

The 23 evils must be captured . . .

See Jack Hunt.

Agent of the Dead

*A novel
by*

Nicholas Black

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Prologue

Their plot to destroy the foundations of Religion, hatched in secret in the year 325 AD, it had not succeeded . . . not yet. But like all such conspiracies of debauchery and chaos, this story is not over. Often, what seems like chance and fate, are merely well thought out conspiracies.

For what none but a privileged few knew, was that the 23 evils souls had escaped the Land of Sorrows, exactly as planned. Through their persistence and diabolical dedication, they had crossed back from the land of darkness and shadows, to the Earth, exactly as it had been prophesied.

And this dark plot, born the exact same time as our religion was born, it is only just beginning. The days until the End are numbered. Steadily approaching. And these 23 evil beings, who chose to go against the will of God, they are walking the Earth. And they are not on a mission of peace. Unstopped, they may bring about the

beginning of the end.

And only the Pagan can stop them . . .



Addison Circle, Dallas, Texas.

July 10th . . .

My name is Jack Pagan . . . and I am six months and seventeen days old.

I can tell you one thing for certain. One exquisite promise. The truth of truths. And that is that things *do* go bump in the night. The things you don't want to see . . . they *are* watching you. When people talk about ghosts and goblins, they might be joking with you, but I'm not.

All of that stuff that no right-minded person beyond the age of 12 would believe in . . . it's really there. Not that I'm an expert on this stuff. Hell, you could probably get better information by watching the *Sci-Fi channel* late at night. You know, right after *Lake Placid 7*, or some deadly giant Anaconda movie. That's when you might get to learn something about the dark world beyond ours.

Me, I'm just the biggest dupe in the universe. The most numb-skulled half-wit to ever walk among the dead. But then, I guess that makes me kind of qualified for this. I see things crawling around that most people don't.

Some people, like my friend Ms. Josephine, she can hear them. Voices from another place. Echoes of the dead and what not. She calls it, *communin' wit da dead*. She's kind of creepy most of the time, but she knows things we can't know. Hears things that none of us can hear.

I don't have any idea how she sleeps at night. I have a hard enough time closing my eyes when I know the world could disappear at any

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moment. But at least I can close out the monsters, if only for a brief while. Ms. Josephine, she hears them whenever *they* want to talk.

My friend Ricky, he says that we are gifted—Ms. Josephine and I. I lean more towards cursed, but that's a semantic argument. Ricky says that arguments like that are absurd, and just to *accept* our new roles in this world.

Our new jobs as trackers.

Skip tracers of the darkness.

As hunters of evil.

I'm not really sure what we are, anymore. I'm still learning how to be a functional member of society. And you can't talk about monsters with normal people. Sure, they'll smile and nod their head. You know, trade a story or two about something a friend of a friend of a friend told them. But the second your gone, they laugh to themselves, and you go right on the nutbag crazy list.

Instead of people saying, "Hey, there's Jack," they say things like, "Here comes that lunatic that believes in ghosts."

" . . . that moron that hallucinates."

" . . . that dickhead that believes in monsters."

So, Ms. Josephine and Ricky and I, we basically keep our secrets. No need to spook the neighbors. And that is really difficult not to do. Especially when I'm glancing out across the balcony at a guy a few apartments over who is surrounded by these small, shadowy creatures that I call, *spooks*.

He's just standing there in a pair of shorts and loose shirt, probably thinking about his taxes, or his girlfriend, or his sports car. Maybe he's happy. Maybe he's sad. I'll never know. The wind is barely moving, just enough to make it comfortable this morning.

In his left hand is a magazine or journal or something. I can't tell if there's a picture of a yacht on the cover, or if it's a big house. Something expensive, I'm sure. So this guy, this guy I don't even know other than passing him near the elevator a few times, he's just relaxing. Doing

pretty good for himself if he lives in this place.

The loft apartments here are super expensive. If Ricky wasn't *ugly rich*, then I wouldn't be living here, for sure. So I watch this successful guy ponder the fabric of the universe. And even though I don't know anything about him, other than that he lives two floors below me, and four apartments to the right, I know that he's not long for this world.

