

See Jack run.

Run, Jack, run.

See Jack Die.

Agent of the Dead

A novel
by

NICHOLAS BLACK

Copyright © 2008 by Nicholas Black

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage, photocopying, recording, and(or) any retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in review.

Author's note: The events described in this work are fiction. As in, *not real*. Have not happened. Probably won't happen. And, unless you're whacked-out on some powerful drugs, nothing you read could ever happen . . . ever! All the characters are made-up, no more real than fairies and goblins and space aliens. So, seriously, if you should accidentally find a name, person, place, or product that is similar to any *real*, or living person, place, or product, don't start laying lawsuits on us. It's a total and complete coincidence, and your lawyers will laugh at you. This especially applies to ex-girlfriends and former parole officers.

www.NicholasBlackBooks.com

Copyright information:

Prologue

21 June, 325 AD . . .

The first ecclesiastical gathering in history, to eventually be known as the Council of Nicaea, was summoned on the day of the summer solstice. Constantine, ruler of Rome, chose this date to celebrate his initiation into the religious order of Sol Invictus, one of the two thriving cults that regarded the Sun is the one and only Supreme God.

It was held in a hall of Osius's Palace, and there were hundreds in attendance. The intention of Constantine, through this convention, was to create an entirely new god for his empire. A god that would unite all religions, and other very vocal and violent factions under one deity.

The factions were diametrically opposed and all argued vigorously for the adoption of their beliefs and their Gods to be a part of this new, unified religion. Throughout these debates the different factions became quite heated as they argued their positions.

53 gods were tabled for discussion. For 17 months they continued to ballot in order to narrow this list of potential deities. In the end, the list of gods had been voted down to just 5 prospects: Caesar, Mithras, Horus, Drisna, and Zeus.

Constantine, the ruling voice at the Council of Nicaea, had another idea. He proposed a merger of sorts, an amalgamation of the different deities. And this proposal enraged many of the independent factions.

Behind the scenes, while these decisions were being argued and debated vigorously, several religious factions were angered by this process. A secret group was formed to counteract the Council's actions. When the scripture and books were presented that would eventually become the text of the Christian Bible, this secret group had their own scriptures and text. They went beyond the books and Gospels of the bibles we now read.

And the story they told . . . is much darker.



See Jack Die.

1,685 years later . . .

R.H.Dedman Memorial Hospital, Dallas.

May, 9th . . .

My name is Jack Pagan . . . and I am four months and sixteen days old.

My name—Jack Pagan—is one that the doctors at the hospital gave me. Jack, because that was a hell of a lot better than *John Doe*. And my last name—Pagan—well . . . that's because I told those doctors they could keep all of their religious propaganda. Save somebody else. If there is a god, he doesn't seem to be in my corner.

Like when my life disappeared, where was *He* then? When the first few decades of my existence were snatched away . . . I could have used some faith. I didn't need a big sea splitting miracle. A floating bible would have been enough. I'd have settled for a toasted Jesus on a grilled-cheese sandwich, even.

But nope.

Just silence.

I don't actually remember what made the darkness come. There's this shrill ringing sound that seems to permanently echo in my head. Like some loud explosion that's stuck bouncing around in my mind, forever. A stagnant memory being replayed, over and over.

A DVD scratched just right to repeat, and repeat, and repeat the same second in time. An answering machine stuck on one fraction of one message. An anonymous frame in time that I won't be allowed to forget.

It never gets any duller, this sound. And it never leads me any closer to what actually happened. Whatever crashed my harddrive, did it completely. It's like, with that one loud pop, everything else was wiped-out.

These know-it-all doctors, they keep saying how lucky I am to be alive. Massive trauma to the base of my skull which caused,

“ . . . localized bilateral lesions in the limbic system, notably in the hippocampus and medial side of the temporal lobe, as well as parts of the thalamus, and their associated connections.”

That's doctor talk for *messed-up head*. They tested me for all kinds of brain disorders and diseases—*Cerebral arteriosclerosis* (hardening of the brain arteries), *Korsakoff's Syndrome* (deficiency of vitamin-B, or Cerebral tumors involving the third ventricle of the brain), and *encephalitis* (brain inflammation).

Negative on all of those.

They, in their white lab coats, with their European sounding names, and their accents, keep telling me that I am a testament to the advances in emergency medicine. They say I'm an example of the breakthroughs in neurosurgery.

They don't know the half of it.

I was told, by the attractive, tall neurosurgeon, that loosing my memory was like being reborn. Like I was fresh to the world. I could start over. Do anything I could imagine.

I told her that I liked my old life. Wanted it back.

