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# SECRETS IN BETHLEHEM

NEW EDITION

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## *Prologue*

Doctor Jeffries contemplated his options, what few he had left as the biting winds coming off the Atlantic whipped across the cliffs. He tugged at the collar of his tattered coat, pulling it tighter around his ears and neck.

Could he make it to the States? Would his hunter follow him to the ends of the earth?

The end of the road . . . the end of land . . . the end of his life? The end.

Six months ago, he'd had a good life filled with promise. He had a career he loved and he strived for a perfection that would put his mark on the world—an indelible mark.

However, the powers that be had decided to keep his work a secret, “. . . for the good of the public. Perhaps in a few more years, when more data has been assimilated.”

He didn't want to wait another few years. He'd already waited for nearly six. The world had the right to know and he, Doctor William Jeffries, should be the one to tell it. After all, he *was* the one who had made the discovery.

From the moment he'd set his plans into motion he realized it was too late.

So, he ran.

Perhaps it had not been him at all, perhaps it was nothing more than the fulfillment of a prophecy that fate had dictated eons ago.

For nearly six months he'd been cheating the Angel of Death. He felt it like a caress of icy fingers on the back of his neck and it sent a shiver of fear dancing up his spine. Those soulless eyes were a constant presence no matter how far or fast he ran. From London to Dublin and from Dublin to Galway and across the counties of Ireland, the predator had stalked him.

He took a deep shuddering breath, held it for a few seconds, exhaled. He took one last look at the horizon before turning back the way he'd come. He saw the figure in the distance as it made its way steadily in his direction.

Primal survival kicked in as he frantically searched for a haven. The only place that gave him a hint of hope that he might escape his hunter was a pile of tumbled stones that, at one time, might have been a castle.

The hunter was steadily making his way up the cliff and Jeffries felt like a frightened rabbit chased by a hungry lion. He spied two walls of dark gray that formed a small right angle.

He threw himself into the corner, ducking his head and pulling his legs against his chest. He lowered his brow to his knees and wept.

He had taken precautions before he set out on this mission. The papers he'd taken from his lab that documented the experiment and The

Committee's involvement were safe. He'd sent them to a trusted soul who would know what to do with them when the time came.

He thought he'd lost the hunter when he detoured from London to Bristol then doubled back to Norwich as though he were heading for Germany. It was a simple matter to change directions and head west after slipping through security at the airport. It was a foolproof plan; how could he fail?

But the hunter was very good at his job and not easily fooled. Now that The Committee had given the TOS order—terminate on sight—the bastard had him in his crosshairs.

“You can't hide from me.” A deep baritone voice echoed through the ruins. The Hunter had cornered his prey.

Dread consumed the good doctor. If he didn't get control of himself, he would have no chance of survival.

“I know where you are. I can smell your fear,” The Hunter said, his voice ringing with the sound of victory.

The first drops of rain speared his cheek as a tall form, with eyes as flat and cold as the winter rain, came into view. The grim look on his face brought a whimper from the doctor.

There was no escape.

“I . . . Please, don't kill me . . . I can give you something more powerful than money. I know things.”

“Don't waste your breath,” The Hunter said, as he set the sights of the pistol he held on the heaving chest of the man at his feet. The weight

of the weapon was as natural to him as his own hand. His finger slowly applied pressure on the trigger.

*“Wait! Please!”* he begged. “I only wanted to—”

The hunter barely blinked as he watched the little man huddle into a ball. “Where are the papers?” His words sliced off the useless pleas for mercy. He didn’t care for reasons. He had a job to do.

“Where. Are. The. Papers?” The Hunter asked again, slowly, his patience waning. Jeffries crumpled into a sobbing heap, begging for mercy—they always begged for mercy. He settled the pistol and squeezed the trigger. The kick of the weapon as it fired barely caused a tremor. The report of the three shots—two to the heart, one to the head—dissolved in the downpour.

The Hunter looked down into the doctor’s eyes, glazed over and lifeless. He was used to seeing that emptiness of death. The eyes dilated, clouded, then . . . nothing.

With a quick glance over his shoulder to ensure he was still unobserved, He patted the body looking for the papers he’d been sent to retrieve. When he found nothing, his eyes narrowed in brief frustration. The Chairman would not be happy.



# *Chapter One*

“Joseph, this is Jonathan Masters.”

The voice on the other end of the telephone line was one that Joseph St. Claire had hoped he would never hear again. One he hadn’t heard in so long it had led him to believe that the protocols he’d set in place so many years before were no longer necessary.

“What is it?” Joseph asked, worry tugging at his thoughts as he pulled the watch from his pocket. *Eleven-thirty-five pm.*

“It’s time to relocate,” Jonathan told him. “The Committee has terminated the experiment. A car will be waiting for you. You must hurry.”

“What’s happened? Why after all this time?” Joseph asked, shoving the watch back into his pocket as he walked quickly to the Chippendale desk.