There are spooks all over the place. They are short and thick, hobbling around, black as the darkest parts of cold space. They're just climbing, bouncing around. They're hanging on his balcony wall, coming in and out of his loft, studying him like he's already dead.

Part of me wants to yell down to this guy; warn him. But it wouldn't make a difference. If the spooks are around, he *won't be* much longer.

This guy I don't know at all, he's marked for death by the surest thing in the universe: the dark little creatures that work for the other side. Ticket salesmen for the Land of Sorrows. Otherwise known as Deadside.

And they're really excited today. Like they get a bonus for this guy's soul or something.

These are some of the things I get to see during a typical day.

This unsuspecting successful guy, down and to the right of me, he glances around, just enjoying the smell of the different flowers that have blossomed their new life and color this morning.

Crape myrtles, and roses, and morning glories, and plums.

There's even the slightest hint of jasmine in the air. At places like this, they spend a lot of money on landscaping. Pretty colors and smells to cover the dirt, and concrete, and jagged metal.

Lots of secrets are buried like that.

This guy, he looks up at me and waves. And it's not one of those jerk-off waves. He takes his magazine and just kind of points it out to the world as if to say, look at how good we live.

I wave back, knowing that I probably won't be seeing this guy in the

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hall too many more times. Judging by the spook activity that's exploding all around him, he'll be cold as Christmas by the time the sun goes down.

I'll be reheating cold pizza, and this guy will be getting ripped apart by things more horrifying than anything he could ever imagine.

I

The Omni Business Park, Dallas.

2:42 pm . . .

“We need legitimacy, dude,” Ricky says as we ride the elevator upwards. He's dressed all businessy, wearing dark grey slacks and a blue sweater. So out of character. Normally he's sporting baggy jeans and a shirt with some silk-screened drug symbol on it. He's purchased a new office location for us in a very nice business park in North Dallas, so I guess he's focused on making good impressions.

If it's any representation of the rest of this building, the inside of this elevator is awesome. Dark-tinted mirrors run from the floor to the ceiling, the floor numbers are illuminated in blue and green on this hi-tech screen, and there appears to be granite tiles on the floor. Fancy in a way I can't even imagine.

“A place like this,” he explains, “it makes people feel like you've been

vetted. Instant accreditation.”

His theory is that a place like this is so expensive to office in, that people would just assume we were a legitimate, revenue producing company. He has been selling me on the idea of opening up our own place for several weeks, and I finally caved in.

Ricky, I guess he got his business sense from his parents—who are probably rich enough to loan Donald Trump money. He's decided to succeed at our new venture.

“Raw materials, for a finished product, for profit,” he says. “. . . it's the American dream.”

That seems a little simplistic, I say. What are our raw materials? What is our product? How do we make a profit?

He scoffs at my silly musings, as if I'm some child trying to understand particle physics. Simpleton me, I'm just not seeing where we *rake in* the dough.

“Dude,” he says as the elevator door slides silently open, “you and Ms. Josephine and me, we're the raw materials.”

I would scratch my head if I didn't think it would be too cliché. We walk across this super soft, grossly expensive grey carpet on our way to probably the nicest office on the 7th floor. I'm still wondering how the three of us somehow equal profit. But then, I never took fancy economics courses in college. At least, not that I can remember.

We walk past a large reception desk with a girl who looks like she came right off the cover of *Sport Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue*. She's got shoulder length black hair, dark exotic skin, and piercing green eyes. Ricky struts on by and nods, while I try and keep the bottom of my jaw from dragging along the carpet.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Chamberlain,” she says. Even her voice is sexy.

“Hi, Sara,” Ricky says.

And you don't have to be clairvoyant to know that he's already got designs on her.

“This is Mr. Pagan,” Ricky introduces as we slow to a stroll. “He’s one of the associates at A-L-G.”

And I’m just going with the flow at this point. Being around pretty girls is still fairly difficult at this state of my life. I don’t know if six and a half months of social awareness is enough to prepare you for close interaction with attractive females.

“Hi, Mr. Pagan, I’m Sara,” she says, extending her hand. Of course, it’s perfectly manicured. Why wouldn’t it be.