She smiled one of those knowing, learned smiles, her greenish-grey eyes looking down on me like I was a fool, “But, Mr. Pagan . . . how would you know if you liked your old life? All your long-term memories are gone. Forever.” She shrugged, “Those parts of your brain are damaged beyond repair. You can't miss what you can't remember.”

And even though she wasn't trying to be mean, there was this condescending undertone to her words that told me I was an idiot. Maybe she didn't mean it. Maybe this was part of her getting me to cope with my new reality. But all I got out of it was, *idiot, idiot, idiot*.

They take an oath, those doctors, to save everyone . . . even idiots. So then I tell her that, other than my head wound, I feel fine. I explain to her how I want to work on getting my life back. She then corrects me, and I rephrase . . . I want to get my *new* life started.

See Jack Die.

And here comes that pity-laden smile again. And she gives me all this fancy talk about how the parts of my brain that hold long-term memories—predominately the *mammillary bodies*, circumscribed parts of the *thalamus*, and of the *temporal lobe* (hippocampus)—how they're destroyed, and will never be repaired. How I'll never remember anything that happened before Christmas Eve of last year. And she emphasizes the word *never* each time she says it.

“It's all gone, Mr. Pagan. You need to find a way to stop looking for your old life. It doesn't exist anymore. Try to imagine that it *never* did.”

I asked her why I still remembered words and locations on a map. I wondered, if my brain is so messed up, why I can still figure out the area of a square? How I remember that I like *Rocky Road* ice cream? How I like the *Victoria's Secret* models? How I could almost taste a thick crust pizza with pepperonis and mushrooms?

She carefully explained, with her eyes looking down her nose at me, that those things were stored in different parts of my brain. Parts that were still functioning normally. In fact, she said, my brain was performing quite exceptionally . . . considering the trauma that my head suffered.

I'm tired of this hospital. I'm sick of the food. I don't like the pastel colors that everything is painted. Mood calming colors. It's always cold and everybody that works here, from the doctors, to the janitors, are emotionally cold and distant. Like they're waiting for me to die, or leave.

I want to leave.

They want me to leave.

Then she asks me how the classes are coming. Amnesia patients—like myself—have to go to all of these special classes that the hospital offers. I think it's an insurance set-up. Kind of like them hedging their bets if we go loopy. The classes are on different subjects that are supposed to drastically affect our “. . . new life scenarios.”

There's a class on *Coping*.

A class about *Nutrition*.

One about *Anger Management*.

A boring set of videos on *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*.

Oh, and a long spiel about the '*Dangers of Prescription Medicine Abuse*'. That particular class is good if you're ever thinking about picking up an addiction, because they tell you everything you need to know to get your 'fix'. I learned more about drugs in that class, than most junkies learn in a lifetime.

Anyway, it's all legislated living skills. All of those important things you need to know about life, broken-down, sub-divided, and agreed upon by a board of doctors somewhere in New England—where they *really* know what it takes to have a productive life.

I told the lady doctor that I liked the classes just fine. That I'd whole-heartedly recommend them to anyone in my position. That they were really helping me put this all into perspective. They like to hear things like that, one of the nurses—a young kid—whispered to me after one of the classes.

I made it clear to the lady doctor that I would soon be ready to start my life anew. And maybe I was selling it too much. A bit overly optimistic. Because there were *some* things I was leaving out.

She nodded as she scribbled some notes down, asking me about my eating habits. I shrugged. I haven't been so hungry lately. Nothing has much taste. But that could be a commentary on hospital food. She laughed at that.

After all of these questions, she looks at me, like I'm an injured stray puppy. Like I'm cute, but too broken to take home. Her face is thin and symmetrical with a small perfect nose.

"Is there anything else going on that you would like to talk about?" she asks carefully.

And while I'm considering her question, she adds, ". . . anything strange? Anything at all?"

Did I tell her about the shadows?

Did I tell her about the things I see just before I fall asleep and just as I wake-up in those blue minutes near dusk and dawn?

See Jack Die.

About the screaming that comes from that *other* place?

Doctors—even fancy, know-it-all, neurospecialists—they don't understand things like that. Heck, I don't understand things like that. But I know that you get a padded cell and a Thorazine drip if you mention creatures crawling around in the darkness. People like me, who talk about the monsters . . . we end up slobbering pharmaceutical test subjects.

We become numbers.

Lab rats.

So, *no*. I didn't tell her about any of the things I see lately. And the whole time we're talking, I'm trying not to stare at the dark grey shadow behind the door, that's looking at this lady doctor as if she might just be dinner.

I

Deep Ellum, Downtown Dallas . . .

