

Everlasting Life

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A Denton Ward and Monty Crocetti Mystery

By

William Mize

Other Books in the Denton Ward and Monty Crocetti Series:
Book 1: Resurrection Angel
Book 2: Everlasting Life

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This book is dedicated to

James C. Rowan

Seminole High School, Seminole, Florida, Class of 1979

A true friend, a talented artist, taken too soon.

"The strength of the vampire is that people will not believe in him."

From the film, "Dracula", 1931

"Modern man must rediscover a deeper sense of his own spiritual life. To do this, he is obligated to struggle with evil, to confront his own shadow, to integrate the devil."

Carl Jung

"But those rare souls whose spirit gets magically into the hearts of men, leave behind them something more real and warmly personal than bodily presence, an ineffable and eternal thing."

James Thurber

One

To Denton Ward the emergency room waiting area was a swarm of motion – blue scrubbed aides, nurses, doctors and orderlies moved throughout the hallways with quick efficiency.

It was a swarm of noise – the dull buzz of conversation, the rhythmic cadence of overhead pages, the shrill ring of telephones.

It was a swarm of emotion. The fear of loved ones dying, the jubilation of a new birth or positive diagnosis, the anger at an unjust God ruling that death was the proper end.

It was all too much for him. The movement, the sound, the noise, the emotions, they all washed over him like a tidal wave, threatened to drown him, suffocate him.

He could feel the sweat on his brow. He could feel his heart slam against his chest. He could feel the voices start to murmur inside his head.

He thought he would go mad, but he had to be strong.

He had to hold it together.

He had to have a drink.

It was a thirst, a need that lived deep inside Denton. It was a dark animal, crouched in the corner.

Pain brought out the animal.

Fear brought out the animal.

He put a few coins into the soda machine, pressed the button marked *Sprite*. He cracked open the can, then poured some of the soda down the drain of the nearby water fountain. He looked left, looked right, then reached into the pocket of his trench coat. He pulled out a small airplane

bottle of vodka, twisted the cap off with his teeth. He held the neck of the bottle over the opening in the aluminum can.

“C’mon,” he whispered. “C’mon - ”

Denton took a deep breath and tried to calm his shaking hand. As he poured, some of the vodka splashed on the rim. He touched the can to his dry lips and sipped it clean, determined to get every drop necessary to appease the animal. He threw away the empty bottle and took a full, long drink.

He let out a sigh, closed his eyes and tilted his head back. He could feel the vodka burn the length of his throat and into his stomach. He could feel the warmth spread throughout his body.

He felt safe.

He felt sane.

The animal was satisfied.

The voices became quiet, his heart began to slow down.

“Better?” Monty Crocetti was leaning against the soda machine, her piercing blue eyes evaluating Denton with each passing second.

“Yeah,” he said. “A little bit.”

Monty reached out and rubbed his shoulder. “Scared?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Growing up in a mental institution will make you kind of jittery around hospitals.”

“I’m not talking about that.”

“I know, I know,” he said. “The answer’s yes to that, too. I just feel so helpless. He’s my best friend. He’s my lawyer. One minute he’s trying the case of his career, waving that damn fountain pen around, in front of millions of people on Court TV and then next minute he’s on the floor, barely breathing. Minute after that he’s in the hospital emergency room and there’s nothing I can do to help him. Nothing.”

“I know baby.” She touched his hand that held the can. “But you’re a psychic, not a faith healer. I’m a private eye. My job is to investigate people, not diagnose diseases. We’re both just human, and all we can do is sit out here and wait.”

“Are you sure we couldn’t go wait in the car?” Denton tried to smile, turn his discomfort into a joke.

“You big silly.” Monty slid her arms around Denton’s waist, the bangles on her wrists colliding. She pulled herself close, buried herself under the folds of his black trench coat. Her black leather jacket blended in, allowed her camouflage and safety in his arms. She placed her head on his chest, careful not to get her red lipstick on his starched white shirt and tried to find his heartbeat. After a few seconds she found it. With each beat, her own heart seemed to match it. She could feel them coming together, become one. She held him tighter. Denton kissed the top of her jet-black flat top and she sighed.