I just kind of nod and shake her hand gently. I hope it wasn’t too gently. Ricky’s always telling me that you want to make a good first impression. That people read you in the first six seconds they come into contact with you. Like a book. And you only have that first six seconds to make a statement about yourself. If you mess it up, it takes like infinity to fix it. And I don’t have that much time, I don’t think.

Luckily, before I have time to say anything monumentally retarded, Ricky asks her, “Did they install the routers yet?”

Sara finished shaking my hand, very thoughtfully, and then turned to Ricky as she checked an appointment register in front of her. Her wonderful eyes lifted, “The guys from *Cisco* left about an hour ago. They said they’d be back in the morning to do the testing on the equipment.”

Ricky smiled, looking at me, “How perfect is she?”

Very, I said.

Then we headed toward our new office. I’m sure Ricky and Sara were both trying to decide how long would be the appropriate amount of time before asking each other out. We made our way to the last office in the corridor. And on the doors, in big professional gold metal plates, were the letters ‘ALG’.

A-L-G, I said to myself. And I’m curiously chewing on my bottom lip.

Ricky is just about beaming with excitement. Like he might explode into a bunch of tiny balls of glitter and light, with like happiness goo or something.

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He slides a card across this black box on the side of the wall near the door handle, and a green light flashes a couple of times. Without speaking he hands me one of these magical cards, and for real, I feel like I'm James-freakin'-Bond.

This is space alien technology, I tell him, staring at my new magnetic card like a caveman holding a Zippo lighter.

"This," he says, pausing for effect, ". . . is the offices of the *After Life Group*."

And then he opens the door.

And as I walk in and take a look around all kinds of questions and ideas are bouncing around in my head. But the only words I can think to say are, *Holy shit!*

2

Omni Business Park (ALG Office), Dallas.

13 seconds later . . .

“What *is* all of this stuff?” I say, my eyes trying to figure it out. There are all kinds of large screens, computers, scanners, monitors, and gadgetry I can't even figure out. The walls are pristine white. Spaceship white. There is stuff here that I will never understand no matter how long I have to learn.

This is like being inside some secret nuclear lab.

Some discrete military project.

“Money was not an object when I had my dad's contractor do the designs,” Ricky said as he led me to a large floor-to-ceiling window that faced down into the interior of the building. Several floors below us was a garden, and several restaurants where people could relax during their lunch break, or on their way in and out of the bank on the first floor.

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On the different screens on the walls there were all sorts of things floating by. *CNN* here, *MSNBC* there. We even had *Al-Jazeera*—you know, that middle-eastern news station that shows westerners getting their heads chopped off and stuff.

There were screens scrolling words in languages I'd never seen before. It was like the whole world was streaming by us, in real time.

I turned to Ricky, What is this place?

“This is our H-Q. Our headquarters.” He walked in pointing to several computer terminals that were covered in plastic. “These babies here aren't even available to the public. My dad knows this dude over at *Apple*,” he shrugged.

What's so special about them?

“They're the fastest computers on the planet earth.”

I laughed, but Ricky didn't. He nodded, his eyebrows raising. “No, seriously, Jack. This technology is at least three or four years from being made public. It's all stuff they were working on for the military, and some budgeting bullshit put the project on hold.”

So, I said, it's better for surfing the web?

Ricky sighed like I'm the dumbest dumbass that has ever walked the planet. “This gives us a competitive advantage.”

Over who?

“Over the monsters we're hunting for.”

Ricky really is a cunning bastard some times. I smiled, looking at the dormant computers as if they might be the first step in us saving the world. Technology will be on our side, this time.

“We're going to need to be able to do research on a global level, as fast as possible. These Evils, or whatever, they probably won't be making too much noise. But they have to leave footprints somewhere. We find out what their footprints look like . . .”

He clapped his hands together suddenly, “Bam! We got their asses.”

For the next couple of minutes I just walked around looking at the different screens and interesting devices. There were large unopened

cardboard boxes from *Best Buy* and *Circuit City*, and near them were smaller, plastic bags and containers that had electronic components and gadgetry that could probably be used to develop a nuclear fission program.