I'm about to turn five months old, so I decided I should treat myself. Because of my outstanding progress, and because there seems to be no criminal record of my DNA, finger prints, and dental records, I have been allowed to go out on my own, and search for a part-time job.

If I get a job and maintain it successfully for a few months, they will consider moving me into off-campus housing. That means I wouldn't be living at the hospital anymore. And that would be just like being released from prison. I guess.

Ricky, that young nurse I mentioned, he told me where I could find a good psychic. He knows things like that. Life things. Ever since I woke-up in the hospital he and I kind of became friends. He was working in my area, tending to all the head cases, like me, and we hit it off.

See Jack Die.

Anyway, I decided that instead of hunting for a job, I was going to do a little investigation into the paranormal. See, I've been reading everything I can about Amnesia, Retro-grade Amnesia, Organic Mental Disorder, Nervous System and Brain Dysfunction. All of it. I feel like I took a mini course in Neuropathology. But I'm looking for answers to questions that don't appear in books written by Nobel laureates.

Ricky says that doctors don't really know shit, and that I need someone who can *see*. And the only place he knows is a psychic by the name of Josephine. She has a small tarot-card, psychic paraphernalia store in Deep Ellum—a rather seedy part of Downtown Dallas where you can find tons of bars, small clubs, and head-shops. People in this part of town have lots of piercings, and motorcycles, and track marks running up and down their arms. From my classes I know that probably means *methamphetamines*. And those people are typically unpredictable and dangerous.

I have a yellow, crumpled page that I ripped out of the Yellow Pages, with *Ms. Josephine 'Channeler and Psychic'* in small black print at the bottom left of the page. And as I look up from the smudged page to the street signs, I see that I must be getting pretty close. Ricky said that I'd see a big red-neon marijuana leaf, right next to her place. And from the way Ricky seems to always have bloodshot eyes and a bag of *Doritos*, I figure he knows the area pretty well.

The street smells like it might explode at any moment. Like all of the fumes are flammable enough to start a runaway chain reaction. It's unseasonably hot in Dallas for the end of April. At least, that's what the local news says. I have to take their word for it.

When I walk by people, I look at them a little longer than I probably should, wondering if they are somebody I knew. But as I see the pieces of shinny steel poking out of their ears, and chins, and eyebrows, and nipples, I figure probably not.

All of this walking is kicking my ass. I'm in pretty good shape, just looking at myself in the mirror. But several months of laying on my back

in a hospital bed have made my body lazy. I find myself breathing hard after just a short walk. My classes stressed how important exercise is, and there is probably something to that. I'm going to mark 'Cardio' as an area for improvement.

My clothes are generic. Blue jeans and a green polo-style shirt. I don't remember my past, but I *know*, beyond any doubt, that I wore nicer clothes than these. These hospital hand-outs are itchy, and smell like moth balls. Ricky said it was good to look like a bum in Deep Ellum because that would keep me from getting mugged. I told him that if people robbed me they'd be upset because I don't remember where my wallet is. He didn't think that was funny.

Walking. Walking. Walking.

And with each street that I pass, I feel like I'm getting closer to something important. Something that will explain what the hell is happening to me. I'm trying to handle this like a detective might. I've been reading all sorts of detective novels that Ricky has been giving me. They balance out all the medical journals I've been lording over.

Fiction to combat the Non-fiction.

Fantasy to wrestle with reality.

Too much of either is a bad thing, I suppose.

In these detective novels, the guy is always facing some intricate, woven melange of unconnected facts and details. Information in every direction. And what he does—Detective Todd Steele—is to test the most logical things first. Every detail. One by one. Until he's left with the oddball, ridiculous, unorthodox possibilities. Good fiction works that way. So that's the way I'm doing it.

I've tried the hospital's doctors. The scientists. The Medical Journals. The courses. *Nothing*. Ricky got me onto the Internet, and we searched around for hours that melted into weeks. *Nothing of substance*. So I thought to myself, what would Detective Todd Steele do? Once out of grounded and logical answers, he would investigate the not-so-normal. And here I am, surrounded by the people that society tries to forget.

The homeless.

The degenerate.

The despicable.

And I just know that I'm close. The sun is hidden behind clouds for the moment, and it's a respite from the atomic level of heat that has been bathing all of us for the last thirty minutes. My green shirt is sticking to my chest and stomach, and I can feel the drops of sweat crawling down the sides of my chest, from underneath my arms, down to my hips. It's a dirty feeling. Sticky.

A large, red truck honks at me as I cross the street, and I wonder if he knows me. I smile and wave at him, But then he yells, "Get the fuck out of the way you homeless piece of shit!" And it's pretty clear from the way that he inflects his words that we were probably *not* acquaintances in my forgotten past.