“Word of the experiment has leaked out and The Committee has decreed it is time to terminate. Your driver will have your destination and travel documents. Go. Now.” The dire news set Joseph’s heart pounding and he realized, that in his complacency, he’d become careless.

The line went silent as Joseph dropped into the leather chair. He carefully placed the cell phone on the desk and covered his face with his hands.

“Oh, dear God. I thought we were safe,” he muttered. He’d hoped this day would never come. He’d prayed that The Committee and the Chairman had forgotten about him and his part in the experiment.

His hopes and prayers had, obviously, been all in vain.

It took another moment for him to shake himself free of the fear and regret. He didn't have time for self-recrimination. He had to get the boy to safety. As he pushed himself out of the chair he dug a key from his trouser pocket and hurried to the file cabinet in the corner of the small study. He fit the key in the lock and yanked open the top drawer before pulling out several files. He flipped through them to make sure he had what he knew he would need, before shoving them into a black leather briefcase.

"Marie! I need you," he called out, loudly.

A moment later the door pushed open and a slight, middle aged woman rushed into the room. Her dark hair was tied back and her apron was snug around her narrow waist.

"What's the matter, Joseph?" she asked, in a worried tone.

"We have to leave. Pack a bag for the boy," he ordered, as he snapped the lock on the case and hurried past the nervous housekeeper. "Hurry, please. The car will be here any moment."

"Now? It's so late. What's happened?"

"Just do as I ask, Marie," he barked and immediately regretted it. "I'm sorry. I don't have time for questions now. I'll see to dressing the boy and my own packing. Now go, we haven't much time."

"Yes, sir. Right away." Marie hurried out of the study, following Joseph as he nearly ran up the narrow stairs.

He slapped the wall as they entered the bedroom, flooding it with light. Marie pulled a suitcase from the back of the closet and set it on top of the child sized dresser. She handed Joseph a stack of clothes before returning to the task he'd set her to.

With a grateful smile, he nodded his thanks. He glanced around at the toys scattered about. They would all have to be left behind, he thought

sadly. Perhaps, Joseph thought, when they got where they are going, he could purchase new toys for the boy. A child deserved toys to play with.

“Jesse, wake up,” Joseph spoke gently, reaching down to brush the halo of blond curls from the sleeping child’s face. Blue eyes fluttered open before finally focusing on Joseph’s face.

“What is it, Joseph?” Jesse asked, rubbing sleepy eyes with his fists.

“Come on, Jesse. You need to get dressed,” Joseph said, placing the clothes on the bed. “We must hurry.”

He picked Jesse up and put him on his feet, trying to speed the boy along and started on the buttons of the pajama shirt.

“Okay,” Jesse said and laid his tiny hands over Joseph’s bigger ones. “I had a dream, Joseph.”

“Was it a good dream?” he asked as he pulled the top over Jesse’s head and reached for the heavy sweatshirt with the image of Spiderman on it.

“I’m going to find my mum and dad soon.”

Joseph’s hands stopped as he stared at the precious boy he’d raised from birth. His breath caught and his heart pounded. As he looked into the boy’s eyes, he thought to himself, *So wise for one so young. You’re barely more than a baby.*

“Oh, Jesse,” he deflected. “You know that your mum and dad are dead. We’ve discussed this before. It was a terrible accident.”

“I know, Joseph. But I’m going to find a new mum and dad when we get where we’re going.”

The chimes of the door bell sounded, interrupting further discussion of Jesse’s dream, thankfully.

“We can discuss this later. Hurry and get dressed, now,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. Turning to Marie, who was dropping a

final pair of socks into the suitcase, Joseph asked, “Will you please take that down and answer the door?” She nodded and picked up the case.

“Finish dressing, Jesse. I must see to my own packing.”

He left the boy’s room and hurried across the hall to pull a large leather valise from his closet. After completing his own packing, he took Jesse’s hand and led him down the stairs.

“Come, Jesse. The car is here. We must leave.”

“Where are we going, Joseph?”

“It’s a surprise. An adventure. Won’t that be fun?”

“I’m scared, Joseph.”

He looked down at the boy and gave him a sad smile. “I know, Jesse. But we’ll be just fine. I promise. Now, let’s go start this adventure, shall we?”

The hired car dropped Joseph and Jesse at Heathrow Airport in London. As the driver retrieved the two bags from the car’s boot, he handed a large brown envelope to Joseph, tipped his cap and without a word, climbed back behind the steering wheel and drove away.

Joseph hurried Jesse to the men’s room. After assuring himself that they were alone, he told Jesse to go ahead and used the facilities before they boarded the plane. It gave him time to glance at the documents the driver had handed him.

A short time later, Joseph snapped Jesse’s seatbelt across his lap before doing the same with his own.

He didn’t take an easy breath until the plane was crossing the Atlantic.



## *Chapter Two*

God, his head hurt. His temples throbbed like a man after a three-day bender.

The steam rose causing a fresh wash of sweat to glisten across his forehead as the aroma of grilling meat made his stomach churn. The heavy bass of loud rock music pulsed in the thick air and pressed mercilessly against his throbbing temples.

