the clerk said, "Your name isn't Ryan, is it?"

"Yeah," Ryan said hesitantly.



“Chanté say to give you this, man,” said the clerk. He handed Ryan a scrap of paper. Ryan looked at it, and saw a local phone number written in a delicate script. He was incredibly confused. Somehow, the woman that he had met a couple of hours ago had known that he would come back, and had known that he would come into this store. He felt a feeling of foreboding, but also one of excitement, because whatever the circumstances, this beautiful girl seemed to have an interest in him.

He took the note from the clerk. “Call me, we’ll have a drink”, it said. Ryan put it into his left pocket. He left the shop, carrying a plastic bag with his Hawaiian shirt tucked inside.

He realized that he hadn’t eaten any lunch yet, but he ran up to his room before going back down to the restaurant. For some reason, he felt compelled to put on the new Hawaiian shirt, so he did so. He laughed at himself in the mirror. Then, impulsively, he grabbed the clamshell necklace from the drawer, and threw it over his head. He looked comically like a tourist that had spent his afternoon buying crap from seaside shops. This made Ryan’s grin even larger.

He walked down to the restaurant and helped himself to the lunch buffet. The food was good, but not fantastic. He filled up on some barbecued pork and several side items, then he went back upstairs.

He walked into the room and sat down on the bed, looking at the room telephone. He just sat there, staring at the telephone, for what seemed like several minutes. He reached into his left pants pocket and pulled out the scrap of paper that Chanté had left for him. He then went back to looking at the phone, wondering if he should call her.

He was startled near to the point of heart attack when the phone rang, a loud staccato series of beeps that pierced into his eardrums. He hesitantly got up and answered the phone.

“Uh...hello?” Ryan spoke hesitantly into the receiver.

“HEEEY!” shouted a voice on the other end, “Steve! How you doin?”

“I think you’ve got the wrong number,” said Ryan.

“Aww bullshit, Steve! Dude you should come down here, there are these slammin’ chicks and we’re gonna party! Get your ass over here!” said the voice.

“Yeah, man. Hey, I’m not Steve. You’ve got the wrong number,” replied Ryan, a little louder than last time.

“Whatever man! Get down here!” yelled the voice. There was a loud whack as the other man’s phone was slammed down onto its cradle, then a dial tone filled Ryan’s ear.

“Well that was weird,” said Ryan, momentarily free of the staring match that he had been having with the phone. He put Chanté’s phone number back into his pocket and walked down to the lobby bar for another beer.

He didn’t see the man come out of his bathroom after he had left.

## Chapter 6

Ryan drank two beers in the hour that he sat in the lobby bar, working up his courage to call Chanté. He hadn't felt as nervous as this since...well, since college, when he was trying to get Emily to like him. In the intervening years, the relationship had just been something that was always there. Ryan was excited to have that thrill of the hunt coursing through his veins again.

His thoughts drifted to his early relationship with Emily. They were inseparable, and he realized that during those first few months he hardly even knew her. He would just meet her, talk a bit, and then lose himself in her, literally and figuratively.

At the beginning of his relationship with Emily, the sex was like a fire that consumed them. It was hot and frequent and adventurous, and the two of them were constantly on the lookout for a spare moment that they could spend in each others' passionate embrace.

As the months and years went on, that fire died, as romantic fires sometimes do. They would still find time for each other occasionally, but it became less and less frequent, and finally every physical aspect of their relationship had been replaced by the realities of school, work, bills, and life in general.

Ryan sighed. Thinking about Emily was not going to get him any closer to calling Chanté. He tossed back the last swallow of his bottle of Presidente and placed the empty glass bottle onto the black lobby table. He stood up and walked back to his room.

Ryan slid the plastic keycard into the door slot. The light flashed green and the locking mechanism clicked open, allowing him into the hotel room. The first thing that he noticed was that the top drawer of the dresser was open. That was the only thing out of the ordinary in the room. Room service must have been there, because the beds were made. But why would they leave the drawer open?

His hand found the clam shell necklace, still hanging around his neck. He thought that it was just a silly trinket, but he remembered the odd situation involving the necklace coming into his possession. Someone must have slipped it into his suitcase. What if it were somehow important? What if that someone or another someone were looking for it again?

He told himself to stop being so paranoid. He raised his left hand to take the necklace off, and stopped as his hand closed on the clam shell, really noticing it for the first time.

He reached into his right pocket and pulled out the heavy coin that the cabbie (What was his name? Auggie?) in Minneapolis had given him. He held it in front of the necklace. The clam shell looked just slightly bigger than the coin.

Ryan pulled the clam shell open and tested the coin inside it. It fit perfectly, almost as if it were made to go in the shell. He closed the shell.

Pain lanced through Ryan's head, and everything went black. Then, just as suddenly as it had come, it was over. Ryan still held the closed clam shell in his hand, and the coin was still inside it. He shook his head. "I must have had one too many," he said out loud to no one in particular.

The phone rang. Once again, it jarred him to full alertness. He walked to the night stand and lifted the receiver.

“Hello?” he said.

“STEVE!!!” said the now familiar voice, even more loudly than before.

“Wrong number,” said Ryan.

“Oh. Sorry, bro,” said the voice on the other end. The click was much softer this time. Ryan set the receiver back into the cradle.

The phone blared again. Ryan grabbed the receiver and yelled, “Wrong number!”

“Nah, I don’ think it’s the wrong number, Ryan,” said a lilting female voice with a thick Caribbean accent.

“Chanté?” Ryan asked hesitantly.

“Yeah,” she said, the hint of a laugh on her lips, “I was wonderin’ if you were gwine to call me, but ye took too long, so I’m callin’ you,”

“How did you—” Ryan started, but then he changed his mind. “How are you?” he asked.

“Good,” she said, “Bored. I’m a little lonely, though. Hey, you ever have Jamaican wine?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Ryan. He wished that he could figure out something more interesting to say to her, but three word sentences seemed to be the most that his brain could formulate at the moment.

“Well,” she said, “We gonna change that. You find a cab an’ meet me at a bar in town called The Rose. I’ll wait for you there.”

What the hell, thought Ryan. This was the end result that he would have been looking for if he had worked up the courage to call her, so it's all working out in the end. "Sure," he said, "I'll be there."

She hung up the phone, and he followed suit.

Ryan took off the Hawaiian shirt and replaced it with a long-sleeved Gap button-down. Then he reached up to take off his silly necklace (which now served the purpose of a coin container), but changed his mind and tucked it under his shirt instead. He put his flip-flops back on and headed out the door.

He walked to the front side of the resort. It now seemed to Ryan like the rear of the building, since the resort was designed to face the ocean, and most of his travels into and out of the hotel had been through the beach side.

It was a distance of about a city block to the main road, with the gate that allowed access to the hotel from the street. Just outside was a taxi station, with several cabs waiting for fares. Ryan raised his arm to signal the closest cab driver and hopped into the taxi as it pulled up to where he stood.

"You know where the Rose is?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah," the cab driver said in a thick Spanish accent, "But I don't know if you wanna go there, man. That's a local place, not a lot of tourists,"

Ryan felt a slight apprehension, but decided to go along with the plan. He didn't want to stand Chanté up. "Take me there anyway," he told the cabbie.

The cab drove into the village of Bavara, the closest thing to a city near the resort area of Punta Cana. The ride was over in about fifteen minutes. The cab driver pulled up

in front of a wooden door set in a stucco building. A plastic light-up sign hung above the door, proclaiming that this was “La Rosa”, or the Rose. Ryan exited the cab and walked through the heavy wooden door.

It was dark in the room, and fairly quiet. The booths and walls were a deep red in color, and looked almost black under the dim lights. A cloud of cigarette smoke hung in the air. A jukebox was playing some Mexican-sounding music, but the volume was turned down.

There were four men that looked to be in their mid-40s standing around a pool table in the back of the room, their hands clutching glasses of beer. A smattering of other patrons sat at the bar, behind which a bartender with a large mustache wiped lazily at a wine glass. There were some other customers packed into booths at the sides of the room, and a few more sitting at the high-top tables. As Ryan entered, every face in the room turned to look at him.

Then he saw Chanté, sitting in a booth by herself. She raised her hand to wave at Ryan, and he hurriedly walked over and sat down. The people in the bar went back to whatever it was they were doing.

Two wine glasses and a bottle of red wine sat on the table in front of Chanté. She began to pour the wine, and Ryan could smell the spices that the deep red liquid contained as it flowed from the bottle.

“So ya here,” Chanté said with a smile.

“Yep,” said Ryan, “I made it. No problem,” He tried to keep confident as he spoke to her.

She laughed. “No problem,” she repeated, smiling. She handed Ryan a glass of the blood-red wine. “Ere, try this,” she said, her voice low, “It’s Jamaican wine,”

Ryan took a sip. He wasn’t much of a wine drinker, although he’d briefly entertained the thought of becoming one. Emily had been a wine advocate, always talking about the different flavors that she could detect. To Ryan, wine was wine. This wine, however, was something different entirely. There were spices in it that almost overpowered the flavor of the wine. Ryan actually liked the stuff, but he couldn’t see himself drinking too much of it without it getting sickening.

Chanté laughed. “We’ll just drink this bottle, and then we can drink something else,” she said. “So, Ryan, tell me about ya’self,”

Ryan did so. He talked about Minnesota, about his job, about all sorts of little, mundane things. He steered the conversation away from Emily entirely. Chanté just sat and listened, occasionally chiming in with innocuous questions to keep Ryan’s story going.

“What about you?” Ryan asked. “It’s your turn. Tell me about yourself.”

Chanté’s eyes held the laugh that was almost on her tongue. “Whatcha wanna know?” she said teasingly.

“It doesn’t seem like you’re from here,” Ryan replied, “Where are you from?”

“Guess,” she said with that hint of laughter.

“Umm, Haiti?” he said, hoping that he wasn’t proclaiming his ignorance of cultures to the entire bar.

Chanté broke out into laughter at that moment. “Good guess,” she said, “but ya wrong. I’m an American. At least I was, before I come here,”



“America? Where in America?”

“I was raised in Louisiana, in the delta of the Mississippi outside a’ New Orleans. You an’ I lived along the same river,” she said, grinning.

She continued her tale. She had come to the Dominican Republic when she was 18 years old, looking to live some place tropical and capitalize on voodoo stereotypes. So she set up a shop selling trinkets and shrunken heads, the type of thing that silly tourists want to see. She had been living in the Dominican Republic for 6 years, and was now 24 years old.

They sat talking for a couple of hours. After the wine was gone, Ryan bought them more drinks. He was having rum and Coke, and she was sipping straight rum over ice. There were no windows in the bar, so Ryan’s sense of time was leaving him. He realized suddenly that he was really enjoying himself, talking to this local girl.

“So, do you live here, in Bavara?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah,” Chanté replied, “I got an apartment here,” she paused, and a strong moment of silence interrupted the conversation. Chanté’s eyes locked on Ryan’s, and her lips parted into a smile. “You wanna see it?” she said, her face suddenly taking on a look almost like hunger.

“Yes,” Ryan said, his voice almost a whisper. He tried to keep his composure as he paid their tab and the two of them left the bar.

## Chapter 7

Chanté's apartment was small, but Ryan barely noticed as her door crashed open and the two of them stumbled inside. Their lips were locked together so fiercely that Ryan thought he might cut his lip on Chanté's teeth. Her tongue and his moved against each other in what almost seemed like a battle, and his arms entwined her lithe form, moving up against her back and clutching her close to him, then moving down and exploring her body.

She pulled him into her small apartment. It was decorated in dark purples and burgundies, with hanging tapestries and candles and the faint scent of incense. Ryan kissed her with everything that he had, and she returned his fervor, leading him across the room.

She pushed him onto the single bed, and as he fell onto his back, his head cracked against the cinderblock wall. It didn't hit hard, but it smarted, and he temporarily saw spots. Chanté didn't seem to care. Her hands came up and she tore the front of his shirt open.

"You have a charm," she said, looking at the necklace around his neck.

"Oh, that," said Ryan. His head hurt, but every fiber of his body was pulsing with need for Chanté. "Yeah, it's just silly,"

"Well," she said, whispering as she kissed his bare neck, "I'm superstitious. If ye want me, ye take it off,"

Ryan didn't hesitate. He pulled the necklace over his head and threw it to the floor. His clothes and Chanté's followed.

Afterward, Ryan slept hard, with Chanté in his arms. His dreams were distorted pictures of jungles and snakes, of mountains of skulls, and of Chanté's smooth skin against his own.

He awoke with a start, not quite knowing where he was. Then pictures of the afternoon and early evening started filtering back into his mind, and it registered to him that he must still be in Chanté's apartment. Chanté was no longer in the bed with him, and he idly wondered where she might have gone.

He tried not to be bothered by the fact that he had just had sex with a girl that he had known for all of...how long? He looked at the digital clock on the night stand by her bed. 3:16 AM. He had officially known Chanté for about 14 hours, and a good deal of that time had been spent sleeping. He tried not to think of how upset Emily would be to hear about, and then he told himself that it didn't matter, because they were broken up for good, and Emily wouldn't be hearing about it anyway.

The alcohol and the lovemaking had worn him out early, and although his head still felt fuzzy, Ryan knew that he would be awake for a while now. He sat up on the bed and flicked the lamp on, bathing the studio apartment with soft yellow light.

There was a note under the lamp, written on stationery in Chanté's precise, delicate handwriting. "Ryan," it said, "I had to leave. Make yourself at home. Lock the door if you leave, and I'll find you later. -Chanté". The note smelled like her perfume, and heightened Ryan's memories.

He found his clothes and put them on. Some of the buttons of his shirt were missing where Chanté had torn it off, but he managed to keep it decently closed with the

two that remained. He found the clamshell necklace lying next to the shirt. He picked it up and put it on again. Thankfully this time there were no momentary blackouts.

Ryan walked out of the apartment door, flicking the lock on the doorknob so that the door closed behind him. Then he walked through the hallway, down the stairs, and out onto the street.

As Ryan walked down the street of Bavara, he thought to himself that he should have stayed in Chanté's apartment until morning. He was in a different country, in the middle of the night, in a kind of sketchy neighborhood. He really wasn't quite sure exactly where he was. He kept his head down and walked toward the lights of a larger street.

Thankfully, Ryan didn't see anyone on the street. He managed to hail a cab once he got to the street, and eventually made it back to the hotel. He trudged back up to his room in the eerie silence of a hotel in the middle of the night. The hallway lights seemed brighter and more oppressive than they did during the day, and the silence from the lack of people in the hallways gave the feeling that he was alone in an empty building.

His keycard opened the door, and he walked inside. He was tired, but not tired enough to sleep. He flicked the TV on and watched mind-numbing infomercials for a couple of hours.

Light started flooding into his room with the sunrise. Rather than block it out, he walked onto the balcony with a cup of fresh-brewed coffee, and watched as the angry red sun rose slowly from the surface of the water. Ryan had an apprehensive feeling as he watched the red sun rise. There was something insidious, a feeling of something oily and black hiding just beneath the surface of his thoughts. Perhaps, he thought, it was guilt

caused by the one-night-stand that he had just participated in. He didn't think so. It was something more.

“Red in the morning, sailors take warning,” he said to the sunrise. The sun became a fiery ball in the sky as it broke the surface of the horizon. It was too bright for Ryan to take any more of, so he walked back inside and prepared himself for another day in paradise.

On this, the second full day of his vacation, Ryan had no problem drinking beer at 10:00 am. After all, he had been awake for seven hours already. 10:00 seemed like afternoon on any other day.

Ryan sat by the pool, in a plastic chair, absorbing the rays of the sun. By noon, he started to think that he might be getting a sunburn, so he went back to his room for a break.

He saw the necklace sitting on the nightstand, the huge clamshell with the heavy coin inside. He laughed at how silly it looked, but he picked it up and put it on anyway. He giggled as he looked in the mirror. He put on a shirt and buttoned it over the necklace, and then he walked down to the patio bar.

Instead of sitting in one of the chairs at the bar, Ryan chose an Adirondack chair on the beach, under a thatched umbrella. His tap beer made sweaty beads of condensation on the plastic glass. Ryan was hungry, so when the bar waitress came by he ordered a burger and some fries, and ate them hungrily while watching the boats passing on the ocean.

He thought about getting up to see if Chanté was working, but decided to have another beer first. He was on vacation and damned if he wasn't going to go through this life as buzzed up as possible. Another sweaty glass of beer was brought to him by the waitress, a pretty young Hispanic girl of about 19, with a long dark braid and a tight skirt. Ryan admired the way that she managed to sway as she walked across the sand to bring him his drink. He enjoyed watching her leave even more than he had enjoyed watching her come over. Then she was gone, back behind the bar. Oh well, he thought, far too young for an old man like me anyway.

He sipped his beer, enjoying it slowly, and breathed in the salty air. Then he put his flip-flops on and walked toward the shop area in search of Chanté.

He saw her before she saw him. He had just rounded the corner onto the street where her shrunken head stand was set up. He saw her talking to a man that was taller than anyone Ryan had ever met. He looked like he was almost seven feet tall, and had skin almost as dark as obsidian. The man wore a white shirt and loose-fitting khaki pants, and sandals that were made of rope. He held a gnarled but polished cane in his hand, and had a necklace of teeth – shark, thought Ryan – on the outside of his shirt.

As Ryan rounded the corner, the man turned to stare at him. There was intensity in the man's eyes the likes of which Ryan had never seen before. Ryan thought that he now understood terms like “icy gaze” and “glaring daggers”. It was almost as if the man's eyes were staring straight into Ryan's soul.

Chanté didn't pay any attention to Ryan. She pulled the tall man down by his collar and whispered something in his ear. Then the man darted off into the crowd, not

running, but impossibly fast. Before Ryan could even guess which direction he had gone, he was nowhere to be seen.

Ryan was amazed that someone so tall could lose himself in a crowd that easily, but he let the thought go. It was Chanté that he wanted to see. He looked at her, and saw that she was looking back, smiling from behind her table. She was wearing a dark green tank top that revealed a tantalizing amount of cleavage, and a billowy light cotton skirt, bright orange and patterned, that would cling to her alluringly whenever the soft breeze picked up. He walked over to her.

“Hey,” he said

“Hey ya’self,” she replied, a flirty smile on her lips.

“I wanted to see you again,” Ryan said.

“Well, now ye see me,” she said teasingly, “but I bet that’s not all ye be wantin’.”

Ryan could feel his cheeks going crimson, but he didn’t care. She was right and he knew it. “What time are you done working?” he asked.

“I gotta be ‘ere until after the sun go down tonight,” she said, “but keep your head about ya and don’ get too drunk, an’ you can come an’ find me ‘ere.”

“OK,” Ryan said. He saw that Chanté had customers standing behind him, so he got out of their way. He waved at her and walked around the corner to head back to his hotel.

As he rounded the corner, he barely caught himself before crashing into a man standing in his way. His eyes went up to the man’s face, what seemed like several feet above him. He realized with a start that he was looking into the icy gaze of the tall man, who stared back at him.

The man's face was scarred with pock marks, and his mouth cracked to reveal brown teeth. The man was smiling, but it looked more like an evil grin to Ryan. The man extended his index finger at Ryan, pointing at his chest.

"I like you," he said, in a voice like the rumble of thunder. His finger moved forward and touched Ryan's shirt, right where the clam shell lay under the fabric. The man began to laugh a deep, bass chortle.

Ryan just nodded and smiled. It didn't seem like the conversation was going to continue, as the man kept laughing with no signs of stopping. Ryan was afraid of this stranger, but if Chanté knew him then perhaps he was ok. Still, he was uncomfortable by the man, so he walked away.

The man continued laughing behind him as Ryan stepped out onto the beach.

## PART 2: HOODOO

### Chapter 8

Ryan walked back with his flip-flops in his hand and his feet in the wet sand, being lapped by the gentle rolling waves. Before long, he was back at the beach bar. He sat down in one of the swings.

Across from him, in the hot tub, he saw the two drunken girls from his first night at the resort. It was just past 1:00 in the afternoon, and the two of them looked just as smashed as they had two nights ago. To Ryan's chagrin, they managed to keep their tops on this time. They didn't pay any attention to Ryan or anyone else at the bar, however.



They were engrossed in drunken conversation with a kid about their age, sitting in the hot tub with them. He had a drink in each hand and a baseball cap that was cocked to the side. He looked aware of the fact that he was going to get some action, if only he could keep from passing out.

That reminded Ryan of his own situation, and he switched from beer to Coke. He wanted to keep his faculties about him, because he fully expected to spend time with Chanté tonight, and she had specifically told him that if he expected anything, he had to remain relatively sober.

Tiredness took over in the late afternoon, and Ryan went back to his room to take a nap. He flopped down on the bed, face down, and realized with a painful start that he was still wearing the necklace. He flipped over onto his back and pulled the necklace off, and then he looked at it, turning it over and over in his hands.

He remembered Chanté asking him to take it off, and telling him that she was superstitious. He wondered idly why, and then the strangeness of the whole situation started putting itself together in his head like a puzzle with a few pieces missing.

He had been given the coin by a cabbie in Minneapolis. The necklace, however, had a much more mysterious origin. It had been placed, or had accidentally fallen, into his suitcase while it was in the hold of an airplane, which could have been the wrong airplane entirely since his suitcase had been lost.

By seeming sheer coincidence, the coin had fit into the clamshell. Now, it wasn't like they were terribly odd sizes, and Ryan could accept coincidence in this case. Still, it seemed strange that it all worked out together.

Adding confusion to the mix was the fact that, no matter how playful, Chanté had asked Ryan to take the necklace off before making love to him. She had been in the room with the necklace, and it wasn't until she actually saw it that she asked him to remove it. Ryan laughed at the thought. Somewhere in the back of his mind, his subconscious had made Chanté into some sort of vampire or monster or something, repelled by the power of his stupid clamshell necklace. The fact that she hadn't cared about it until she saw it disproved that theory.

Then there was the strange, tall man from this morning. He had reached out and touched the necklace with his finger. The necklace hung in the middle of Ryan's chest when he was wearing it, so Ryan could understand that this was possibly a coincidence, but when he put it all together it seemed like there were an awful lot of coincidences coming together at the same time.

Finally, there was the blackout that had occurred when Ryan put the necklace on for the first time. He had almost convinced himself that it had never happened, but the more he thought about it, the more sure he was that it had. It was all too much.

He stood up, took the necklace off, and put it in the top drawer of the dresser. Then he was able to fall asleep.

Ryan woke up at about 5:00 and headed down to the restaurant for the dinner buffet. He filled himself up on the food and enjoyed a couple of beers – nothing outrageous. Then he went back upstairs.

He walked out onto the balcony as the sun was setting. He couldn't see the sun, of course, but once again the sky was a dazzling orange, dimming as it stretched to the

horizon. He took the Dominican cigar from his pocket and removed it from its plastic tube.

He smelled the cigar and was pleased by the high quality tobacco. He reached toward his pocket and realized that he didn't have his keychain with him. He had no need of a car, so he had left the car keys in a drawer. He walked back into the room and grabbed his keychain and a book of matches.

He took out the item on his keychain that he needed – a cigar cutter – and snipped the tip of the cigar. He sat down in the patio chair on his balcony and lit the cigar. He didn't inhale, but puffed at it and blew clouds of cigar smoke into the twilight.

The cigar was rolled tight and lasted a long while. He enjoyed it for almost a half hour, and then he got up, rinsed his mouth with some mouthwash, changed into some khaki pants and some sandals, and walked out the door.

The beach at night was windy and peaceful. The breeze cut out all sounds but that of the ocean, and stars blazed in the sky overhead. Occasionally he would pass a couple out for a walk, but for the most part the beach was empty.

When he got to the shop area, most of the lights in the stores had been turned off. He saw Chanté standing by her table, which was packed up and ready to be carried away.

Chanté smiled at Ryan as he walked up to her. Ryan smiled back at her. Under the yellow of the outdoor lamps, she was gorgeous. As Ryan approached, she looked at him as if he were the only one in the world.

“Can ya help me carry these things to my car? Then we can have a little date,” she said.

“Where are we going?” Ryan asked.

“My car, first. Then maybe the beach? Beautiful sky tonight,” she replied.

They carried the table and trinkets to her car, a bright-yellow Volkswagen rabbit that looked to have been around since the 60s. It was in decent shape, though, and he supposed that it got her from place to place without too much trouble. Ryan helped Chanté cram the table and the rest of her stuff into the car. She grabbed a woven purse with a long shoulder strap, which she slung over her head and wore like a bandolier. Then she clicked the locking buttons and turned and grabbed his hand.