Man up, or back down. That's what Detective Todd Steele would say. Of course, he always carried a nickel-plated .357, snub-nosed, stainless steel revolver. It's a lot easier to 'Man up' when you're packing. But I keep walking. Keep looking.

It's an odd numbered address, so it will be on my right. And it should be here pretty quick. Marijuana leaf. I hope I didn't miss it. Red neon should be fairly prominent. I doubt I could accidentally walk by something like that.

Sweat is creeping down into my eyes, from my brow, and it's burning. And the fumes from all of the delivery trucks—which there seem to be thousands of—are making my stomach turn. I feel like I need shots. Like I might imbibe a lifetime's amount of carcinogens in my blood, just from this one little trip.

And just as I'm about to start backtracking, I see a ten-foot tall glowing marijuana leaf. Just like Ricky said. Glancing at the yellow page, now moist enough that you can read both sides of the paper without turning it over, I see the black ink. And I hope that she can answer some of my questions.

I notice a small sign, carved on a rectangular piece of what might have been driftwood.

MS. JOSEPHINE
Psychic/Channeler/Spiritual Advisor

I place the sweat-moist yellow page in my generic jean pocket and reach for the door when it opens rather suddenly. A short chubby black woman stares up at me with large honey-colored eyes and a strange look of recognition.

Startled, I said, "I was trying to find, to talk to, um, Ms. Josephine?"

She studied me for a moment, looking me up and down—a lot like those doctors did. She cocked her head to the side, her rope of bead necklaces rolling and folding over each other as the beads made little noises. She had on a black dress with strange green and blue squiggles on it.

I could smell incense, and there were candles burning somewhere nearby. It was just the way I imagined it might be. At least, from standing at the threshold, looking into the relative darkness.

And then she nodded, extending her chubby little arms, and said, "Come in, Jack. I've been expecting you for six months."

2

Ms. Josephine's, Deep Ellum.

She walked me in without saying another word. Instantly all of the smells of the outside—the trucks, the trash, the sweltering concrete and runny tar that filled in the cracks in the road—all of it was gone in a flash. Replaced with the spice of cinnamon, vanilla, jasmine, and even the faint hint of some kind of berry floating off from somewhere.

This store, if in fact it is a store, is dark and cramped. It seems like the only source of light is the flicker of an occasional candle here and there. You can almost see books and small sculptures. There are lanterns, sticks, straw hats, and other more difficult to describe objects. It could be located in Somalia, this tiny store. Or in some jungle in the Congo. Dallas was gone.

This was, if I had to put one word on it . . . voodoo. But even that's not enough.

There were several rows of strange books and new-age objects. And as we walked by I caught some of the titles:

The Other World.

Land of Shadows.

Walking Among the Dead.

Yeah, all of it feel-good stuff. In the background, as we approached a round wooden table near the back of the shop, there were lots of little trinkets. Pieces of wood and clay, bent into strange shapes. And Ms. Josephine must have sensed that I was curious, because she started stopped and nodded.

“Dose are spiritual barrier-markers,” she said in a soft voice. And there was just a very clear French accent in her words. Creole, maybe.

“Do you need those?” I asked. “I mean, *why* do you need those?”

She continued tugging me to the small round table. In the center was a metal ash tray of some kind. There were several small burning chunks of something, and lines of smoke rising gently, twisting and turning around each other until they dissipated above. I've never been in a jungle, but this is what I imagine it might smell like right before you meet the witch doctor. I half expected to see a bubbling cauldron or shrunken heads.

“ . . . oh, we don't 'ave nothin' like dat, 'ere, Jack,” she said as if my thoughts were something she could read out of the air.

I had this uneasy feeling that I would never look at the world the same way after this. Like I was crossing some imaginary line. A line that I would never be able to uncross.

“How do you know my name?” I asked, feeling a bit naked around her.

She sat down on a rickety old chair that looked like it was made by children. Blind children. She motioned her thick fingers for me to do the same. And when we were both down in our squeaky groaning chairs, she placed her hands—palms down—on top of the table.

See Jack Die.

"I bet you 'ave a lot of questions you want me to answer," she said, blinking her big, liquidy eyes at me.

Strangely, I felt safe with her. Almost like she was a teacher, or a relative. Someone I could confide in. I'm not sure why I felt like this. But you sense this warmth about her.

"Did Ricky tell you I was coming over, today?" I asked. "Is this some kind of little joke you guys will have at my expense? I don't mind if it is. I like a good laugh like the next mental patient. This whole—"

"Jack," she interrupted, ". . . you need to relax and listen to what I am going to tell you."