Travis Brody heaved out a frustrated breath as he looked over his shoulder. All it would take, he thought to himself, was one well-aimed toss of the spatula in his hand and the torturous racket would end. Normally he wouldn't have cared that Stevie blared the radio at an eardrum splitting decibel. But, today, it only added to his misery.

Travis was a man of few words: "fuck off!" and "leave me alone!" being the most predominant phrases spoken, and usually hissed out between gritted teeth. With a chip on his shoulder the size of Arkansas and a go-to-hell attitude, most people gave him a wide berth. He preferred it that way and he didn't really care what others thought.

The events that had turned his once amiable disposition into a bitter, pugnacious aggression were ten years in the past. The memories were vicious, but the dreams were the worst, forcing him to relive everything and bringing that hell back over and over again.

In the dreams, he tried to warn his family of the danger. He'd run into the house where, his sister Tina, his two-year-old nephew, Parker, and his parents were trapped only to watch as they faded to nothing before he had a chance to save them.

Then, he would find himself standing alone and naked in the middle of a cold, empty road; the horizon distorted by ferocious, churning black clouds. Lightning flashed and struck the ground at his bare feet, missing his toes by mere inches.

He'd wakened drenched in sweat with tears of impotent rage streaming down his face and his head pounding. He'd given up trying to get anymore sleep and decided he'd get another miserable day started. What did he have to lose?

He'd gotten to the diner earlier than usual and a day that had started out as miserable, quickly reached a higher level of appalling.

If he'd followed his instincts, he would've ended up in jail on assault charges, and the jerk giving Janey Carmichael—the only decent waitress in the place—a hard time, would be in the hospital in a body cast.

He tolerated few people; Janey being one of the few exceptions. He even spoke to her in real sentences on occasion instead of the monosyllables and grunts that he usually uttered when a response on his part was required.

He pushed a stray lock of hair out of his eyes and the fleeting thought of taking a knife and hacking it off flashed through his aching head.

*Better yet, why not just shave it all off and be done with it?* Travis shook his head derisively. It was the middle of February and it would be harder to keep warm if he shaved his head. Besides, the apartment where he lived had few amenities and a working furnace wasn't one of them.

Travis pulled a grease stained towel from his back pocket and wiped it across his forehead. The heat from the grill and steam from the dishwasher had turned the small kitchen into a sauna. He didn't mind the heat, he just wished he didn't have to tolerate the asinine customers and the bullshit from the owner of the place.

A loud crash and discordant clatter temporarily drowned out his thoughts, making him cringe. He spun around, the spatula in his hand aimed like a weapon as his instincts prepared him for a possible threat. His muscles relaxed when he saw that Stevie had dropped another stack of dishes, sending shards of glass, crockery and bits of uneaten food skidding across the cement floor.

A melodic laugh drifted through the serving window dragging his thoughts from the clumsy teenager. He looked out into the dining area and spotted the source of the laughter.

*There she is.*

Faded red hearts were still taped to the front windows, a surreptitious nod to Valentine's Day. Travis sneered at the very idea. It was a ridiculous holiday that had no real meaning other than keeping greeting cards and florists in business. He slid his gaze to Janey and realized that maybe he should have asked her out to dinner no matter how ridiculous the sentiment. *No, that was a stupid idea.*

He watched her as she poured a cup of coffee for one of her regulars as she smiled at them. When she looked up and turned that smile on Travis, he felt a contentment he'd seldom known.

Janey was a good waitress and Travis liked the look of her. The top of her head reached just under his chin and her densely packed body had curves in all the right places. She wasn't bone thin where she looked like a tuberculin teenage boy. She had substance and an understated, internal strength.

The thought of what she would look like under that ugly work uniform, taunted his senses. A warm ball of lust settled low in his belly as he contemplated what it would be like to have a woman like her by his side.

Nope, he was not going to go there. This wasn't the first time that image had found its way into his brain. Unfortunately, it had been working its way under his shield since the first day he walked into the diner, two years ago, and asked for a job.

He glanced through the serving window, watching closely, as Janey chatted with a dark-haired man in a camel colored coat. The guy looked out of place wearing his fancy coat—that had to cost more than Travis made in two months—sitting at the counter. His slicked-back dark hair and a pair of brown eyes that looked like they didn't miss much had Travis' breath snorting out through flared nostrils.

The man smiled up at Janey and said something that made her smile as her face flushed.

*That asshole!* A dark rage flashed through Travis. He imagined knocking the guy on his Armani clad ass, and warning him to stay away from his woman.

The image vanished the next moment as reality crushed his fantasy. She wasn't his; she was so far out of his league he wasn't even in her universe. He had more emotional baggage than a Broadway drama queen and Janey deserved better. He had nothing to offer her except what he could make standing behind a grill ten hours a day for minimum wage.

His thoughts were interrupted by the harsh voice coming from behind him. Johnny Mason, the owner, had finally dragged his lazy, fat ass out of his hole, Travis decided. This day was just getting better and better.