“How was the ambulance ride over?” he said.

“Rough,” she said. “I tried to sit down and hold his hand, but the two paramedics were all over him and kept pushing me out of the way. Then there was the starting and the stopping and the siren and the shouting.” She let out a long sigh. “I’m frazzled.”

“You want some of this?” He held out the can.

She frowned. “Maybe a little bit.” She took a baby sip, coughed, then handed the can back. “Holy crap.” She coughed again. “I don’t see how you drink that stuff.”

“Lots of practice.”

She growled at him.

“Hey,” he said. “It’s like you eating tofu.”

“Being a vegetarian is not the same thing as being a - ”

“A what? A drunk? Is that what you think I am?”

“No baby, no,” she said. “You know that’s not true. I know why you do it. I just worry sometimes.”

Denton frowned and decided to steer the subject away from himself.

“How is he? Do we know yet?”

“Not yet. Doctor’s still looking at him. Shouldn’t be too much longer.”

“God, I hope he’s gonna be okay. Maybe it was just a fainting spell.”

“I’m sure he will be.”

“He didn’t look good, though. He looked skinny. Skinnier.”

“He did look pretty pale,” Monty said. “I didn’t even recognize him when we walked into the courtroom. His jacket just kind of hung on his body.”

“Maybe he’s just lost weight because of all the stress. This case is pretty important, I mean, a kid could get the electric chair or whatever just for defending himself against some rednecks.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Monty said.

“But what if he’s not?” Denton looked into her eyes. “What’ll we do then?”

“We’ll do whatever we can.”

“You’d stay home then, wouldn’t you?”

Monty’s eyes narrowed. She pushed herself away from Denton and crossed her arms. “So that’s what this is all about.”

“What?”

“Me going to San Francisco. I told you, Den – it’s my family. It’s my sister’s wedding. I’m the Maid of Honor. I gotta go.”

“But that was before Nicholas - ”

“Don’t put this on Nicholas.” Her arms remained crossed and her voice lowered to a hiss. “If Nicholas needs help, either him or his doctor will get on the phone and call for help, and when he does we’ll be there for him.”

“But if you’re out there - ”

“Then you’ll handle it.”

“Me? You have got to be kidding. Can you imagine me having to go to a hospital every week to take him to his appointment or something?”

“Well then, if you can’t help, you’re going to have to get out of the way.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You’ll have to let go.”

“No way.” Denton stood up straight and his jaw went tight as he spoke. “There’s no way that I would abandon him.”

“I didn’t say abandon him. I said let go of him, in that Buddhist, Zen sort of way. You’re going to have to let go of me, let go of him, let go of everyone, eventually.”

“You? Let go of you?”

“Of course.”

“But we’re engaged - ”

“No, no baby - ” She brushed his cheek with her hand, tucked an errant lock of his long, blonde hair behind his ear. “I don’t mean like that. I mean that you’re gonna have to let me go on vacation. You’re gonna have to let me go on business trips, you’re gonna have to let me go, period.”

“But what if he’s dying?” Denton pleaded. “How do I cope with that?”

“That’s the answer everyone’s got to come up with on their own.”

“How’d you answer it?”

“Sometimes with God,” she said. “Sometimes with a good cry. Sometimes just by looking at you. These things make me feel strong.”

Denton was silent for a moment. He looked into her eyes and he felt calm. He felt strong.

“You’re right.” He took a deep breath, looked at the *Sprite* can, then threw it in the trash. “I’m just a little off right now.”

“This is what I’m saying.” Monty took a step closer and returned to her place next to him. “Let’s not talk about that stuff right now. Let’s just pray that Nick’s okay and we can get him and you the hell outta here.”

“Amen to that, sister.”