How much did all of this cost?

“Lots,” Ricky said as he knelt down and played with some electrical box that had several flashing lights on it.

Who paid for it all?

It's all investor money, he tells me as he stands up and walks toward the west-facing wall, which is the giant window that goes from carpet to ceiling. And Ricky's glancing upwards at something.

Investor money? Who are the investors?

Ricky's looking down, then up, then down again, staring at something I obviously can't see. “Oh, uh . . . my parents. They're the investors. They own fifty-one percent. You, me, and Ms. Josephine, we own the other forty-nine.”

But I never put up any money, I told him. I don't even have any money. Seriously, I only get like five-hundred and twenty-nine dollars a month from County Services. That barely keeps me in pizza.

“Our money is Sweat Equity,” Ricky says as he touches some button near the window and it suddenly turns black. Like pure magic. One second you can see through it, the next, it might as well be a black mirror. He looks back at me with a devilish grin, “Liquid crystal.”

I don't understand about *sweat* equity. I don't even understand much about equity.

“Don't stress, dude. Our investment is our time and effort. Thus, *sweat*.” He touches another button and the giant black mirror becomes a window again. Somebody should get Ricky a television series.

“This is our new business. We are the *After Life Group*. A-L-G.”

So . . . what do we actually do to turn a profit, again?

Ricky walks back to me, placing his hands on my shoulders. “We are going to rid people of unwelcome supernatural forces and negative

spiritual entities.”

Like *Ghostbusters*? I ask, kind of warming up to it. I just saw *Ghostbusters 2* the other night, so I'm kind of experienced in this field.

His eyes rolled, “No, Jack. Not like *Ghostbusters*. This will be for real. We are going to investigate hauntings, and possessions, and anything phantasmic that comes our way. This will be our excuse to ask the kinds of questions we will eventually have to ask in order to find the twenty-three Evils. You get it?”

I have to admit, Ricky is way smarter than me on lots of things. “So,” I say nodding, “. . . this is just our cover.”

He smiles, nothing but pearly white teeth.

What happens when we actually get jobs? I ask him kind of nervously. What do we do then?

He shrugs, “We'll just have to wing it. Heck, most of them will probably be swamp gas and old plumbing. And if we do come across a bonafide haunting, well . . . you and Ms. Josephine can figure it out.”

I ask him, Do our other 'investors' know what we're up to?

His lips seem to lower over his teeth as his eyes dart around a bit. “Thing is, it's hard to convince people that we have a mission assigned to us from the land of the dead. The whole, you die, and wake-up, and die again thing . . . it's hard for people to wrap their minds around.”

Fair enough, I said. But I hope nobody expects us to turn a profit.

“You'd be surprised,” he said, walking across the room to a small table with a bunch of paperwork on it. As he's thumbing through some technical stuff he says, “We need to get more oranges. We're out of oranges.”

“I didn't eat the last one,” I explain. “I left it for you.”

He nods to himself, “Well, we need to go shopping, anyway.”

I figure now is as good a time as any to tell him about the guy in our building. I tell him, “Hey, you know that kind of young guy that we see on the way into the elevator every now and then? The one who lives below us a couple of floors, I think he's single?”

Ricky looks up, considers my question, then nods, "Yeah, the attorney guy."

Right, well, he's on his way out. His apartment will probably be on the market soon.

Ricky stops shuffling through his papers and turns his head slightly, "I doubt it, Jack. That guy runs marathons and stuff. He was voted as one of Dallas's most eligible bachelors last year."

Well, I say, as many spooks as I saw around him, he's probably going to stay a bachelor.

Ricky turns towards me, "Shit. That sucks. I was going to try and put that guy on retainer for us. Supposedly he's some badass attorney."

I fold my arms, "Unless he's going to represent us from the Land of Sorrows, I'd say we need to keep shopping."

I shrug.

He shrugs.

And then we hear a knock at the door.

3

Dallas Tollway, North.

Tuesday evening . . .

As Ricky coasts in and out of traffic, playing what feels like a game of *Leap Frog* with our lives, I'm trying to study the Texas Drivers Handbook. This is the one that is dirty yellow, with large red, yellow, and green dots on the cover. I have to learn all of this stuff if I ever want a chance at getting a driver's license.