"Stevie, turn that damn racket down!" Johnny bellowed at the dishwasher. "I can't hear myself think with all that noise going on. And if you break one more goddamn dish, it's coming out of your pay."

It only took a millisecond for Stevie to drop the broom and dustpan he was using to clean up his mess of broken dishes and reach up to the shelf above his head to turn the volume down on the radio.

"Brody, get your ass in my office, *NOW!*" Johnny Mason growled.

"I'm busy, Johnny, I have orders to get out. It's lunch time for Christ's sake," Travis said, keeping his back to the other man. He flipped a burger onto a bun, put the burger on a plate then set the platter in the serving window under the warming lights.

"Order up!" he called out. Only seconds passed before Janey was there to collect the order.

"I don't care, Brody! Get in here now!" Johnny demanded. "Janey, take over the grill."

As he stood in the doorway of his tiny office with his meaty fists perched on thick hips, Johnny glowered at Travis.

"I got orders to serve, Johnny. The customers are waiting," Janey said as she picked up three large platters and placed them along her left arm. Her eyes jumped from Travis to Johnny then back to Travis. She gave him another fleeting smile.

"Let Sarah take over. Get on the grill. *Brody!*"

“Well shit,” Travis muttered under his breath. He threw the spatula down and stomped out of the kitchen and into the small office next to the walk-in freezer.

“What? I'm busy, Johnny, it's lunchtime,” Travis demanded. His temper was on the verge of erupting.

The room, amusingly termed “office,” was barely large enough to accommodate an old, battered, metal desk, a cracked vinyl desk chair and a small filing cabinet. Johnny's bulk took up the rest of the space in the windowless hole. The chair groaned in protest as he squeezed into it.

“I've had enough of your goddamn attitude,” Johnny started without preamble, pointing a thick index finger at Travis. “This is the last time I am going to tell you to straighten up or you're out of here,”

Travis glared at Johnny before digging his fingers into his temples, trying to alleviate some of the tension. “I don't need this,” he mumbled as Johnny continued his tirade.

“Yelling at the employees is one thing. I'll even take you yelling at me, but I will not tolerate you cussing and threatening my regular customers.” Johnny's fists bunched and Travis could see the pudgy knuckles turning white.

“What are you talking about?” Travis asked, confused at the accusation. “I've been behind the grill since ten thirty. I haven't left the kitchen to take a piss since the lunch rush started.”

“Dan McConnell was in here this morning for breakfast—”

“That asshole?” Travis asked incredulous, cutting off anything more Johnny had to say. “I have to get back to the grill and let Janey get back to her customers.”

Johnny cursed under his breath before he spoke again. “I just hung up from talking to him and he gave me an earful about how you threatened to kick the shit out of him if he ever came through that door again. What the hell was that all about, Brody?”

“He deserved that and more.”

“What did he do, criticize your cooking? No, let me guess, he put ketchup on his scrambled eggs, right? Let me tell you something, smartass. This is my place of business and I don't need you running off my regulars.” Johnny tapped his index finger on the desk, emphasizing his point.

*I have a finger I'd like to point right now,* Travis thought.

“McConnell was sexually harassing Janey,” Travis yelled back, matching the other man decibel to decibel. “He kept grabbing her ass and making filthy suggestions to her. What was I supposed to do, let him keep at her like that? He's lucky I just warned him what I'd do if he touched her again.”

“I don't care what he said or what he did; Janey can handle it. If she can't, she doesn't need to be working here. Your job is to cook the goddamn food and hers is to serve it.” Spittle sprayed from Johnny's fleshy lips as he ranted. “If a customer gets heavy handed and she can't handle him then she needs to come to me and I'll take care of it.”

“You weren't here! I'll be damned if I'm gonna let some low life piece of scum treat her like that.”

Janey stood next to the grill with a spatula in her hand as she chewed at her lower lip. “Oh dear,” she whispered under her breath as the two men hammered at each other. “This is my fault.”

“I don't care! You do not talk to *my* customers like that. If you don't like the way I run this diner you go somewhere else. There aren't many people that'll put up with you. You should be thanking me for letting you work here.”

Johnny levered his girth out of the chair with a speed that defied logic, causing the chair to roll backward and hit the wall behind him with a heavy thud.

“Are you through? I've got orders to cook for *your* customers,” Travis asked, belligerently, as he turned his back and headed toward the grill.

“That's it, Brody. I've had it,” Johnny said as he grabbed Travis' shoulder and shoved him toward the back exit. “Get the hell out of here; you're fired.”

With a violent jerk, Travis turned to face the man that had just pushed him to the limit. He drew back his fist and was ready to let fly, catching himself before the blow struck.

“Get your damn hands off me!” Travis growled, pushing Johnny back with both hands. The hefty man stumbled back a couple of steps and caught himself on the doorjamb.

He stepped closer to Travis, neither man wanting to give an inch as they faced off. “Get out before I call the cops!” Johnny shouted as he leaned into Travis' personal space as though trying to intimidate him with his size.