The storm around the couple continued, the colors, the sounds, the chaos of the hospital swirled around them; but between them, in the center, in the eye of the storm, it was peaceful.

Quiet.

Safe.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too, baby.”

A tap on Monty’s shoulder broke the reverie.

“Miss Crocetti,” the nurse said, “they can see you now.”

Two

Denton and Monty were shown into a small office, where Dr. James Ray was sitting. Standard diplomas and certificates were on the wall; one from Johns Hopkins slightly askew. Requisite family photos on the desk and on the bookshelves.

Family, but no the nuclear family. One of Dr. Ray and another man. Smiling, squinting into the Florida sun, arms draped around each other like sweaters, to comfort and warm.

“Mr. Ward, Miss Crocetti – please - ” He motioned with a thin hand to the two hard back chairs before him. Folders, magazines and journals lay stacked neatly beside the far chair. “Thank you both for coming in, I appreciate it.”

“Thank you for seeing us,” Monty said.

“That’s quite alright,” he said. “I know how much the two of you mean to him, how close you all are.”

“So you’ve been his doctor for a while?”

“More than either of us would like to admit,” he laughed.

“So what happened?” Denton said. “Can we take him home now?”

“Den - ” Monty hissed.

“Not quite yet,” Dr. Ray said. “He’s very weak and needs to rest and get some of his strength back.”

“Can’t he do that at home?” Denton said. “He’s got a pretty nice condo. We can take him right home, tuck him in and get him taken care of.”

“If he had a cold, I’d say yes, but unfortunately that’s not the case here. It’s a bit more serious than that.”

“Serious? Didn’t he just faint?”

“I’m afraid that Nicholas is very, very sick, and this fainting spell is just a symptom of a larger problem.”

“Sick?” Denton said.

“Oh God.” Monty dug her crucifix out of her shirt and kissed it.

“What?” said Denton. “What is it?”

Dr. Ray exhaled and ran a hand through his long graying ponytail. He pushed his thick glasses up on his nose and looked at Denton and then Monty in succession before he spoke.

“Nicholas has AIDS.”

“Big deal,” Denton said. “Millions of people have it. Let’s get him out of here.”

“Den,” Monty said. “Will you stop it?”

“It’s okay,” Dr. Ray said. “It’s okay.” He raised his hand to keep the peace. He exhaled, paused, then spoke.

“You’re right, Mr. Ward,” he said. “Millions of people do have it. But right now, Nicholas doesn’t just have AIDS.”

“There’s more?”

“There’s more.”

“Jesus,” said Monty, who again kissed the cross around her neck.

“Like what?”

“God – where do I begin?” The doctor seemed to be getting older before their very eyes. As he listed each infirmity, a year – a decade seemed to be drained from him.

“Diabetes.” One finger up.

“Hypertension.” Another finger up. “His blood pressure is through the roof. All this stress, his crappy diet, which leads us to his heart problems.” Third finger up. “He’s got coronary artery blockage that you couldn’t dynamite out, but we really can’t operate because of - ”

“His AIDS,” Monty said.

“And he’s just been diagnosed with Kaposi’s.”

“What’s that?” Denton said.

“It’s a predominantly HIV related cancer.”

“I can’t believe this.” Monty was clutching the crucifix. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Denton didn’t move. Didn’t look at the doctor.

“This is wrong - ”

“No, I’m afraid not - ”

Denton shook his head. “No. No way. He looks fine.”

“Looks can be deceiving, Mr. Ward.”

“I want a second opinion.”

Dr. Ray smiled. “So did he. I’ve known him for fifteen, twenty years, and even he didn’t believe me when I told him.” He reached out and picked up a tattered and wrinkled manila folder. He put it in front of the

pair. "It's all there, Mr. Ward. Second opinions, third opinions. Blood work. T-cell counts. Arteriograms. Biopsies. Everything."