She led him into a corner store and told him to buy a bottle of red wine. He did so, picking up a bottle that cost about 20 U.S. dollars. He figured that would be good enough.

Chanté handed Ryan a Swiss Army Knife from her bag. She had already extended the corkscrew. He took the cork out of the bottle and threw it into a garbage can as they stepped out into the sand.

“We don’t have any glasses,” he said.

“That don’t matter,” she said, smiling her usual smile. She grabbed the bottle from his hand and took a long drink. She licked her lips afterward, and the motion caused a stirring in Ryan that he hoped didn’t make itself too obvious.

He took a drink to match hers. Then they walked along the beach, passing the wine between them. They walked southward, farther away from Ryan’s hotel.

“So what’s with all of the trinkets?” Ryan asked, “Why do people buy them?”

“People think that kinda stuff is cool,” said Chanté. “The problem is that they don’t know anything about any of it. They think this all Voodoo stuff, but it ain’t.”

“What? It seems like Voodoo to me,” Ryan said.

“Ye don’ believe in Voodoo, do ya?” Chanté asked.

Ryan thought about his answer. He didn’t want to offend her. He opted for honesty. “No,” he said, “I don’t believe in Voodoo.

“Me either,” she replied with a laugh. “I don’ believe in the kind of Voodoo that the movies show, and I don’ believe in the real thing either, with they snake *Vodoun* and they gods.”

“But you told me you were superstitious,” Ryan said, returning her smile, “You made me take off my necklace,”

“Dat ain’t Voodoo,” she said curtly. “Dat’s magic. An’ magic, well that’s somethin’ I do belive in,”

“Magic?”

“Yeah. Hoodoo,” she said, “People think dat Voodoo an’ Hoodoo the same thing, but they ain’t.”

Ryan just shook his head. He was starting to wonder about Chanté. He had only known her for a little over a day, and the things that she was saying were startling. Still, he reminded himself that she was a part of a different culture.

“Jus’ look at this night, this sky, an’ try an’ tell me you don’t believe in magic,” she said teasingly.

He looked up at the stars. They completely filled the cloudless sky, bright and dazzling. They had walked far enough from the village to be away from the aura that the town lights made, and the sky was so full of stars that it almost looked white. It was breathtaking. His head craned upward, searching out familiar constellations, and he felt Chanté’s lips against his neck, softly kissing his exposed skin. There was no hiding his

lust for her at that point. He stiffened and panted as he moved his mouth down to meet hers.

“This way,” she said, taking him by the hand and leading him into a copse of palm trees a few feet from the beach.

She walked, pulling him behind her, until a silhouette was visible in front of them. As Ryan got closer, the starlight filtering through the trees revealed an overturned wooden boat. Chanté looked back at Ryan over her shoulder, then let go of his hand. She put her palms facedown on the boat, bending over slightly.

Ryan grasped her around the waist and kissed the back of her neck. She moaned with delight. He moved his hands across her flat stomach, then reached up and cupped her left breast. It was full and firm and he felt her nipple go erect under his fingers.

She turned around and undid his belt buckle. Then she unzipped his fly and pulled his pants down. The wind touched him, and his ability to contain himself almost left. She turned back around and put her palms on top of the boat again.

Ryan moved his hands along her legs, lifting her skirt. His hands touched her hips. She wasn't wearing anything under the skirt. He moved a hand around her and touched her between her legs. She panted looking over her shoulder.

Ryan began to make love to her, standing, gripping her hips as she held onto the overturned boat. He idly remembered cracking his head on the wall when they had had sex the night before. His head still hurt a bit, and he was glad that there was nothing in the immediate area that he was at risk of hitting his head on this time.

At that moment, something cracked him over the head with a force that knocked him to the ground. Everything went dark.

## Chapter 9

Ryan woke up with a headache worse than any hangover he had ever had in his life. He couldn't place what had happened to him. He was lying on a wet floor, and there was a loud sound like something mechanical. The whole world seemed to be moving, and he couldn't clear his head to figure out why.

He tried to move, but his hands were tied behind his back. The icy fingers of panic started to well up from deep within Ryan. What had happened to him? Where was Chanté?

Chanté. He remembered. He had been having sex with her, and then...he must have been hit over the head. Hit over the head and kidnapped? He cursed himself for being so stupid. What had compelled him to follow her into such a strange place? He admitted to himself that he hadn't been thinking completely clearly. The prospect of having Chanté again had quashed any qualm he may have had at the time.

It was dark, but light enough to see. His vision started to clear, and he thought he might be on a boat. That would account for all of the rocking. He tried to move his feet, but they were bound as well. When he kicked forward with both legs, his arms were wrenched as well. He figured that the bonds that held his legs must be tied to those that held his arms.

His vision cleared a bit more, and he became certain that he was on a boat after all. He was on the deck, and it seemed that he was the only prisoner. He didn't know what had happened to Chanté, and he feared the worst. Anything could have happened to

her. She might have been raped or killed. Ryan felt tears in the back of his eyes, but he refused to let them fall until he figured out where he was and what was going on.

The boat had a gas engine that was chugging away as the waves caused the small boat to careen up and down with a motion that was nauseating to Ryan. He turned his head and looked at the boat's deck. It looked like a fishing boat, and there was a small cabin at the front. The starry night lit the boat well enough for Ryan to see, and he could make out four figures in the cabin.

Three of them were large men and the fourth was either very small or was a woman. His suspicions started to rise, because in silhouette, the woman looked like Chanté. It was still too dark for Ryan to be completely sure. If it was her, and she wasn't tied up, perhaps she was in on the whole thing.

Ryan fought with the thoughts in his head and tried not to jump to conclusions without proof. Over the noise of the engine, he could barely hear their voices from the cabin. They were jabbering at each other in a language that Ryan did not know. It sounded to Ryan like French, but he couldn't be sure.

With the pounding pressure in Ryan's head, he felt like his head would explode. He worried that he had a concussion. He still felt dizzy. He eventually lost the struggle to stay awake, and passed out again.

Cold water splashed onto Ryan's face, and he groggily returned to consciousness. The light of dawn filled the sky above him, and so did the figure of a huge man. He was shirtless and dark-skinned, wearing green camouflage shorts. He looked like he was just



as broad in the shoulder as he was tall. He held a plastic pail in his hands, which Ryan presumed was the source of the water.

“Get up,” the man said to Ryan. Ryan struggled to his feet. The ropes binding his feet had been cut, but his wrists were still tied painfully behind his back. His muscles were sore from being bound all night, but that was nothing compared to the pain in his head. He could barely stand from the muscle fatigue and the dizziness.

Fear welled up within Ryan. He had no idea what these people wanted. He had been kidnapped. It was like something from out of a movie, or one of those cheesy thrillers that Ryan had been reading by the pool just over a day ago. It was all that Ryan could do not to panic.

“Move!” shouted the huge man. Ryan steeled himself and put one foot in front of the other. He walked off of the boat and onto the dock that it was tied to.

Then he saw her. Chanté stood on the sandy beach, talking to two other men. One was so much like the huge man leading Ryan that Ryan had to do a double-take. Obviously, these men were twins. The other man was the tall stranger that had poked at Ryan’s necklace. The necklace, he realized, that was still in his hotel room. He thought about the coin and its purpose of protection. Was this the kind of thing that it was supposed to have protected him from?

Chanté didn’t seem to be in any sort of trouble. She was unbound, and talking freely to the two men. She turned around, and their eyes met. Ryan knew of the hurt expression that must be on his face. She smiled back at him, but her smile looked much crueller than it ever had before. Then she turned back to the men. Even now, her beauty made Ryan shiver.

It was obvious that Chanté had set the whole thing up. Ryan wondered how he could have been so stupid. He had been played like a harp, and had fallen for the whole thing. He remembered Chanté telling him to take off the necklace. He knew that she was superstitious, but as he thought about it, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Perhaps the coin was supposed to protect him from *her*. The thought chilled Ryan to the bone.

The huge man put a rope around Ryan's neck and started to pull him along the dock. With his hands tightly bound behind his back, Ryan was forced to follow or be strangled.

The dock was on a sandy beach with a thick tropical forest running along it. There were only a couple of small, white buildings, and a dirt road that led off into the forest. It was morning, and Ryan could see the sun rising on the other side of the trees. He realized that this meant that he was on the other side of the island. If it was the same Island, that would make this –

“Haiti,” Ryan whispered.

“Shut up!” yelled the huge man, pulling sharply on the rope and causing Ryan to stumble forward. “Get moving!” he yelled. Ryan complied. He couldn't see any land to the west. Either he was in Haiti, or he was on a completely different island. Jamaica, maybe? He didn't think so.

He was led north along the coast for a short distance. There were several people bustling around the beach, performing various tasks. Ryan saw a number of other boats tied to docks along the water. It looked like he was in some sort of small fishing village,

but he couldn't see any buildings other than the two boathouses that he had noticed before. Perhaps there were more in the forest.

After a while, the huge man turned onto a walking path that led into the trees, and Ryan was forced to follow. After perhaps a hundred feet, the forest opened into a clearing, and it felt to Ryan like he had entered another world.

Low huts filled the clearing. They had thatched roofs and looked like the type of thing that movie headhunters would dwell in. The village that opened before Ryan was built around a central square, which had a large fire pit at its center. Around the fire pit were several poles, some carved with outlandish totems, and some adorned with skulls. Ryan actually saw some shrunken heads that looked very much like the ones that Chanté was selling. He didn't think that these were fake. In fact, now he wasn't positive that Chanté's heads were fake, either. The thought was chilling to Ryan.

The rope was removed from Ryan's neck, and he was roughly thrown into a hut. It was a one-room building, and there was not light except for the sunlight that flitted through the wooden plank walls. The floor was also wood, and sat perhaps a foot off of the dirt ground. There was a thin mat and a wool blanket in the corner, and an empty bucket. Ryan presumed it was his toilet. The room stank of sweat and bodily fluids, as if it had been used for this purpose before.

Minutes passed, and the door opened behind him. The tall man from the shop area walked in, with Chanté behind him. The man looked as menacing as ever, but Chanté looked dazed, almost as if she were high on something. She flashed a smile at Ryan, and in the dim light he could see that her teeth were coated with a dark liquid. Ryan's imagination told him that it was blood, but he tried to convince himself otherwise.

The huge man and his twin brother walked in and stepped around Ryan. Each of them grabbed one of his arms, which were still tied behind his back, and yanked him to his feet. Then the tall man stepped forward.

“Good morning, Ryan,” he said in his rich baritone rumble. “I am Dr. Zazu.”

“Fuck you, doctor,” said Ryan.

Dr. Zazu laughed, and Ryan was reminded of their first meeting. The man’s laughter cut off abruptly, and he smacked Ryan across the face so hard that Ryan thought he would pass out again.

“My associates here,” he said, pointing to the men holding Ryan, “Are Mr. Left and Mr. Right. You already know Chanté.”

Ryan looked at the men to his sides. He thought about making a crack about their less-than-creative names, but his jaw ached from the slap and the blow to his head, and he didn’t feel like receiving more injuries.

“What do you want with me?” Ryan asked.

Dr. Zazu smiled. “Oh, we’ll get to that within due time. For now, I just need you to take a drink.” The man that called himself a doctor pulled out a leather flask and removed the stopper. Ryan clamped his jaws shut. Whatever was in the flask, it was sure to be bad.

“No,” Ryan said through his clenched teeth.

Dr. Zazu wound up and smacked Ryan again, this time from the other direction. Ryan saw stars. Then, one of the huge men (Ryan couldn’t tell Mr. Left from Mr. Right – was it his left, or Dr. Zazu’s?) put a burly hand to Ryan’s jaw and forced it open. The other man reached over and plugged Ryan’s nose. Then Dr. Zazu poured a dark liquid

from the flask into Ryan's mouth. Ryan could do nothing but swallow. It was salty and thick. The men let go of Ryan, and he coughed and sputtered. He tried willing himself to vomit the foul concoction, but to no avail.

Strangely, Ryan's headache and the pain in his jaws evaporated as soon as the drink hit his stomach. He started to feel warm and tingly, almost as if he were floating. Mr. Left and Mr. Right pushed him down on the mat.

Dr. Zazu opened the door and turned to Ryan. "Until next we meet, young man," Dr. Zazu said. He left, Chanté following him like a lost puppy. Mr. Left and Mr. Right were close behind them, and as they left the hut they slammed the door behind them. Then Ryan heard what sounded like a large bar being placed over the door, locking him in.

Ryan descended into madness.

## Chapter 10

As Ryan looked up at the ceiling of the hut from his mat, he thought that he must have some sort of fever. He was sweating profusely, and couldn't handle the heat in the hut. He took off all of his clothing, save his boxer shorts, and threw it on the floor next to the mat on which he lay.

The light filtering through the wooden walls of the hut stopped looking like sunlight, and started to look like lights of every color of the rainbow.

“Oh shit,” Ryan said to himself as it dawned on him that he must be hallucinating. It seemed logical that they had drugged him with something. That certainly fit these people’s character.

He couldn’t focus his thoughts. Suddenly the whole thing seemed absolutely ridiculous to Ryan. He laughed loudly at the situation, cackling madly from his cot. The sweat dripped down his face in what seemed like a river. He was surprised that he wasn’t lying in a puddle.

The sound of his own maniacal laughter reached his own ears slowly, as if sound were hindered by molasses. He reached up his hand and watched in awe as colors trailed behind it.

“I have to fight this,” he whispered. The sound of his whispering came behind the sound of his own laughter, and it caused him to laugh again.

This time, his laughter frightened him. He stood up and lifted the mat from the floor and crawled under it. “I’m in a tent!” he yelled to the air of the hut. “Nothing can touch me! I’m in my tent!” He giggled to himself in a moment of clarity. He could hear his own heartbeat, pounding out an incessant rhythm.

He noticed that the sun had gone down. How long had he been in this hut, raving? He could feel heat and see flickering light from outside. He ran to the wall and slammed his head against the wall, pressing his eye to a crack between the boards. He saw the village square, and realized that it wasn’t his heartbeat that he was hearing; it was the pounding of drums.

Some sort of strange dance was taking place on the dirt square, around a bonfire that blazed 15 feet high at the very least. Local people, clad only in their skin and wild

designs of white paint, were dancing, writhing, and in some cases copulating around the fire. It was tantalizing and strange to Ryan, trapped within his prison cell of a hut.

Ryan shook himself. He thought that the hallucinatory drug that he had been given might be wearing off. “Good,” he whispered to himself. He quickly put his clothes back on. “I can get control of this. I can get out of here. I can--”

He was cut off as the door opened. Chanté stood in the doorway, completely naked. She glistened with perspiration. A skeletal pattern was painted on her dark skin, and she was bathed in the light of the fire. Ryan moved back against the back wall.

She looked at him, and a look something like sadness crossed her face. Then she hardened, her expression becoming a scowl to match the skull paint that masked her features. Hands reached around her from behind and groped her, and Ryan saw the tall shape of Dr. Zazu rise behind her in the doorway.

Unlike Chanté, Zazu was fully clothed. He wore a battered suit that had seen better days. Oddly enough, he also wore a dilapidated top hat, which had what looked like alligator teeth in a band around the body of the hat. His face was painted like some sort of monster, with fangs and bulging eye sockets and the hint of horns rising into the hat. Chanté stepped to the side and made room for Zazu to enter.

The man laughed at Ryan. “It’s time,” he said.

“Time for what?” yelled Ryan. The effects of the drug were definitely subsiding, but his head still felt foggy. Thankfully, the headache did not return as the drug effects faded.

“Time for you to join the army,” said Dr. Zazu. From behind his back he drew a long knife, almost as long as a machete. From its handle dangled two large, black

feathers. The keen edge glinted in the firelight behind Dr. Zazu. “Get up,” Dr. Zazu said to Ryan, “or you die now.” Ryan obeyed.

They walked from the hut and into the village square. Ryan was led to a group of perhaps twenty other people. All of them looked like tourists. There were people of all different nationalities and genders, but every one of them looked scared. Ryan hoped that he was holding his composure a little better than the others, but he knew that he must look just as scared as each of them. The simple truth was that he *was* scared. Petrified, in fact. All of this was so completely surreal. This was not the type of thing that happens in the real world. It could be found in some jungle fantasy story, but not in the real world.

Ryan’s hands were bound behind his back. The prisoners, Ryan included, were made to form a line, facing a raised stage. To the sides of the line, men stood holding guns. Ryan wasn’t sure what types of guns they were. He thought they looked like AK-47s, but he really had no idea. They were definitely something like that, though, and they weren’t toys. The men were clothed in camouflage fatigues, and looked like soldiers or mercenaries or some other sort of hard individual. None of them spoke; they just stood there and quite literally kept the prisoners in line. He wondered if these men were members of the “army” that Zazu had said Ryan would be joining.

Zazu stepped onto the stage, closely followed by Chanté. She had clothed herself in a white cotton dress, and stood behind the so-called doctor like some sort of obedient dog. Ryan almost laughed aloud when he realized that the “Dr.” in “Dr. Zazu” must refer to “Witch Doctor”. The whole thing was absolutely ridiculous. The problem, of course, was that the people involved seemed to take it very seriously, and they currently had



Ryan tied up and held at gunpoint. He was not about to argue with them over the validity of their faith, under the circumstances.

The chanting, dancing, naked orgy came to a halt as Zazu took the stage. The people slowly walked in front of the stage, and each one started to hum. It was a low, guttural sound that filled the air like the buzz of a 400 pound mosquito.

Zazu raised his knife over his top hat. The blade gleamed brightly in the firelight. “MY PEOPLE!” he shouted.

“ZAZU!” they replied in unison.

“Tonight, the rising begins! Soon our army shall cover all nations! We shall go forth from each of the secret places, and the world shall be ours!”

“*ZOMBI! ZOMBI! ZOMBI! ZOMBI!*” the crowd Chantéd.

“Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me,” breathed Ryan.

Zazu held his left hand out, palm forward, and the chanting ceased. He focused his icy stare onto the crowd before him. “YES!” he shouted to the night sky, “tonight we create the zombi army that shall cover all nations with their darkness so that we may become the new light!”

The people in the crowd cheered.

“We must start the rite!” shouted Zazu. “We must have the sacrifice!”

The people cheered.

“In the days of old,” Zazu said, his voice taking on the low quality of a storyteller, “the magic demanded sacrifice. Some would sacrifice the animal. Some would sacrifice the man. Tonight, we must sacrifice as well. For the zombi magic, tonight we sacrifice the sullied woman.”

Two of the gun-wielding men led a screaming woman from a hut. She was completely naked and looked haggard. Her face looked worn and tired, and her arms displayed angry red track marks from years of needle use. Ryan guessed that she was a whore, pulled from a street somewhere.

She was brought up to the stage and held in front of Zazu.

“For the magic, I make the sacrifice!” he yelled, staring coldly into the eyes of the prostitute. Her screaming had died into a strained whimper.

Suddenly, Zazu spun, and his long knife slashed Chanté’s throat, nearly from ear to ear. Shocked surprise filled her face, but the only sound that came from her ruined throat was a gurgle of blood.

“My dear,” Zazu said to her, “You are sullied.”

She slumped forward. Zazu took a silver chalice from a table behind him, held her head up, and let blood from her gaping neck fill the cup. The whore started to scream again. Zazu motioned to the men escorting her, and they took her away from the stage.

Ryan stared at the motionless form of Chanté. He wanted to scream, but at the same time he felt that somehow justice had been done. Then he felt sick with himself for thinking that way, and sick from the whole situation. He wanted to weep, to wail, or simply to wake up. He did not. He was not dreaming.

## Chapter 11

The stage itself was like some sort of idiotic horror circus show. There was a man in a top hat and suit, holding a bloody knife and a chalice full of blood as he stood over the corpse of a woman. Ryan almost laughed out loud with dismay and disbelief as the two huge men, Mr. Left and Mr. Right, carried a large metal cauldron onto the stage. This was becoming so stereotypical that Ryan wanted to scream at all of these people for how stupid they were. He didn't think that it would be long before he couldn't contain himself any longer.

The cauldron bubbled and steamed, and one of the men (either Left or Right) took a large paddle and began to stir it. Zazu raised the chalice above his head, and with a cry from the crowd he poured Chanté's blood into the nearly full kettle.

The line moved forward slightly Left and Right brought the first person onto the stage. It was a girl, fairly young with an excellent figure. She was wearing low-rise jeans and a bikini top. In her terror, she was struggling weakly against the two men holding her. Her head darted from left to right, and Ryan was shocked to see that he knew her. It was one of the two drunk girls from the hot tub bar that he had seen the night that he had arrived in the Dominican Republic. It was only a few nights ago, but it seemed like forever. The young blond on the stage had not aged well in those few nights. She was dirty and disheveled, and it looked like she was going insane. Her hair was as wild as her darting eyes.

Dr. Zazu dipped the chalice that had once been filled with Chanté's blood into the cauldron, which was no longer steaming or bubbling, as it had begun to cool off after having been removed from whatever fire it had been on.

Ryan was reminded of being forced to choke down the drugged spirits from Zazu's flask as the witch doctor brought the chalice to the girl's lips. Her nose was held in a similar manner to the way his had been, and her jaw was cranked open by one of the men's muscular hands. Dr. Zazu then poured a black liquid from the chalice down the woman's throat.

She screamed. It wasn't a scream of terror or even one of pain. It was a gut-wrenching cry of absolute anguish, the likes of which Ryan had never heard in his life. She raised her head and howled, and her arms and legs jutted out to each side stiffly, as if she were being electrocuted. Then she went limp. Dr. Zazu reached forward with his index finger and poked it into her forehead.

From the point that the finger touched, Ryan could see a thin wisp of smoke rising. She jolted upright and stood in front of Dr. Zazu, staring at him. Then she slowly turned toward the side of the stage where Ryan and the rest were waiting their turn.

Her eyes were black as pitch -- not just the pupils or even the irises, but the entire eyes. They were like looking at spherical blobs of ink. Any tan that the girl had obtained for herself (and judging from the tan lines that Ryan had seen on his first night, she had spent a good amount of time in the sun) had been completely washed away. She looked like a corpse. Her skin was still smooth, but it was pallid and dead looking, save one bloody fingerprint in the center of her forehead, where Dr. Zazu's finger had touched her.

She walked – shambled, really – off of the stage and past the others that were waiting in line. She didn't say a word, nor did she scream anymore. She simply walked past the other prisoners and disappeared into the forest, and no one moved to stop her.

Dr. Zazu smiled, showing his brown teeth.

The prisoners started screaming.

Ryan screamed as well. The butt of a machine gun hit him hard in the stomach, driving the wind from him. He doubled over, coughing, and was ordered to move forward.

One by one, the prisoners were taken up onto the stage in front of him. The end result was the same for almost everyone. They walked up, drank the concoction, screamed, and shambled off into the woods without a word, as if they knew their destination. One older man behaved differently – he didn't seem to have any ill effects at all. He was abruptly and decisively shot by one of the armed guards. Others took his body away. One other woman drank the concoction that was forced down her throat, and rather than turn into the shambling corpse-thing like the others, she dissolved. She literally dissolved into a puddle of bloody, fatty liquid. Ryan turned and vomited, as did two of the remaining prisoners.

Soon, there was nowhere else for Ryan to go but onto the stage. He tried to think of something that he could do. Fleeting thoughts of resistance entered his mind, and were crushed by the sight of all of the guns, the crowd, the sheer insanity of it all. There was nothing that Ryan could think of.

Before Mr. Left and Mr. Right had descended the staircase that led onto the stairs, Ryan heard a roaring noise coming from down the small dirt road that led into the village.

It sounded like a vehicle of some sort, but too big to be a car. The crowd slowly turned around to look toward the sound that was approaching.

Dr. Zazu also momentarily forgot what he was doing and looked down the road. There were no lights, only the sound. Then suddenly, improbably, a black Humvee came careening into the square of the village, traveling very fast through the crowd of people. The crowd, seeing the truck barreling down on them, dove to either side as the Humvee drove inexorably toward the stage. Ryan could only watch, frozen.

The Humvee's headlights came on suddenly, filling the square with blazing halogen light. The black, boxy vehicle smashed into the stage with a noise like hell itself had come roaring to the surface of the world.

Ryan stood transfixed, watching as Dr. Zazu, who had been standing on the stage as it was smashed, was thrown through the air and landed on the ground behind the stage with a thud. The crowd continued to scatter. The soldiers seemed too perplexed to know what to do with themselves. Some of them ran with the rest of the crowd, some of them opened fire into the air with their machine guns, and some of them shot at the Hummer.