Travis wasn't intimidated.

He jabbed his index finger into Johnny's soft, flabby chest as he spoke. “I don't need you or this roach infested cesspit. You can take it and shove it up your ass.”

“Don't you poke me, you little bastard,” Johnny said, pushing Travis' hand away. “Just get out.”

Travis' hands fisted at his sides so tightly his fingernails dug bloody crescents into his palms. “*Fine!*” he ground out through clinched teeth. “I'm out of here.”

He whipped the dirty apron from around his hips and threw it in Johnny's face. He marched to the back door leading to the alley behind the diner, his boot heels thumping heavily on the concrete floor.

“You owe me a week's pay, and I want it, now,” he said, pushing his arms through the sleeves of his worn leather coat.

“You want your pay?” Johnny asked in a low, menacing voice. He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket; counted out three hundred dollars in twenty-dollar bills and threw it in Travis' face.

“Here's your money, now get out of my place before I throw your ass out.” The bills floated to the floor as silence hung in the air as thick as mud.

Travis took two deep breaths to regain his self-control before stooping down and picking up the bills that were scattered at his feet. His eyes never left Johnny's face.

He stood slowly, the bills crushed in his fist. Without a word, he crammed the wad of money into the front pocket of his thread worn jeans, turned and walked out the door without a backward glance.

He heard Johnny's voice bellowing behind him, "I don't have roaches, you little shithead!"

Travis shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket as he walked around the building. The afternoon air was cold and brittle and stabbed at his exposed flesh.

He stomped through the snow mounded at the edge of the newly shoveled sidewalk as anger rolled off him in waves.

He walked with his shoulders hunched to keep his ears and neck warm as his long legs ate up the sidewalk. Pewter clouds hung low in a gunmetal gray sky, drifting slowly over the sun, promising more snow.

Travis mumbled curses on Johnny and his family under his breath, oblivious of his surroundings.

Between the biting cold and his hatred for Johnny, realization crashed in; he was out of a job again. The money he had in his pocket should hold him until he found another job. He was a hard worker and experienced, most places preferred experienced cooks. Maybe he could get a job at Hotel Bethlehem. That would definitely be a gigantic step up from where he had been working.

So what if Travis had a slight anger management issue from time to time? He controlled it, didn't he? He hadn't punched McConnell in his butt ugly mug this morning, had he? Did he beat the living shit out of Johnny when every cell, nerve, and chromosome in his body burned to do just that?

No, he did not.

Not that it mattered. He was still out of a job and was behind on his rent. Again. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Janey's smiling face popped into his mind.

What must she have thought just now as he and Johnny cursed and bellowed at each other like a couple of angry bulls?

He hadn't even said goodbye to her when he left. She must think he . . .

A tingle skittered through him, raising the little hairs on the back of his neck. The sudden rush of awareness that washed over him told him that trouble was heading his way.

*Damn it!* He'd been so focused on his fight with Johnny that he'd let his guard down.

He took a quick look over his left shoulder and spotted a man about twenty feet behind him. It only took a few seconds for him to place the guy. He was the same customer who had given Janey the eye at the diner.

The subtle lifting of Travis' shoulders was the only external difference in his posture. He didn't increase his speed nor did he acknowledge the man's presence.

It wasn't long before the guy had caught up to Travis.

This was all he needed.

“What?” Travis growled after stopping to face the interloper.

“I heard what happened in the diner. Tough break losing your job like that,” he said with a wide grin. He looked Travis over from head to foot with one quick sweep.

Travis snorted in disgust at the understatement. “Yeah, whatever.” He began walking again, ignoring the man who seemed to take no offense to his surly retort.

They kept pace for several moments before Travis stopped again and turned to look at the man.

“Look, I’m not in the mood for company or conversation, so get the hell away from me.”

“I get it. You’re pissed. You just lost your job. I’d be mad, too. You got anything else lined up?” Travis gave him a withering glare then faced forward and increased his pace, determined to lose his newfound best friend. “Job wise, I mean.”

“None of your damn business. Now leave me the hell alone,” Travis ground out.

“I’ll bet you just want to beat the holy shit out of someone right now, huh?” The man’s endlessly smirking face was becoming a fast light to Travis’ short fuse.

He stopped walking again, and turned to face the man who seemed to be begging for an ass-kicking. “Back off before you get your answer by finding my fist in your face and my boot in your ass.”

Though his ever present smile slipped a fraction, the stranger ignored the threat and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his inside coat pocket and tapped one out.

“You know, I just might have something for you,” he offered. “It’s only one night but the pay’s pretty good. You interested?”

He put the Marlboro between his lips and held the pack out to Travis. When Travis didn’t make a move at his offer, he shrugged his wide shoulders, then put the cigarettes back in his pocket. He pulled out a slim gold lighter. He cupped his hand around the fire as he touched it to the tip of the cigarette. A soft hum of satisfaction accompanied the drifting curl of smoke as it left the man’s lips.