"I just don't understand -"

"Let me explain it to you this way, Mr. Ward. Imagine that you are a soldier, in the field. Carrying say, 5 hand grenades. Now imagine that each of those hand grenades has had their pin pulled. And you have no idea which one will go off first. Which one will kill you. That's where Nicholas is right now. He's put up a good fight, but right now, I'm thinking that the fight is almost over."

"Bullshit," Denton said. "I refuse to believe that."

"Whether you believe it or not, Mr. Ward, it's true."

"That's a monster." Monty was focused on the medical folder. "So he's had it for a while?"

"Quite some time." Dr. Ray said. "Of course it started with the HIV test coming back positive. That was about 10 years ago. But then as his practice started to go south, and his stress levels and lifestyle went to crap, so did his body."

"I can't believe he didn't tell us." Denton was slumped in his chair, eyes focused on the folder, and on another distant point, a thousand miles away. "We're his friends."

"Everyone handles it differently," Dr. Ray said. "Some tell their loved ones immediately, others after time, others battle it in silence or in anonymous support groups."

"And Nick?" Monty asked.

"I think he battled it alone."

"Oh God." Monty wiped her eyes, tried to hide her tears, tried not to smear her mascara. She failed at both.

Denton reached over and took her hand into his, laced their fingers together.

"And now what?" he said.

"We move on," Dr. Ray said. "As best we can."

"How?"

"Together."

"You've done this before?" Monty asked.

"Oh, yes." Dr. Ray smiled a sad smile and then picked up the photo on his desk. "This was my husband. That's not the official word for it, but that's what he was." He brushed off the dust. "Man, we were so young back then. Just out of college.

"We were at Six Flags over Georgia. He just had to ride those damn roller coasters. Couldn't go to Busch Gardens - 'They're made out of metal. Real roller coasters are made out of wood' he'd say." He passed the picture over to Monty. "That was one of our last good days together before I had to start working my internship for twelve to eighteen hours a day and then watch him die for whatever was left out of twenty-four."

"I'm sorry," Monty said.

"Me too," Denton said.

"It's quite alright," Dr. Ray said. "It's probably the first of many depressing conversations we'll have during this time."

"Probably."

"So where do we go from here?" Monty was on the edge of her chair, back straight, feet on the floor.

"It's his life," Dr. Ray said. "All we can do is be there for him."

"And we will."

"But for right now, he needs rest."

"What about drugs?"

"I hate to say it, Miss Crocetti, but he's really beyond drugs."

"Are you going to keep him here?"

"Maybe a day or two, enough to get him back on his feet. After that he can be taken home, as long as there's someone there with him."

"What?" Denton said. "Like pill taking or pillow fluffing? Hell, I can do that."

"It's beyond fluffing pillows, Den - " Monty said.

"Quite right," agreed the Doctor. "It's like taking care of a small infant, except this one can communicate to you exactly what he wants. Or doesn't want. Things like giving him a bath or shower, washing his hair, shaving him, giving him his medications, brushing his teeth, taking him to doctor's appointments, feeding him - "

"No problem," Denton said. "I can do that."

"I'm afraid that this is more of a job for a trained caregiver."

"Like who?" Denton said.

"Like me," said a voice from behind them.

Three

The trio turned around to face the striking young woman who stood in the doorway of Dr. Ray's office.

"Hello," She extended a hand. "I'm - "

"Adrienne!" Monty squealed. The diminutive private eye was out of her chair and in front of the woman in a second.

"Monty!"

The pair hugged and rubbed each other's back.

"How are you doing, girl?" Monty took a step back to examine her friend. Tall, thin, and regal with hair the color of a bat's wing and braided in a single strand down to the small of her back. She wore the requisite blue scrubs with a long sleeve white T-shirt underneath. A few bangles and leather straps on each wrist accented her pale, almost translucent skin.

"Clean and serene, baby," Adrienne said. "Clean and serene."

"How many years?" Monty asked.

Adrienne reached in her pocket and pulled out a white plastic fob key chain. "12 years. And you?"

"Fifteen." Monty smiled. "But no key chain."