"I am relaxed," I blurted anxiously. "I'm good. Ready to listen. Hundred-percent open to your explanation." My eyes danced around at all of the 'spiritual barriers'.

She tapped her hands on the table, raising her eyebrows at my hands. I sighed, and placed my hands on the table. At this point in the game, there was no point in playing the skeptic. I came here for answers . . .

". . . and dat's what you goin' get," Ms. Josephine said.

Again, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, her words answered my thoughts. I nodded. "Okay, okay." I took a deep breath, and let my shoulders hang.

She smiled at me, "Good, Jack. You're doin' really good. Sometimes it takes people two or tree visits just to get demselves comfortable enough to listen. To *see*. Da way we goin' do dis is simple. You ask one question. And if I can answer it, I will. Den I will ask a question. And you got to do da same. Dere are no secrets 'ere. And if you 'ide tings from me—"

"I won't," I interjected. "I mean, you'd already know anyway, right?"

She laughed, sending the thin lines of smoke tumbling in all different directions. "Alright, you first."

I cleared my throat. Be smart. Be like Detective Todd Steele. Ask the most logical, most reasonable, questions first.

"How do you know my name?"

“Your friend, Ricky.”

I nailed that one.

She continued, “. . . 'e talked to me about you a few months ago. February, if I remember right. 'e's takin' a likin' to you. Really wants to see you get out of dis intact.”

Something about that seemed ominous. *Get out of this intact?* I nodded slowly. Okay, so Ricky made some calls. So far, nothing I can't live with. He's a young kid, and young kids seek answers in unlikely places. Idealistic youth and all that.

“Now,” she said. “My question. What's your last memory . . . before it all went dark?”

I considered her question for a while, just staring at the lines of grey smoke as they wiggle and vibrate to unseen forces.

“Truth is, I don't remember anything. I just, I've got this sound in my head. Like a . . . like a hammer smashing down on a large anvil. Or, a bat hitting a baseball. That *crack* sound. That's it.

“And then it's just darkness and flashes of bright light. Which, I've been explained by the doctors, was just bits and pieces of the medical procedures as I went in and out of consciousness. Probably some random neurons firing, too. Brain chemistry reacting to trauma.” I shrugged. “Just the noise. That's as far back as it gets.”

Her fingers lifted and lowered as if she was playing the piano, or typing on some computer. She closed her eyes for a moment, and started to gently rock back and forth. I half expected the ash tray to spark up, or a bright flash of light, or something. But no. She just rocked back and forth for a minute or so and then opened her eyes.

She had beautiful eyes. Unique in a way that I can't put into words. Like they had been drawn by a great artist. They were too vivid. Like there was a tiny universe inside each one of them.

“My turn?”

“Yes, Jack.”

See Jack Die.

“Okay,” I closed my eyes for a moment, “. . . can I ever get my life back? My memories? Are they gone forever, like the doctors keep telling me?”

“Dat's many questions,” she said. And before I could reply she continued, “. . . but I tink I can answer you. Your memories, and your old life, dem doctors is right. Dey are all gone, forever. You won't never get your old life back.”

That was just about the biggest letdown of the century. My body slumped forward, as my eyes lowered.

“But,” she added, her voice lower than before, “. . . just 'cause somethin' is lost, don't mean we can't find it in other places.”

I looked up, my eyes narrow and confused.

“You see, while your old life is gone, and your brain is broken, dat don't mean nothin' on da other side.”

Stay logical. Be an investigator. Remain objective about all of this. “So, my memories are all gone, but you can get them back?”

“I can't do nothin', Jack. But I can show you da way. But that path, it's a path dat is very dangerous. A journey dat you may not want to take. Cause it's one of dose tings dat, once you start it, you can't ever stop. Not until it's all over.”

“I'm confused.”

She nodded. “Okay, child, tink of it like dis. Your memories, dey's like a computer. Your computer got broken a bit. Messed-up your memory. But when you were using it, all of dose times before your accident, you were sending copies out. So dere is another copy of your memory, somewhere.”

“Somewhere . . . where?” I asked, knowing that this was about to get uncomfortable.

“De other side,” she said softly.

“The *other* side?”

She leaned forward, placing her hands on mine. They were warm. And her touch—human touch—felt good. I could feel her trying to empathize with me.

“Dere is another place, between dis world and da next. Your memories, and da details of your entire life, dey's dere.”

“Can you get them?”

“No, child. I can't.”

“You can't, like, *channel* them or something. I mean, you're a psychic, right? You call up the dead and talk to them.”

“I'm a channel, yes. I don't feel tings da same way an others might. But we's different.” She lifted her fingers briefly, kind of shrugging with her hands. “Psychics are like professional athletes, we're all playing on da same field, but we 'ave different skills.”

