

# Chapter One



Ghosts. They drifted in and out of the periphery of my vision, taunting me with their shapeless forms and formless shapes. Paralysed with fear, all I could do was cringe internally, and cringe I did.

I felt them more than I saw them, and they were my demons, and in their feeling was death...cold, cruel, and uncaring. Death was here to claim my wasted life, to reclaim the chance I hadn't earned. He was eager to encircle bony, lifeless hands around my throat.

My apprehension grew as the ghosts began whispering. Hissing, hateful voices ticked off my failures, one by one, and they brought with them scenes from my life. Mercilessly, incessantly, the voices drilled painfully into my head.

I clapped my hands over my ears, but the voices found their way into my head, became more insistent still...

Eyes closed tightly, the scenes grew only more vivid, more colorful, more real...

Tears streamed unchecked down my cheeks, and my body began to shake convulsively. The voices grew impossibly loud, and every cold accusation was a dagger in my skull.

I tried to speak, to scream, to beg them to stop, but all that escaped my lips was a wretched sob, then another.

There was only one avenue of escape. I sensed him behind me, watching my torment with calm and sickening glee.

I whirled to face him, took an instinctive step backward as I beheld the face of Death. Hollow eye sockets bored their gaze into my soul from under a menacing black hood. His skull was lifeless, and more: I felt a loathing of life, a hate so powerful it seemed to be consuming me, bit by bit, the longer I held his irresistibly terrible gaze.

I forced myself to take a step toward him, and felt a wall of fear that hit me like a physical blow. I stood trembling for a moment, steeled myself, then took another step.

My stomach twisted in a knot of revulsion; but even as I doubled over in pain, I forced myself forward another agonizing step. I fell at his feet finally, my breath coming in short, quick gasps.

Eyes begging for mercy, I looked up at him. Not a hint of compassion came from the skull's eyeless sockets. He mocked my pain, even seemed to *feed* off it.

I tried to drag my body closer, only to collapse again.

Hopelessly, pleadingly, I reached out to him, begging with my eyes shamelessly: *end it, just end it, please!*

Finally, he responded.

Slowly, purposefully, mockingly, he stepped forward, reaching for my outstretched hand. As he grasped my hand with a cold, viselike grip...

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I awoke, a scream caught in my throat. Sitting up with a start, I hit my head on hard glass, collapsed onto the cold blankets I had cast off in my sleep. Shivering, wiping tears from my face, I breathed deep, tried to calm myself. As my mind came fully awake, I became aware once again of my predicament. Hopelessness came crashing in on me. I frowned fiercely against more tears.

Shaking violently from the cold, I wrapped the blankets tightly about my body. I curled up in the fetal position, partly because it was so cold and partly because I didn't have room to stretch out: I was sleeping in the back of my car.

Thankful for my accidental foresight in buying a hatchback, I had pushed the back seat forward. That gave me enough room for nearly everything I owned and a makeshift bed.

I snorted in self-disgust, appalled that I should be thankful that my car was accommodating enough to also be my home. A month ago I'd have never considered it a possibility; now it was my reality.

Pulling the blankets closer, I tried to push my own thoughts from my mind. It didn't matter why I was here, it didn't matter what I did wrong or what I should have done right. It didn't matter that tomorrow scared me more than that terrifying nightmare.

Sleep was my only escape, my only reprieve; and now even my dreams were being tainted by my hopelessness. As it stole over me again, I heard the whispering, hissing voices that assured me I would find no peace tonight.

## Chapter Two



I awoke the next morning to car doors slamming and accompanying voices. Moaning, I tried to roll over, only to painfully ram my knee into a crate of clothes. I tried to rub my knee and bury my face in the pillow at the same time.

More sleep was what I wanted, what I really needed, but I knew I couldn't get that here, in the parking lot of a grocery store. In the back of my car.

Head pounding, body aching, I wiped a circle in the condensation that clung to the inside of the window. I raised bleary and bloodshot eyes, reluctantly, to face the day.

It was raining.