The pair laughed and looked each other up and down some more.

"I take it that you two know each other," Dr. Ray motioned to a chair for the nurse to sit.

"Yep," Monty said. "Been a million years."

Denton coughed the *Introduce Me* cough behind Monty's back.

“Sorry, baby.” Monty touched his shoulder. “Addy, this is Denton Ward. Den, this is Adrienne, whose last name I actually don’t know. We never used them at meetings.”

“That’s okay,” Adrienne laughed. “It’s Flaherty, a good Irish last name.”

“Meetings?” Denton asked.

“Yeah,” Monty said. “You know those Thursdays when I told you I was going to kickboxing practice?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, after kickboxing, I’d go down to St. Mary’s for a Narc Anonymous meeting.”

“Narc? As in narcotics?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Den – honey – you don’t go around telling everyone that you’re going to meetings to make sure your heroin habit doesn’t come back.”

“I’m not everyone. I’m me.”

“We’ll discuss this later, baby.” She put a single finger on his shoulder and pushed him down into his seat. “Right now we’re here to talk about Nicholas.”

“Exactly.” Dr. Ray opened the file folder. Adrienne had opened up her Palm and was busy pecking notes into it.

“Adrienne will be Nicholas’ home care and hospice nurse,” Dr. Ray said. “She’ll be responsible for doing all those things that we spoke about earlier – his day-to-day care and things of that nature.”

“Excellent,” Monty said.

“And remember,” Denton said, “Money is no object. I want Nick taken care of.”

“I’m doing this for free,” said Adrienne.

“What?”

“Free. As in no charge.”

“Why, may I ask?” Denton’s eyes narrowed behind his dark glasses.

“Let’s just say that I’m returning a kindness and leave it at that.”

“Yes,” Monty said. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“What about references?” Denton said.

“I have five pages of references and I’ll be glad to send them to you, along with phone numbers and addresses, if you like.”

“That would be great.”

“What’s your e-mail address?” She held the stylus poised over the Palm, ready to write.

“I have no idea.” Denton looked at Monty, who just sighed and shook her head.

“You don’t have an email address,” she said.

“I should, though, shouldn’t I?”

Monty shook her head. "That's okay Adrienne, you and I will get together later and discuss this -"

"Right." Adrienne smiled and touched the screen of the Palm. "Now the first thing I want to do is visit his condo and make sure it's ready for him."

"Ready for him?" Denton said. "What's that mean?"

"Things have got to be changed. Moved around. Nick's going to be weak and need some help moving around."

"Changed?"

"Yeah," Adrienne said. "I go through and make sure that it's got things like handrails on both sides of the stairs, good lighting so he can see where he's going, make sure all the lamp or appliance cords are covered up, you know, just do a general safety inspection for the patient, to make sure that he's going to be safe and not hurt himself. Lay in medical supplies, that sort of thing."

"Wait a minute," Denton said. "You guys are talking like this is some sort of long term thing, like he's going to be laid up for weeks or something. He's going to want to get back to work, and he's going to want to go back and win that trial."

"Den," Monty said, "you need to realize that Nick's legal career is just about over."

"No -"

"Yes," Dr. Ray said. "Nicholas is exhausted. He's burned his candle at both ends about as much as it's going to be burned. We're down to a bit of wax and a little bit of wick."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that he doesn't have long to live and right now his main concern should be getting well, getting strong and having a quality of life that affords him some comfort and equanimity before -"

"Before what? He dies?"

No answer from Adrienne.

No answer from Dr. Ray.

"That's bullshit," Denton said. "Bullshit."

"It's not bullshit, Mr. Ward," Dr. Ray said. "It's the truth."

"No." Denton slumped down into his chair. He looked at the floor, looked at the white, white tiles beneath him.

"I can't lose him," he said. "I don't know what I'd do without him. Go crazy. Something."