When the gunfire erupted, Ryan dropped to his knees and tried as best he could to cover his head as bullets started to whiz by him. The black-tinted window of the Humvee rolled down, and when Ryan saw the driver, he thought for sure that he had gone insane.

“Agwe?”

“Shut up and get in!” yelled the Minneapolis cabbie that just happened to be driving a black Humvee in Haiti at the precise moment that Ryan needed escape. It was all too much coincidence. It was *impossible*.

However, Ryan wasn't in a position to argue against salvation. He ran and dove into the passenger's seat of the Humvee.

Agwe threw the gearshift into reverse, and the tires sprayed dirt as the vehicle backed up rapidly. Then he cranked the wheel, spinning the truck around like a stunt in a cop movie, and slammed the gearshift into first gear. They were off, speeding through the forest.

"Agwe – what the *HELL?*" screamed Ryan.

"It's a long story, my friend," said Agwe.

Ryan noticed that the sound of gunfire was fading into the background.

"You'd better start talking, then!" yelled Ryan, anger warring with confusion and fear within him.

Agwe drove and hurriedly untied the rope from Ryan's wrists with one hand.

"Take this and put it on," said Agwe, "I gave it to you for a reason,"

Ryan was hardly even surprised when he saw the skull pattern on the back of the clamshell necklace staring back at him. He grabbed the necklace and threw it over his head.

"Long story short," began Agwe in his thick Caribbean accent, "That talisman *bends* probability. It's more than just good luck. It can alter coincidence to ya favor. I'll explain more later. You're lucky I found it before they did."

"Who?" asked Ryan. "Who are they?"

"Later," said Agwe, "We're not out of the woods yet,"

Ryan glanced into the trees to the sides of him. There were shapes, flashes of pallid skin, pacing the car. They were human, but they were running impossibly fast.

Ryan looked at the speedometer of the vehicle. It read 57 kilometers per hour. There were people running faster than 35 miles an hour through a *forest*, pacing the Humvee.

“Agwe...” Ryan said.

“What is it?” the driver asked.

“What are the things in the forest?”

Agwe looked at him, and then glanced to the trees to the sides of them. “Reach behind the seat, now!” he yelled.

Ryan clambered around in the passenger seat of the Humvee, trying to keep his balance as the vehicle careened recklessly over the bumpy forest road. His hands touched a metal cylinder, and he pulled a double-barrel shotgun from behind the seat.

“Shells! Under the seat!” yelled Agwe.

Ryan had used a shotgun before, having grown up hunting in Minnesota. He quickly loaded the firearm with shells from a cardboard box that had been tucked under the passenger seat.

One of the pallid creatures leaped inhumanly from the trees and landed squarely on the hood of the vehicle. Ryan shrieked as it nimbly landed in front of him. It was a naked man, but its limbs were longer than a human’s should be. Its skin was a sickly grey. Its mouth was much larger than a human mouth, and was filled with three rows of sharp teeth. Its eyes were glossy black and huge, making the creature look like an alien out of a sci-fi movie.

It pounded on the windshield and caused a large series of cracks to spider-web from where its fist had impacted. Ryan didn’t think that he should shoot through the windshield, and hanging out of the window didn’t seem like a good idea. He reached to



the center console and opened the moon-roof. Then he stood, aimed, and shot the creature in the face.

Blackish blood splattered in a cloud of mist, which the car caught up with, to Ryan's misfortune. He was covered in flecks of black blood, and it smelled like carrion. More of the creatures were coming out of the woods. One leaped at the car from the side, and Ryan shot it. The shell hit the creature's knee, and as it landed on the car hood it lost its balance and fell over the hood. The Humvee lurched as it ran over the body. Ryan lowered himself into the truck to reload the shotgun.

The vehicle blasted out onto a paved road, and Agwe turned right. The cabbie-turned-savior slammed his foot onto the gas, and the Humvee sped away. Ryan looked at the woods behind him. The creatures weren't pursuing more than a couple of feet past the tree line. Either they were scared, or they realized that they couldn't keep up with a vehicle traveling 100 miles per hour.

The road was deserted and dark, and arid land stretched to both sides of the truck. Ryan tried to make sense of it, and figured that they were traveling to the east. The road was paved, but it obviously wasn't well traveled. There were potholes that occasionally caused the truck to bounce as it sped on its way.

Ryan clutched the shotgun to his chest after flicking the safety catch. He didn't want to go over a bump and somehow blow Agwe's head off. He turned to the Haitian native.

"OK man, what the hell were those things?"

"Zombies," Agwe said stoically.

“What are you talking about?” Ryan yelled, “They weren’t like any zombies I’ve ever heard of.”

“Ahh,” Agwe replied, “So ya hear of the zombie, and ya hear that they be shamblin’ things, rottin’ flesh an’ maggots an’ arms fallin’ off they bodies as they try an’ find the brains t’ eat, yeah?”

“Something like that,” said Ryan.

“Nah. It ain’t like that. Well, kinda, at first. See, dey drink the potion that they get forced down they throats, yeah? Then they will is the will of they creator. That guy back there, right? He’s the master. They do what he want’s them to.”

“So they obey his commands?”

“More than just commands. His thoughts become theirs. That’s how they all know right where to go after they been turned, y’see.”

Ryan did. He recalled the people drinking the fluid and walking straight into the forest as if they knew exactly where they were going.

“Then,” Agwe continued, “They go through the real transformation, and become like the creatures that ya saw back there in the forest. They can run as fast as a car. They much, much stronger than a man. An’ those teeth, they only wanna taste flesh. It can be cow flesh or dog flesh or rat flesh or man flesh, but they crave the meat, and the blood, and the bones.”

Ryan nodded. He had seen the creatures. He had never seen a shambling, rotting zombie outside of a horror movie. He could buy it, after having seen it with his own eyes. He still thought, on a subconscious level, that this must be some sort of strange

dream or delusion, but he opted not to argue, and he suppressed the thought that he might be going insane.

“So who are these people? Why are they doing this?”

“These men that took ya were part of a Hoodoo cult. I don’ know what they call theyselves. But they all workin’ for a much larger society that call theyselves The Dying Sunrise,” said Agwe.

“What? A larger society?”

“Jus’ listen,” said Agwe curtly. “Every culture, every country, they all have they dark side. They dark magic. They folk magic. It all started back at the beginning, you see, the beginning of time.

“Well, the magic spread with the people. There were always the people that are righteous and good and pure and whatevah’. Then they always the people that are dark, evil, and cruel to the soul. Then they just the people what wants the power, power to control people or live forever or whatevah’. They all the ones that do the magic.

“As the human race spread over the world, the magic changed with the culture, but there were still the powers that unite all of the practitioners of these dark arts. Certain rituals all come from the same root.”

The Humvee continued speeding along the straight road. Ryan listened intently, still holding tightly to the double-barreled shotgun as Agwe spun the tale.

“After the folk spread to all the corners of the world, they was separated. Then the world caught up, right, and suddenly all of them cultures come together again.

Especially in America. All these people comin’ together, well, those what do the dark

arts come together too. They decided to form this society, an' they named it The Dying Sunrise.

“No one really knows what that even means. Some say it's cuz they want to destroy the light. Who knows. But we watch 'em. We see 'em.”

Ryan chimed in at that comment. “Who watches them?” he asked.

“Me an' my brothers. We ain't got a name or nothing. But there just as many of us as there are of the other ones, an' we keep watch on 'em because we know they gotta be stopped.

“The Dying Sunrise has this plan, a plan what you heard a little of when that Zazu was talkin' on the stage. They gonna make an army of zombies, an unstoppable force, and they gonna take things over.”

“Take what things over?” asked Ryan.

“Take everything over,” said Agwe.

## Chapter 12

The two men continued their drive along the dark highway without speaking more than necessary. Ryan eventually put the gun away, realizing that no one was giving chase at the moment. Agwe seemed to think the same way, although he kept glancing into the rearview mirror anxiously.

“Are they going to come after us?”

“Yes,” said Agwe, “They can't risk letting you go. The only question is how fast they can come.”

Ryan nodded. He figured that the village full of soldier-type-vooodoo-crazies probably had some sort of transportation other than boats. The Humvee was cruising along at very high speeds, and Ryan didn't think that any other car would catch up with the lead that they had. However, Ryan didn't know what they had hiding in the village. For all he knew they could have a helicopter.

“See, them zombies, they saw which direction we went, but now that they at the stage they at, they not linked to Dr. Zazu anymore.”

“They were linked to him? Like to his brain?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah,” replied Agwe grimly. “When the zombie is made, it has the mind of the creator. Like Dr. Zazu. It goes where he wants it to go and does what he wants it to do. Then it changes. It's still completely devoted to the creator and will do whatever he wants it to do, but he can't read its thoughts and it can't hear his. So he don' know what it sees. So that's a good thing for us, see, cuz he don' know where we go until he find the zombies.”

“If he's even still alive. He took quite a flight off of that stage when you hit it with the car,” said Ryan. “Hell, I'm surprised the car is still running,”

“These cars are tough,” said Agwe. “He's still alive, though. He got wicked hoodoo keepin' him strong. He flew,” Agwe laughed, “but he probably just surprised, not even hurt,”

Ryan saw lights ahead of them, which appeared to be a town of some sort. The truck sped toward the lights of the town, and Ryan was jolted back into reality by headlights on the road in front of them. They were just cars, going about their business – the occasional person out and about in the middle of the night.

Ryan saw the flashing runway lights of a small airport, off the road a ways to their left. Agwe turned left onto a road with a sign depicting an airplane, and they drove toward the flashing lights.

Agwe reached under the seat and pulled out a brown paper bag, which he gave to Ryan. Ryan opened the bag and was delighted and mystified to find his wallet, his keychain, and his passport.

“I couldn’t pack all of your clothes and things,” said Agwe, “but I’ll have them shipped to your home after this is all said and done. You gonna have a hard road back, I’m thinkin’”

“I’m going home?” asked Ryan hopefully.

“Nah, not yet,” replied Agwe, “They gon’ be lookin’ for you at ya home. Only plane we got for ya is goin’ to Mexico.”

“Mexico?” yelled Ryan, “I can’t go to Mexico! I’ve got a life! Work!”

“You can make ya way home from there in not too long. Just be careful. Don’t use credit cards, shit like that. They be watchin’ for ya.” Replied the Haitian. “You gonna touch down in a small town in the Yucatan. I got a car rented for ya. You just need to go north, right? You can do it. Jus’ know that the Dying Sunrise, they everywhere.”

Ryan turned toward Agwe after placing the shotgun under the seat. “Why am I involved in all of this? Why me?” he asked, on the verge of panic. He felt like his whole life was falling apart.

“That’s what everyone asks theyselves, innit?” replied Agwe. “Truth be told, a part of it is that you in the wrong place at the wrong time. But there somethin’ more with

you. You got a light in you, man, and we need you. Eventually you'll figure out how to use that light.”

He pulled up to the airport gate and the guard opened it, giving Agwe what almost looked like a salute of some sort. The guard waved them through, and Agwe drove across the dark tarmac and stopped in front of an airplane.

The plane was old – almost *ancient* in Ryan’s opinion. It was a dull metallic grey in color, and had two large propellers, one on each wing. Its rear door stood open, and a man in a shabby-looking pilot uniform stood outside the door, smoking a cigarette and glancing impatiently at his watch.

“Dis your flight,” said Agwe. “When you get to Mexico, you find an American guy named Mark Wilson. He help ya from there.”

“Okay,” said Ryan, bewildered. His entire life had descended into lunacy, in his opinion, but it was still his life and he was determined to put it back together. The thought of Emily briefly touched his mind. He wondered how she was doing in Watertown, and what kinds of twists and turns her life had taken since she had left him. He was positive that it wasn’t nearly the complete madness that his had become. He had been kidnapped by a witch doctor and a village full of voodoo madmen. He had found what he thought was a friend, only to be betrayed by her and then watch as she was murdered. He had escaped from *a horde of lightning-fast zombies* with a *cab driver* from his home town that had coincidentally showed up at just the right time, *dues ex machina* style. Weariness started to creep into him, a deep tiredness that went all the way down to the center of his being.

He felt like there was so much more that he had to figure out, but couldn't think of a single thing to ask Agwe. He had no idea whether he would even see the man again, or why he should even trust the cabbie in the first place. Something in the back of his mind told him that Agwe was trustworthy, though. The man had saved Ryan's life, after all, and he was a fellow Minnesotan.

Ryan hopped out of the car. He realized that a large number of his personal files were sitting on the laptop back in the Dominican Republic. The information was password protected, but if someone were to crack it, they would find a lot of privileged lawyer-client information on the computer. He told himself that the laptop was the least of his worries. Right now he had to concentrate on the task at hand. If he didn't get home by Monday, or at least call the office, he could be out of a job. Again, he told himself not to worry about that. He had bigger fish to fry, like the horde of zombies that were chasing him.

He walked toward the plane, trying not to think about propeller failure and crashes and the fact that the ancient thing looked like it was liable to fall apart in the sky.

"Don't take the pendant off anymore!" yelled Agwe. Ryan raised his hand and waved, acknowledging that he would comply.

He turned to the pilot, a relaxed-looking Haitian man with a name tag that said Xavier right under his pilot's wings. The wings themselves looked to Ryan like the type that stewardesses give to kids, but Ryan once again tried to turn his mind away from misgivings of that nature. He could probably worry himself to death, but he told himself to stay positive and focused. He had the pervasive feeling that he had a job to do, but he couldn't really think of what it was.



He shook hands with the pilot, and they exchanged pleasantries. Ryan was the only passenger, and he was ushered onto the small airplane and took a seat. There were only four passenger seats on the plane, and Ryan took the front right seat, from which he could see out of the window and into the cockpit. The upholstery of the seat was old and frayed, but the seat was comfortable enough as he sat down.

Before long, the plane was in motion, and it began its ascent, away from Haiti, away from the Dominican Republic, flying westward in the general direction of home. As the rickety plane leveled out, the sun rose behind it, shining on the crystal blue water of the Caribbean Sea.

## PART 3: MEXICO

### Chapter 13

The plane was nowhere near as fast as any of the commercial planes that Ryan had been on in his life, and it was nowhere near as smooth, either. Ryan was able to handle the bouncing and banging turbulence for about a half-hour before his stomach decided to empty itself. Thankfully, besides the lack of other accoutrements, the plane had a good supply of air sickness bags. Ryan used three before his stomach finally settled down.

“Hey, it’s ok man!” yelled Xavier the pilot over the noise of the plane, “You ain’t the first to sick up on this plane!” He laughed loudly. “You won’t be the last either! You just try to relax, man, and we’ll get you to Mexico after a little while! We gotta fly

low, though. We got Cuba to the north, Jamaica to the south! This is like a little Caribbean tour for ya, mon!”

Eventually Ryan’s weariness was able to overcome the noise and movement of the plane and his sour stomach. He fell asleep with the seat upright, as the azure water rolled beneath the plane.

He woke slowly, with Xavier the pilot rubbing his shoulder. “Hey mon, wake up! It’s almost time for you to get off!”

The airplane was quite obviously still moving. Ryan bolted upright. “Who’s flying the plane?” he yelled to the pilot.

Xavier said, “Autopilot,” and pointed to the cockpit. A piece of twine was holding the yoke in place. “It’ll be alright for a bit, but I gotta get back up there before we crash an’ die horribly, eh?” he laughed, then walked back up to the cockpit, sat down, and grabbed the yoke.

Ryan stood up and walked to the cockpit. They were flying low, and he could see the shore in front of him. The sun had crested and was now in front of them, but was still high in the sky. Ryan checked his watch, which read 1:14 PM. They had been in the air for about seven hours. He had slept soundly the entire time, after having lost whatever food he had in him. He realized that he was actually hungry.

“So where are we landing?” Ryan asked over the noise of the airplane.

“Landing!” said Xavier, “Who said anything about landing? I gotta keep a low profile! Your parachute is in the back!”

Ryan no longer felt hungry. In fact, he thought that he might be sick again. “WHAT?” he yelled, “I can’t jump out of a plane! I have no idea how to skydive!”

Xavier erupted with laughter. “I’m just kidding, mon,” he said, catching his breath in between chuckles, “We’re gonna land at an abandoned airstrip that’s a ways inland. We don’t even have parachutes!” His laughter continued. For some reason, Ryan didn’t feel any more assured.

Ryan stayed in the cockpit, watching the lush land of the Yucatan Peninsula stretch out in front of him. He had been to this part of Mexico before, on a trip to Cancun during a college spring break. He had come with Emily, and some other college friends. The vacation had been a wild and drunken blast, much different than the one that he was supposed to be on now. In retrospect, that vacation had been much less wild than this one had turned out to be.

The plane banked southward slightly, and Ryan saw a clearing in the jungle landscape. Sure enough, there was a blacktop runway, a small building that might at one time have been a control tower, and a hangar. Even from this height, he could see that the runway had gone to disuse long ago. There were visible potholes in the pavement. The control tower seemed sturdy enough, but the roof of the hangar had caved in long ago, and the whole airfield had a deserted look to it.

“Oh for the love –” Ryan said, “Xavier! You’re planning to land THERE? I’d rather skydive!”

“Strap yourself in, mon. The seatbelt light is on!” he laughed.

Ryan didn’t hesitate. He went back to the dilapidated seat and strapped the seatbelt on himself hurriedly. He clutched the chair’s armrests as the plane descended. The jolt was surprisingly light when the plane first touched down, but that changed rapidly as the aircraft started hitting potholes.

From the cockpit, Xavier gave a whoop like a wild west cowboy as the plane slowed and finally skittered to a halt on the pocked asphalt runway.

“Thank ya for flying Xavier Airlines, and we hope you have a pleasant stay in sunny Mexico!” he said cheerily as he toggled the switches on the plane.

He opened the door of the airplane and Ryan followed him out into the hot sun. The air was so humid that Ryan broke out in a sweat almost immediately. He could see waves in the air around the runway from the convection currents, and all of the buildings looked like they were bending and swaying in the heat. Close to the runway, a large RV was parked next to a plain-looking black sedan.

Three men stepped out of the sedan. Two looked like the Mexican equivalent of secret-service type goons, wearing dark suits and sunglasses. The third man wore a pair of brown trousers and a white shirt with a brown tie. His hair was balding and had been combed over, and he stood almost a foot shorter than the goons. He started walking toward Ryan and Xavier.

Xavier lit a cigarette, and offered one to Ryan. Ryan declined, although he admitted to himself that this was the type of week that would make a man take up smoking. Xavier leaned back against the airplane, his jaunty pilot’s cap giving him the air of a man who wasn’t really concerned with life.

The balding man approached the plane, followed by the two goons. “Hello, Mr. Sanders!” he said in a high-pitched, nasal voice. His accent was completely neutral, and Ryan assumed that he came from someplace in the Midwest. “Welcome to Quintana Roo!”

“Hi there,” said Ryan, putting on his lawyer-face as he shook hands with the man.

“I’m Mark Wilson,” the balding man said.

“Ryan Sanders,” Ryan said, “But you already know that. I was told that I was supposed to meet you here for some reason. I’m just trying to get home,”

“We understand that, Mr. Sanders, but I’m afraid we’re going to need your help with a couple of things before we can get you home.”

Ryan barely suppressed a groan. “Why me?” he asked, “What kind of help?”

“We’ll explain all of that,” replied Wilson, “But I think you need a break first. Have you had any sleep?”

“I slept on the plane,” said Ryan.

“You’re a brave man,” said Wilson, smiling at Xavier. “Well, I don’t mean to imply anything by this, but I’m sure you could use a shower.”

Ryan figured that he probably smelled about as good as a zombie right now. He grinned. “No offense taken,” he said, “I really could use one.”

“There’s a shower on the RV, and we’ve brought some clothes for you to wear. Go ahead and take your time and freshen up, then meet us in the control tower.”

Xavier patted Ryan on the shoulder. “Good flying with you, mon. I’ll be seein’ ya,” he said, and he climbed into the plane. Ryan waved as he powered up the plane. In a few minutes, Xavier was airborne, presumably headed back to Haiti. Ryan walked to the RV.

## Chapter 14

The RV seemed new, and although the bathroom was small, out of necessity, it was very comfortable. Ryan showered and washed off the dirt of the last few days. It felt wonderful. After his shower, he shaved the 3-day growth of stubble on his face, using shaving utensils that had apparently been placed in the RV for just this purpose. He toweled off and found the clothes that had been set out for him. There was a pair of sturdy jeans, a plain white t-shirt, a pair of briefs (at which Ryan laughed, because he hadn't worn "tighty-whiteys" since he was a kid), some socks, and a pair of hiking boots. The footwear seemed much better for traveling than the flip-flops that he had been wearing for the entire escape and flight. There was also a light brown jacket hanging on a hook, but Ryan opted not to put it on due to the heat.

He got dressed, and felt much better after having cleaned up. He stepped out of the trailer and walked across the sweltering landing strip, toward the control tower building.

The two goons stood stoically outside the door to the building. They looked like two peas in a pod. Ryan hadn't been introduced to the two men, and he didn't figure he would be.

"How's it going?" he asked. The two goons stared ahead, their eyes hidden by dark sunglasses. One of them reached for the door and opened it. Ryan walked inside and saw Mark Wilson relaxing in an old, rusty office chair with his legs up on an equally old desk.

“Come on in, Ryan,” said Wilson, looking a bit like a gnome sitting behind the desk. “You’ll have to forgive Mr. Salazar and Mr. Espinoza. They speak English, but they would rather not speak at all. They’re both Mexican Secret Service, of course, so they’re a little hard to get to know.” He laughed, a weasel-like cackle that came out mostly through his nose. Then he motioned for Ryan to take a seat in an uncomfortable-looking chair opposite him.

Ryan sat down. “OK, Mr. Wilson, I appreciate your hospitality here, but it’s time that you explain some stuff to me. What the hell is going on?” said Ryan. He was trying desperately to keep a rein on his temper, but the impish little man put him off, and he wasn’t in the mood to take any more of the secrecy.

“I understand that you were filled in a bit by Agwe?” said Mark.

“Yes. He told me about The Dying Sunrise. Aside from that info, I know what I saw with my own eyes. I was *kidnapped by people that were making fucking zombies.*” Ryan said, his words growing louder as each one was said.

“Yeah,” replied Mark. “That’s what they’re up to. They’re making a zombie army. Well, several zombie armies, really. And we need you to help us stop them.”

“Why me?” asked Ryan.

“Because we know you can do it,” said Mark. “Look, you’ve been through a hell of a lot of shit. I know this. And it ain’t easy to tell you, but you’re going to go through a hell of a lot more. You’re gonna learn stuff that you probably don’t want to hear, but you have to trust me when I say that we need you, OK?”

“Start talking,” said Ryan.

“OK. Look, I’m just a regular guy, too. I’m a schoolteacher. I went to college in Nebraska and studied Spanish. I moved down here to become an English teacher, and that’s what I did for 15 years. I teach English to Spanish kids. I settled down here in Q-Roo, and married a local girl. I had a good life, but they took that from me.

“You’re not the only one that’s run afoul of The Dying Sunrise. Not by a long shot. Seven years ago, they took my wife. I sacrificed everything I had – my job, my home, my money, everything – just to track her down.

“When I found her, she was already dead -- dead, but alive. They had turned her into a zombie, and kept her in a pen in the jungle, close to Tulum. You know where Tulum is?”

Ryan replied that he did. It was a tourist attraction, an area of Mayan ruins on the coast of the Yucatan. The buildings weren’t nearly as impressive as some of the other Mayan ruins like Chichen Itza, but the ocean setting was beautiful, as the ruins sat on the east coast of the Yucatan, on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean Sea. Ryan and Emily had visited Tulum on a bus tour when they had come to Cancun for spring break.

“Yeah, well,” Mark continued, “That’s close to where she was being kept. The Dying Sunrise has a group there – kind of like a branch. This sect worships the Mayan gods, performs the blood sacrifices, all that kind of shit. They know the magic, and they use it. They’ve been creating zombies just like the people in Haiti. Our intelligence tells us that there are sects like this all over the world. Russia, Africa, Japan, the U.S, you name it. Hell, even Canada has some of ‘em. I didn’t have any idea that there was a whole lot of Canadian black magic out there.”

“You said, ‘our intelligence’,” said Ryan. “Whose intelligence is that?”



“Oh. Well, we’re an organization that doesn’t really have a name. See, with a name you get an identity, sure, but that means that other people can identify you. Personally, I think we should call ourselves something cool like the ‘Paladins’ or something, but we’d rather keep secret.”