Even though Ricky says he doesn't mind taxiing me around, I have to get my license for personal reasons. I need to have my freedom. I want to be able to drive to the grocery store on my own, without risking going to jail. All kinds of horrible things happen in county jails. Not to mention that the place is probably crawling with spooks and gatherers.

Anyway, I need to get something other than my hospital ID card so that I don't look like a damn mental patient when I try to cash a check.

It's all part of me becoming a functioning member of society . . . at least until I find and kill the 23 Evils that escaped the Land of Sorrows when I thought I was the savior of all mankind. Once that's done, I don't really care what people say.

I'm on page 5-6, reading the section on *WARNING SIGNS*. All of these little signs are yellow with a black border. Inside are a variety of arrows and squiggly lines and skidding cars to alert the driver to, “. . . conditions which lie immediately ahead and tell them what to look for.”

When I read this to Ricky he starts laughing. Actually, it's more of a cackle. Like a coyote or a hyena. “You'll never see half of that shit. You just have to memorize it for the test.”

But what happens in an emergency?

“In an emergency you're going to probably flip-out, anyway. No sign is going to keep you from doing that. You need to just get behind the wheel and learn it in the streets.”

I don't know if that's a good idea, I say. What if I get into a wreck, learning how to drive?

“No, Jack. We'll head out to some old parking lot and let you drive around. Practice parking. Skidding. J-turns. Bat-turns—”

“Hold on,” I say, flipping through the manual, and I can't find any section on Bat-turns. J-turns, either.

“Jack,” he says turning his head sadly, “you have so much to learn.”

As we near Addison Circle, where our penthouse loft is located, we stop, waiting to make a left across the tollway. I turn to the section on making left-hand turns in different scenarios.

We are turning left from a two lane, one-way, onto a four lane, two-way. There are several steps that need to be followed and as far as I can tell, Ricky is violating each and every one of them.

I think he sees me grading him, and he says, “What?”

I close the book, reaching to make sure my seatbelt is firm across my chest so that *when* we have a collision I might make it out alive.

He laughs and we somehow make it across the Tollway, and find

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ourselves at our parking garage. Three minutes later we're riding the elevator upwards, waiting for our floor.

As the doors open we are bathed in cool, freon-charged air as we walk across white, marbled tile on the way to our loft. We live in 6-A. It's big—about 4,200 square feet. And it's lavish. Ricky's parents had the oak floors redone, even though they were brand new.

The loft is spacious, with the first floor being composed of a large dining area, a large living room with an entertainment center that rivals the movie theaters. In the center, just behind the staircase is a decked-out kitchen with every kind of appliance and cooking utensil known to man. We have a giant Sub-zero refrigerator and freezer combo that looks like it could hold a full cow, un-cut.

This penthouse, it has a balcony that runs around three of the four sides, since we're out on the corner of the building. And really, it's so nice that I feel like I'm breaking the law by living here. I almost feel guilty, except that Ricky says his parents like the idea of him getting me back together as a person.

As weird as this seems to me, I'm pretty sure that I wasn't wealthy in my past life. The furniture is all white leather. The tables, thick glass—so thick that it has a blue hue to it. The lights are “moody,” Ricky says. “The perfect place to entertain.”

He's also been pressing me to start talking to women. This is another one of those things that I haven't been able to 'get' yet. I'm ordering every kind of romantic comedy that there is from *Netflix*. But you know, they make it look so easy. I definitely wasn't a Casanova in my forgotten past.

Ricky and I unload the bags of groceries near the mammoth refrigerator and then sit at the bar. I've got my Drivers Handbook. He's got a small notepad.

I read, *A flashing red light . . .*

He says, “Give it a glance and then haul ass.”

A flashing yellow light . . .

“Slow your roll to around forty-five or fifty, glance, then haul ass.”

A flashing red light, with a flashing left-hand green arrow . . .

His eyes narrow, “Glance in all directions, then perform a late-apex, controlled slide to the left. Try not to let the ass-end come around.”

