

See Jack Die

(Part 3 of 5)

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

PART III: CHAPTER 26

JACK'S APARTMENT.

MONDAY EVENING . . .

We walk into my apartment and right off the bat, the very second we open the door, I know something is not right. I stop in my kitchen, and Ricky can sense that I'm picking-up on something.

“What is it, Jack?”

I don't know, I tell him. I look around my kitchen, then my eyes focus farther out into my small apartment living area, and beyond. At first glance everything seems fine. But I have a feeling otherwise.

Ricky whispers, “Spooks?”

No, I say as I take a step forward. I think somebody has been in here. Looking around.

Then we both glance at each other and simultaneously we say, “The book!”

Quickly we both race into the living room, and over to the shelves near my bed where our fake bookshelf is hiding in plain sight. It's still there, not moved an inch.

Ricky bends down, looking back and forth over his shoulder before he does the combination.

“Maybe we should search the rest of the apartment before we check.”

Good idea, I nod to him.

Then, like super-silent ninjas we both creep our way over to the short hallway leading to my bathroom and washroom. Like stealth secret agents we line-up on both sides of the bathroom door. We trade nods.

On 3, I mouth to him.

1 . . .

2 . . .

3! Both of us spring into action, me turning the door knob, and him kicking it open. “Freeze!” I yell, feeling just like *Horatio* on *CSI: Miami*. But there's nobody in the bathroom except us two dumbasses.

Ricky and I laugh at our over-paranoid reactions and I notice him looking down at my sink basin. His eyes, they go back and forth between my two soaps.

My aromatherapy soaps.

“Jack . . . what are those?”

What?

“Those.”

Never mind all that, I say, trying to get him the hell out of there before he starts asking questions that my masculinity may not be able to answer.

He leans his head back, looking at the soaps one last time, and I know that there is a question forming in his mind.

Let's check on the book, I say.

He nods slowly, and I'm certain that this won't be the last of the *aromatherapy soap inquisition*.

We head back into the living room, and over near my bed. He unlocks the safe and, cozy as can be, the *Book of Sighs* is sitting there with several pages of my handwritten notes on top. He takes out the notes and closes the safe.

“So, what have we got?” Ricky says as he sits down on the bed and shuffles through the pages. “Where is this *Book of Sorrows*?”

Last few pages in the pile, I instruct him.

And then I watch as he finds the pages and sets the others aside. He leans forward and begins reading, whispering as he goes through each verse. Occasionally he looks up at me, as I pace back and forth. But mostly he's just mouthing the text.

While he's reading, I walk slowly from the living room, down the short hallway, make a slow 3-point turn, and then amble back. I'm taking those elongated steps where you let the weight of your body shift at its own pace from left to right. I feel like a soldier marching in one of those parades, although much slower. My left foot falls to the carpet, then my right.

Left, plop.

Right, plop.

And I continued doing this as I think about everything that's happened in the last few hours. Ricky and I, neither of us has discussed the death of my caseworker. It's a taboo subject for the meantime. I think we'll probably talk about it after he finishes reading my notes. As a matter of fact, I'm certain we will.

The chapter—I'm sorry, the *book* of Sorrows—deals with the other side, and the kinds of things you will encounter when you get there. It's like being at a museum and getting a pamphlet that describes the interior of some old battlefield. Or, at the aquarium, where they have all those placards about the different sharks you may see.

The *book of Sorrows*, it must have been something that Constantine and his people wanted kept secret, because it's not the kind of thing a religious person would expect to be presented with. I'm not even religious, and it rocks my faith a little.

To be honest, I'm not really sure about the whole *God* thing. I hope there is a God. I like the concept and the moral principles involved. But I'm just not convinced beyond a reasonable doubt. I don't think I could find the universe *guilty* of being run by God. At least, not enough to convict.

Back in the day—in 325—when Constantine and his *Council of Nicaea* were meeting in secret to decide what religion would keep Rome from being ripped apart, they made all of these decisions. Negotiated deals, really.