Monty rubbed his back. "It's gonna be okay. Adrienne's here and she and I are gonna get together and make sure Nick's condo is all set up just the way it should be and then when he comes home, you can go over and visit every day."

"Really?" Denton looked at Dr. Ray, looked at Adrienne.

“Sure.” Adrienne said. “No problem at all. Like Monty said.” She gave Denton a sincere smile and then turned to Dr. Ray with the stylus at attention.

“So he’s on a BRATT diet right now?”

“Yeah,” Dr. Ray said. “Keep it simple and let’s make sure he can keep food down and get his basic nutrition for a day or two, before we change anything.”

Adrienne tapped a few times on the Palm. “I see.”

“You see?” Denton perked up in his chair. “What’s that mean?”

Adrienne smiled and touched Denton on the arm. “Nothing. Really. I know you’re feeling out of the loop right now, but later on, I’ll sit down with you and Monty and I’ll tell you what everything means and what we’re talking about. You can give me the third degree if you want to, and I won’t get up until you’re satisfied. Deal?”

“Deal.” Denton exhaled and rubbed his eyes.

“I hope you’ll trust me, Mr. Ward,” she said. “I take good care of people. It’s what I do.”

“It’s okay,” Monty said. “He’s just a little - ”

“I can speak for myself.”

Monty stopped speaking, withdrew her hand from Denton’s shoulder.

“I just want him to be okay,” he said.

“So do I, Mr. Ward. Trust me, so do I.”

“Okay,” he said. “That’s all I got for now. But we’re gonna have that talk.”

“You bet,” she said. She turned her attention back to Dr. Ray. “I’ll download his chart from the nurses’ station and get your orders and meds.”

“Great.”

“What about a DNR?”

Dr. Ray shot a glance at Denton, who was staring at the floor, and Monty who was staring at Denton.

“Yep,” he said.

“Living?”

“Yep.”

“Excellent. POA?”

“Yes.”

“Sweet.” Adrienne clicked the Palm closed then stuck it back in her spacious scrub pocket. “We’re ready to roll.”

The sound of footsteps running was a distant thunder. A vision of blue against the smoked glass door of Ray’s office. A thud as they hit the door and wrestled for the knob. The door flew open and an out of breath nurse spoke five words between gasps.

“Mr. Shanley. He’s in trouble.”

Four

Adrienne was first out the door, followed by Monty, then Denton and then Dr. Ray. People, patients, all were a blur as they moved down the hallway, as they followed the nurse to Nicholas' room.

They pushed open the door and made their way into the room. Nicholas was a frail, thin hand that could be seen above the nurses and support staff that surrounded him. A band around his wrist made him a number, made him a small cog in the large overpowering wheel that was the hospital. His arm fell to his side, his shoulders went limp and the EKG machine started beeping.

"Nicholas?" Denton pushed his way to his friend's side. "Nick?" He looked at Adrienne who was already by Nicholas' side, gauging the situation, looking at the readouts.

"Out." Adrienne's eyes met Monty's and the two looked toward the door. "Now."

"No." Denton's knuckles were white against the steel bedrail.

Monty grabbed Denton and pulled. "Let's go," she said. "Let them do their job."

Monty pried Denton's fingers off the bedrail. She hauled him toward the door, step by step, as they worked on the lawyer.

"I'm sorry for what I said in there," Denton said. "Just please save him -"

Adrienne had joined Monty attempting to move Denton out of the room. "He's going to be fine." Her eyes met Denton's and they were firm and fierce and did not flinch. "I promise." She turned away from the pair

and began to work in unison with the collected nurses, the beeps and alarms filling the room like angry wasps.

“Okay.” Denton relented and allowed himself to be led out of the room.

The door hissed to a close, the beeps became fainter and fainter, until soon there was nothing but the sound of silence. Denton looked through the small window and watched. He saw his friend, not moving, not reacting, the calm center of the storm.

He saw the nurses that surrounded him, a blur of blue, waves rising and falling against a white bed sheet sky. Their hands moved to instruments, to read-outs, to monitors, each person doing their own choreographed part in the waltz.