“I see. Continue your story,” said Ryan. He told himself that even though he didn’t have a clue what was going on, he was the one in control. They (whoever “they” were) needed him for something, and it was within his power to set the price.

“Okay,” said Mark. “So my wife was missing. I hooked up with the police, the Mexican army, and any number of other people in order to find her. I wasn’t able to find her until I was contacted by this organization of which I am now a part.

“They welcomed me, because they needed me. They needed me because they need everyone they can get. I freely admit that I’m not any kind of hero, but I knew a couple languages and it turned out that I was able to learn some more. I now know 17 different languages, including most of those spoken by the different sects of The Dying Sunrise. Therefore, I earned my position within the organization.”

“And just what position is that?” asked Ryan.

“Linguist,” said Mark, “among other things.”

“Fine. What does your organization want me for, then?”

“Who the fuck knows,” said Mark. “I do what I’m told, just like everyone else,”

“Well who’s the big boss of the organization? Who is in charge?” Ryan asked.

“That’s need-to-know information, and guess what – you don’t need to know.”

Mark retorted.

“Very funny,” said Ryan. “Look, I’m sick of this tough-guy shit.” He could be a tough guy too, he thought to himself. “What is it you want from me?”

Mark reached forward, and in a gesture that was eerily similar to the one that Dr. Zazu had used the first time he met Ryan, he poked the clamshell medallion that was hanging under Ryan’s shirt. “The two pieces making up this thing aren’t the whole thing. There’s one more part, and we need you to get it,”

“Why me?” asked Ryan.

“Because for whatever reason, the medallion works for you. It doesn’t work for everybody; very few people, in fact. We spent a long time looking for someone that it would work for, and we found you,” explained Mark.

“How the hell did you figure out that it would work for me?” asked Mark.

“It was Agwe that figured it out first. He carried that coin around with him, in his pocket. I guess that the only way to explain it is that when the objects get close to someone that can use them, there’s this kind of resonance. When you hopped into the cab, it actually made Agwe black out for a second. He knew right away that you would be able to use it.”

Ryan recalled blacking out when he had put the two items together. He nodded at Mark, indicating that the balding man should go on.

“Even then, the coin started altering coincidence and making things happen. You just happened to be going to the Dominican Republic, and just happened to have gotten into Agwe’s cab. You just happened to be going the very week that Dr. Zazu’s sect was doing their ritual, and collecting people to become zombies.

“If there’s only one thing that I can impress upon you, it’s this: When you’re wearing that thing, *everything happens for a reason*.

“Now I don’t want to get you overconfident. That necklace has magic, and I think even you’ll admit it. But it doesn’t make you invincible by any means. There’s only so far that coincidence can go, and that thing doesn’t alter the laws of nature. A truck can still hit you or get your head blown off by a gun to the head. The thing is, it can help you avoid those situations. That car that’s going to hit you could wind up skidding off of the road. The gun to your head could jam -- things like that.

“There’s a third part of the necklace that will make it even stronger for you. The problem is that we don’t know what it is, or where it is right now, but we know where it’s going to be.”

“And where is that?” asked Ryan.

“Tulum,” replied Mark.

“Who has it?” asked Ryan, afraid of the answer.

“The local sect of The Dying Sunrise, of course,” the balding man replied matter-of-factly.

“So they’re just going to take it to a huge tourist attraction?” asked Ryan incredulously.

“Yes, they are. See, The Dying Sunrise has people in very powerful positions all over the world. They need to go to Tulum tomorrow. It’s part of some religious ceremony.” Mark said.

“Tulum is a huge tourist attraction now,” said Ryan. “All of the old Mayan ceremonies are big attractions for tourists. How are they supposed to have a religious ceremony without a whole bunch of people wandering around?”

“Whoever said that it was a *Mayan* religious ceremony?” replied Mark. “Sure, the Mayans built Tulum, but The Dying Sunrise, they’re like – religious parasites. I don’t wanna get too wrapped up in religion, but they don’t believe in any God. They only use the power, the magic, which they’ve passed along over the years. It seems that in order to make that magic work for them, they need to use places of religious significance.

“The Dying Sunrise is a very powerful organization, with members in the very highest possible places and positions around the world. I’m not exaggerating when I tell you that this is not an isolated group of yokels. These people have infiltrated damn near everything. That’s another reason that we need you: You were captured by them, and rescued from them, and for that reason we can be sure that you’re not one of them.

“The fact that The Dying Sunrise has so many friends in high places allowed them to close Tulum completely tomorrow. The official excuse is that they’re taking steps to preserve the historical site. That’s bullshit, of course. They’re just there to use it.”

“How do you know all of this?” asked Ryan.

“Because The Dying Sunrise aren’t the only ones with friends in high places. We’ve got intelligence of our own, of course, and we can get information. Trust me, they’ll be there. And they’ll have the third part of that medallion with them,” said Mark.

“What does the third part of the medallion do?” asked Ryan.

“Well, we’re not entirely sure. The records relating to the medallion are old and not completely reliable. The coin itself can alter coincidence to a point. Add to it the

clamshell and you're got definite power that even a skeptic like you has to acknowledge. You've seen it firsthand.

“Add the third part, and that probability enhancement type thing will go through the roof, I'm guessing. Who knows, there might even be more that it does. All we really know for sure is that you're the only one that we've been able to find that can harness the power of the medallion. There hasn't been a single other person that we've been able to find, and believe me, we've been looking.”

Ryan stayed silent for a moment, trying to take it all in. He had to admit that even though he didn't want to believe Mark's story, it all fit with the things that he had seen over the course of the last few days.

“Okay,” said Ryan, “I'll do it. Tell me what it is I'm looking for. What is the third part of the medallion?”

“Well,” said Mark, “honestly we don't know.”

Ryan sighed in exasperation.

“No, wait!” said Mark. “I mean, we don't know exactly what it is, but it should be obvious to you. It's going to somehow fit with the rest of it, just like the coin fit into the shell. It was obvious to you, right? You wouldn't have tried it otherwise.”

Ryan nodded slowly. “I suppose you're right. So what is it that I should do?”

“You ever seen Conan the Barbarian?” asked Mark.

Ryan nodded again. “One of my favorite Schwarzenegger movies.”

“You know the part where Conan infiltrates the cult at the pyramid by dressing up as one of the cultists?” said Mark.

“Yes, but I don’t like where this is going,” said Ryan. “Conan was caught, if I recall correctly.”

“Yeah, but he won in the end,” replied Mark. “Here’s the deal: They’re all going to be dressed as site workers, the type of people that do restorative and preservative work. They’ll all have uniforms and badges. Guess what we’ve got for you?”

“A uniform and a badge?” asked Ryan.

“Bingo,” said Mark.

“I don’t think it’s going to work,” said Ryan. “I mean, this is ridiculous; if anyone asks me anything I’ll be busted. Especially if they ask in Spanish, because I don’t speak the language.”

“There are members from all over the place attending this event,” said Mark. “This one is more than just a good ol’ fashioned zombie raising. There is something big and evil going on at this one, so the invitations have gone out to other sects all over the world. No one will expect everyone to know Spanish, or even English. Just keep your head down and make for the goal. Remember, you have the medallion. Coincidence will be on your side.”

“Yeah, but if there’s a gun at my head, coincidence might not help so much,” said Ryan glumly.

“Trust me,” said Mark. “Besides, you’re not going to be alone. I’m going with you.”

Ryan almost laughed out loud when he heard that comment. The man had to be insane. He would stand out like a sore thumb in any crowd that he tried to blend into, anywhere. The man looked nothing close to normal.

“I’m a linguist, remember?” the gnome-like man said. “I’ll help you out if anyone is asking the wrong kind of question. I know which way to go, and how to do everything that needs doing. You just follow my lead. When we get close to our goal, that’s when I’ll need you. You’ve got to verify that we’ve got the right item.”

“What happens if we get in a fight?” asked Ryan.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” said Mark. “There are going to be thousands of them. If we get in a fight, we’re totally screwed.”

Ryan sighed loudly and nodded his head.

“Well, we’ve got some time to kill, in any event,” said Mark. “This little ceremony of The Dying Sunrise doesn’t start until tomorrow. Do you play cribbage? I’ve got a board and some cards.”

Ryan laughed. “It’s been a while since I’ve played, so I might be a little rusty, but yeah. I know how to play.”

“Hell yes!” said Mark. “Those two spooks out there have no idea how to play any decent games, and lemmie tell ya that gets really freakin’ old really fast. I’ll go grab the board, and we’ll play a few hands!”

Ryan sat back in his chair and smiled. He couldn’t believe that he’d gotten himself into a situation like this.

## Chapter 15

Ryan and Mark played several games of cribbage at the table in the abandoned control tower. When night fell, the two of them sat in patio chairs outside the RV, talking over the plan for the next day. Mark gave some coveralls to Ryan, and had him try them on to make sure they fit adequately. Then he took him into the RV where a passport-photo-type camera had been set up, and took a shot of Ryan's face. It turned out to look sufficiently like a mug-shot to pass on an employee badge.

Ryan thought that this was a humorous kind of double-subterfuge. Every one of the so-called workers that were going to the historical site would be wearing uniforms and badges that were similarly false. He was pretending to be a person that was pretending to be someone else.

Mark showed Ryan to a bed in the rear of the RV. It was a single bed, and thin, but it had clean sheets and looked much more comfortable than the pallet in the grass hut or the dilapidated aircraft chair.

Ryan fell onto the thin mattress and was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. If he dreamed that night, he didn't remember.

The next day, Mark's shuffling steps woke him up. Ryan sat up on the bed and took a proffered Styrofoam cup of coffee from the man's hand. Then he walked with Mark out of the RV and into the humid Yucatan morning.

They sat in plastic patio chairs drinking coffee as the sun rose behind the buildings and trees that separated them from the coast. Ryan got up after about a half



hour, and dressed in his clothes and coveralls. He emerged from the RV to find that Mark had garbed himself similarly. The black sedan was running, and the two goons were in the front seat. They weren't wearing sunglasses, and both of them were clothed in coveralls like Mark and Ryan. Apparently, they were going to accompany the two men to Tulum. Ryan still didn't understand why the Mexican Secret Service wanted to involve themselves with all of this, but he figured that at this point, it was better not to ask questions. Besides, the two goons looked like they would be very good in a fight, in the unfortunate event that something like that came up.

“Hop into the car, it's time to go,” said Mark in his nasal voice.

“Sure,” said Ryan. He climbed in behind the driver of the vehicle, and Mark entered the back seat on the passengers' side. The car started rolling, the driver and the other goon remaining stoically silent as it travelled out onto a dirt road.

The dirt road wound through the jungle, and Ryan was reminded of his mad escape in Haiti with Agwe. Of course, the only similarity was the jungle drive. It was day now, and they weren't being chased. Ryan was relieved about that.

The car pulled out onto a well-maintained highway. As their drive got closer to the coast, Ryan began to see several tour busses. Apparently, the tourism business was still in full force. They passed a sign for Xel-ha, a nature preserve and snorkeling area that Ryan knew was fairly close to Tulum. Then they started seeing signs for the historic site itself, and pulled in to the parking lot.

The parking lot, although completely free of tour busses, was close to filled with cars of various types. There were several people milling about the parking lot as well,

most of whom were dressed exactly like Ryan and Mark were. Ryan tried to keep his head down and not make eye contact with anyone while the sedan rolled to a stop.

Mark, Ryan, and the two goons piled out of the vehicle. The driving goon, Mr. Salazar, hit the lock button on the sedan's keychain. The car horn honked, signifying that the alarm had been armed and that the car was locked. The four men walked toward the entrance to the ruins.

No one checked their badges at the door. They walked in through a door, barely more than a hole in a stone wall, without anyone stopping them. They were in the midst of many others, all dressed the same, but Ryan thought that security seemed fairly lax. Ryan felt the weight of the heavy medallion against his chest, under his coveralls, and realized that the lax security might be a coincidence of the type affected by the item.

As they walked onto the grounds, Ryan could see several people milling about the buildings. To the casual observer, they might well have appeared to be doing restorative work. However, Ryan knew it was all a sham, and because of that knowledge he could see that none of the coverall-wearing people were actually accomplishing anything at all. They were simply performing menial tasks like sweeping at bricks with small handheld brooms, or using tape-measures to size up chunks of rock. Nothing was being done. Ryan was happy to see that Mark had been telling the truth.

The four of them continued walking to the center of the ruins, toward the main temple building. Once they got past the initial group of people at the entrance, the place took on a wholly different feel. No one here was pretending to be working. Instead, a large crowd had gathered at the base of the pyramid.

The pyramid, made in the style of the ancient Mayans, wasn't all that spectacular. Ryan had seen pictures of pyramids at Chichen Itza and Mexico City that completely dwarfed this one. What was stunning about Tulum was the location.

Far below, at the base of a high cliff, a thin strip of sandy beach stretched along the azure Caribbean Sea. When Ryan had seen this place before, there had been a large number of people swimming on that beach. Today, it was deserted, and the white waves lapped at the sand in an incessant rhythm that Ryan thought might match his own pounding heart. He was nervous, and still quite unsure of exactly what they were looking for here and what they hoped to accomplish. Still, he followed Mark, and Mr. Salazar and Mr. Espinoza brought up the rear.

The crowd was sitting and standing in the central grassy area, looking toward the temple. The temple itself wasn't very high, and Ryan could see figures hauling equipment up the steep staircase on its front, toward a room at the top.

Around the temple, people were setting up electric lights at the ends of long extension cords. Whatever was going to happen was presumably going to happen at night, Ryan figured. That was good, because it was currently still morning. That gave the four of them a lot of time to figure out what they were looking for, take it, and get out of there.

The people that were climbing the stairs seemed to be setting up for the ritual. A large crate was cracked open to reveal a cauldron that looked frighteningly familiar to Ryan. It was placed over an unlit fire at the top of the temple. One of the men on the temple pulled a Bic lighter out of his pocket, and lit the crumpled newspaper under the sticks, and soon the fire was blazing beneath the cauldron. Buckets were passed up the

stairs, and their contents (which Ryan couldn't make out from the grass at the base of the temple) were emptied into the cauldron, which started to steam before long.

Ryan tried not to think about what that cauldron meant. He followed Mark between some smaller stone buildings, away from the crowd. Ryan rounded a corner and saw a sight that returned his thoughts to the things he was so desperately trying not to think about. Under the piercing gaze of several men with machine guns, a line of people were being led through a door with their hands bound behind their back. Ryan knew from his previous visit here that the area that they were being led into was the Cenote House, a small but complete building with high walls that would be easy to hold prisoners in.

None of the prisoners were yelling or causing any kind of a scene, but Ryan could tell that they were terrified, and he could hear the occasional muffled sob. The armed men were ushering them through the narrow doorway. Ryan knew exactly how the prisoners felt. He assumed that they would be forced to take the hallucinogen that he had, but couldn't understand what the point of that had been. Perhaps there were subtle differences between the sects of The Dying Sunrise, and these prisoners wouldn't be drugged the same way that the Haitian prisoners were. For that matter, he wasn't positive that any of the other prisoners in Haiti had been given the same drug that he had, or any drug at all. Perhaps it had just been given to him. He couldn't figure out why, but he dismissed it from his mind.

Ryan followed Mark through the narrow back corridors of the ruins. The short balding man seemed very familiar with all of the twists and turns of the place, and Ryan found himself having trouble keeping up. Before long, they emerged at the base of the

temple once again, but this time off to the side and out of the view of the crowd that had gathered in the front. They huddled against the wall of the temple, behind another section that jutted to the south. Ryan remembered, looking up at the building, that its name was “El Castillo”, because it was a castle-like structure.

The building stood quite literally on the top of the cliff, plunging down to the beach and ocean below. A wooden staircase descended the cliff behind them. The whirring noise of a motor drew Ryan’s eyes to the ocean, where he saw a boat approaching the beach. He quickly ducked back against the wall of the structure before he was seen by anyone on the boat.

He glanced up toward the top of El Castillo. He couldn’t see any of the men that had been setting up for the ceremony, which meant that he and his companions were likely out of their sight as well. He crawled toward the edge of the cliff and looked at the approaching boat.

It was a small boat with one motor, manned by what looked to Ryan like four men. It wasn’t even as big as the fishing boat that he had been taken to Haiti on. This reminded him of the aluminum fishing boats that were popular on Minnesota lakes and rivers. Lining the boat’s floor, Ryan saw what looked like boxes or crates. He figured that the men in the boat were bringing some more supplies to Tulum.

Ryan suddenly had a feeling that whatever it was he sought was in one of those boxes. He couldn’t explain the feeling, it just seemed logical to him. He looked to Mr. Salazar and Mr. Espinoza.

“Is it safe to assume that you gentlemen are carrying guns?” Ryan whispered.

“Yes.” Replied Mr. Salazar, “We are wearing our holsters under the coveralls.” It struck Ryan that this was the first time that he had actually heard either of the men speak. Mr. Salazar had an accent that reminded Ryan more of New York City than Mexico. He wondered idly about the background of these two gentlemen.

“I think that what we’re looking for is on the boat that’s about to land on the beach,” said Ryan.

“What makes you think so?” piped in Mark.

“It just makes sense. The stuff that we’ve seen so far is a bunch of lights and tables and whatnot. The last crate we saw opened was the cauldron, right? It seems logical that the trinkets, the items of power or magic or whatever, would be the last to be unpacked,” replied Ryan.

“Doesn’t make sense to me,” said Mark. “If it were up to me, I’d get the important stuff here first, to make sure that I had my eye on it.”

“Well,” said Ryan, “It can’t hurt to check, right?”

“It can if we get caught,” replied Mark.

“We’re not going to get caught,” said Ryan. “The guys in the boat are the only ones on the entire beach. Everything will be fine.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Mark.

“Look at how we’re all dressed. We blend in with these people. It doesn’t make sense for us to be hiding behind this building; it looks like we’re up to something. Let’s just walk down the staircase like we’re supposed to be here and we know what we’re doing. We’ll walk out to meet the guys in the boat, and we’ll offer to take the crates up,” said Ryan.

“They won’t buy that!” argued Mark. From the tone of his voice, he seemed to think that his position was weakening. That was a good thing, from Ryan’s perspective.

“Sure they will,” said Ryan, “Just follow my lead, and if things get ugly, we’ll improvise.” He flashed what he thought was his most confident grin, a look that he had perfected on his parents when he was young, and had later started using on judges.

“Fine. Let’s go,” said Mark. Ryan stood up and started confidently striding toward the staircase, and the other three men followed his lead. They walked down the wooden staircase, striding as if they owned the place.

## Chapter 16

The motorboat crashed over the waves toward the shore as the men descended the staircase. The passengers saw Ryan and the other three, and looks of confusion passed between the men on the boat. They cut their motor and drifted the rest of the way toward the shore. As their aluminum boat ground into the sandy beach, one of the men on the boat stepped out into the water and pulled the craft the rest of the way toward the shore. The other three hopped out onto the sand, and started passing boxes and crates onto the beach.

Ryan strode confidently across the sand with his three companions in tow. The men from the boat stopped unloading the crates, and stood watching Ryan, Mark, Mr. Salazar and Mr. Espinoza as they covered the distance between them. Ryan raised his hand over his head in greeting. “Hi there!” he said.

The man that had hopped out of the boat first, a tall and heavily muscled Mexican man wearing coveralls similar to the ones that Ryan wore, raised his hand weakly.

“Hola?” he said, questioningly.

Ryan sized up the men from the boat. They looked pretty tough, but not amazingly so. He gave himself and his friends about a 50/50 chance of taking them in a straight fight. Then he glanced over at Mark and changed that estimate to about 40/60. The calculation didn't really matter, though, because these men didn't appear to be armed. Mr. Espinoza and Mr. Salazar, however, were.

Ryan looked back at the men that were standing by the boat. “We can take it from here,” he said, trying to think quickly on his feet. “The boss sent us to help you guys out, so that you can get the boat taken care of before the ceremony.”

A wary look of confusion crossed the face of the man by the boat. “No habla Engles”, he said. Mark stepped forward and chattered a long stream of Spanish that Ryan couldn't make heads or tails of. The man by the boat looked angry when Mark had finished.

“What did you tell him?” asked Ryan.

“I told him exactly what you just said,” replied Mark.

The man by the boat chattered back at Mark in Spanish. Mark replied to the man, and then turned to Ryan and said, “He says that this isn't the way it's supposed to go. They're supposed to carry the boxes up the stairs and get paid by someone named Kul. It sounds like he's the boss. I told him that you were in charge here and that I was just translating. I said that I would have to run it by you and see what's going on.”



Ryan nodded as Mark spoke. He smiled widely at the man by the boat, then spoke to Mark. “Tell him that they’ll still get the whole payment, and that —” he hesitated, trying to think of something to say. This wasn’t going at all like he thought it would have. He didn’t expect these men to want to get paid. “—and that we’ll bring their money back down once we deliver the boxes. Tell them that Kul just thought that they should get a little rest and not have to climb the stairs.”

Even before Mark finished his chattering, Ryan could see that the man wasn’t buying it. He started shaking his head before Mark stopped talking. At that moment, Ryan did the only thing that he could think of: he wound up and coldcocked the man with a roundhouse punch to the face.

Ryan hadn’t been in a fight since high school, and even then he had only been in one or two scuffles. He had no idea what he was doing, but he felt his fist connect with the other man’s jaw and watched the man drop to the sand. Pain exploded through Ryan’s hand, and he realized too late that he had probably done something wrong. Still, it looked like the man was down for the count, and Ryan couldn’t help but feeling a little pride. Of course, it was a sucker-punch, but Ryan didn’t care.

The other three men rushed forward at Ryan, but Salazar and Espinoza already had their guns drawn and trained on them. They stopped in their tracks.

“Get down on the ground,” said Ryan, rubbing his sore right hand. Mark repeated the order in Spanish, and the men complied.

“Hurry,” Ryan said, “we’ve got to get these guys tied up before someone looks down here and sees what’s going on, which could happen at any time. There are ropes in the boat; they were holding the crates in place. Let’s go!

They quickly tied the men, hand and foot, and gagged them with strips from their own coveralls. Ryan was amazed at how quickly Mr. Salazar and Mr. Espinoza worked in this capacity. Obviously it was not their first time restraining someone in this manner. The four of them worked together quickly and brought the bound men to the base of the cliff. They tucked them in under the wooden staircase, and used some more rope to tie them to the large wooden beams that held the staircase up. The men would not be visible from the top of the cliff, and they would be very difficult to see from the ocean. There was a chance that the knots wouldn't hold forever if they struggled, but it looked like the goons had done a very good job with their hog-tying.

Ryan, Mark, and the two goons moved back to the boat. No one was coming down the stairs, so it appeared that they hadn't been spotted from above. The luck of the medallion was working, it seemed. Either that or Ryan's own luck was amazing. He was beginning to wholeheartedly believe in the power of the mysterious necklace.

To an observer from the top of the cliff, it would look like Ryan and his fellows were the ones that had arrived on the boat. Mark kept an eye on the ruins at the top of the cliff while Ryan started opening the boxes.

The first box that he opened contained a chalice, which brought Ryan back to that night in Haiti, standing in line thinking that his life would soon be over. He tried to ignore the fact that there was another group of scared prisoners practically within spitting distance, huddled into the Cenote House at the top of the hill. An image of Chanté came to him, with her throat cut and spilling blood into a cup just like this one. He waited until he was sure that no one on top of the cliff was looking, and then he heaved the cup into the ocean with all of his might. The heavy metal cup splashed against an incoming wave

and sank like a stone. Ryan didn't think that would stop the ceremony from taking place, but he wanted to hinder The Dying Sunrise as much as he could.

He continued looking through the boxes. Some of them had extremely mundane things like extension cords and light bulbs, surrounded in Styrofoam packing peanuts or wrapped in cloth. Others held more exotic items, like jade or onyx statuettes and an ornate dagger.

Ryan picked up the more magical looking items one by one. After examining each item and determining that it wasn't the one he was looking for, Ryan would glance to the top of the hill to make sure that no one was looking, and then hurl it into the ocean. The items were landing in perhaps two feet of water, because the grade of the sea was gentle, but with the surf and the sand and the fact that Ryan was scattering them along the beach, Ryan figured that this would at the very least be a thorn in the side of The Dying Sunrise.

There were fifteen boxes, total. After going through a couple of the boxes, Ryan looked at the top of the cliff and saw a man, wearing coveralls, looking down at them. Thinking on his feet, Ryan raised his arm over his head in a gesture of greeting. The man returned the wave, and left. Ryan continued combing through the boxes at a quickened pace.