Rupert told us how they took a vote with a majority show of hands (161-157) and that effectively merged the Druid god, *Hesus*, with the Eastern Savior-god, *Krishna* (Krishna is Sanskrit for *Christ*). They merged the names, and then you had *Hesus Krishna*. Because there was no “J” letter in alphabets until around the ninth century, the name Hesus Krishna evolved into “Jesus Christ.”

So, when I think about the historical underpinnings of religion, it makes me a bit skeptical. Now, I'm not well versed in these things, but I just have a problem with believing in a legislated deity.

But then there is another side of me. A spiritual side that yearns for something bigger than just what I see. And I also know that just because there isn't *proof* for something, that doesn't mean it can't exist. I've never seen a black hole, but I believe they are there because I've seen enough in *Popular Science* to feel confident in this choice. In that sense, I can relate to people with faith.

The part of me that wants to believe in God, that part is constantly looking through newspapers and magazines and seeing horrible catastrophes all around the world. And I can't imagine why a God would let all of that occur.

If God just sits back and watches us suffer, I'm not sure that's somebody I can love. I hate to see people in pain, and I'm not even part-God.

Rupert said that God has his hands tied because he gives us free will. That clever librarian, he supposes that God would like to help, by performing miracles and the like, but he can't because that would cause a moment in time where the laws of physics—the underlying laws of the universe—are inconsistent. That *moment*, it would spell disaster.

I told Rupert that he needed to start dating.

Anyway, as I walk slowly up and down my hallway, I'm thinking of all these things. I don't even notice that it's way past dark outside. Me doing my walking, and Ricky doing his reading, we could be in two different worlds. We're both in the same place, but it's like neither of us knows where the other is.

The whole time I've been walking back and forth, my eyes have been numbly focused down on the blue carpet. And when I get to the end of the hallway again to make my 3-point turn, I notice there is no color in the walls.

The normally egg-shell painted hallway is a dull grey. I turn slowly around, 60 degrees . . . step, 60 degrees . . . step, 60 degrees . . . *whoa!*

I look back across my apartment, and I'm stuck in that other place. The melted, stretched place of twisted reality and blue skies. I'm between dogs and wolves and sharks, and as I glance over at the bed I notice Ricky, looking colorful and vibrant in this colorless reality. He's still there, just reading like nothing is happening.

Is everything alright? I say delicately, not completely sure he can hear me.

“Yeah,” Ricky says, not looking up. “Why do you ask?”

No reason, I say as the dead girl walks past him.

CHAPTER 27

5 LONG SECONDS LATER . . .

This is the first time that the dead girl has been in my presence at the same time as somebody else. I want to say something to Ricky, but I don't want to spook her. She's walking nervously, as if somebody may be following her.

There are no spooks to be found measuring Ricky, and I find myself relieved by this.

“This is insane, Jack.”

I know, I say softly.

She looks at me and I nod, motioning her into the hallway where we can have more privacy. I feel like I'm cheating on Ricky, not telling him she's here. But I know he'd understand.

“ . . . keep reading,” I tell him calmly. And then I slowly make my way down my colorless hallway.

She follows me, taking small, careful steps. I want to get a warm blanket to cover her. She looks cold and her clothes are all ripped to shreds. Her eyes are so sad and wanting that I wish I could keep her here. Cook her a warm meal or something.

I wish she could explain everything to me. Tell me if she is real, or just a phantom memory from my lost past. We go into the bathroom and I carefully shut the door, trying not to scare her. Imagine that, me trying not to scare the ghost of a dead chick.

Even though the light is not on, there is a blue glow between us, and I can see her very clearly. She wants to tell me something, I can see it in her face. In her body language. We are no more than a foot apart, and this is the closest I've been to any woman, alive or dead, since I woke-up in that hospital bed with those gatherers chopping me apart.

This is the most intimate I've ever been with a woman, as far as I know.