“The job pays two grand for one nights work,” the man intoned quietly as he kept pace with Travis.

“Now I know I’m not interested.”

“Why not, you have another offer to make that kind of cash?”

“I said I’m not interested. Who the hell are you anyway? Never mind, just leave me alone.”

“Sorry, I guess I should introduce myself.” The stranger put the cigarette between his lips, stuck out his right hand. “The name’s Jonathan Monroe, but everyone calls me Duke. Pleased to meet you, Travis.”

Travis stopped and looked at Jonathan “Everyone Calls Me Duke” Monroe and then down at the out stretched hand. “How do you know my name?”

“I have my Jedi ways,” Duke said, around the cigarette that dangled between his teeth. “Offer’s still on the table, Travis.”

“Alright, if it will get you the hell out of my life, I'll bite. What's the job?”

Duke dropped his hand and fell into step beside Travis as they continued walking. “Nothing much. You meet someone who will give you a package and you take that package to someone else. When you deliver it, you'll get your money in cash. No fuss, no muss, all done.”

“Yeah? And who's going to bail me out of jail when I get caught carrying drugs? No thanks.” He looked at Duke with cautious eyes, his lips set in a firm line.

“Don't be silly. We don't deal in drugs.”

“Really? What do you deal in? Never mind,” he said before Duke could answer. “I don't want to know.”

“It's best you don't ask what it is, safer that way. Anyway, the job's yours. I know you could use the money.” He eyed Travis again.

“Tell you what. I'll make it three grand.”

Travis' fists clinched in his pockets. He tried not to let it show that three thousand dollars could very well change his mind as he continued walking.

His heart had jumped in his chest when Monroe had made the offer of two thousand and it had literally skipped a beat when the offer hit three thousand.

Red flags popped up by the hundreds and he ignored them all. His rent was two months overdue and he had no real job prospects. The three hundred that Johnny had thrown in his face was all he had to keep himself from living on the streets.

What did he have left to lose?

“Sure, why the hell not. Like you said, I need the money.” He took a deep breath and blew it out. “When and where?” If this landed his ass in jail, he would be warm, have three squares a day and no rent to worry about every month. Things just might be looking up.

“Tomorrow night at midnight, you'll pick up the package in the alley behind the North End Republican club at Eighth and Tillman streets, in Allentown. You bring it to a guy at this address in Bethlehem.”

Duke pulled a folded piece of paper from an inside coat pocket and handed it to Travis. He gripped the slip of paper not releasing it yet as Travis' fingers grasped it and asked, “You do know where the Republican Club is, don't you?”

Travis gave him another of those withering glares. “Yeah, I know where the Republican Club is,” Travis said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“Ask for a man named Caldwell. You don't give it to anyone but him. Understand?”

“Sure. Caldwell. What if he's not there?”

“He'll be there.”

“Why so late?” Travis asked as he took the paper from Duke’s fingers. Another alarm in his brain faded into oblivion.

“Less chance of being, shall we say, interrupted during the transaction.” Duke narrowed his eyes at Travis and asked, “I don’t think I have to tell you not to mention this to anyone, do I?”

*Was that a threat?*

“Who am I going to tell?” Travis asked.

Duke flashed another smile at Travis before turning and walking away as he pulled another cigarette out of his pocket.

Travis let the events of the day rattle around in his brain as he made his way to the south side of Bethlehem. Had he just made the deal of his life or had he just sold his soul to Satan?

As he huffed out a vaporous breath, he decided it didn’t matter. Divine intervention or Faustian contract, he was committed and would do the job as promised. The money would go a long way.

He let the idea of this one-time job float around in his head. He’d been so disgusted with everything in general, and Johnny in particular, that in his anger he’d let himself be blinded to reason and an offer of easy money.

If things had been different, he would have . . . but things were not different. They were what they were and he alone had made them what they were.

Not that he believed in signs, omens and portents, but maybe this was a sign things were about to change for him.

*If he survived.*

That thought jumped into his mind with a cold truth that sent a chill doing the tango up his spine . . . in spike heels.

He’d worked in two-bit diners, shrugging off all responsibility for over ten years, putting forth only enough effort to feed, clothe, and shelter himself. The last two years he’d spent working the grill at Stella’s Diner, seemed to have been the catalyst for the restlessness that held him in its grip. He dug in and looked hard at what he’d accomplished since his family was killed. With a sense of shame, the significance of his situation crashed in on him.

His parents had worked hard and given him every advantage their middle-class status could afford him. When he’d won a track scholarship to Lehigh University they’d nearly burst with pride.

*Now look at me. How the hell did I let this happen?*

“I need a beer,” he muttered to himself as he turned toward his apartment. He stopped at a liquor store two blocks from his apartment building. He scanned the shelves grabbing a six-pack of Bud, pretzels, and beef jerky. He handed the bleach blonde clerk a crumpled twenty-dollar-bill, wanting nothing more than to get to his place and pop open a cold one.

With a mumbled thank you when the clerk gave him his change, he dropped the money into his jacket pocket. The buzzer over the door sounded loudly as he went back out into the cold afternoon.