Every once in a while, another person would come to the top of the cliff and look down at them. Ryan would wave, and he and Mark and the two goons would shift the boxes to make it look like they were still unloading them from the boat, or were preparing to carry them to the staircase. Thankfully, no one up at the ruins seemed to have known who was going to be arriving with the crates, so no one came to investigate.

He continued with the boxes, chucking items one by one into the surf. There were several knives, candlesticks, ornate jeweled skulls of every shape and size, statuettes, and several other things that had a feel or a look about them that spoke of dark magic.

Finally, after looking through seven of the boxes, Ryan came upon a small blue velvet jewelry box. He opened it to find a tarnished silver ring. It was plain, and looked like a wedding band. The size of the ring was large, too big for Ryan to wear. He reached for it and plucked it out of the box.

The world went dark, and Ryan felt a jolt course through his body. He opened his eyes and saw blue sky overhead, and then Mark's bald pate entered his vision.

"You okay?" the impish man asked.

"Yeah, I think so," said Ryan, hurriedly clambering to his feet. "I found it," he said. He looked at the Ring in his hand and wondered how it would fit with the rest of the medallion that he wore around his neck.

A string of Spanish words erupted at the top of the hill. Mark slowly turned around and chattered back at the man standing at the top of the stairs, then turned back to Ryan.

"He just told us to hurry up with the boxes. I told him to settle down, and that we were coming," said Mark.

"Okay," said Ryan, rubbing his head. "Let's each take one of the full boxes to the top of the stairs."

"Alright," replied Mark. He picked up the smallest box that still had its contents in it.

"Don't overexert yourself," said Ryan sarcastically.

“Let’s get going,” said Mark, “The sooner we’re up those stairs the sooner we can nonchalantly sneak out of here.”

Ryan nodded to him, but a black mood was descending over him. He was recalling his time, trapped in the hut in Haiti. He would still be there if he hadn’t been rescued. He thought that there had to be some way to save the people being held in the Cenote House. Throwing trinkets into the sea was one thing, but he knew that he had to think of some way to save those people.

The problem that he had was that there were at least twenty of them, maybe more. There was no way that they would get out of there in the five-passenger sedan, or even in a Humvee like the one that had rescued him.

Ryan suspected that this group already had several zombies of its own. If they were anywhere even close to Tulum, the prisoners would be torn to pieces if they tried to escape on foot. The zombies that he had seen could run 30 miles per hour.

Ryan picked up a box and started walking toward the staircase, and a thought came to him. He filed it away. It was still morning, and he thought that with a little luck, he could get those people out. A little luck was all he needed. He patted the medallion, and lifted the ring from his pocket.

Ryan stopped at the base of the staircase and glanced under it. The men from the boat were still hogtied and gagged. That was a good thing. He glanced up to make sure that there was no one close to the edge that could see him. He slipped the medallion off of his neck, and compared it to the ring. Then, on a whim, he stuck the leather cord through the ring and slid the ring down so that it rested around the top of the shell. Then he put the medallion back over his neck. It felt right.

Ryan slid the ring back toward his neck, which cinched the necklace tight. Now there was no chance of the necklace falling off. He didn't think that the ring would fit inside the shell along with the coin, and it was certainly too big for a finger. He was sure that this was the way that the pieces were supposed to fit together. He didn't know how he knew, he just knew.

Apart from that knowledge, there was nothing about the situation that told him that he had done it correctly. There were no thunderclaps, blackouts, or choirs of angels descending from the heavens. Still, Ryan was confident, and he tucked the necklace back under his coveralls and zipped them up. Then he picked up his box again and walked up the staircase, resisting the urge to kick sand in the faces of the men bound beneath the staircase. Mark, Mr. Salazar, and Mr. Espinoza followed Ryan up the wooden stairs.

They reached the top of the stairs to find three men waiting for them. None of them had the look of a leader; they were just coverall-clad cultists waiting for the delivery of some important items.

"You speak English?" asked the man in the front. Ryan thought that his accent sounded like he was from the east coast, maybe New Jersey. He couldn't really tell, but he had watched a lot of *The Sopranos*, and that's what this guy's voice reminded him. It had a wiseguy quality about it.

"Yeah," said Ryan.

"We'll take those from here. You can set 'em down and we'll haul 'em up the pyramid," said the wiseguy.

Ryan remembered how the men on the boat had reacted when he had made the same suggestion, and he tried to act as indignant as they had. "We're supposed to take

them to Kul,” he said defiantly, “He’s supposed to pay us.” Behind him, he heard Mark stiffen at the suggestion. Ryan acknowledged that talking to the big cheese might be a bad idea, but he felt that he had a part to play, and that the situation could still work out for the best.

“We’ll pay you when you go get the rest of the boxes,” said the wiseguy. “Kul thinks you bozos are taking too long, so he told us to come help your sorry asses.”

Ryan nodded. “Whatever, man. I’m just doing what I was told to do.” That seemed the right thing to say, because the wiseguy laughed in agreement and grabbed the box out of Ryan’s hand. He and the two other men with him walked with the boxes around to the front of El Castillo, presumably to climb the steep staircase to the room at the top.

“Now’s our chance,” said Mark. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah,” said Ryan, “We have to leave now, but we’ve got to come back.”

“Come back? Are you fucking crazy?” asked Mark. He started walking in the direction of the door in the wall that they had come through to enter the grounds. Ryan followed him, along with Espinoza and Salazar.

“No. Look, we can’t leave all of those people here,” Ryan said as they walked.

“The hell we can’t,” said Mark. “I feel sorry for them, yeah, but we’ve got what we came for. We’ve gotta get the hell out of here!”

“I have a plan,” said Ryan. “Trust me. But we’ve got to get them out of there. Otherwise, they’ll become zombies, and the bad guys’ army will just grow.”

Mark apparently saw the logic in that. “Okay. Fill us in on your plan in the car. We’ll see what we can do.”

They strode confidently through the door and out to the parking lot, where they piled into the car. Ryan breathed a huge sigh of relief when it became apparent that no one was following them.

“Alright, big shot. What’s the plan?” asked Mark as their car turned out onto the highway.

“First, we find a gas station,” said Ryan.

## Chapter 17

They rode casually down the highway until a gas station sign became visible on the left-hand side of the road. As Ryan had hoped, a large tour bus was parked at the gas station. Mr. Salazar was driving the sedan, and Ryan indicated that he should pull into the gas station.

Ryan was happy to see that there were obvious tourists milling about in a market area set up to the side of the gas station. He remembered taking a break similar to this one when he had been on a bus tour, and that’s what made him think of the gas station. He needed transportation for all of the prisoners. He felt bad about how he planned on getting that transportation, but the people here weren’t in any immediate danger, and those at the ruins were. He hoped that his plan worked, and ruefully admitted that most of it was going to be made up as he went along.

Mr. Salazar pulled the sedan into the gas station, and Ryan indicated that he should park the vehicle behind the bus.

“Okay,” Ryan said nervously, “I need a gun.”



“What? Why?” said a flummoxed Mark.

“Because I’m going to hijack that bus,” said Ryan.

“Oh. Um. Yeah, do you really think that’s a good idea? I mean, that might call a little fucking attention down on us if you know what I mean,” said Mark, obviously agitated. “Escaping from Tulum with the item we wanted was one thing, and you can be sure that if The Dying Sunrise didn’t know we were there when we were there, they do now. Now you want to jack a bus? Are you fucking insane? We’re going to have the cops on us!”

“Is that such a bad thing?” asked Ryan. “These two are Secret Service, don’t they have any clout with the cops?” He motioned toward Salazar and Espinoza.

“Well, yeah, but—” started Mark. Ryan tried to look as resolute as possible, and eventually Mark backed down from the fight. The balding gnome of a man turned to Espinoza, who sat in the front passenger seat of the vehicle. “If the police come after us, can you handle them?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Espinoza, “We’ll just explain the situation to them.”

“Yeah right,” said Mark, “Like they’re going to believe the ‘situation’ that you explain.”

“Oh, we can be very convincing,” said Salazar from the driver’s seat, cracking his knuckles.

“Alright, whatever. Why the hell not, right? I mean jeez, it’s amazing that we’re not dead already,” said Mark, his face turning red, “why not just go *completely fucking nuts* while we’re at it?”

“Relax,” said Ryan, glaring angrily at the little man. “Just follow me in the car. Stay close and hopefully we’ll be able to get to the ruins before the police show up.”

“Fine,” said Mark petulantly. “You somehow know how to drive a giant fucking bus?”

Ryan hadn’t thought of that. He had assumed that it would be similar to driving a manual transmission vehicle, but now that Mark asked, he realized that he didn’t even know how many gears there were. He thought that he might be able to figure it out, but it would probably take too long. His plan was making him feel worse and worse about the way that he was going to have to treat people.

“No,” said Ryan, “and I assume that none of you can?” He feared that he was going to have to make the poor bus driver take them to Tulum at gunpoint.”

Espinoza turned back and grinned. “I can drive a bus, hombre. No problem. But you don’t get a gun. Come on.” He opened the door of the car, and Ryan opened his door as well. The heat from the late morning sun entered the air conditioned vehicle with stifling suddenness. The humidity clung to Ryan’s lungs. It wasn’t terribly oppressive, but was quite a change from the inside of the vehicle.

Espinoza said something to Salazar in Spanish, and the other man nodded agreement. Then Espinoza shut his car door and walked toward the bus, with Ryan pacing him. They walked through the market area toward the door of the bus, and a couple of the tourists looked at them warily. They were still wearing coveralls and badges, which was a little out of place in the market, and Ryan suspected that there might be a look of grim determination on their faces that was off-putting to the tourists. He forced himself to smile.

They walked briskly past the tourists without stopping long enough for anyone to really get a good look at them. Espinoza then turned and darted into the open door of the bus, drawing his gun. Ryan bounded up the stairs behind him.

“Salga,” he said to the bus driver. By the man’s reaction, Ryan figured that must mean, “Get out.” The driver didn’t hesitate. A look of horror came over his face, and he leaped out of his chair and was on the ground outside without a foot touching a single one of the steps.

Ryan heard a woman scream from outside. Obviously the tourists had figured out what was going on. He moved down toward the door.

“Don’t panic,” he yelled. He feared that it was futile, but he wanted to give these tourists some modicum of calm. “We’ll get the bus back to you! I promise!” It didn’t really look like any of them believed him, but he felt better having told them.

With that, Espinoza slammed the shifter into gear and the bus lurched out of the parking lot and spraying a cloud of dust behind the spinning tires. Ryan glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw that Salazar and Mark were following closely in the sedan.

The bus got up to speed quickly, and Espinoza proved adept at driving it. Ryan had never really paid too much attention to the driver of a bus, but now that he watched, he thought that he could handle it. The problem for him would have been getting used to the size and lack of speed of the vehicle, and where exactly how the transmission worked.

Ryan heard a static voice start chattering in Spanish, and then Espinoza reached over and flicked off the switch on the bus’ two-way radio. Ryan drummed his fingers nervously on the back of the rail behind the driver’s seat. Espinoza turned around and glared at Ryan, and Ryan stopped the drumming. Tulum was only a couple of miles

away from the gas station, but the bus was slow to get up to speed, and Ryan was sure that the police had been called by now. He sat down in one of the front row seats, but found that he was too fidgety and stood up again, peering out of the window.

There was nothing in the rear-view mirror except for the black sedan, still close behind the bus. Espinoza took the bus expertly around a corner, almost without slowing down, and Ryan crashed back into the front row seat.

“Where exactly are we going?” asked Espinoza.

“To the Cenote House,” replied Ryan.

The goon shifted the gears in the bus again, and the transmission whined a bit. The bus was travelling down the highway very quickly now. “Have you forgotten that there’s a stone wall in the way?” asked Espinoza, sounding surprised at the sound of his own voice. Ryan speculated, based on his limited knowledge of the man, that he didn’t use his voice very often.

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” said Ryan, “We’re going to have to go through it.”

“It’s a thick stone wall,” said Espinoza.

“But it’s old,” replied Ryan, “And there are weak spots.”

“It’s a historical site,” said Espinoza. “You’re okay wrecking a historical site with a bus?”

Ryan nodded. “If you’re gonna make an omelet, my mother always used to say.” He trailed off. The other man just nodded silently.

The bus rounded another corner onto the road that led to the parking lot and the site itself. The gears shifted and the engine roared, and the bus picked up speed.

“You should sit down, sir,” said Espinoza, “This might be rough.”

Ryan complied. He sat in the bus seat and buckled the seat belt, hoping that the bus was large enough and tall enough to smash through the stone wall, and also that the collision didn't total the vehicle. The whole thing would be pointless if they were unable to get the bus back out.

As the bus rounded a bend in the road, Ryan saw the wall that surrounded Tulum, with El Castillo visible above it. They had reached the parking lot, and Ryan could see a number of people standing by their cars, watching the bus barrel past them. Ryan suddenly felt vulnerable without any weapon of his own. There were men with guns in there, and a lot of them.

Suddenly his plan didn't seem like the best idea. Still, it was the only plan he had, and he desperately wanted to free the people before they were turned into the living dead. He gripped the medallion around his neck and held on for dear life as the bus careened toward the outer wall of the ruins.

The wall got closer and closer, and Mr. Espinoza had a look of cool calculation on his face. Other coverall-wearing attendants were coming out to look at what was going on, now. Ryan glanced in the rear-view and saw that the black sedan had backed off slightly, perhaps in anticipation of what the bus was about to do.

"The Cenote House is just on the other side of the wall on the right side!" yelled Ryan. Espinoza only nodded, and pressed his foot harder onto the gas pedal.

The next few seconds seemed to Ryan to pass in slow motion, as if the bus and the whole world were underwater. He saw everything clearly as the bus crossed the final stretch from the end of the parking lot to the wall. Some of the members of The Dying Sunrise were walking on the road, and dove out of the way as the bus reached them.

There was a noise that sounded to Ryan like the world was ending when the bus hit the wall. The wall itself shattered, the pile of rubble and bricks barely slowing the bus down. Rocks flew to every direction in front of the bus, which proceeded on through the ruins without much trouble. A few of the bricks had flown up and cracked the windshield glass of the bus, and although Ryan could barely see, it didn't seem like Mr. Espinoza was even fazed.

Ryan looked out of the side windows of the vehicle and saw that there were several men with guns running toward them. He suddenly realized that his idea might have been very bad indeed.

The bus lurched to a stop, only a few feet from the Cenote House. Espinoza leaped to his feet and had his pistol drawn faster than Ryan could have believed. The Secret Serviceman crouched behind the bus seats and motioned for Ryan to do the same. Ryan complied, and almost immediately after he did so, the air was filled with the tack-tack-tacking noise of machine gun fire.

The Plexiglas windows of the bus shattered, and the air was filled with shards that rained down on Ryan from every side. He covered his ears and tried not to scream as bullets whizzed over his head. He was positive that the gunners would take out the tires on the vehicle or hit the gas tank, it didn't seem to happen. Perhaps the power of the medallion was keeping the bullets from doing anything but superficial damage.

A searing pain in Ryan's left arm told him otherwise. He looked down and saw an angry red mark staining his coveralls where a bullet had grazed him. The injury didn't look too bad, but it was bleeding, and Ryan started to feel a little faint. He quickly ripped a strip from his coverall sleeve and tied it over the wound.

He looked forward at Espinoza. The man popped his head up, and held up four fingers. Ryan presumed that there were four gunmen outside of the bus. That fit with what Ryan recalled from Haiti. It didn't take too terribly many gunmen to keep a bunch of bound and unarmed people in line. Ryan assumed that there were probably four or five more inside the Cenote House, and that these men had been walking around the ruins, patrolling.

The machine gun fire wound down and stopped as the gunmen emptied their clips. There was a brief moment of silence, followed by the sounds of guns being hurriedly reloaded. At that moment, Espinoza popped up again. His gun reported twice in quick succession, and Ryan heard a similar noise from the back of the bus, which he assumed was Salazar in the sedan. Espinoza motioned for Ryan to follow him, and started out of the bus.

Ryan emerged into chaos. There were coverall-wearing men scattering in every direction and hiding behind pillars and walls and all manner of other objects. Most of the people here were not carrying guns. He glanced back at the sedan and saw that it had been riddled with bullets similarly to the bus. Unlike the bus, however, the sedan wasn't going anywhere. The tires were flat, the engine was smoking, and there were large holes perforating the entire passenger's side of the vehicle. Salazar stood on the driver's side, gun drawn. Mark sat on the ground next to him, clutching at his chest, a pained expression on the man's face.

There were four dead bodies on the lawn, each of which held a machine gun. Espinoza and Salazar were obviously crack shots.

“Come on,” said Espinoza, and he darted through the dark door of the stone Cenote House.

## Chapter 18

It was dark inside the Cenote House, compared to the blazing sun outside, but he thought that within the rock walls of the building there were torches lit. The room wasn't incredibly big, and Ryan thought that if 20 people were being held captive within the Cenote House, they must be packed in like rats. There couldn't be many of the armed guards within.

Espinoza crept like a cat, his leather shoes not making a sound as he walked through the thick stone door. Cool air hit Ryan as he followed the Secret Serviceman into the stone building. He tried to remain as silent as Espinoza, but he knew that he didn't have nearly the amount of stealth skills that the other man possessed. Still, no one was shooting at them, so perhaps no one had heard.

In the dim torchlight, Ryan began to see the shapes of people huddled on the ground, packed tightly together. Four men with guns stood watching them. The men had their weapons trained on the prisoners, obviously aware of the commotion that had been going on outside, but focused on the task that had been assigned to them: keeping the potential zombies from escaping.

The next few seconds engrained themselves in Ryan's memory for the rest of his life. Never again would he witness such cold precision in the act of taking human life. Espinoza stepped into the room, gun drawn. His arms, holding the pistol, pivoted fluidly



as he turned from one gunman to the next. The gun in his hand reported four times, accompanied by muzzle flashes that lit the room in conjunction with the “pock” of the pistol. Before the gunmen even realized that someone had entered the room, all four were dead.

The bound and gagged prisoners tried to scream against the strips of cloth in their mouths, but a chorus of muffled mumbles was all that came out. Ryan reached down and grabbed the nearest dead man’s machine gun. Then he took charge and addressed the panicking prisoners.

“We’re here to rescue you!” he yelled, feeling a bit like Luke Skywalker rescuing Princess Leia from the Death Star. Espinoza had drawn a lockblade from his pocket and was using the knife to efficiently and quickly slash through the thin cords that bound the prisoners’ hands and feet. “There’s a bus outside,” Ryan continued. “Espinoza here and I will cover you while you get on it, and we’ll get out of here.”

Espinoza was finished freeing everyone, and the prisoners were removing their gags and moving their arms and legs to get the blood flowing again.

“No time to waste!” shouted Ryan, “Let’s move!” He went to the door, flicking the safety catch on the gun and moving the butt to his shoulder.

He sprang out of the door and into the sunlight. He could see several people milling about, including more gunmen firing shots in the direction of the bus. It looked like Salazar and Mark were already on the bus. Salazar, like Ryan, had acquired a machine gun and was spraying bullets at the oncoming members of The Dying Sunrise from the bus, shooting through the shattered windows of the vehicle.

Ryan joined in the chaos, sending a spray of bullets whizzing over the heads of the crowd. Several of the Dying Sunrise men dropped to the ground, as they were unarmed and unable to fight back. The gunmen that were approaching took cover behind pillars and buildings and the like. Ryan could see that he and his companions were hopelessly outnumbered, and he saw that even more gunmen were coming down the gentle slope from near El Castillo.

Espinoza herded the prisoners from the building behind Ryan, and led them across the short stretch of grass and onto the bus. When one of the opposing gunmen fired, Ryan and Salazar answered in kind. Soon, the last of the prisoners was on the bus. Ryan had counted 22 people as they filed past him. Salazar opened fire again, and Ryan made a break for the bus.

He made it thought the bus door and threw himself into a seat as Espinoza turned the key in the ignition and slammed the gearshift into reverse. All of the bus' passengers were hunched low, in order to take advantage of what little cover the bus still offered. All of the windows had been shot out, and there were shards of glass on most of the seats. Salazar crouched as the bus pivoted, and Espinoza clutched the steering wheel and tried to make himself as small as possible as a rain of bullets started cascading through the bus again.

Miraculously, all of the tires were still inflated and the bus seemed to be functional. Turning it around wasn't too much of a problem, because the bus had been parked in a relatively open area of grass. Espinoza just put his foot on the gas and the bus turned, and anyone that was in its path quickly jumped out of the way.

The sedan that the four men had originally been riding in was nothing but a bullet-riddled pile of junk. That must have been the reason that Salazar and Mark had come onto the bus, Ryan thought. That turned out to be a good thing, though, because escaping in two vehicles would have been difficult.

The bus blasted out through the hole that it had made on its way into the ruins. Ryan once again clutched the medallion under his coverall shirt. He knew that the bending of coincidence must have had more than a little to do with the ease of their mission. Still, he had to admit that it wasn't over yet.

The bus sped through the parking lot, and it didn't look to Ryan like anyone was even going to give them chase. No cars were coming, and anyone that had been in the ruins had stayed there. There were still some people in the parking lot, but they remained stock-still, watching the bus speed out of the historical site.

The sky suddenly filled with red light, easily visible despite the high sun. Ryan thought that it was some sort of huge flare, obviously a signal of the prisoners' escape. But who was it a signal to? More gunmen?

Familiar humanoid shapes darting through the trees answered Ryan's question. Zombies were pursuing the bus. Ryan had an odd feeling of déjà vu as the vehicle sped along the forested road, although the circumstances of his escape today were different from his escape from Haiti. He marveled that it was only two nights ago that Agwe and he had had their breakneck flight from Dr. Zazu's compound. It seemed like another lifetime.

The first of the zombies sprang from the forest and landed on the side of the bus, its claws holding onto the window. Ryan ran over and opened fire at its face, causing

the monster's head to jerk back rhythmically before it finally lost its grip. Obviously this type of gun wasn't as effective as the shotgun had been, but it still seemed to do the job.

Another of the monsters landed on the other side of the bus, and met with a similar end at the hands of Salazar. A third zombie sprang from the forest and landed near the front of the bus on Ryan's side. Ryan pulled the trigger of his gun and heard nothing but a disheartening series of clicks. He had run out of ammunition.

Espinoza turned from the wheel of the car and shot the zombie in the temple with his pistol. The monster fell from the side of the car and rolled onto the ground. Ryan saw several more of the zombies flitting through the trees, and a veritable herd of the beasts trying to keep up with the bus on the road behind them. Ryan was happy to see that the bus was outdistancing the herd. However, the forest was packed with the creatures, so more zombies replaced every one that they passed.

Another zombie landed on the car, on Salazar's side. Salazar shot it with one round to the head. He had started to conserve his bullets. Two more zombies landed on Ryan's side. Ryan kicked the creature in the face with all of the force that he could muster, and sent it sprawling onto the street. Another man, one of the prisoners, was emboldened by Ryan's act and tried a similar move against the second zombie. The man screamed in pain as the zombie caught his leg, the creature's claws sinking deep into the flesh of the man's thigh.

The zombie jerked with both of its arms, and Ryan almost lost whatever food was in his stomach when the man's leg was ripped from its socket. The zombie quickly tossed the leg behind it and leaped at the screaming, bleeding man, sinking its teeth into the poor man's face.

Salazar fired two shots, one into the zombie's head and the other into the prisoner's. No one protested. The Serviceman had ended the doomed man's agony.

Ryan breathed a sigh of relief as the monsters in the woods started to dwindle. The wind whipped at his face as the windowless bus picked up speed. They were almost to the paved highway, and then they would be able to put a large amount of space between themselves and these monsters.

From the driver's seat, Espinoza said something in Spanish, and from his tone Ryan could tell that the man was cursing. He turned his head toward the front of the bus, and saw a milling mass on the road, perhaps half a mile ahead of them, standing at the mouth of the road and blocking their escape onto the highway.

Even at this distance, Ryan could tell that the figures in the street weren't quite human. They might be closer to human than the zombies in the trees, maybe, but still not human. They were zombies in the first stage of undeath. Perhaps "Stage One Zombies" was the best title for them. They moved with the jerky shuffle of a person who doesn't quite understand how to use his own legs. Their eyes were black inkwells staring up the road at the approaching bus, and they crowded together, arms outstretched as if to stop the vehicle's progress. There may have been a hundred of them, and they were all packed together in the middle of the road.

"Can you get through them?" yelled Ryan at Espinoza.