We are studying each other, she and I. She looks like she's in her mid to late twenties. Her skin is smooth and clear—obviously discounting the fact that I know she's dead. Her hair is straight, falling just below her shoulders, and a few strands are in front of her eyes. I have the urge to use my finger and push the hair to the side, but I don't want to make her panic and disappear.

I have this feeling that we're on borrowed time.

The first time I saw her, a few days back, when we were in the kitchen, she didn't move any part of her body. Just her eyes blinking. But now, she's almost alive. A living entity. And in this surreal blue light, I might be the ghost. I could be the phantasm. I might just be the one haunting *her* life.

She looks at me with kind, affectionate eyes. Her gaze takes me in, and infects me. She's still tense, afraid of something. But in this quiet little place, surrounded by only my sink, a mirror, a toilet, and a combination shower and bath . . . the worlds we're from don't even matter. May not even exist.

My heart is beating really fast, and I am trying to understand her. I need to know what she knows of me. To be able to find out who I am; who I was. And I know that I need her for that. She swallows slowly, her thin lips pursed as she considers the me she's looking at. And I see her look at the sink.

I hope that her first question, her first worldly commune with the living, isn't to ask me about the aromatherapy soaps. Because, I still don't have an answer for that.

She looks into the mirror, and there's nothing. Not her, just me. There is no reflected *us*. Whatever the physics of light are in this strange state, they don't allow her to appear in my bathroom mirror. She looks at this blank mirror, the reflection of the bathroom door and me, alone. And her head droops a bit.

She turns her eyes up at me, considering something.

"If you have something to tell me," I whisper, ". . . I'll listen."

She nods. She *can* hear me. This is a breakthrough. I have the ability to communicate with her. Even if it only goes one way. My heart races a bit. I quickly glance around, making sure there are no spooks. That would really kill all of this if she turns out to be a big phantasmal carrot used just to lure me to the gatherers. But I don't think so.

I watch, studying her delicate and considerate movements.

Then, slowly and deliberately, she reaches down and takes my right wrist into her hand. And this beautiful girl that can't talk, this ghost, this dead person, her touch is not what I would expect. I felt a warmth that I cannot explain. Like picking-up something you thought was really scalding hot, only to find out it is cold and safe.

She is warm.

Alive.

She takes my wrist, extending my arm towards one of the aromatherapy soaps. Because of the blue light, I assume she wants me to pick up the Vanilla Bean bar. Good choice.

My hand takes the bar as I look into her face for assurance. She almost smiles, briefly, for just a hint of a flash of a second. Then it's gone. Slowly, she takes my wrist, her fingers closer to my hand now, and stretches my arm towards the mirror.

I have a feeling we are about to communicate the only way she knows how. Or maybe, the only way she's willing to. The last time she made any noise at all, the screaming came. And I have a feeling that this is what she's trying to avoid. Whatever makes those screams, it seems to be trying to keep us from communicating in any way.

I nod, placing the way too expensive bar of Vanilla Bean soap against the mirror. She then nods very slowly, glancing back at me. Her eyes are absolutely hypnotic. There is so much going on inside of them, like small galaxies. Universes.

And then she turns back to the mirror that won't show her image and begins to manipulate the soap, writing letters on the glass. Each letter is thick and slow as her hand presses against mine, pulling and pushing lightly. It's like she's aware of how unique all of this is for both of us, and she's taking her time.

As I read her words I find myself not being able to breathe. There is this kind of vibrating electricity that flows through her hand, into my wrist, up my arm, and into my chest. This is so incredible that it's difficult to describe. Our two different places, they are momentarily connected. Her movements are very slow and thoughtful.

My eyes are frozen on the mirror.

Help us, John.

And when I look back down . . . she's gone.

CHAPTER 28

JACK'S APARTMENT.

17 MINUTES LATER . . .

I left the bathroom, glancing up at the writing several times.

Help us, John.

As I'm making my way down the hallway, back to the living room, I see Ricky looking up at me, his face locked somewhere between amazement and disbelief. The apartment is back to normal, all of the furniture resized for human living. The colors are back too, and I don't mind saying that even though they paint everything with happy tones, and mood enhancing paint, it's a bit of a relief.