“What are *your* skills?” I asked, still unsure where this was all going. I hoped she wasn't going to ask me for money. Not that I wouldn't have paid, but that I only have a twenty-dollar bill, and what's left over from the bus ride and a *Double Quarter-pounder with cheese*.

“What I do is commune with da dead,” she said matter-of-factly. “I try to 'elp people dat are stuck in limbo. People dat can't move on. I try to 'elp dem. Sometimes it means talking to deir children or deir parents. Other times, I just listen to dem. Let dem explain tings dey could never admit when dey was livin'. I'm a friend to da departed who can't transcend.”

I wanted to ask her so many questions, but the one that kept repeating behind my eyes was, “Where are they? These people who are stuck, where are they stuck?”

“Dey's stuck in a place very nearby.”

She stared at me for a moment, and then a slight grin appeared on her face as she cocked her head to the side and squinted. “'ave you started seeing dem yet?”

See Jack Die.

Them. The shadows. The things that run around when I'm falling asleep. The little creatures that form from the darkness, and lurk among us. I didn't have to answer. Ms. Josephine seemed to already know.

"And when do you see dem?" she asked, her hands gripping mine more firmly than before.

My mouth and throat were suddenly quite dry. "When I'm tired, mostly. Right as I fade off to sleep, and sometimes when I'm waking-up. That's when the hallucinations come."

"Dose are *not* dreams, child. Dose are da dead. Da wandering souls. Dose dat can't move on. And other, darker tings, too."

I didn't really know how to respond. I'm either going crazy, or she is, or we both are . . . or neither of us are. I actually hoped it was one of the first three. That I could deal with. I can stomach brain disorder. I can palate dysfunction based on severe trauma to the head. I can deal with stress-related dementia.

What I don't want to hear is that the things I see are real. I want something I can take a pill for. I want an answer that can be cured by 20 cc's of this, or three milligrams of that. Electroshock? Sign me up. You want me to stand in front of a group of strangers and tell them I was touched in inappropriate ways by my uncle? No problem. I'll do whatever it takes to be rational. For this to be sane.

Anything but this.

There are no ghosts in Todd Steele novels. The dead don't commune with the living. Shadows don't jump out from behind doorways and gather around sick people, waiting for something to happen. Things that you can't see don't scream at you to look away.

No, none of these things ever happened to Todd Steele.

"Ms. Josephine," I asked, ". . . can you see them, too?"

"No, child. Not like you can. Whatever 'appened to you, it opened a doorway to da other side. I can 'ear dem. I can even talk to dem. But you . . . you can see dem. And my guess is, dey can see you too. Dey's

goin' try and communicate with you, sooner or later. It's only a matter of time. And when dey do, you 'ad better be prepared."

"And how do I do that?"

She patted my hands several times and then backed away, standing slowly. I could tell by the way she stood, that she was aching.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh, dat's just my old bones lettin' me know who's boss."

She didn't look older than forty. Fifty tops. And her skin was clean, her face energetic and powerful. She seemed healthy.

Again, with her parlor trick, she replied, "Oh, I'm much older dan fifty, child."

"Really?"

She smiled as she walked to a small doorway that was almost hidden from the front of the shop. Several strings of plastic beads clicked and clacked together as she disappeared into another room. A minute later she appeared again, holding a dusty leather-bound book. It looked about a hundred years old, with yellowed pages.

"Much older dan dat," she said as she laid it down in front of me.

I looked up. "What is this?"

"I want you to go back to the 'ospital and read dis. I want you to understand what you're getting yourself into. When you're done reading it, you bring it back and you can give me your answer."

"I need to pursue this," I insisted. "Nothing is going to change my mind."

I told her how I needed to know what happened. Who I was. What I was. I told her that there might be a family out there—a mother, or children—looking for their father. People might be counting on me. And I suddenly disappeared. For them, and for me . . . I needed to follow this as far as it takes me.

"Read da book, child," she said, patting me on the shoulder. "And when you're done, we'll talk about it."

See Jack Die.

I opened the book and noticed that it was in some language I didn't know. And actually, it was in a language I had never even seen before. "What is this?" It was all sorts of dots and swirls and scribbles. It looked alien, or nonsensically childish.

She laughed politely, ". . . you know dis language, even if you don't remember it. Da pages read from bottom to top, and from right to left. Give it a little time and you'll read it better dan da *Dallas Mornin' News*. You've got da sight now. It's your choice if you use it." And with that she took me by the hand and led me slowly up and out of the store.