"I think so," replied the man, yelling over the noise of the wind and the bus, "but I have to make a 90 degree turn. This road ends in a T at the highway!"

"Everybody sit down and hold onto something!" screamed Ryan to the bus passengers. "Put on your seatbelts!" No one argued. Quickly, all of the passengers

found seats and the seatbelts clicked as they locked into place around the passengers' waists.

As Espinoza sped toward the shambling mass of zombies, Ryan could hear a moaning noise over the roar of the wind and the bus' engine. He realized that it came from the crowd of zombies, all moaning and groaning in a completely stereotypical zombie fashion. Ryan quickly took a seat and fastened his seatbelt.

Just before the bus blasted out onto the highway, Espinoza cranked the steering wheel to the right, as hard as he could. The bus began to slide on the gravel road, and began turning to the right. Ryan felt fear that it would flip over, but it managed to stay upright as it slid.

There was a sound like a hailstorm as the bus connected with the crowd of zombies. The thunks of the creatures' heads and bones hitting the metal side of the bus were accompanied by a squelching sound of blood and gore. The bus slid over the zombie horde like a scythe over wheat, mowing the monsters down where they stood. As the bus hit 90 degrees, Espinoza took his hands off the wheel, letting it turn, and slammed his foot on the gas pedal, all the while fidgeting with the gearshift. Amazingly, the bus made the sharp corner, although the last part of the turn was done on two wheels. The bus settled back onto the road with a jarring thud, and the prisoners and the rescuers were on their way back down the highway, away from Tulum.

## Chapter 19

Ryan watched the last of the zombies dwindle in the rearview mirror. He told Espinoza to take the bus back to the gas station that they had stole it from, and that they would talk to the authorities there and try to explain the situation. The secret serviceman told him that although he might have a little clout with the police, it was still a bad idea. Ryan told him to stop the bus. Espinoza complied.

“Okay,” yelled Ryan to the crowd of passengers, “I don’t really care who does it, but we need one of you guys to drive this bus to a gas station near here. It’s just up the road; you’ll see it on the left side. You’re going to have a lot of questions to answer once you get there, but you should be safe at least. The four of us are getting off now.”

The passengers stared at him in stunned silence, but no one argued. They were free and they were alive, and not a whole lot else mattered to them at the moment.

Ryan walked slowly back through the aisle of the bus, to where Salazar and Mark were sitting. As he approached their seat, he knew something was wrong. Mark was still hunched over himself, but now Ryan could see a bright blossom of crimson where his hands clutched his stomach.

“Heh,” he laughed weakly, as he saw Ryan approach, “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for me to get off the bus right now, champ.”

Ryan bent over him and asked to take a look. Salazar waved a hand at Ryan with a look of irritation on his face. “I’ve got it under control, sir,” said Salazar, “You and Espinoza get off here. We don’t want to mix you up with the police. Once we get to the gas station, we can get help for Mark.”

Ryan couldn't argue with the man's logic. It was the only way that Mark was going to get any help. Ryan and Espinosa stepped off of the bus. A graying man in a filthy Hawaiian shirt moved into the bus driver's seat and fired up the vehicle, and soon it was moving down the road, back toward the gas station.

"We'd better hurry and get a vehicle for you,"

"For me?" asked Ryan, "Not for us?"

"For you. You're driving back to the United States. I'm staying here," replied Espinoza.

"Isn't that a dangerous drive?" asked Ryan, "No offense to your country, but aren't there bandits and shit out there?"

"Follow the coast and you'll be fine," replied the secret serviceman, as he pulled out his gun and an identification badge and stepped onto the highway.

A scared-looking old woman pulled an old Toyota Tercel to the side of the road as Espinoza showed her his identification and chattered at her in Spanish. She got out of the car and removed a number of personal items from the vehicle. She left the driver's side door open and the car running.

"Okay Ryan," said Espinoza, "This lovely lady and I are going to find her some transportation home. You're to take her vehicle with the blessing of the Mexican Government. Who knows, maybe I'll see you again."

With that, Espinoza turned and walked the direction that the bus had gone, leading the old woman along beside him. Ryan was dumbstruck, but he waved to the man when Espinoza glanced back over his shoulder, and Espinoza waved back.



Ryan hopped into the Toyota, which to his disgust smelled like old lady and cinnamon-sugar. He moved the seat back to make himself a bit more comfortable. The car had enough gas in the tank to get him a good distance down the road. He hit the gas and was on his way back home.

Mexican highway 180 had some beautiful stretches of road. Ryan couldn't find anything decent on the radio, so most of the time he spent just enjoying the scenery. The highway followed the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and based on the map that Ryan had purchased at the last gas station, would get him all of the way back to Texas. He still had his passport and hoped that he wouldn't have any trouble getting back into the United States.

Now the only trouble was traversing an unfamiliar country, and that didn't seem to be such a big deal so far. Espinoza would no doubt handle the situation with the requisitioned car, so Ryan didn't think that he had anything to worry about as far as the police went. By now, Ryan hoped that Mark was safely in a hospital getting his gunshot wound looked at, and all of the people on the bus were also safely on their way home.

One thing that nagged at him was the relative ease of their escape. That was twice now that he'd been able to conquer almost insurmountable odds and get away with his life. He wondered if The Dying Sunrise were looking for him at the moment. He didn't think that anyone had taken a picture of him during the escape, and he looked like a lot of people: dark hair, blue eyes -- typical American white dude. He didn't have anything too terribly distinctive about him; at least nothing that was going to make him an easy mark for anyone hunting him. Still, there was a nagging fear of being followed.

Obviously The Dying Sunrise wasn't stupid enough to send a mob of zombies into a crowded city after him. They did seem to have plenty of manpower, though, and guys with guns were almost as fearsome and certainly as deadly as the zombies.

Ryan drove up the coast, looking at the beautiful blue ocean. On the start of his journey, he had followed the highway straight across the Yucatan Peninsula. The road had turned south, with the coast on the east side, and then had bent around with the curve of the Gulf. Now Ryan was driving in a Northwestern direction. Eventually, according to the map, the highway would curve and he would be driving northeast, toward the southernmost tip of Texas.

Ryan hadn't been on a good old-fashioned road trip in quite a while. The last one was a trip to Colorado with Emily, before he had even started law school. It felt good to be out on the road, cruising along and watching the scenery pass. In Ryan's opinion, there was no better way to see a country than to take a trip over the land. Flying in a plane got you from point A to point B more quickly, but you missed out on everything in between.

This trip was different than one in the US, however. It was a beautiful coastal drive for much of the trip, but there were many places that the freeway became a toll road. The road gave the option of paying the toll and staying on the freeway or taking an exit. The first time such an exchange took place, Ryan opted not to pay the toll. There was some change in the ashtray of the Toyota, but Ryan didn't think that it would last through many tollbooths and he didn't have any Mexican money of his own.

The exit ramp led him over several jarring speed bumps and into a tiny Mexican town. After he had returned to the freeway, he didn't even recall the name of the village, but the memory of the town itself stuck with him.

There was a gas station, which blessedly had a Banamex ATM. Ryan filled up his tank and took out about 2,500 pesos, which was just shy of 200 US dollars. As he turned from the ATM to go and pay for his gas, he saw four surly looking men staring at him.

He was out of place in a small Mexican village, and he was fairly certain that he was about to get his ass kicked. The four men approached, the largest one of them leading, and one of them said something in Spanish that sounded like a challenge or an order of some sort. "Give me your money," or something along those lines, Ryan figured.

Ryan tried to think of some sort of exit strategy. It didn't look like there was much hope of escape from the altercation. Then, like a vision from heaven, a police squad car drove slowly into the parking lot.

All four of the would-be muggers backed away at the sight of the car, "Policia" emblazoned on its side. A uniformed officer stepped out of the vehicle and looked questioningly at Ryan.

"¿Hay un problema?" asked the officer, and Ryan puzzled out that the policeman was asking whether there was a problem. The four men shook their heads, turned, and walked up the street and into the village. Ryan looked at the officer.

"Thanks," Ryan said. "Sorry, I don't speak Spanish."

The officer said, “Hey, no problem man. I speak a little English.” His accent was thick and he had a smile on his face that looked condescending. “I save you, man. Now you pay a fee.”

“What?” asked Ryan. He didn’t really understand what was going on immediately, but after a couple of seconds he realized that the police officer wanted a bribe for saving Ryan. Some country, Ryan thought.

“Six hundred pesos,” said the police officer. Ryan sighed and gave the money to the man. The police officer put the bills into his wallet, hopped back into his squad car, and drove away.

Ryan went into the small gas station and paid for the gas. He went back out to his car, got in, and left the tiny Mexican village. After that, Ryan chose to pay the tolls and stay on the freeway.

Ryan had driven for six hours when he finally started moving back to the north. The sun was setting, an orange fireball hanging on the horizon over the water to his right. He leaned back in the driver’s seat and relaxed a bit. Eventually, he was going to have to find a place to stay for the night, but he still had quite a few hours in him. The view over the Gulf of Mexico was gorgeous, and his mind was at ease for the first time in several days. He was almost able to forget about the horrors that he had witnessed.

Thoughts of The Dying Sunrise were still very present in his mind, of course. He wondered whether any of them were out looking for him, or if the two sects that he had escaped from had communicated with each other. He wondered if there was any way to spot a member of the group. From what he had seen, he didn’t think so. The first sect that he had seen, back in Haiti, had all looked Haitian, but other than that there were no

identifying features like tattoos or uniforms. At Tulum, the sect had all been wearing coveralls of the type that Ryan was still wearing, but each of the members was as different as could be. He recalled the man with the Jersey accent, and the others that looked like they had come from all over the place. Truly, The Dying Sunrise was a global organization, and Ryan feared just how much knowledge they might possess.

The sun sank behind the ocean horizon, and Ryan kept driving on into the darkness, his headlights blazing onto the freeway in front of him. When he came to sections where he had to pay a toll, he did so gladly. When he needed to get off and get gas, he did so carefully, remembering his incident in the little village. There weren't any other situations like that one, though. He kept his head down if the place looked shady, and he paid for gas and went on his way. The Toyota got great gas mileage, so he didn't need to stop much.

The lights of a small city filled the sky in front of Ryan as he drove, and he discovered by puzzling out the road signs that he was approaching the city of Tuxpan in Veracruz de Ignacio de la Llave, Mexico. The city was on a wide river, called the Tuxpam River, and looked to be the type of place that might have a decent hotel.

Ryan was getting extremely tired, and realized that he had been driving for 12 straight hours when he saw the digital display on the dashboard clock. He took the exit, this time slowing down for the speed bumps, and drove into the city.

He found a motel called La Vista, close to the freeway and a gas station. It wasn't too scary looking to Ryan, but wasn't anything too fancy, either. The doors to each room were on the outside, and there was a small office. The building, which was a long, one-

story rectangle, was painted an awful pastel pink, and a red neon sign proclaimed, in Spanish, that there were rooms available.

Ryan walked into the office and was greeted by an old Mexican man who had obviously been dozing. Ryan glanced at the clock and saw that it was 1:42 a.m. The clerk sleepily took Ryan's money and gave him a room key. It was an actual key on a key chain, which was something that Ryan hadn't seen in a hotel or motel in a very long time.

He walked back to his car, and drove to room 112. He opened the door and was pleased to find that although the décor was extremely outdated, the room was clean and apparently secure. He checked the bed, and the sheets were clean. There was even a window in the room that looked out over the river, which Ryan supposed was the "vista" in the motel's name.

Ryan was so exhausted that the room barely even registered to him. He managed to click the deadbolt and throw the chain across the door before flopping onto the bed and falling fast asleep.

## PART 4: HOMECOMING

### Chapter 20

Ryan woke up the next morning with the sun streaming through a crack in the curtains of the window next to the door. He glanced at the clock radio on the nightstand, which read 8:20 a.m. He had slept longer than he had planned.

He didn't have a toothbrush or toothpaste, and he thought about rinsing his mouth with water from the sink before realizing that he was in the heart of Mexico, and consuming tap water wouldn't be the best idea for an American. As far as clothing went, he only had the t-shirt and jeans that he had been wearing under the coveralls the day before. He decided to leave the coveralls in the motel room, because he didn't figure he'd need them for anything after he made it home. The clothes would have to do for another day's drive, and then he could get some fresh clothes once he got to Texas.

He couldn't believe that he was actually on the way back home. It was Friday morning, and although Ryan had a couple of long days on the road ahead of him, he figured that he could make it back to Minnesota by Sunday night without too much incident. He would have to leave the Toyota at the border and walk across, as the vehicle wasn't registered in his name and he didn't have any letters to get it back into the United States.

Ryan's plan was fairly simple. He was going to stop near the border in the city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico. The city was just on the other side of the United States / Mexico border from Brownsville, Texas, and was sure to have clothing shops and all other manner of tourist crap. Ryan was going to buy some tourist junk, then walk back across the border into the United States. He hoped that the customs officers weren't too careful about checking the stamps on his passport, because it might raise questions if it showed that he arrived in the Dominican Republic a week ago by plane and was walking across the border into Texas. He inadvertently touched the clamshell medallion around his neck, stroking it like a good luck talisman.

First thing was first, however. Ryan needed to get to the border. He yawned, stretched, and got himself into some semblance of cleanliness. He realized at that moment that he was starving, but that would have to wait a bit. He hadn't eaten a thing since the previous morning, and had been running on adrenaline.

He checked out of the motel and fired up the car. He got onto the freeway, and pulled off when he saw the familiar golden arches of a McDonalds. It was open, and although it didn't serve breakfast like an American McDonalds would have, it provided Ryan with sustenance in the form of two Big Macs, a large fries, and a coffee. "Breakfast of Champions" Ryan said as he pulled the first of the burgers from its cardboard container. He tucked into the food while cruising northward on highway 180.

The day passed in much the same manner that the day before had. He drove, occasionally paying a toll and occasionally stopping for gas. The sun was setting when he saw the lights of Matamoros ahead of him. He brought the car into the city.

Matamoros was much larger than Tuxpan had been, and the freeway traveled most of the way through the city. After a while, Ryan took a left onto Mexico Highway 2, which eventually would lead him to the border crossing into Brownsville, according to the road signs and the map that Ryan had been consulting.

The sun was starting its descent toward the horizon when Ryan reached the border area. The pharmacies and shops were still lively, as were the taverns and restaurants that lined the border. Ryan didn't really know anything about this city, but he had a feeling of unease as he parked his car in the lot of a shopping center called "Garcia's" and stepped out of the car.



He walked into the shopping area and came out a half hour later wearing a fresh set of clothes, a bright Hawaiian shirt, a pair of jeans, and a wide-brimmed straw hat. He had purchased toothpaste and a toothbrush, which he had used with bottled water in the public restroom where he had changed his clothes.

Looking like an idiot tourist, he walked toward the border crossing, which he was thankful to see was still open. Spending another night in Mexico didn't appeal to him in the least. The type of people on the streets had changed from shopping tourists to locals and the occasional prostitute. Ryan quickened his step. Thankfully, no one messed with him.

He got in a line of people headed for the customs office. Most of them were Americans, and all of them looked to have spent the day in the shops and pharmacies. There was an elderly couple in front of him, and they turned to strike up a conversation.

"How are you today," asked the friendly old woman. She had hair that was died blonde, but Ryan was sure had gone grey. Ryan thought that she must be close to 80, but she and her husband appeared to be doing well. He was also wearing a Hawaiian shirt, although his was predominantly blue whereas Ryan's was red. He walked with a cane, was bald, and stood about the same height as Ryan.

"I'm just great," said Ryan, happy to be having a fairly normal conversation after two days on the road.

"We're from Montana!" said the friendly woman, beaming with pride. "We're visiting Texas during the winter. Our son lives in Brownsville; he's a Lutheran Minister. Where are you from?"

“Minnesota,” Ryan said to the woman. “I’m on vacation too, but I’m about ready to head home.” That was about the understatement of the year, Ryan thought.

“What do you do for a living, Ryan?” asked the woman’s husband.

“I’m a lawyer,” replied Ryan.

“Good for you!” said the man, smiling, “it’s always nice to meet a young professional. My name’s Harold LaPorte, but you can call me Hank.” He shoved his large hand out and grasped Ryan’s.

“Nice to meet you, Hank,” said Ryan genuinely.

The line moved at a slow but steady pace, and Ryan continued his conversation with the LaPortes. Hank was a retired CPA. His wife’s name was Betty, and she was a retired nurse.

They walked into the small customs building. There was a desk, manned by two U.S. Customs agents. The men asked to see each of their passports, which they checked over without too much scrutiny, and then asked the usual customs questions: what they had been doing in Mexico, whether they had any fruits or vegetables or illegal drugs, that sort of thing. Ryan replied that he had been visiting Matamoros for an afternoon of shopping, and neither of the guards paid him any mind. They waved him through, and before he knew it he was back on United States soil. It was a sweet feeling.

“Well,” said Betty LaPorte, “It was nice to meet you.” She and her husband were walking next to Ryan on the U.S. side of the border, toward the parking lot full of the cars of the people that had walked into Mexico.

“Likewise,” said Ryan, “Enjoy the rest of your vacation,”

She smiled, and she and Hank turned to go toward their car. Ryan suddenly realized that the two of them were likely familiar with the town and could help him out with a little bit of information. “Wait, Betty,” he called, and the elderly woman turned around on the sidewalk.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Do you know where a good car rental place is around here?” asked Ryan.

“Oh, sure!” she replied, “There’s an Enterprise a couple of miles up the road. If you want, Hank and I can give you a lift.”

Ryan thought about it, but decided that the night air was perfect for a walk, and that he still needed to stretch his muscles a bit before piling back into a car. He got directions to the Enterprise building and started walking.

Brownsville was a fairly large town of almost 150,000. It wasn’t nearly as big as Matamoros, but there was still plenty going on at this time of night. Ryan walked along the boulevard of the South Padre Island Highway, a busy street that apparently ran from Brownsville to the Texan spring break Mecca of South Padre Island. Here, it was just a four-lane street through town, and although there wasn’t a sidewalk along several stretches of the road, Ryan still walked along the road, because that was the direction that Betty had told him to go.

It only took him about a half hour of walking before he saw the friendly white and green sign of an Enterprise Rent-A-Car dealership. He walked in, still looking like a tourist from head to foot in his straw hat and his Hawaiian shirt.

The clerk was a friendly, attractive girl with red hair and freckles. She helped Ryan out quickly and courteously, and soon Ryan was ushered out to a Ford Focus with a

terrible brown hotdog-colored paint job. The car was close to new, though, and looked quite comfortable despite the color. Ryan was pleased to find out that his Minnesota driver's license didn't cause him any problems. Apparently there were enough people that flew to Texas and rented a car that no questions were asked. He was able to rent the car for two days, to be returned in Minnesota on Sunday night.

It was already about 8:00 PM on Friday evening, so Ryan figured that there was no sense delaying. He hopped into the car, fired it up, and got on his way.

Before leaving Brownsville, he stopped at a Texaco and picked up a couple of sandwiches and a six-pack of Red Bull. He had gotten a decent amount of sleep the night before, and he figured that he could drive for quite a while yet tonight.

He was soon off across the scrubland of southern Texas with his cruise control set on 80, a full stomach from the gas station roast beef sandwiches, and a feeling of optimism. He laughed to himself. Hordes of zombies sure could make a guy feel homesick.

The dark road passed quickly beneath the wheels of the car, and Ryan found himself wondering what the next step would be. He got the third part of the talisman, and he was the one who was able to use it. The unnamed organization that opposed The Dying Sunrise surely wasn't going to call it quits with him yet.

He stifled a feeling of apprehension at the thought. He told himself that he had already been through hell, and he could make it through whatever they had in mind as well.

He made it as far as Denton, Texas that night. Looking at his atlas, it looked like he hadn't gone very far. He had not even made it out of Texas. But Texas is a

deceptively big state, and The drive from Brownsville to Denton had taken him seven hours.

He pulled into a Super 8 that was right off of Interstate 35, and got a room. The whole atmosphere of the place put the Mexican motel where he had stayed the night before to shame. Everything was clean and updated. Although he was bone-tired, he was wired from the caffeine in the Red Bull. He stayed up and watched a little late-night TV before finally drifting off to sleep.

He woke up early the next morning, thanks to the blaring alarm clock that flashed 6:30. He realized that he had only had a few hours of sleep, but he figured that he could power through the day on sugar and coffee. To accomplish that goal, he headed downstairs to the continental breakfast and consumed several donuts while sipping some coffee that tasted ok and did the job, but wasn't anything special.

Within 45 minutes of finishing his breakfast, he had showered and got his small collection of belongings together. Soon after that, he was checked out and ready to go. He went by the continental breakfast area on his way out and refilled his coffee cup, then grabbed one more donut for the road.

He filled the focus up at a small gas station and got back onto 35W. The scenery of the Midwest started spreading out before him, and he enjoyed the ride north. The horizons got wider and the freeway seemed longer, and the sun slowly made its crawl across the blue sky as the rental car made its steady progress toward home.

Each of the gas station breaks that Mark took on Saturday showed a marked change in the weather. It grew progressively colder every time he got out of the car,

almost as if winter were coming all over again, but much less gradually. As he passed into Kansas, he began to see some snow on the ground in places. The car continued.

He actually had to turn the head on in the afternoon as he crossed into Iowa. By 6:00 that evening, he drove into the city of Des Moines, where he stopped to have supper at a Perkin's restaurant. He ordered the "Tremendous Twelve", a meal that included pancakes, eggs, sausage, and bacon. It made for a fantastic dinner and a warm welcome home.

The air was cold this far north, and Ryan didn't have a winter coat. The car hadn't lost much of its heat in the time that Ryan had enjoyed his food, thankfully, so after a brief, cold run to the vehicle he was able to warm up in relatively short order. Still, he knew that he was going to have to brave the cold, so he pulled into the parking lot of a Fleet Farm that was close to the restaurant, ran inside, and purchased a winter coat. It was thick and hunter-green, and would protect him from the cold very well. He walked back out to the rental car slowly, enjoying the way his breath made frosty clouds. He got into the car and fired up the engine once again, and he was back on his way.

The frost on his windows, the snow at the sides of the road, and the lack of leaves on the trees lining the sides of the freeway all screamed to Ryan that he was homeward bound. The thought brought Simon and Garfunkle to his mind, which he quickly replaced by turning the radio to a classic rock station.

By coincidence, the station was playing exactly the song that he wanted to hear: Highway to Hell, by AC/DC. Perhaps it wasn't coincidence after all. He still had the completed medallion hanging around his neck. He laughed to himself at the possibility that the majority of songs to come on the radio would be ones that he wanted to hear.

Then he dismissed the idea. Enough horrible things had happened to him to disprove the notion that the coincidences affected by the talisman would always occur.

Ryan wondered why they did, then. He was a firm believer in order and rules to the universe. He thought that the talisman must have some sort of reasoning behind its abilities. There must be some way to predict which coincidences could be bent to Ryan's favor with the power of the necklace. He thought long and hard about it during his drive, but he didn't come up with an answer.

## Chapter 21

By 8:00 p.m, Ryan was crossing Interstate 90 at the southern edge of Minnesota. There was snow all over the place now, but none of it looked recent. The ribbon of I-35 stretched ahead of him, the headlights of cars streaming out of the city creating a line of light leading him homeward. After all of the stresses of the last couple of days, working 80-hour weeks as a grunt lawyer seemed like the real vacation.

Gradually, the lights around the freeway got brighter. There were progressively more and more cars in both lanes, many leaving the city and many coming back in. Ryan was happy to be home. The last few miles of his journey were full of regret. He regretted not being able to have relaxed on his trip. He regretted the time that he had spent with Chanté, and the way she had betrayed him. He felt terrible for her death, because despite the betrayal, he had still cared for her.

Most of all, he regretted that he had gone on the vacation in the first place. He had removed himself from the world that he knew, a universe with rules and order, and

found himself in a chaotic mess full of the kind of thing that isn't really supposed to exist outside of fairy tales. The worst part about it was that he knew that he would live the entire rest of his life knowing that this kind of crazy thing existed.

He drove the car into Minneapolis and straight to an Enterprise Rent-A-Car that he knew of within walking distance of his house. They were still open for another ½ hour by the time he rolled in at 9:30 p.m. They took the car back without any hassle, and Ryan soon found himself walking back to his apartment and his old life. It was Saturday night. He still had a full day off before he had to go back to work.

The night air was cold, but his new coat kept him warm. It had a fur-lined hood on it, which he pulled over his head to ward off the chill. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and continued his walk.