At least I still had a few cigarettes. Three, to be exact. I lit one, then spent the next several minutes rifling through the trash on the floor of my car looking for change.

Seventy-eight cents. Seventy-eight goddamned cents to my goddamned name. I cursed under my breath.

Clenching my jaw, I started my car, waited for the gas gauge to rise. It stopped before it started, resting firmly on "E."

That did it.

Sobbing, incoherent, I dutifully used every curse I knew in a high, shrieking voice that was not my own. I was frightening *myself*, but I still didn't seem to want to stop.

Then I caught something out of the corner of my eye, people. Curious, a small group had stopped in their tracks to watch the young man who had mistakenly thought he was alone with his insanity.

"Fuck you!" I screamed in that strange, scary voice. "Fuck you all!"

I slammed my car into gear and squealed the tires all the way to the street.

The girl behind the counter at the gas station was chewing gum and twisting a lock of hair absently around her index finger. She looked down at my little collection of coins on the counter and smirked. She started to open her mouth to make some comment; but at that moment, she looked up and into my eyes.

Her face went lax, the comment died on her lips.

*Smart girl*, I thought.

"Seventy-eight cents on pump number four," I hissed.

She nodded, still not speaking, counted the change.

Then I was headed for the freeway, as I heard my stomach start to wake up. I hadn't eaten for some three days now. All I could do was to ignore it as best I could, as I had to ignore my mind protesting with its practical concerns as I pulled onto the freeway.

My family had moved to Montana when I was young. We lived among the majestic beauty of the mountains and trees in the northwest region of the state until I became a legal adult and moved immediately west to Seattle.

From the day we moved there, I hated Montana. I cursed it whenever I got the chance, because I had never wanted to live there. But Montana had gotten to me in one way, one way I'll never forget. Among the expected hard winters and short summers and rednecks, there was one saving grace I had never expected: the woods.

In the woods I felt calm, hiking for hours, climbing trees and rock faces nearly every day, sometimes all day. I had always felt a kind of kinship there among the patient nobility of the trees and the quietly restless murmuring of the creeks. It sounded corny to me even as I thought about it, but the closest I had ever come to a feeling of peace was alone in the silence of a forest.

So I headed east on I-90, away from the city I had so eagerly set out for what seemed like lifetimes ago.

I had to keep continually pushing so many voices to the back of my mind. Not enough gas to get back to town, no money to even buy food, just go back to...

But there was nothing *to* go back to. Something had snapped inside of me, and I knew I couldn't be around any of that, any of those people anymore.

I just didn't care. I didn't care about any of it anymore.

It seemed strange to have to keep reminding myself of that, again and again.

So I screamed then, screamed at the top of my

lungs like the madman I felt like. I screamed until I coughed, cleared my throat, started screaming again. It drowned out the voices in my head a little bit. And to tell the truth, it felt kind of good, and I thought, *I wonder if one could consciously and purposefully drive oneself out of one's own mind, screaming oneself into complete insanity...*

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The car's engine sputtered once, twice, then came back full power as I coasted down the exit ramp. I shook my head, amazed that I had reached my destination at all.

I parked, turned the key off and closed my eyes gratefully, in exhaustion.

After a few moments, I opened my eyes and looked around. I remembered then why this place had come to mind. Friends had brought me here a couple of times, and it had struck me as too natural of a setting to be called a park. Far from untouched by man, you could almost fool yourself into thinking it was wilderness if you broke trail.

I sat behind the wheel, engine ticking, and smoked my second-to-last cigarette. I sat there until my mind starting asking just what I thought I was doing. Angrily, defiantly, I stubbed out my cigarette and got out of the car, locking it behind me.

Spots swam in front of my eyes for a moment, and I had to put my hand on the hood to steady myself. My makeshift bed in the back of the car caught my eye and I stared at it longingly, then shook my head. I'd come back later to get more

rest. Right now, while it was daylight and not really raining, I had to get something in my stomach.