"This is incredible, Jack."

"My name is John . . . I think," I say slowly. I explain what just happened for the last who-knows-how-long. My pulse is soaring. So many things are starting to come together. I tell him about her, and how she took my arm and wrote the message on the mirror.

He squints at me, then down at the translations, and then he's up on his feet, fast-marching to the bathroom.

This is the break we've needed in all of this. This girl—my dead companion—she reached out from beyond, and we have finally made a connection. Something nobody can doubt.

Ricky walks into the bathroom and stops in his tracks.

I'm right behind him, feeling like a prophet. Feeling like somebody who has been blessed with this new gift. I have a sense of self, and I think, for the first time since I woke-up in this life, that I may soon have all of my answers.

"*What the fuck?*" Ricky blurts.

He probably thinks I'm messing with him. That this is some game of mine, playing off of the excitement caused by the translation of the *Book of Sorrows*. I enter the bathroom and look up at the mirror. And then I see why he's perplexed.

What had been a simple message to me just seconds ago, is now just a series of squiggles and dots and dashes and incoherent nonsense. The same writing found in the *Book of Sighs*. Damn.

I don't know what happened, I tell him. When she was here she used my hand to write the letters with the aromatherapy soap.

Ricky glances down at the bar of soap, picks it up, sniffs it, and then turns around as if the bar was scented with gasoline. "You better not be going gay on me," Ricky says as he takes one more sniff.

“The writing!” I say, bringing him back to the point of all this. The writing is the same as the *Book of Sighs*. That makes sense. I was on the other side . . . kind of. Somewhere between, I try to explain, not sure about the logistics of it myself.

His eyebrows raise as he takes a whiff of the berry scented bar. “Kind of nice, actually.”

I shrug. I've got taste.

“Hundred-and-ten percent queer,” he adds, “. . . but nice.”

We finally agree that the writing is the same on both the mirror, and in the book. I then tell him everything that happened with *her*. And we find ourselves at a crossroads. One of those what-now moments.

“I need some time to assimilate all of this,” he says as we walk back to the living room and sit down on my bed.

I flip on the television, and we watch the local news as ideas buzz around in our heads.

“You might,” he says slowly, “. . . want to erase that stuff on the mirror.”

But that's proof, I counter. Actual evidence of ghost activity.

“That's nothing but a bunch of lunatic scribbles. Your new caseworker sees that and you'll not only lose your job as a tard-farmer, but they'll have you loaded-up with anti-psychotics until your eyes pop.”

But it *means* something. It's important to me.

“It was a moment you and some poltergeist shared,” he reminds me. “This isn't *Bridges of Madison County*. You can't pine for a dead chick. Unless you want a job in the morgue?”

I realized how others might look at my message on the mirror, and be less understanding than Ricky. Fine, I say. I'll erase it. But we still have problems. This thing is coming to a point somewhere close.

I talk as I'm walking back to the bathroom. I think we need to get professional help. And I want to find out if my name is John.

“Your name is Jack,” Ricky yells, “until we find out otherwise.”

She wrote, *Help us, John*. Not Jack. *John*.

I wet a small cleaning cloth with blue liquid that I use to keep the bath basin free of soap scum. I have cleansing bubbles that do all of the work for me, so that all I have to do is spray and wipe. With no hard scrubbing. I notice, as I'm wiping away the scribbles and markings, that the light is soft yellow, a result of the 75-watt light bulb in the bathroom.

I miss the cool blue.

I miss the girl.

“Jack!” Ricky yells, and I can tell from his voice this isn't a joke. “Get in here, you have to see this!”

So far, all I've really done is to smear the Vanilla Bean soap tracks, making the mirror completely unusable. Frustrated, I toss the rag into the sink and head out to the living room. Ricky, he's sitting

there on the bed, his legs together. He's leaned forward watching the television like it has some hold over him.