He turned off of the busy street that the car rental office sat on, and back down into the residential side streets. Once again, Christmas lights filled each street with a wonderland aura. He thought back to the night that he had walked, just a few weeks ago, and had gone to church on Christmas Eve. It seemed like a lifetime had passed, but it had really been only about two and a half weeks since that night.

He toyed with the idea of going to church again, but he knew that there wasn't a service at this hour of a Saturday night. The doors might be open, but being alone in a church after dark gave Ryan kind of a creepy feeling of trespassing, rather than one of peace. He made up his mind to go the next morning, though. He felt like he needed some kind of connection after the last week. Now he was painfully aware of forces at work in the world that were far beyond anything that he had ever seen. He thought to himself that if there was magic, then it was logical that God existed as well.



The resolution gave him a sense of peace. He walked slowly back to his condo building, enjoying the winter night and the lights and the sounds that the cars made as they drove through the slush on the roads. Soon, after walking the familiar streets, he came to his own door. The building was the same as when he had left it, dark brown bricks rising up above a quiet street. He walked through the front doors and turned his keys in the lock, and then he walked up the stairs, down the hall, and into his own condo.

His condo almost felt unwelcome to him, like he was opening the lid of a sealed tomb that was not supposed to be disturbed. The first thing that he noticed was the faint smell of rot. He supposed that he had left something in the fridge for too long, or perhaps that he had left some fruit out on the counter for a week. The second thing that he noticed was his luggage and his laptop bag, sitting in the middle of the floor. Puzzled, he opened the suitcase and saw a note scrawled on the Sea Breeze stationery:

“Ryan – I managed to get back to your hotel and get your luggage for you. I shipped it to your condominium with instructions for it to be brought to your home. Hopefully it makes it there OK. We’ll be in touch. Agwe.”

So, not only had he received his luggage again, but he had already been contacted by the Organization, in a sense. He knew that his peaceful life was probably over, but he was certainly going to try and get it all back in order for at least a while before everything went to hell again. The back of his mind told him that there was a war coming, but the front of his mind told him to be happy that he was back home and had his luggage and his laptop.

He flopped down on his couch with a sigh, and looked around the room. The TV remote was sitting over in the entertainment center, next to the TV. He didn’t feel like

getting up and grabbing it, he just wanted to sit for a bit. Then he saw that the light on his answering machine was flashing.

He got up and crossed the room and hit the play button on the machine. The first message was from a coworker.

“Hey Ryan, this is Brett at the office. Hey, I know you’re on vacation but I wanted to call and let you know that we’re gonna need you to find some cases in our favor for the Anderson case. Not the Anderson case with the will dispute, the Anderson case with the newly constructed home. I’ll fill you in when you get to work on Monday, but we’ll need you to do the research a.s.a.p.” The rest was cut off by the beep of the answering machine.

The next voice that came out of the crackly speaker hit him like a brick. “Hi Ryan,” said a soft, sad voice, “It’s Emily. Hey. I’m going to be in town this weekend and I wanted to talk to you. I’m coming in on Saturday night. I’m staying with Michelle, but I think that we really need to talk.” The message stopped, and the third message started.

“Hey Ryan, it’s Emily again,” said the voice of Emily on his machine, “I made it to Minneapolis and I’m at Michelle’s place. Look, I really need to talk to you. I’m coming over. It’s like 9:00, I’ll be there in 20 minutes.” The machine beeped once more, and then Emily’s voice came on for a third time. “Hey Ryan. You’re not here, and you’re not picking up your cell phone. It’s like 9:45 on Saturday night. I’m gonna try to go to your office and see if you’re there. We really need to talk. Please call me if you get this message.” The machine beeped a final time, and was silent.

Ryan grabbed the phone, and then stared at it in his hand. He wanted desperately to be able to just give her the old mental middle finger and never call her again. She had broken his heart by leaving. Yet, he had to admit that he still loved her. Somehow he knew that he could still be happy with her.

Ryan dialed the phone. It rang three times, and then he heard her pick up.

“Hello?” she said. Ryan could hear the sounds of the city in the background.

“Uh, hey Emily,” Ryan said hesitantly.

“Hey Ryan, how’s it going?” she said.

“I’m...uh...pretty good. I just got home from a vacation, sorry I missed your call,” he said.

“It’s not really a problem,” she replied, “I’m outside your office right now. Do you mind if I come over? I need to talk to you about stuff.”

“I guess that’s ok,” Ryan said.

“Alright,” she said, “I’ve just gotta get back to my car, I’m parked on the street and I—” she cut off abruptly.

“Emily?” said Ryan into the phone. “Hey, are you there?” he asked. The only answer was the eventual repeating beep of a dial tone. He hung up the phone.

The phone rang again, blaring in the silence of the room. Ryan picked it up.

“Hey, we must have gotten cut off,” he said into the receiver.

“Ryan?” said a nasal voice on the other end. It took Ryan a minute to figure out who the voice belonged to.

“Mark?” said Ryan.

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m calling from a hospital in Cancun. Glad to hear you made it home,” Mark said.

“Glad to hear that you’re doing ok!” said Ryan genuinely.

“Yeah,” the other man laughed, “I’m tougher than I look I guess. I have bragging rights now, I’ve been shot. Thug life and all of that, right?”

“Yeah,” said Ryan, chuckling. “So what’s up?”

“Big news, my friend; there’s another sect of The Dying Sunrise planning something big soon, and we have reason to believe that they’re somewhere close to you.”

“Close to me like how?” asked Ryan.

“Close to you like somewhere in the Twin Cities area. We don’t need you to do anything at the moment, just lay low and watch your back, okay? We think they’re probably onto you,” said Mark.

Ryan felt the hairs on the back of his neck rising. “Okay,” he said, “Thanks for the heads up.”

“No problem,” said Mark. “Agwe’s back in town, sniffing around a bit. It’s not like he’s very inconspicuous though, you know? So would you do me a favor? Would you call me if you happen to find anything out before he does?”

“Sure, I can do that,” Ryan said. He took out a pen and a pad of Post-it notes from the desk on which his phone sat, and jotted down the telephone number that Mark gave him.

“That’s my cell phone, so you don’t have to worry too much about who picks up, because it’ll be me,” said Mark.

“Okay. Take care of yourself,” said Ryan.

“You too. I mean that,” replied Mark. He hung up the phone on his end and Ryan did the same. Then he picked up the phone to call Emily again.

The only warning that he had was a low growl, almost like a cat, from the corner of the room. He spun around to see a pallid-skinned creature leap at him, all claws and razor-fangs. It hurtled through the air like a nightmare, inky black eyes reflecting the light of the stand lamp in the corner.

Ryan barely made it out of the way of the careening zombie. It crashed into the wall and the phone desk, causing the wood to shatter and the phone to become dislodged. It was on its feet in the blink of an eye.

Ryan was painfully aware of his unarmed status. On both of the occasions that he had faced these creatures in the past, he had been well-armed. He had also been travelling on a moving vehicle. Now he was enclosed in the confines of his condo with the slashing claws and gnashing teeth of the monster, and even one of them was dangerous beyond anything he could possibly comprehend.

It moved like liquid, skirting around him. It was almost too fast to see. Ryan tried to dodge out of the way, but the creature’s arm leaped out like a blur, and pain lashed across Ryan’s left shoulder.

The zombie drew back its claws, which dripped blood from Ryan’s shoulder wound. He needed some way to fight the thing. He had been through too much for it all to end with him punked by a single zombie in his living room.

In desperation, he grabbed the stand lamp and yanked it to himself, removing the plug from the wall in the same action. He held it in front of himself like a quarterstaff.

The zombie lunged. Rather than duck to the side, Ryan swung the lamp with all his might. The metal shade hit the monster in the face, and broken glass from the bulb sprayed the area. It backed off slightly, fearful of the weapon that Ryan now had. Ryan didn't see a great deal of intelligence behind those inky black eyes, only speed and ferocity.

The monster paced, planning its next move. Ryan tried to anticipate its movements as it slowly walked on his living room carpet, cornering him like some vermin. Its pearl-white fangs drooled a large drip of saliva onto the living room floor.

It sprung, whirring through the air with mouth open and claws extended. Ryan was able to bring the lamp up like a lance, the broken shards of the light bulb that still remained in the top of the lamp smashing into the creature's head as the lamp knocked it out of the air. The creature howled and landed on its stomach.

The zombie started to push itself across the carpet, leaving a streak of oily black zombie blood on his white carpet. It was clutching its eyes with both of its clawed hands. Before the creature could escape, Ryan brought the base of the lamp down on the back of its head as hard as he could. He kept raising the lamp and bringing the heavy base down onto the things head over and over like a hammer until its legs stopped kicking. He was sure that the creature was dead.

## Chapter 22

Hastily, he ran to the bathroom. The thing had only grazed him with its claws, but it was painful. His arm was on fire, and the shoulder made him want to scream. He opened the medicine cabinet with his right arm and grabbed a bottle of hydrogen peroxide. He dumped it liberally onto the wound, and ground his teeth and growled loudly as the stuff fizzed. At least it wouldn't get infected now. After the initial fizzing, the wound didn't hurt quite as much. The claw marks had shredded his t-shirt, and the gashes were shallow but long, stretching almost all the way to his elbow.

He ripped open a first aid kit and took out some gauze and tape, and made a quick bandage for the cut. His mind was racing. He knew that he had to get to the office to find Emily. He didn't believe in coincidence any longer, and it wasn't working in his favor at the moment anyway. He was worried that something had happened to her. At the very least, she was a friendly face. The Dying Sunrise obviously knew where he lived. There would be more zombies soon enough.

He walked out into the living room and looked out of the sliding glass door that led to his balcony. With slow precision, he saw pallid, clawed hands reach over the base of the balcony floor. One of the hands gripped the metal railing, and then the other. Then two more hands gripped the balcony floor, right next to the other pair. One of the zombies sprang onto the balcony, followed closely by the other. Two sets of inky black eyes stared at Ryan through the glass door, and one of the zombies growled.

Ryan spun and ran to the door. He fumbled with the deadbolt, but finally got it open. Just as he opened the door, he heard the glass of his balcony door shatter loudly. He slammed his door shut and ran as fast as he could down the hall.

The only way to the underground parking garage was a staircase and an elevator, both of which were at the end of the hallway. He thought that the zombies would follow him into the staircase, but didn't think that they were smart enough to figure out where the elevator would go. He jabbed at the button frantically, and was overjoyed when the elevator chimed and opened immediately. It had been waiting on his floor.

He turned around in the elevator and saw his door disintegrate into shards as a zombie broke through it. A couple of his neighbors opened their doors to see what the commotion was, but slammed them again hurriedly upon sight of the zombies. Ryan stabbed at the garage level button, then frantically hammered at the "close door" button on the elevator's panel. The doors were closing painfully slowly, and both of the zombies were speeding down the hallway like slimy, claw and tooth bullets.

The doors of the elevator closed a millisecond before both zombies slammed into the elevator doors with a resounding CLANG! There was no visible dent on the inside doors, but the creatures had hit with such force on the outer doors that Ryan felt sure that the doors must be severely damaged.

The elevator began to move downward, and Ryan breathed a sigh. From overhead, in the elevator shaft, he heard the wrenching sound of metal on metal, and knew that the zombies were prying the shaft doors open. Suddenly, the elevator car was shaken by an impact overhead, followed by an equal, similar impact. Ryan's heart leapt into his chest. The zombies had landed on top of the Elevator.



He heard scratching noises; grating sounds like claws on metal. Thankfully, the zombies hadn't yet found the hatch that would lead them into the elevator car. If they did, Ryan feared that what was left of him would have to be scraped off of the walls of the elevator. He looked up at the hatch, and beads of sweat trickled from his forehead back toward his ears.

The bell rang and the elevator doors slid open. Ryan was off toward his car at a sprint, running faster than he ever had in his life. He could see it at the end, a black Nissan Altima, sitting in his reserved parking spot two in from the far wall.

He heard the hatch clatter to the elevator floor behind him, followed by the sounds of two bodies dropping into the car. He darted a glance over his shoulder as he ran, and saw both of the ashen grey forms emerge from the elevator. The one in the lead gave a growl, and then they both darted after Ryan, faster than any human could move.

Ryan had his car keys in his fist, and pressed the unlock button with one hand. The car was new, and didn't require a key. As long as the electronic key mechanism was inside the car, it started with an ignition switch. He dove to the passenger side door, which was closer to him and clear from obstruction except for the car in the next stall. As he slammed the door shut, the monsters reached the car.

The zombies started clawing at the sides of Ryan's car, and he scabbled over the center console and into the driver's seat. He turned the ignition switch as quickly as he could, and the car fired up. One of the zombies was trying to tear the passenger side door off of the car, and it wasn't having any luck. The other monster had crawled on top of the vehicle, and was apparently trying to punch its claws through the roof. The pointy

dents appearing over Ryan's head in a rapid staccato gave indication that the second zombie was having a better time of it.

Ryan turned the wheel 90 degrees, slammed the car into reverse, and hit the gas. He had purposely taken the turn out of the stall too wide, and there was a scraping grinding sound as his car met the car that was parked in the next stall. The zombie that had been standing there was crushed between the two vehicles with such force that its torso was severed from its legs. Copious amounts of brackish blood poured from the monster's body, which now sat on the passenger's side of Ryan's hood and stopped below the midriff. The dying zombie twitched spasmodically in its death throes.

Once Ryan's car was clear of the stall, he rammed the gearshift into drive and slammed on the gas again. He still had one zombie on top of the car, trying with all of its might to punch through the roof of the car. Ryan couldn't spare a glance at the ceiling of the vehicle, but he was fairly certain that it was almost through.

Ryan got up to a decent speed in the parking garage and slammed on the brakes of the vehicle. The dead torso zombie slid off in front of him, and the zombie that had been clinging to his roof flew off and hit the pavement about 30 feet in front of Ryan's car. It rolled to a stop, flopping on the concrete floor of the parking garage. Then it sprang to its feet and flashed its fangs with a loud roar, and once again rushed at Ryan's car.

Ryan slammed on the gas. His car hit the zombie full force in the chest, and the creature fell underneath the front right wheel. The car lurched as if it had hit a speed bump. Ryan threw the car into reverse and ran over the zombie again. He saw the zombie lying motionless on the garage floor, its grey skin marred with tire tracks. He quickly drove around it and exited the garage.

It didn't look like there were any more zombies in the immediate area. Perhaps The Dying Sunrise had figured that three should be able to do the job sufficiently. Besides that, the creatures were rather conspicuous, and sending more than that would probably have raised an alarm before the dark society was ready to make its move and unleash its army on the citizens of the world.

Ryan drove his car quickly through the side streets and onto highway 169. He sped along the highway at 80 miles per hour, unconcerned for police or icy roads. He had to find Emily before somebody else did.

He took the exit for highway 394, which led straight to downtown Minneapolis and his law firm's building. He whizzed past the other cars on the freeway until at last he was forced to slow down and take the exit ramp that led to the street on which his building stood.

It was Saturday night, and as such downtown Minneapolis was packed with people enjoying the town's nightlife. He saw huge crowds of young bar hoppers and concertgoers and fine diners, all moving around in this hub of Minnesota, despite the cold weather.

He wasn't about to park in a parking ramp, and at the moment he didn't care at all about being towed or ticketed. He parked his car in an alley in front of a "no parking" sign, and ran toward the front door of his office building.

There was no sign of Emily. He saw her car, a grey Chevy Cavalier, sitting in a metered parking spot on the side of the road. She wasn't in it. He looked around the ground, hoping to spot some sign of where she might be. He saw something small and pink sitting by the door to his office building. He walked closer.

He reached down and picked up the object. It was a cellular phone, and he was fairly positive that it was Emily's. He flipped open the phone and went to the menu screen, cycling through the options until he saw the list of dialed calls. At the top of the list, his name stood out in bold black letters: Ryan. This was Emily's phone. She was right here. There weren't any signs of a struggle, not that Ryan was sure he would be able to tell what signs of a struggle looked like.

He tested the door to his office. It was locked. He took out his key and opened the door. There were low lights on. It looked like everyone on the ground floor was gone. He was sure that there were still some people working, even this late on a Saturday night. He decided to check things out. Maybe Emily was in here somewhere.

## Chapter 23

There was no one at the reception desk in the front lobby. The law firm took up five stories of a 20-story building in downtown Minneapolis, and as such this lobby was used for anyone entering to see any company in the entire building. Ryan made his way to the elevators.

He called an elevator, and punched the button for his own floor, level 12. The elevator sped its way upward into the levels dedicated to the law firm of Beecher, Edwards and Baxter.

Ryan tried not to think of zombies landing on the roof of the elevator car as it made its ascent. Thankfully, nothing of the sort took place. The elevator doors opened into the brightly lit lowest floor of his law firm.

Ryan wasn't important enough to have his own office. The lower level was divided into sections, and his section housed a number of bland gray cubicles, one of which was his. He made his way back into the cubicle area.

A couple of other lawyers of about his job level were still here, working on various tasks. He saw Brett, the man that had left the message on his machine, typing diligently at a computer keyboard. He walked over to the man.

"Hey, Brett. Burning the midnight oil?" said Ryan.

"Jesus, Ryan, you look like shit!" said Brett after turning around and looking Ryan up and down. "What the hell happened to you?"

"That's a long story," said Ryan. He had washed off most of the travel dust when he had showered after coming home, but a fight with three zombies had left him sweaty, injured, and generally bedraggled.

"What, did you get mugged or something?" said Brett.

"No, nothing like that. Hey, this might sound weird, but I'm looking for Emily. Do you remember her?" said Ryan.

"Sure, your old girlfriend, right?" asked Brett.

"Yeah," replied Ryan.

"No, I haven't seen her. What would she be doing here?" said Brett.

"Looking for me," replied Ryan.

"No, I haven't seen her tonight," repeated Brett. "Not sure how she would have got into the building anyway. There's a lot of weird shit going on around here tonight, though."

Ryan felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “What kind of weird shit?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing too out of the ordinary,” said Brett, “but the partners are here -- all of them, tonight.”

Ryan admitted that that was indeed strange. It was a Saturday night. “Is something going down?” he asked.

“I think so. Something big. It’s got me worried,” said Brett. “There have been rumors going around the office this week, about some partners not getting along with others, that sort of thing. Not the usual type of disagreements, but nobody names any names or anything so it’s all really just hearsay. Still, people have been talking like the company might dissolve.”

That was just what Ryan needed. After spending a week’s vacation in hell, the prospect of coming back and losing his job didn’t exactly thrill him. Still, he had to find Emily. That was more important than any job.

“Thanks anyway, Brett. I’ll talk to you on Monday,” Ryan said. He turned to leave.

The lobby doors opened, and three men strode from the elevator area. Ryan was astounded to see that it was the senior partners. Edward Beecher was in the lead, wearing an expensive black suit. His dark hair was combed back from his forehead, and his black goatee was meticulously manicured. Behind him was Susan Baxter, a thin and attractive woman in her late 40s, her blond hair starting to go grey, pulled back severley into a ponytail. She looked sternly over her square black glasses. She was also dressed smartly in a black skirt and jacket. Nathan Edwards flanked Beecher on the other side. He had

sandy blond hair that fell to his shoulders, although it was starting to thin in the front. He was big, and looked like he might have played football instead of practicing law. He wore a dark sport coat over a white turtleneck.

Mr. Beecher flashed a toothy smile at Ryan. “Good evening, Ryan,” he said in a smooth voice. He was every inch a lawyer.

Ryan was taken aback. Aside from his initial interview, he had never even spoken with any of these three partners. He was amazed that Beecher knew his name.

“Uh, hi there, Mr. Beecher,” said Ryan. Ryan glanced over the man’s shoulder and saw a number of other well-dressed people in the elevator. All of them looked tired. Beyond tired, in fact. The doors slid shut and their elevator continued up, according to the lights on the wall.

“What brings you here tonight, Ryan?” asked Ms. Baxter. Her voice reminded Ryan of an angry grade school, or perhaps a stern nun.

Ryan tried to think on his feet. “I just got back from a vacation. I wanted to catch up on some research before I come back to work on Monday,” Ryan said.

The three partners seemed to study Ryan. Finally, Mr. Edwards spoke up. “Ryan, we actually came to this floor hoping to find you here.”

“Yes,” said Beecher, “what a fortunate coincidence.”

Ryan felt the blood drain from his face. The weight of the talisman necklace under his shirt was suddenly very heavy to him. He didn’t believe in coincidence any more.

“Oh?” he asked, genuinely confused as to what the partners would want him for. He thought that it was probably something to do with the rumors that the partnership was dissolving. “What is it you need,” said Ryan.

“We’d actually like you to come with us,” said Ms. Baxter.

“Come with you,” Ryan repeated, suddenly wary. He had to find Emily. She could be in trouble. There wasn’t an excuse that he could think up, though. He had to get out of there. He thought about asking how long it would take, but then he realized how that would sound. He thought about telling them that he was looking for his girlfriend, but then he would be caught in a lie.

“Yes, come with us,” said Beecher. “Incidentally, you’d probably be interested in knowing that your girlfriend is with us.”

“Emily?” asked Ryan. The whole exchange was starting to feel very strange.

“Yes. She walked into the building with us. We talked with her, and told her that she could wait with us on the top floor, because we needed to talk to you as well,” said Mr. Beecher.

Ryan wondered if the talisman was at work. This was perfect. Not only was Emily safe, but Ryan didn’t have to think up some lame excuse to get away from the partners. He could find out what was going on.

“Okay. Where are we headed?” Ryan asked.

“To the top floor,” said Ms. Baxter. “Brett, would you go around and tell everyone that’s still here that they’re needed upstairs for a quick meeting? There will be more that we tell you all on Monday, of course, but we figure that since there are so many of our lawyers still here on a Saturday night, we’ll keep you all informed.”



Ryan was starting to get used to the feeling of everything falling together in a fashion that seemed impossibly coincidental. Still, it was hard for him to grasp the idea that there were enough of his coworkers here this late on a Saturday night to warrant an impromptu meeting. He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was twelve minutes past eleven P.M. Granted, many of the lawyers at his level spent a lot of time burning the midnight oil, occasionally even on Saturdays. But how many could there possibly be here? The only one that he had talked to was Brett, but judging by the lights in the building there were perhaps 20 others here tonight. He just happened to be one of them. It had to be the necklace.

Ryan still couldn't shake the feeling of weirdness as he followed the partners toward the elevator. Why had they singled him out? He was the only one that the partners had even talked to on the floor. He wondered why they had suddenly taken an interest in him after barely seeming to know his name?

Ryan had only been to the upper floor of the firm on a couple of occasions. With his limited visits there, he was completely sure that he had not seen every room. He had been to the offices of each of the partners, performing various tasks like delivering files or memos. Most of his interactions with those above him were conducted via email or a telephone call, however, so Ryan's experience on the fifth floor was certainly nothing to brag about.

Even so, he felt that he had little choice at the moment but to do what his bosses wanted and attend their meeting. He followed the three of them into the elevator. Mr. Beecher inserted a key into the button panel, turned it, and pressed the button for the fifth

level of the law firm. Without the key, the elevator button would not have responded. The elevator doors slid shut, and Ryan was on his way up to the top floor.

## Chapter 24

As the elevator started its ascent, Mr. Beecher leaned toward Ryan. “It really is an unbelievable coincidence, you know,” he said, with a smile on his face.

“What’s that, sir?” asked Ryan hesitantly. Being stuck in these close confines with three of his superiors was starting to make him sweat. He was keenly aware of the fact that he looked like hell, at least in the opinion of Brett downstairs. He knew that he was sweating, and he had a bad feeling about the whole evening. To top it off, he didn’t like the way that this conversation was going.

“All of this,” replied Mr. Beecher, “It’s just uncanny that you’re here, tonight, after everything that’s been going on.”

The two other partners moved slowly behind Ryan and Beecher. Ryan knew that the elevator wasn’t a large space. Still, he got a feeling like they were flanking him. He felt like a gazelle about to be jumped by a pack of hyenas. Ryan didn’t say anything in reply to Beecher.

“See, you were just exactly the person that we wanted to see tonight. We’ve been hearing a lot about you this week. It seems that you’ve been responsible for quite a bit of trouble, and that you’ve become quite the world traveler as well,” said Beecher.

Somehow the man knew what Ryan had been up to. All of the possibilities of how he knew started to flood into his head. The authorities in Mexico, the customs

office, the staff at the Sea Breeze Resort, or any number of people could have called and informed Mr. Beecher of the events of the last week. For that matter, Mark or Agwe could have called. It wouldn't be outside the realm of possibility. After all, Agwe had arranged to have Ryan's luggage carried back to his condo. Still, Ryan had a feeling of apprehension. He decided to play it safe. "What do you mean, sir?" he asked.