This whole thing was such a whirlwind that I couldn't tell if I was walking, or if we were both floating. Maybe those incense made me high. Maybe pot fumes were drifting in from the head-shop next door. Maybe all of the important connections in my brain were unraveling.

Wires disconnected.

Retarded neurons banging their heads against the insides of my skull.

Lots of maybes and very few certainties.

When we got to the door she took my free hand between both of hers and placed my palm on her head. And I felt something. Almost electric. A vibration. Then she released my hand and her eyes locked with mine.

"Da shadows wit da burning eyes," she said very seriously, ". . . 'ave dey approached you?"

"No," I said, a bit unnerved. There was something eerie in her words. "Who are they?"

"You don't never talk to dem. Never. Do you understand me, Jack?"

I nodded, glancing down at the book that suddenly felt very heavy. As if the pages were made of lead.

"Dose . . . dey's looking for people like you. People who can cross. People who can *see*. And dey . . ."

"What, Ms. Josephine? They *what*?"

She shook her head, her eyes glancing nervously around. "Don't you never talk to dem. Dere are tings on da other side dat can be dangerous.

Tings dat will do a lot more dan run around in da darkness of night. Da ones with da red eyes, you'll 'ear dem by deir screams. 'orrible screams."

I swallowed deeply. "I've heard screams."

"Den you don't 'ave as much time as I tought." She opened the door, rushing me outside, "Go now, Jack! Read dat book and come back to me da second you're finished. Your world is about to change."

And as I walked out into the street, the sun was gone. Clouds had taken over the sky. The temperature had dropped from the 80s, to what felt like the 50s. Night was only a couple of hours away.

And I didn't want to be out when the monsters came.

3

R.H. Dedmen Memorial Hospital.

Later that evening . . .

I didn't eat much that night. My stomach was twisted in about a thousand knots. And when I finally sat down to look at the book, all I saw were scribbled pages, empty of anything I could understand. I tried looking at it in different colored lights. From different angles. Even got real close to it and breathed on it, giving the bottom of the first page a hot liquidy breath. Blank, nothing more than old, crinkled egg-white paper . . . with squiggles. I rented *National Treasure I* and *II*, but that didn't even help.

The book looked old and valuable. And it had that musty old book smell. The odor of nostalgia and history. But what it didn't seem to have were any words I could recognize. I tried squinting at it for a while,

but that just gave me a headache. I even closed the book, and then reopened it, really fast. Like that would make a difference. Todd Steele doesn't have any clever advice for magical old books . . . I checked.

So, I called young Ricky. He sounded like he was eating something when he answered the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Ricky, this is Jack."

"Oh, hey man. What's up? You talk to that psychic chick?"

"Uh . . . yeah," I replied, ". . . she gave me this book and I—"

"Hmmm?" Ricky said.

"I said that she gave me a book. Like a voodoo book or something."

"What's it called?"

And that was a pretty good question, because I had never even thought to ask. "Not sure, hold on a second." I reached across the bed and grabbed the dusty old thing, dragging it back across the bed. "This damn book is heavy," I said as I flipped it back and forth, turning it over onto my thighs. "I don't see a title."

"What kind of book doesn't have a title?" Ricky asked as he chewed on something that made his words bloated.

"She said that it would help me understand what's happening to me."

"You talking about all of those shadow thingys that you keep hallucinating?"

I sure hoped he was right. That would be wonderful if all of this was just me loosing my mind. "Yes. Whatever it is I keep seeing. She says they will come more and more. Until I start seeing *other* things."

"And the book will explain all of it?"

"I guess."

"I'll be over in a few minutes," Ricky said, between chews, ". . . I'm finishing up a little grudge match on-line. This guy from Germany has been talking big shit all week about how he will take me down in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. So I have to put his ass in check."

See Jack Die.

“You're playing a video game?” I asked, thinking that my little 'seeing the dead' problem wasn't very high on his list of interesting things.

“He's stuck in this building, in the south of the city, right now. I'm going to sniper his bitch ass and then I'll be on my way. Ten minutes, tops.”

Click.

And the line was dead. And my head still hurt. And my stomach felt like it had turned inside-out and was being pricked with a hot iron. And really, I'm not sure why I think that Ricky, a 22-year-old nurse who smokes more weed than *Cheech-and-Chong* is going to be able to help me. I hope I don't eventually find out that he was my kid.

13 minutes later . . .

“Smoked his bitch ass!” Ricky says as he walks into my room. He was wearing baggy tan khakis and a long, red pin-striped sweater. He had a *Texas Rangers* baseball cap on, covering his shaved head. “Germans can't fight.”