Despite the years growing up in Montana, the only thing I knew I could eat for sure were wild blackberries. Everything else was at least *somewhat* questionable, and my stomach was not up for experimentation. It was, however, making constant gurgling and groaning noises, and starting to spasm from time to time. Of course, that wasn't just the hunger, either. More than a little anxiety laced my every thought.

Up the trail, there was a bridge over a small but strong creek. I sidestepped the bridge and walked to the water's edge. Kneeling down, bending over to get a drink, I flinched.

My own reflection, and I couldn't bear to look at it. I forced myself to, though, to examine the dark half-circles under my eyes. And my eyes, usually a bright blue, were now sunken and milky, dull and lifeless. My complexion could kindly be described as sallow, and my long blond hair hung limp, stringy and unwashed.

I made myself look, for a long time, thinking how much I looked like a corpse already. I hated myself for being here, for letting things get so far out of hand. It had been a long time since I had looked myself in the eye; and as I did, a tear escaped from one eye and slid slowly down my cheek.

Standing abruptly, I wiped the tear away with the back of my sleeve. I swayed a bit as another wave of dizziness came over me.

Shaking my head to clear it, I started up the steep incline of the nearest trailhead.

I regretted it immediately. Tired, sore, burned

out, my legs moaned in agony. Punishing myself, I pushed onward. I broke a sweat too quickly, but was too dehydrated to maintain it. My eyesight got blurry, then cleared, faded, came back. As it started to fade again, I tripped on a rock and fell to one knee.

I stayed that way a full minute, head down, forearm on one knee, other knee on the ground. Standing slowly this time, my vision was clear, and I remembered:

Blackberry bushes hedged the trail on both sides. Looking back the way I'd come, I saw that I had passed dozens of them in my self-absorbed frenzy to find them.

Like an animal, I pounced, picking with both hands and ravenously shoving them into my mouth one after another. Rivulets of juice ran down my chin, dripping to stain my shirt. I paid no mind to anything but the taste of *food*, finally. After three days, anything can taste like heaven...

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Twenty minutes later, I was on my hands and knees, vomiting painfully until I had parted company with every last berry. I rolled over onto my back afterward, eyes closed, trying to think of something I could eat. After a few minutes, I just stopped being hungry. Apparently my stomach had given up on me. Fine by me.

Lifting myself slowly from the ground, I dragged my tired body back down the trail. I felt old, so old I could *feel* myself dying. It took my last reserves of strength to half-walk, half-stumble back to the edge of the creek.

Careful not to look at my reflection, I knelt and leaned over the water. I submerged my face completely. A few quick gulps of the ice-cold water, then I felt bubbles tickle my cheeks as the air escaped my lungs.

*This is the way to die, they say, I thought casually. Just breathe in real deep; then you feel all calm and peaceful for a minute, then everything goes black.*

I lifted my face slowly from the water, wondering where on Earth that thought had come from.

"That's just not like me," I said aloud, my voice a little shaky, "To contemplate suicide when I still have a cigarette left."

My voice sounded strange there by the water, somehow unnatural.

Even more unnatural was the sound of my lighter, the soft click as sparks were cast into the path of the butane. I chuckled softly at my own off-color humor as the tobacco caught fire, inhaled deeply. Exhaling ringlets of smoke, I wondered if that had been my subconscious intention, coming all this way.

I shrugged. *If I'm going to die, better on grass than concrete, I mused silently. At least here my body would go to good use, dragged away and eaten by bear or coyote. If I died among people, the idiots would either incinerate it or bury it in a box, no use to anyone.*

An image formed in my head of a headstone over an empty grave, epitaph brazenly stating: "Here lies Jay. Unremarkable in every attempted endeavor save being a tasty appetizer."

Sprawled on my back, I smoked and gazed at the clouds that drifted lazily by.

At least my stomach wasn't demanding anything.

Apparently we were no longer on speaking terms, it being so unimpressed with my pathetic attempt to fulfill its simple request.

For a moment, there on my back in the grass, I thought I felt something akin to contentment. As the unfinished cigarette slipped from my fingers, it manifested as sheer exhaustion, and my eyes closed.