"Ahh, mister modest doesn't want to talk about his exciting week," said Beecher, flashing his toothy grin at Ryan. "We know what you've been up to," said Beecher. The smile was gone. The elevator continued its climb.

"Of course, even though we know what you've been up to, I think I'll go ahead and cut the bullshit, just so you know that we know," the grin was back, but it didn't calm Ryan in the least. "You went to the Dominican Republic, but you got wrapped up with some rather nasty folks, and your relaxing time of fun in the sun ended rather swiftly. You wound up in Haiti with a head full of crazy drugs and a bump on your head.

"You somehow managed an escape with the aid of a Minneapolis cabbie, who just happened to be in the exact right place at the right time. Deus ex machina at its finest, wouldn't you say?" Ryan didn't reply. The elevator doors opened to reveal the beautiful marble-tile floors of the fifth floor of Beecher, Edwards and Baxter. "This way," said Mr. Beecher, striding out of the elevator and into the hallway. Ryan thought about leaving, but the other two partners were behind him, and he didn't know where he would go anyway.

The lights on this floor were dim, and most of the offices were dark. Mr. Beecher continued talking as he led the others down the hall. "So, after your daring escape you found yourself on a flight to Mexico. You hooked up with some like-minded individuals

and caused a fairly large amount of trouble at a historic Mayan ruins site involving a bus and some machine guns. Once again, you beat all odds and escaped.

“You took a car from a little old lady with the help of a Mexican secret serviceman, and then you traveled all of the way across Mexico and across most of the United States, and you made it back home. Does that about sum things up?” Mr. Beecher asked.

“Yes, that sounds about right,” said Ryan cautiously.

Mr. Beecher turned down a hallway that Ryan had never before even seen. At the end of the hallway, Beecher used his key and opened a locked door, which opened to reveal a continuation of the hallway stretching off to a corner. There were doors on the sides of the hallway, but none were open. This hallway was much more brightly lit than the other had been, and was far less ornate. Ryan got the feeling that this was an area of the building that clients did not come, due to the utilitarian feel of the place. Rather than the soft lamps on the walls, fluorescent lights on the ceiling provided light for this hallway.

“That brings us to this wonderful coincidence that I was talking about,” continued Beecher. “We wanted to find you, of course, after hearing all of the stories about what you’ve been through. And who should walk through our door this evening, but the one person that you were looking for: Emily. Like a magnet, you arrived soon after. Here you are, on just the night that we need you.”

They reached the end of the hallway. Mr. Beecher used his key and opened a door on the left. Ryan could see that the lights were extremely dim on the inside of the room. Beecher held out a hand, indicating that Ryan should enter the room.

Ryan stepped through the door of the room, and blinked as his eyes adjusted to the low light. When he was able to take in the room, he gasped in shock. There was a man, hanging by his ankles and tied to a table. He was tall, and black, and he was completely naked. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was ragged. He was apparently passed out. His stomach was a mass of blood and gore. It had been ripped open, most likely as a form of torture. Ryan felt himself about to slip into unconsciousness as the man's face registered to him in the low light.

It was Agwe.

“What have you done?” Ryan asked Desperately. At that moment, he felt the cold round metal of a gun barrel press against the back of his head. In the dim light of the room, Beecher smiled his plastic grin, which now looked extremely sinister.

“We're protecting our interests, of course,” said Beecher. From the sides of the room, more men emerged, holding small machine guns. Ryan couldn't believe that he had walked into this. He remembered Beecher's comments about coincidence, and thought about the talisman. It was supposed to alter coincidence in Ryan's favor, not against him. He couldn't understand why this was happening. He slowly moved his hands above his head in an attempt to discourage the gunmen from shooting.

“Oh, there's another thing,” Beecher said, moving slowly toward Ryan. He reached out his hand and moved it under Ryan's t-shirt. He grasped the clamshell talisman and jerked it, hard. The snapping leather cord burned Ryan's neck as Beecher broke it. He withdrew his hand from under the t-shirt and held up the talisman. “We can't have you keeping this,” said Beecher.

He walked away, holding the talisman. “You have to think you’re pretty special, being a one-in-a-million type of person for whom this type of thing actually works,” said Beecher. Ryan didn’t think that the man expected a response, so he kept quiet. “The thing is,” said Beecher, “You’re not the only one.”

He reached down into his own collar and drew out a necklace. It was a fine silver chain, holding a black piece of stone. The stone was rectangular, and about the size of a playing card. On it were carvings that looked to Ryan like Nordic Runes.

Ryan’s head was swimming. He had taken it for granted that even if he weren’t the only one able to use the relic, that the necklace that he had possessed was the only one in existence. Obviously that was not the case. This explained the reason that Ryan was in the office tonight. Coincidence was working in favor of Beecher. Ryan idly wondered how long the partner had been in possession of the talisman. Perhaps all of his success in life was somehow due to its power.

No, Ryan thought. Most of his power, most of his success, and most of his station in life were likely due to his position within The Dying Sunrise.

The gunman behind Ryan pushed him farther into the room. Ryan looked down at Agwe with sadness. The man was still alive, but Ryan didn’t think that he would last long. The man’s insides were on the outside. His breathing was shallow, and he was obviously passed out.

The gunmen led Ryan through the room and out another door. The door led to yet another hallway, with what looked like reinforced steel doors on the walls. This was some sort of cellblock. He was around another corner and up a flight of stairs. This

would have put him above the fifth floor of the firm, to a level of the building that he had never been to before.

Ryan was pushed through one of the doors with such force that he staggered across the small cell. Beecher appeared in the doorway behind him.

“We’ll be seeing you again rather soon, Ryan. You’ll be part of a very special ceremony that we’ve been preparing. You’ve got one hour until the festivities start.”

With that, he closed the door.

## Chapter 25

The cell was small. The walls were cinderblocks and the floor was plain stone. Everything was painted in shades of grey. There was a single bed in the corner, and a metal toilet in the other side. It was a perfectly stereotypical cell, and it had been built here in this law firm building. A glaring fluorescent bulb bathed the room in light, and Ryan didn’t think that it was going to be turned off any time in the near future.

Ryan couldn’t help but laugh. He had been working for them the whole time. He had no idea, of course, and likely most of the company didn’t even know. This whole time, he had been an unwitting servant of The Dying Sunrise.

The situation was grim. Obviously there was something going on here tonight. Ryan figured that it must be some sort of zombie creation ritual like the ones in Haiti and Mexico. Ryan had escaped from those, and he could escape from this one. He wasn’t ready to give up yet. Still, his talisman had been taken away.

Ryan thought to himself that Emily was probably somewhere around here. There would have been no reason for Beecher to lie about that, but he doubted that she was calmly waiting in a lobby somewhere. The more he thought about it, the more he figured that she was probably in a cell just like this one. He would shout, but he doubted that his voice would carry past the cinderblocks.

He didn't have the necklace anymore, but that didn't mean that all hope was lost. He just had to find the opportune moment. He knew from what he had seen that there were zombies alive and well here in Minnesota. He had only seen three. He wondered where the rest of them were.

Ryan sat down on the bed in the corner. It was late, and he was tired. This week had been anything but a vacation. His entire world was slipping away into insanity, and he didn't know that there was any chance of pulling it all back together.

He knew that he was currently on the sixth floor of the twenty-story building. Ryan was curious as to how much of the building was actually owned by The Dying Sunrise. The firm that he worked for was obviously a sham, but it was still a functioning law firm. The implications staggered Ryan. How many other businesses in the area, or even in the world, were just fronts for this horrible organization? Mark had told him that The Dying Sunrise had people in positions of power all over the world.

Still, the people that were working for these businesses were likely unwilling or unwitting workers like Ryan had been. He certainly didn't believe that he was the only one in the firm that hadn't been aware of what was going on. The thought gave him some hope. After all, if most of the people working for the various businesses controlled



by The Dying Sunrise were unaware of the group, then perhaps The Dying Sunrise had less people at its disposal than it would seem.

Of course, that was probably the reason for the zombies. The Dying Sunrise would probably have a difficult time convincing people that its agenda of world takeover was sane. Therefore, thought Ryan, they could just turn people into zombies that would work diligently for their masters. That, and zombies didn't have to get paid anything more than flesh.

Could that be it, Ryan thought? In America and perhaps in other parts of the world, were employees going to become the main source of soldiers for the zombie army? The picture was somehow fitting. Every day, millions of Americans went to work, day in and day out, and acted like zombies. It would be the ultimate army if that were exactly what they were being employed to do. People tended to trust their bosses. Subtle hints, likely trickling down from the management of the firm, had caused a number of Ryan's coworkers to be here on this very night.

The time seemed to crawl as Ryan sat on the cell in his bed, awaiting his fate. Thoughts flashed through his head as he thought of all of the far-reaching implications of his law firm's activities. Other subtleties didn't seem to fit together quite right. For instance, he had seen the elevator full of dazed-looking lawyers heading up ahead of the partners. Where had they gone? What was their story? They weren't zombies; their eyes looked normal and their skin was a natural color. They had just seemed despondent. Perhaps they were people being led to the ritual, prisoners that were going to become zombies. Maybe they had been drugged to keep them docile.

Foremost in Ryan's mind, though, was the desperate thought that he needed to escape. Somehow he needed to get away from gunmen and who knew what else in a building that was quite possibly entirely under the control of the organization that he was trying to escape.

His thoughts touched on Agwe, tied upside-down a floor below him with his guts spilling out of his stomach. He didn't have long to live. The man had saved Ryan's life, and Ryan felt that he owed Agwe at least an attempt to get him out of there. Hopefully Agwe would last until Ryan was able to think of something.

The door lock jolted Ryan out of his thoughts. The heavy metal door creaked open to reveal several armed men. Behind them stood a line of people, tethered together in much the same fashion that they had been in Haiti. Two huge men with submachine guns roughly grabbed Ryan and led him out into the hallway.

He knew most of the people in the line. As he had feared, many of them were his coworkers. Apparently, there were enough lawyers in the world out searching for jobs that these could be replaced after being added to the numbers of the undead horde. Ryan chuckled internally from the thought. Some of the other prisoners were unfamiliar faces, looking as if they were people who had happened to be walking by the building at the wrong moment.

One face stood out in the line of prisoners. Emily stared ahead of her, looking disheveled but as beautiful as ever. Her blond hair was in disarray, and her blue eyes darted back and forth, finally meeting Ryan's.

“RYAN!” she screamed when she saw him. One of the gunmen slammed her in the gut with the butt of his gun, dropping her to her knees and knocking the breath out of her.

“No! Emily!” yelled Ryan. Another gun butt took him in the gut in a similar fashion. He was pushed to the end of the line and a tether was looped tightly around his neck, adding him to the chain of prisoners. A leather cord was wrapped around his hands, lashing them behind his back.

The prisoner chain was roughly led through the hallway. Most of the people here must have been recently taken. Everyone seemed to be in shock, wondering what was going on. Ryan looked at the line ahead of him. He was once again at the end of the line. Everyone had hands tied behind their backs.

The climbed several stories of a staircase, and as they progressed upward Ryan noticed that the air in the stairwell was getting colder. Ryan saw the open door ahead of them, after climbing what seemed like an endless amount of stairs, and he knew that the door opened onto the roof of the building.

He walked with the rest of the prisoners out onto the roof of the building. Aside from the situation, the view was quite spectacular. The other, taller buildings of downtown Minneapolis towered over this one, rising like behemoths to scrape the starry winter sky. Overhead, the lights of the city caused an aura that caused the sky to glow pink.

The air was cold. Ryan was thankful that he was still wearing his jacket from Fleet Farm. It hadn't been taken away from him. Some of the other prisoners, Emily included, were wearing jackets. Others, like Brett, were not so fortunate. Ryan

speculated that the jacket-wearers were prisoners that had been taken off of the street. The others must have been lawyers working downstairs.

There were other people milling about, and they didn't seem to be doing anything. Most were dressed in suits and business attire. They all seemed lethargic, almost catatonic. Ryan thought that they must be the people that he had seen on the elevator, among others. There were perhaps a hundred people in this state. They looked completely normal, aside from their despondency.

The building's roof was decked out in light. Much like the ceremony in Haiti, there was a sort of raised platform, almost like a stage. Ryan saw an all-too-familiar bubbling cauldron, ready to accept the blood necessary to cause the masses here to become zombies.

There was a smattering of people whom Ryan recognized as partners of the firm. There were also several armed men. Ryan wondered how the firm could possibly be getting away with this insanity. There were windows all around him. Skyscrapers formed huge walls that surrounded this building. Surely someone would be looking down at them?

Then he remembered that it was close to midnight on a Saturday. Everybody who was downtown at this moment was likely in a bar or a club, hundreds of feet below them. There were some restaurants on high levels of buildings in the downtown area, but Ryan didn't think that any of them had a view of the top of this building. They were probably relatively free from prying eyes. Ryan's only hope was that some lonely security guard in a building close to them would see what was going on and call the police. Of course, without the necklace, he couldn't really rely on coincidence bending to his will.

The decorations atop the building were starkly different from the décor in Haiti and Mexico, but they shared the same theme of dark magic. Haiti had been filled with shrunken heads and voodoo dolls, and Mexico had been a dazzling array of images of skulls and human sacrifice. This building, by contrast, was a mishmash of black magic symbols. Ryan saw pentagrams and goat heads, runes and other symbols that put an image of Satan in his mind. He knew that this thing, this rite, didn't necessarily have anything to do with the devil or with any god. It was an exercise in power, in magic, and didn't touch religion at all. Still, Ryan was interested in the fact that each of the groups involved used symbols of a dark nature, borrowed from religions of the world, to conduct its magic.

Ryan thought to himself that he was going to be the last to die. Once again, he was in the rear of a line that would all be marched forward, one by one, and Ryan would once again be subjected to the agonizing wait, watching each person in front of him die and be reborn a shambling stage-one zombie.

Lurking in the shadows, hiding around stairwells, air conditioning units, and other cover, Ryan thought that he occasionally glimpsed the pallid form of a stage-two zombie, ready to pounce if anyone got out of line. The thought made him shudder.

To Ryan's surprise, he was cut out of the tether and marched up toward the stage, in front of the rest of the prisoners. A knot of fear welled up within him. Apparently he wasn't going to have to watch everyone else turn into a zombie after all. The alternative, of course, was that he was going to be the first to die, and he had to admit that he didn't like that much, either. He walked up the stairs and onto the stage, and stood in front of a smiling Mr. Beecher.

## Chapter 26

Beecher looked at Ryan, and although the man's teeth flashed in a grin, his eyes held a look of condescending scorn. "Hello, Ryan," he said through his teeth."

"Fuck you," said Ryan. It was the most eloquent statement that he could think to say.

"I figured that after all of the trouble you've caused us, you should be the first to be bent to our will," said Beecher. Behind him, Mr. Edwards laughed smugly.

Two other figures walked onto the stage. Ryan's heart sank when he took in the form of a tall Haitian with bad teeth. It was Dr. Zazu. Beside him walked a Mexican man with a feathered headdress that Ryan could only assume was Kul.

"I hope you don't mind, I invited some friends. It seems that they have an interest in watching you die," said Beecher.

Ryan nodded slowly. He was beyond caring. "Get it over with, then," he spat.

"All in due time. I just want you to know that despite all of the problems you think that you've caused with our operation, it's all for nothing. Do you see the mindless people milling about?" asked Beecher.

"Yeah, I see them," said Ryan. "I figure they're burned out lawyers."

Beecher smiled. "That's the beauty. They blend in. These people are the perfection, the culmination of our efforts. I suppose that you could call them stage-three zombies," he said.

The truth hit Ryan like a brick. It all made sense. The stage two monsters wouldn't be able to do anything but terrorize and kill. Stage three zombies, if that was what these people were, would be able to go where humans could go, and do what humans could do.

“We had to work hard to figure out how to make them, but we did it. We can take the stage-tvos and force them to evolve one step further. They revert to their human appearance, but they're still dead as doornails and do...well, they do whatever we want them to do,” said the evil lawyer.

“And now,” said Beecher as he drew a long knife, “it's time to get underway.”

Two of the armed men brought a girl forward. She was obviously a prostitute, in a skin-tight short skirt and fishnet stockings, with frizzy dark hair and a look of panicked terror in her eyes. She must be the sullied woman, Ryan thought. Apparently, some of the components of the ritual were the same, no matter who was performing it.

Beecher had a gleam in his eyes that was half elation and half insanity. The girl was brought forward, and Beecher picked up a metal chalice from a table behind him. Ryan, as the only non-Dying Sunrise person present who had witnessed this ritual before, knew what was coming. He felt sorry for the girl. On the same table, to the rear of the stage, Ryan saw something else: The clamshell that held Agwe's coin, encircled at the top by a ring, still attached to the broken leather cord.

Suddenly, it registered in Ryan's fear-filled mind that there was a familiar sound in the air, growing louder as each second passed by. Soon, Ryan recognized the sound: it was the cavitations of helicopter propellers.

Chaos erupted on the rooftop. Ryan was astounded to see several black helicopters descending from above, plummeting down toward the building. The night erupted in machine gun fire, both from the armed men on the roof and from the helicopters.

Ashen stage-two zombies leaped from the shadows, entering the fray. They were cut down by men on helicopters as they emerged, their bodies blossoming with bullet holes and black zombie blood as they were riddled by the machine guns of the people on the helicopters.

This had to be the work of The Organization, Ryan thought, but at the moment he didn't care. Mr. Beecher snarled at him and raised his knife. In desperation, Ryan lunged at the man, even though Ryan's hands were still bound. He caught Beecher square in the gut with his head, knocking him sprawling onto the stage. The knife was knocked out of Beecher's hand.

Ryan glanced to the right and watched Kul as he was blasted with gunfire from several sources. The man dropped to the ground, feathers from his headdress floating on the winter breeze as he fell to the building roof, dead.

Ryan scrambled for the knife that Beecher had dropped. The lawyer was no longer on the stage, and Ryan wasn't sure where he had gone. In the chaos, the armed guards had stopped paying attention to their prisoners, and were instead focusing their attention on the men in the helicopters.

Ropes had been thrown from the helicopters, and gunmen descended from the vehicles with guns blazing. They were dressed in S.W.A.T. team uniforms and body armor, and were making a hash of the gunmen that belonged to The Dying Sunrise.



Ryan awkwardly dropped to his knees and maneuvered to pick up the knife that Beecher had lost. After several attempts, he finally grasped the blade. It was sharp, and pain lanced through him as the metal cut his hand. He was able to flip the knife around eventually, and after some work, cut the ties that held his hands behind his back.

Once free, he looked at the cut. It wasn't bad at all. He scrambled to his feet and grabbed his necklace from the table. Hastily he crammed it into his jeans pocket, hoping that it's power didn't require it to be worn around the neck. Somehow, he didn't think that was necessary.

He ran toward the chain of prisoners. They were all crouched in the fetal position, trying to protect themselves from the bullets that were whizzing around them. Ryan didn't waste any time. He used the knife and cut each of the prisoners free. While he did so, several of the S.W.A.T. team members poured into the building, chasing after the retreating members of The Dying Sunrise.

Once Ryan cut Emily free, she leaped to her feet and threw her arms around him. She squealed in fear and joy, and she hugged him so tightly that he thought she might crush him.

"Emily," he said, "We have to get out of here, now."

She nodded silently, tears welling up in her eyes. He took her by the hand and led her into the stairwell. "Before we go," he said, "there's someone else we have to rescue."

She didn't argue as they walked down the stairs. There were bodies on the floor in intervals, but it seemed that the fighting had moved to lower levels as the S.W.A.T. team members cleared out each floor. Occasionally, Ryan saw the form of a stage-two zombie, cut to pieces by machine gun fire. There were also several bodies of S.W.A.T.

team members, many of which had been shot and many of which had been torn apart by zombies.

The doors, which had previously been locked, now hung open, allowing freedom of movement for Ryan, Emily, and the other prisoners that had followed them from the roof. Ryan made his way through the cell block hallways, and eventually emerged into the room where Agwe had been hanging.

The man wasn't there. Ryan couldn't be sure that he had been rescued, though. There was a trail of blood leading out of the door, and Ryan followed it. The blood went down a hallway that was familiar to Ryan. It led to the partners' offices.

Holding onto Emily's hand, Ryan followed the blood trail to the office of Mr. Beecher. The door was locked, and Ryan kicked it down with all of his force. The flimsy door lock shattered as Ryan's foot landed next to the doorknob.

The light inside the office was dim, but Ryan could easily see Mr. Beecher, standing over the still-breathing form of Agwe. The senior partner had traced symbols on his lush carpeting in Agwe's blood, and he was kneeling over the body, apparently casting some sort of spell. Ryan strode confidently into the room.

"Stop right there," said Beecher, once again flashing his smile. He pulled a small pistol from his pocket. "You didn't think that I'd be so stupid as to come in here unarmed, did you?"

Ryan stood in the doorway, frozen. Beecher raised the gun. "It's not as fun as turning you into a zombie, but dead is dead," the man said. He pulled the trigger.

A muffled "chunk" sound came out of the gun, but no bullet. The gun had jammed. Ryan's talisman was still working.

Ryan leaped across the room, practically in a single bound. He raised the blade the knife in an overhand stab and brought it down, hard, into the lawyer's chest. It sank in between the man's ribs, and he clutched at the blade that had embedded itself in a lung.

With strength born of adrenalin, Beecher kicked out and sent Ryan sprawling to the floor. He brought the gun up and opened the chamber, discarding the worthless bullet. Then he raised the gun with shaky hands.

Ryan started running around the man. The gun reported in quick succession. Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Ryan continued his run around the man, and none of the bullets fired hit him. The last one shattered the window of the building, and cold air rushed in.

The gun clicked as Beecher continued firing. Ryan was behind the man's desk, and Beecher was standing next to him, the knife still lodged in his lung but not causing him to slow down much. Ryan prepared for a fistfight.

Emily suddenly stepped in from behind Beecher and shoved him, hard. Surprise and shock registered on the senior partner's face as he fell out of the window.

Emily and Ryan watched as the man fell ten stories, landing with a smack on a downtown Minneapolis street.

The two of them stood in the window, looking at the body of the man that had led The Dying Sunrise in this city, sprawled on the street beneath them. A breeze brought snowflakes in through the shattered window. In the street below, sirens wailed as ambulances and S.W.A.T. vehicles arrived. In his heart, Ryan felt that it was finally over.

## EPILOGUE

Watertown, South Dakota

Ryan watched the late summer sun setting as he drove his father-in-law's combine across the field. His thoughts often went to the events that took place nearly a year ago, but he tried to keep them from his mind. It was all far in the past.

He rounded the corner in the big machine and thought about how his life had changed. He and Emily hadn't wasted any time since getting out of that building. Three months of hasty planning later, and they were married and had both moved to Watertown, where they had purchased a small house and settled down, well away from their former lives.

Ryan's cell phone rang as he drove the large machine away from the sunset. He picked it up without looking at it.

"Sanders Law Office," he said, assuming that it was a business call based on the ring tone, which was an instrumental version of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up". The song always made him laugh.

"Hey kid. How's it going?" said a nasal voice.

"Mark! How's the land south of the border?" asked Ryan. He hadn't talked to Mark since the wedding.

"It's going well. Agwe's made a lot of progress after the surgery. He ran five miles this morning!" said Mark.

"Fantastic. I'm glad you guys have both recovered," said Ryan.

“Yeah. Hey Ryan, I just wanted to let you know that even though you moved out of the mainstream, you’ve still got to keep your eyes open. The Organization has caught wind of some other Dying Sunrise activities,” Mark said.

“I’ll keep a lookout,” said Ryan sullenly. It seemed that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t escape The Dying Sunrise. The S.W.A.T. attack on the firm had dealt a major blow to their U.S. operations, but the group was worldwide and as old as the hills.

“Sounds good, man. Keep me posted if you see anything strange,” said Mark.

“Will do, as always. Later,” said Ryan.

“Bye,” said Mark. They both hung up the phone.

Ryan turned back toward the setting sun and continued his work. On the far side of the field, he saw what looked like a large group of people. He drove closer to investigate.

As he came closer, his heart leaped into his chest. The group of people was a milling, shambling mass that was unmistakable: Stage one zombies. They were slowly trudging toward the farmhouse. Emily’s parents were in there, and so was Emily. There was no way that Ryan was going to let this happen.

He threw the combine into high gear and slammed on the gas, aiming the huge machine at the crowd of zombies. This was going to get messy.

THE END.