My place near the hospital is modest, but comfortable. Our tax dollars at work. Think of it like one of those hotel rooms where you can stay for weeks on end. Like where junkies and drug dealers stay so that the government can't ever snatch them up. There's a little kitchen nook. A bedroom, with a bathroom so small you can extend your arms and touch both walls.

The living area is in the few feet of space between the kitchen and the bed. Everything is either blue or brown. Blue Formica covers the table and counter tops. Blue carpet, and light blue floor tiles for both the kitchen and bathroom. Brown shelves and furniture. This would probably be like entering the 7th ring of Hell for an interior designer.

And I've got a small refrigerator that can hold little more than a meal at a time. It's almost the same scale as a *Barbie* Refrigerator. But then,

this is just temporary living, until I get on my feet and the hospital case worker in charge considers me fit enough to have my own place in town.

I've actually got a meeting with my case worker, Dr. Smith, in a couple of days. I'm supposed to talk to him about how I'm coping. And how my job hunt is going. I probably won't mention any of this *other* stuff to him. Something tells me that it would probably set back my progress . . . at least, in his eyes.

"Is that the book?" Ricky says as he drags his feet across the carpet, leaving little Ricky trails in his wake.

I nod, lifting the thing towards him. He reached out and took it, and his skinny arms almost buckled. "Geez! What's this made out of . . . lead?"

I laughed, "That's what I said."

He sat down on a small brown stool that might actually be a coffee table, we're still not certain. He laid the book on his thighs and opened it delicately, using just the tips of his fingers to lift the cover.

The book was covered in a dark, leathery material. "Think this is, like, dried human flesh or something like that?" He lowered his head and studied the inside of the cover. "What language is it written in? It looks kind of like Arabic."

He looked up, "I took a course in Middle-eastern studies. This could be some old terrorist propaganda. They do that, you know."

I shrugged. "Ms. Josephine said that I would be able to read it soon enough. But I've been staring at the first page for over an hour and it still looks like nonsense."

"Maybe there's a key," Ricky said, slowly turning the pages. "Lot's of old books have keys."

I pointed to the bottom of the page, "Ms. Josephine told me that it's read from the bottom up, and from the right to the left."

"That makes sense, I guess."

"What part of any of that makes sense?" I said as I frowned.

See Jack Die.

He closed the book. "It's something that they don't want people reading. Whatever it says, the people who wrote it thought it was a secret. Thus the absence of a title, and any other instructions about its use."

He handed the book to me, almost struggling, and leaned his head back. "You know, maybe it's music. Do you know anything about music?"

I know that I like some of it, and hate most of it, I told him. Country music makes me feel like taking prescription medicine until I can't see straight. Rap makes me want to do a drive-by. All the other stuff they call rock, I'm not even sure about that. I like jazz. Just jazz.

Ricky smiled, his eyes lighting up, "I took a class on music appreciation. And sheet music follows a system, just like the written word."

"I've lost my memory, Ricky. I'm not retarded."

"Yeah, yeah. But listen . . . not all people write music in the same way. Think about tribes in the jungles of Africa, or South America. They don't read sheet music, so they find other ways to record their music, like dots and squiggles and shit. Maybe this is that."

I sighed, "You think my magical, no-name book is musical notes?"

Ricky crossed his arms, "Look, Jack, I'm just trying to think this all through. Like an investigator would. I'd think you would be a tad bit more open-minded about all of this. You did just wake-up with your memory erased. You're the one seeing ghosts and shit. Anything is possible."

I crossed my arms, realizing that he was right. I was getting frustrated and it was clouding my judgment. "Okay. So, if I can't read it, and we can't find what language it's written in, well . . . then what?"

"The Morgue," Ricky said, his eyes wide as he nodded slowly.

I squinted at him. "What in the hell are we going to learn at the morgue?"

He stood up and walked to my balcony door, peering out into the night. "That's where the dead people go. So, if we go there, there

should be a shitload of spirits floating around, or whatever. Maybe the book would work there.”

He turned back toward me, holding his hospital ID in his left hand, fanning it back and forth, “And . . . I can get us in. Probably wouldn't even be that busy right now.”

That was the most ridiculous idea that he had come-up with yet. This was quickly deteriorating into an epic waste of time. For sure, we would both be less capable adults when all of this was over. What was next?

Dungeons and Dragons?

Japanese Animal Pornography?

Finger painting with mustard?

No, all of this was getting too creepy. Sane people don't engage in this kind of behavior. I should know, I've been taking a class on *Integration with Society*. I'm going to end up one of those losers who works in a comic book shop, instructing teenagers on what issue of Super-Mutant Fish is the best.

“So,” Ricky pressed, “. . . what do you think?”

I'll get my jacket.