I watch him, the lights and colors of the news broadcast reflecting opposite and upside down in his eyes. He's unflinching. Captivated.

What is it? I say.

He doesn't answer, he just points to the screen.

I join him at the edge of the bed, standing beside him and looking at the television. There is footage of a bunch of police officers around a car accident. They're saying something about a hit-and-run accident near the *Dallas Public Library*, just a few minutes ago.

Oh, no. I look at Ricky, his eyes wide and concerned. Then back to the television broadcast. No way this is what I think it is. No way.

“ . . . the driver, Rupert Singleton, was hit from behind in an alleged hit-and-run incident at the northwest corner of . . . ”

What's going on Ricky? I ask under my breath—as if somebody else might be listening. And really, given what all has occurred in the last three or four days, it might not be paranoia.

He takes a big slow breath, standing up. “Jack, we need to get the book and get the hell out of here. My parents have a place outside of Dallas that nobody knows about. We'll be much safer—”

What are you talking about? I counter. We don't know if this has anything to do with the book. This could be some freak accident.

“Are you an idiot?” Ricky asks. “Really, after all of this . . . are you going to tell me that you think this is just part of the mystery of life? Bad luck for old Rupert, it must have been his time? Is that really your position?”

And I know that Ricky's correct. I know that he's being more reasonable about this than me. But, even though I see what is happening, my mind doesn't want to except it. Because if I admit to myself that this is all related, that means we're partly responsible for Rupert's death.

And then, why stop there. I suppose I could have warned my caseworker that the spooks were checking him out. My life—all five months of it—is cascading completely out of control. I'm not sure if I'm a harbinger of life, or a messenger of death. And for me, this is a very difficult pill to swallow.

Okay, Ricky, I say. You're right. Whoever is willing to kill Rupert with a car, is certainly willing to do the same or worse to two deadbeats like us. But I don't think we should go and hide. That will only prolong this. Eventually, they'll find us. We go back to where this all started.

We go back to Ms. Josephine.

I've read the book. I'm ready. It's time that I stopped running from all of this and man up. *Man up, or back down.* That's what Todd Steele says. I'm done running from this thing. There's no more hiding

in my fears, camouflaging them with my neurotic behavior. I've been using my amnesia as a crutch for long enough.

I can see the dead. Big deal. Worse things could happen. So I see shadowy spooks. So what? Some people see things that don't really exist, so who am I to complain. I have a gift, even if it's an accidental one.

It's time to start using it.

I nod to Ricky. He nod's back, saying, "You need to see that translation of the *Book of Sorrows*."

Why? I say, reaching for it.

"That note on the mirror in the bathroom, it called you, John?"

Yeah, and?

"Well," he says tapping the sheet, ". . . that chapter, number twenty-three, it was written by St. John the Divine. I think . . . that is the twenty-third chapter of the *Book of Revelations*. The one we don't read about in Sunday school.

And?

". . . and there aren't 23 chapters of Revelations."

"Oh." Something tells me I need to pay attention for a change.

THE BOOK OF SORROWS

of St. John the Divine

- 23 *1. And I must speak of the land of Sorrows.*
- 2. And I saw a new land between heaven and earth: for this place is unlike the other place of wanting and reflection.*
- 3. And whosoever was wanted by the shadows must fall to their knives and beckoning: for they shall be no stronger than the lamb against the wolves when the collectors return.*
- 4. And the door to this land opens in but one direction: none may leave its walls, but all the chosen must enter.*
- 5. And in this land of Sorrows are the unending times of darkness, for they shall see but little light, and forms both long and twisted from their earthly shape.*
- 6. And I saw the dead, both sad and quiet, stand before its closed doors: their pleas and cries are but silenced.*
- 7. And neither death, nor hell, nor the land of waiting, nor the kingdom of heaven lead to this land of Sorrows.*
- 8. And I saw the beasts with fire for eyes, stalking the living and the dead, as the wolves do the sheep.*
- 9. And I heard a scream that shook this land as it sounded, and all the inhabitants of this dark place stood still and scared.*
- 10. And he saith unto me, take heed the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time of the land of Sorrows is at hand. And when I walk again between the light and this land of darkness, only then will they be put to peace.*
- 11. For the one that walks of both light and dark, living and death, he will be their savior.*
- 12. And the kingdom of heaven should be open to them, those unwanted by Him, but saved now by he who walks between the earth and the land of Sorrows.*
- 13. The grace of our lord Hesus Christ be with you. Amen.*

CHAPTER 29

DEEP ELLUM, DOWNTOWN DALLAS.