I'm in real trouble. I ask him, “How is it you're still alive?”

Ignoring my question he scribbles something down on his notepad, chewing on the back of his pen between thoughts.

“Jack?”

Yeah.

“These twenty-three Evils . . . will they be coming after us?”

I'm looking at the standard colors of road signs. “I'm not certain,” I answer. “. . . maybe.”

Red: Stop or prohibition.

Green: Indicated movements permitted, direction guidance.

“If the Evils take a proactive approach, wouldn't it behoove them to just come and kill us?” Ricky suggests.

It's something I had considered, I say. I just don't think they'd risk it. They're on the run, and we're like, INTERPOL or something. Mostly, I figure, they'll try and stay hidden.

Blue: Motorist services guidance.

Yellow: General warning.

“But if they *did* come after us, they would certainly have an easier time finding us, than us finding them,” Ricky says as he writes something down. Then he taps on the page a few times, “We're easy to find. Too easy.”

Black: Regulation.

White: Regulation

“And we haven't even considered the art dealers and collectors that still want the Book of Sighs,” he adds. Just making sure I am totally and completely unable to ever sleep again. That's a headache I don't even want to think about. So I'm just reading colors.

Orange: Construction and maintenance warning.

Brown: Public recreation and scenic guidance.

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I sigh, closing my ugly yellow little book, folding my hands on top. “What should we do about it? What can we do about it? Run and hide? Rich eccentric collectors will always find a way to get to us. They may even try to use your family.”

Chewing on the cap of his pen, Ricky says, “Maybe the more public recognition we get the better. Our exposure could be our safety net.”

Will that work? I ask him.

And even though he says, “Sure,” I don't think he's so sure about it.

Then something comes to my mind. “You know,” I tell him, “I don't know if the Evils know that we're on their trail. They all took off before the Angels gave me the third-degree. So, there's a good chance they have no idea what we're up to.”

Ricky nodded to himself, and went back to scribbling.

And even though I'm reading about pavement markings, all I can think about is Kristen. That one moment when I saw her in full color, on the other side of the door I wasn't supposed to open. She was the most magnificently beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Of course, I was dying at the time, so my perspective might have been a bit skewed.

But that moment, seeing all her perfect and wonderful beauty, I felt like we had eternity to spend together getting to know each other. Falling in love again. And then, in that instant, her face turned cold and haunting. And there was suffering and contempt in her menacing eyes. And she told me,

“ . . . you *killed* me . . . you killed me when I was so young. I had my whole life in front of me. You robbed me of that. You stole my life away from me, Jack. And then I was sent to the Land of Sorrows. Why? Because my faith was not *strong* enough?! I was twenty-three years old!”

And right at that moment my stomach churns and I feel like the most horrible scumbag that has ever existed. Even though I know I would never have killed her . . . I know that I did. The fact that it was in my vile invisible past is no excuse.

I'm a monster that forgot his teeth.

The devil that misplaced his horns.

I killed the only person that I can remember loving. And the real stink of it is, now I have to do it again. To this girl that I loved enough to drown myself in the most exotic and terrifying ways, I have to do the one thing I could never do, but must have done. This delicate creature that I gladly walked among the dead for, I have to look her in the eyes and snatch the life right out of her.

And the thing about it is, I know when the time comes, that even though I can't possibly do it . . . I will. I'll do it because God and the Angels have ordered it. I'll do it because she represents true evil in this place.

And I'll do it because I'm a killer. Somewhere in my programming, hiding in my neurons, buried in my DNA, is the coded sequence for *murderer*.

I hate the *me* I used to be.

The *me* that I, biologically, still am.

"Jack?" Ricky says, startling me from my morose thoughts.

I look up, "What?"

Delicately he asks, "You want to talk about . . . *her*?"

No.

I flip over to *Vehicle Registration*, and he goes back to scribbling. He's avoiding me avoiding myself. We're just one-upping each other with emotional procrastination.

It's getting to be that darkening, aqua blue when the sun has run west for cover, and the sky looks like a thousand miles of deep ocean. The French say that this time of the evening—dusk—is the time between dogs and wolves.

For me, it's just when the shadows start walking.