A few minutes later, he stood on the sidewalk looking up at the dilapidated building where he rented a couple of rooms from a bony old fart named Jonesy.

The cracked sidewalk, graffiti covered brick, and plywood nailed up to cover the broken glass of the door caught Travis by surprise. He'd seen it before. Hell, he'd been living there for over a year and knew the building was little more than a hovel. It was all he could afford. He told himself that same thing each month when he handed over the rent money.

The bare boards groaned with each step and the dirty walls with the peeling paint reeked of mold and rot from the years of neglect. As he reached his third-floor apartment, he saw Jonesy messing with the doorknob. When the little man turned and saw Travis, Jonesy started to giggle.

Travis let out a frustrated breath. The sound of Jonesy's giggle reminded him of a teenage girl after her first look at the football quarterback at homecoming.

"Shit," he groaned. He'd hoped to stay out of Jonesy's sight until he got the money for the past due rent.

"So, Travis, you got something for me?" The man in the dirty blue sweatshirt asked as he leaned against the doorjamb.

"I only have about two hundred dollars. You can have that. I'll have the rest of the money for you by Monday, I swear," Travis said as he shifted the bag with the beer and snacks and dug into his pocket for his keys.

Jonesy shook his head. "Look, Brody, I told you before, if you were late with the rent one more time you were out of here. I got a lot of opportunities to rent this place for a lot more than you're paying."

"Come on, Jonesy, just a couple more days. Give me until Monday," Travis pleaded, knowing it was of no use.

"Sorry, man. I gotta make a living. I took the liberty of packing for you. Your stuff's in the bag," Jonesy said around the stump of cigar clinched between his teeth as he pointed to a crumpled paper sack.

"Asshole!" Travis yelled at Jonesy's back as he bent down to pick up the paper grocery sack. He opened it to check the contents.

"Where's the rest of my stuff?" he called out. Travis didn't have much to begin with and the bag Jonesy packed for him held only a small portion of his clothes. None of his personal items like razor and deodorant were included, even his toothbrush was missing. Not a single pair of his boxers made it into the sack.

His mind froze. *Where is it?*

He searched through the bag frantically, upending it before dropping to his knees in a fit of panic. He grabbed and shook each item, his fury rising with each passing second.

*It isn't here!*

The only thing Travis had kept through the years was gone.

He rose to his feet and raced to the stairs.

“Jonesy, you little prick, what did you do with it?” he shouted.

Alarm shot through him as he stuffed everything back into the bag, grabbed up his other bag and raced down the hall after Jonesy.

“Where is it?” he demanded as he saw Jonesy fit his key into the lock of a door at the base of the steps.

“Everything you had is in that bag. If something’s missing, it ain’t my fault,” Jonesy yelled up to him then slammed the door, locking himself inside his own shabby apartment.

“It’s just a picture, Jonesy. I want it back!” Travis demanded, pounding on the flimsy door.

“Get out of here, Brody, before I call the cops. I ain’t got nothing of yours.”

The picture he’d kept as a reminder of happier days was of his older sister’s graduation day. Tina stood, between their proud parents, in her cap and gown, while seventeen-year-old Travis grinned, holding up two fingers behind her head.

The following month, Tina had married her high school sweetheart and all their lives changed.

Travis gave the door a hard kick and heard Jonesy squeal before he turned and walked out of the building.

He’d been worse off in his life, Travis decided. There was a time he didn’t really care if he woke up the next morning and actively prayed that God would see fit to take him out. He’d made it through before and he’d make it through now.

*Damn, was that a positive thought he just had?*

He adjusted the bags under his arms as he slowly walked down the steps. He had no choice, he may be down and he may be out, but he wasn’t broken . . . yet.

*Huh, there it was again: a positive reinforcement.*

He stopped at the base of the stairs and studied the derelict building. “This place ought to be condemned.”

He stood on the sidewalk for another minute as he watched cars pass by. He took a deep breath and looked up into the rapidly darkening sky hoping for divine intervention as a few flakes of snow fluttered out of the dismal sky.

Just what he needed, more snow, more cold. He mumbled curses under his breath as he tromped over the snow-covered sidewalk.

After another few moments of cursing his abominable luck, he began to take stock, ticking off his options as they came to him. He did have close to three hundred dollars in his pocket so he could stay in a hotel if he wanted to. There were plenty of dives he could stay in that wouldn’t cost him too much. Some

of them were a step up from where he'd been living, so that wouldn't be too bad. A hot shower that didn't turn cold before he got the soap rinsed off his body would be a welcome change. He had the snacks and beer he'd bought on his way home so he didn't have to worry about food, at least for tonight.

He needed to watch what he spent, though, at least until after tomorrow night.

Of course, Travis wasn't so naive to think everything about the job was on the up and up. Common sense told him there was a hell of a lot more to it than what Monroe let on. If not drugs, as Monroe professed, then Travis couldn't imagine what he could be delivering that would warrant such secrecy and high payment.