TUESDAY MORNING . . .

Neither Ricky or I are saying much as we make our drive through Deep Ellum. We're both locked in our thoughts. For me, I've decided to be proactive about this whole ordeal. No more running. No retreat.

Ricky, I'm not sure what he's feeling. I know he's questioning the things in his life he thought he could count on. For the most part, up to this point, he was just having fun with all of this. To him I was probably some guy, down on his luck, with an interesting delusion to ponder. And he kind of promoted it, let it run wild. But it was just a way to pass the time.

People like him, they have a hard time making friends because others can't think on his wavelength. Ricky is literally a genius. And guys like that, they know pretty much everything. Knowing what's always going to happen next takes the fun out of living. There's no adventure. No surprise. So a guy like me comes along, and his personality feeds off of it.

And I like having him around. He keeps my feet on the ground. If I didn't have somebody to bounce my crazy ideas off of, I would be a card-carrying lunatic by now. I'm not smart like him, but I'm basically sensible. I'd like to think that he sees in me the kind of person who is what he appears to be.

All those times I was staring in the mirror, trying to figure out who I am . . . this is who I am. For whatever reason, I have been chosen to do this sordid task. Whether or not this is fantasy, fiction, delusion, or a miracle, I am very much a part of it. I don't know if there is anything like fate and destiny in this life, but I'm damn sure going to try and find out.

Ricky is driving much more sensibly, as his eyes scan back and forth like those *Blue Sharks* we were watching in the shark tank. I'm seeing a different side of him. The facet of his personality that I realize would have made him a good doctor. Exceptional, even. The funny, yuckster has been replaced with a calculating machine.

The team of Ricky and I, it's a formidable one.

As we're slowing for a red light he says, "I'm rich."

"That's awesome. What do you mean?" I say. "*Rich* . . . is that a trendy expression?"

"No, Jack," he says shaking his head. "I'm loaded. As in, I have lots of money. My dad invented a kind of heart stint that has revolutionized heart surgery."

He explains to me that a heart stint is like a pair of Chinese finger-cuffs, although very small, and it goes into a clogged artery and opens it up. It's made of very fine wire or fabric, or some other kind of space-age material that I'll never comprehend.

But I don't know what Chinese finger-cuffs are.

“Look,” he says, “. . . it's not important. I just wanted you to know that I'm not some drug dealer, or stolen property fence. I'm a trust-fund baby. Every month I get fourteen thousand dollars if I keep a job.”

Any job, I ask. At all?

He nods.

McDonald's? I ask.

“Yes.”

Taco Bell?

“Yes, Jack. Any job.”

Now I don't feel so bad about letting him buy all of those frozen pizzas for me.

“Do you have any idea what we are getting ourselves into?” he asks rhetorically.

And we both sit there, just the sounds of the seedier part of Dallas life resonating around us. I see homeless people walking in no particular direction, wearing torn socks for gloves. There are overflowing trash bins, and bits of paper and trash blowing here and there. All of this—the people and the trash—they're the parts of our lives we no longer need, discarded out of our timelines.

This part of Dallas, Ricky explained to me, was once *the* place to be. All the trendy clubs were located here. The restaurants were top notch. Valet service, the whole 9-yards. But Dallas expanded in every direction. And traffic swelled. And new hot-spots were born. And this place, that was once a mecca of social interaction, it became a forgotten wasteland.

Like a garden, left untended for several years.

A ship left at sea, just rocking back and forth with nobody at the helm.