He just hoped it didn't get him into something that would get him killed. Jail he could live with, dead; he couldn't.

"I guess it takes scraping the bottom of the barrel to make a man see the truth." Travis didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until the woman in a tattered blue coat gave him a startled look then quickly skirted around him as though she were afraid he might be talking to her.

He hunched his shoulders and continued on his way in silence. He thought about what he would do with the three grand. He didn't even have to stay in Bethlehem. He could go anywhere he wanted.

Why had he never thought of it before? That was exactly what he would do! He would use the money to get out of town and head for a warmer climate. Florida. Miami, maybe.

*That's it!*

Maybe when he got to Miami he could take a couple of college classes. He could take out a student loan and apply for a few grants and get his degree.

Sure, he could do that. There was nothing to hold him here other than a whole lot of bad memories.

*And Janey.*

He let the memories flood his mind, he didn't fight it this time and the grief didn't debilitate him as it usually did.

*New Year's Day 2001*

*Travis had come home from his first semester at Lehigh University and, as was the Brody holiday tradition, he and his father were sitting on the overstuffed sofa in the living room watching a football game. The lights on the Christmas tree twinkled in colorful whimsy, sending festive rainbows reflecting off the frost covered windows.*

*His mother was in the kitchen fixing the customary New Year's Day meal of pork and sauerkraut, mashed potatoes, and his favorite; pumpkin pie. All that was needed was for his sister Tina, his brother-in-law, Sam, and two-year-old nephew, Parker to arrive.*

*They were already an hour late and were not answering their phone. The aromas of his mother's cooking scented the air, making his mouth water and his stomach grumble.*

*He reached over to the huge bowl of barbeque potato chips sitting on the coffee table and stuffed a handful in his mouth. With his thoughts bouncing between the game they were watching and when he could get to a phone to call Angie, his girlfriend, he hadn't a care in the world.*

*"It's about time," he said, at the knock on the front door. He shoved himself up from the sofa as he wondered why his sister would feel the need to knock on the door of the house she'd grown up in.*

*His attention returned to the game when the roar of the crowd indicated another touchdown. "Ah hell. We lost the game."*

*He clicked the television off and turned as his father ushered two uniformed police officers into the living room.*

*Unease had the small hairs on the back of his neck stand up as the rush of blood roared in his ears. Something bad has happened.*

*He stepped closer to his father as his mother stood between Travis and his father, taking each of their hands.*

*Speaking in low, sympathetic voices, the police officers informed them that Samuel Evan Martin, Travis' brother in law, in a fit of rage, had shot both Tina and their son Parker, killing both before he turned the gun on himself. A neighbor heard the gunshots and immediately called 911.*

*Their faces held the compassion that was called for in circumstances such as these, but their cop's eyes said they had seen it before and no doubt would see it again.*

*"I'm sorry for your loss," didn't seem to do much in the way of consoling the bereaved family.*

*Nothing did.*

*Happy New Year.*

Travis had disliked Sam from the moment he first met the man. There'd been something seriously wrong with Sam Martin, and he'd told his sister his suspicions, but Tina would never listen to him.

On the day of her wedding, Tina kissed his cheek and told Travis how much she loved him. With a petulant sneer, he'd told her he was glad to be rid of her as only a teenaged kid brother could do. She laughed at him and called him a liar. He agreed.

He may have been seventeen at the time Tina and Sam married, but if he'd known or had even suspected that Sam was hitting Tina, he and his Louisville Slugger would have gone calling.

There was nothing lower, in his eyes, than a man that would hurt a woman or a child. You do not hurt someone weaker than you to prove you are a man, you protect them because you are the stronger one. A man that respected women had taught that respect to his son. Unlike most teenagers, Travis loved and respected his parents.

Two weeks after the double closed coffin funeral—insisted upon by the funeral director and the coroner—Travis returned to LU campus at the persuasion of his parents. A little less innocence and a lot more sadness had settled on his young shoulders.

During a surprise visit the weekend after he returned, they'd made the trip to the campus to see him. It was a good visit and helped them heal just a little more.

At the end of their visit, he promised to call them as they bid him goodbye.

"I love you," he told them and waved them on their way.

They'd made half the distance home before a man with a history of DWI arrests crossed the double yellow line. His blood alcohol level had been three times the legal limit and his license had been suspended the last time he'd taken a trip through the court room.

His father was killed on impact; it took his mother a few hours longer to succumb to her injuries.

It was too much for a nineteen-year-old who had known nothing but the love and unending support of his family. If he'd only stayed home where he belonged, they would not have made the trip to visit him and they wouldn't have died.

It was time for him to forgive himself. There was no way he, at such a young age, could have recognized the sociopathic tendencies that led Sam to kill his wife and son.

The driver of the car that had hit his parents had been sent to prison for twenty years for vehicular homicide.

That part of his life was over and he wanted to make plans for the rest of it.

He would go to Florida. He'd hop a bus and be there in a couple of days. All he had to do was bide his time and do what had to be done next.