And now it's this sad, grey part of the city where only people looking for a cheap drink, or a hit of something, come. It is aching, Deep Ellum. Moaning for rebirth. For another chance at greatness. But as we near Ms. Josephine's small shop, I realize that positive growth always leaves somebody behind.

I wonder if my life, and this entire world, if I am about to leave all of it behind. The way that Dallas left this district. Or is it leaving me behind?

Will I be the only living thing in that forgotten garden?

The only one left on that lonely ship at sea?

We pull to a stop at the curb. I see the familiar red neon marijuana plant. *Columbian Red*, I joke to Ricky motioning toward the sign. He nods and then shuts off the truck.

We both sit there, not unhooking our seatbelts. Not opening the doors just yet. It's like we want to savor this last moment. This last quiet time on our planet before our reality forever changes. Once we pull back the curtain, that's it. Nothing will ever look the same.

We both sense each others' apprehension.

“This is what you're supposed to do,” he says, staring out into the traffic.

“I know,” I say, my eyes cast downward. I'm looking at the leather dashboard. Smelling the various scents that make up the interior of Ricky's truck. This is like a safe place. Where nothing can get to us. I slowly reach down and press a button that releases the seatbelt.

He does the same.

I look over at Ricky, and I tell him, if this all goes tits-up, to get out of here. Take off. Don't get caught up in my mess. I never meant to drag him into all of this supernatural crap. It isn't fair of me to ask him to continue. I'm giving him the opportunity to walk away from all of this.

He reaches down and frees his seatbelt, letting the buckle pull violently to the side where some coil is finally at rest. *Thump*. It dangles near his left shoulder. And then he stares at me, the way I stare at myself in the mirror—trying to see what others see.

“This is *our* mess, now, Jack,” he says. “I'm with you to the end.” He shrugs, “. . . hell, maybe this is my destiny, too.”

And I feel pride well-up inside of me. Ricky, he leans toward the radio, which had been set so low that we couldn't hear it when the truck was running. And he half smiles, bobbing his head to the beat. He looks at me and turns it up a bit.

It's the *Rolling Stones*, he tells me. Despite being heterosexually challenged, Ricky says, Mick Jagger is a fucking prophet!

The song that's playing . . . it's called, *Sympathy for the Devil*.

CHAPTER 30

MS. JOSEPHINE'S SHOP.

5 MINUTES, 17 SECONDS LATER . . .

Again, she met us at the door. And she looked bothered, like she'd seen something. "Come in quickly," Ms. Josephine said, glancing out past us, to the street and beyond.

"The cops didn't follow us," Ricky joked.

"Child," she says between clenched teeth, her eyes darting back and forth, ". . . I'm not lookin' for da police."

When we get inside the door she quickly slides the bolt into the metal threshold, shaking the door a couple times just to be sure. It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, but those familiar smells were thick in the air. The jasmine, the cinnamon, it was like we hit the replay button on last week.

Dallas was gone as this room of dark corners and flickering yellow candles illuminated our path to the small round wooden table. Ms. Josephine waddled past Ricky and I, her long black dress fluttering like the candles. About the only thing missing was a spooky soundtrack to finish it all out.

I pointed out the strange books as Ricky and I made our way past the book shelves to the table.

The Living Darkness

Ghosts of the Beloved

Dreams of the Demonic

"Just a bit of light reading, eh?" Ricky mused quietly.

"Different explanations for different people," Ms. Josephine said as she brought out another rickety old chair that looked like it had been constructed from things that washed-up on the shore of the Hudson river. She set the chair near the small round table.

I leaned forward, placing the *Book of Sighs* on the table, and then carefully lowered myself into the chair.

Ricky didn't look too confident in the chair, his eyes glancing down as they measured just how far he was going to fall when the chair collapsed.

"You're way too skinny to break dat chair," Ms. Josephine said, answering Ricky's unasked question. She was good at that. The kind of good that makes you nervous to think around her. I'm glad there are no copies of *Maxim* magazine nearby.

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