Denton closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, they were filled with tears, and his tears became rain upon the sea.

Five

“You okay?” Monty was sitting next to Denton in the same hard back chairs they’d occupied only minutes before.

“Yeah.”

“I know this is rough, but you gotta believe me when I tell you that Adrienne’s the best at what she does and you really, really gotta lay off of her and let her do her job.”

Denton growled.

Monty ran her hand over his thigh. “Okay?”

Another growl. “Alright.”

“Excellent.” Monty slapped the place where she’d been rubbing. “So tonight I’m gonna go over to Nick’s and help her get the condo set up, and after that, after he comes home, you can come over and visit as much as you want as long as she says it’s okay. Okay?”

“Alright.” He was staring at the shiny dimes in his black Bass loafers.

“It’s gonna be okay.” She leaned over and kissed him on his temple.

As the couple sat there, they heard the squeak of fresh-bought shoes on the tile floor.

“Excuse me.” She was tall, skinny, and her jet black Clairol-assisted hair was haphazardly piled and seemed to be ready to fall at any minute. Judging by the wisps of gray at her browline, it had been some time since Miss Clairol had been on sale at Walgreens.

“Yes ma’am?” said Monty.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I saw y’all in the courtroom with Mr. Nicholas and I was hoping that you could tell me what room he was in.”

“He’s right here.” Monty motioned to the door on her left. “His nurse is taking care of him now, but you might be able to go in there in a bit.”

“Thank you kindly.”

“You’re welcome,” Monty said. “Are you a friend of Nicholas?”

“Oh no - ” She waved the misunderstanding away. “I just wanted to stop by and see if he was okay, because of everything that happened, I just don’t wanna be un-Christian-like by wishing him any bad luck or ill health or anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m Doris,” she held out a skinny claw. “Doris Randolph. I’m Bobby Randolph’s Momma. Mister Nicholas is the lawyer that’s – that’s defending those boys.”

“The fags that killed my brother.”

The shadows of George Randolph, Dale Reynolds and Joe Langstrom gathered like malevolent mountains behind the frail little woman. The three men were well-muscled from manual labor all their lives, tanned like leather from exposure to the Florida sun that baked them while they worked. All three looked out of place and uncomfortable in their trial suits: the cuffs too long, the sleeves too short, the shoulders too tight.

“George! “ Mrs. Randolph said. “That ain’t nice to talk like that.”

“I’ll talk like I damn well please.” George Randolph stepped to the front of the trio. His sand-colored beard moved as he spoke. “That fag is defending the other little fag that killed my brother.”

“That *man*,” Denton said, “is defending the kid who put up a fight when you and your redneck friends almost killed him at the Emerald.”

George Randolph’s brown eyes grew bright, and he could barely contain the smile that was trying to come across his lips. He looked down at Denton and squared his shoulders. “What’d you say?”

“You heard me.”

Randolph took a step closer and whispered his warning.

“I know you don’t want to be talking that shit here, little man.”

“George!” Mrs. Randolph hissed. “You stop this right now.”

“I ain’t stopping nothing, Momma,” he said. “We come here because you wanted to, ‘cause you wanted to pay your respects. Well, we done that, so let’s get you outta here.”

“I ain’t leaving ‘til I seen Mr. Nicholas and told him I wish him no ill will.” She clutched her black patent leather purse with both claw-like hands and made her way over to the chair next to Denton.

“Momma - ” He reached out and grabbed his mother’s frail arm, which caused her to yelp with fright and surprise.

“Hey - ” Monty stood up. “There’s no need for that.”

“Sit down, you dyke bitch,” he said. “This ain’t got nothing to do with you.”

Denton stood up. “Listen, you -”

“What?” Randolph clenched his fist, two large shadows moved up behind him to guard his flank. “What you gonna do, you little fag?”

“You wanna see?” Denton held out his hand.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Randolph laughed. “You want to shake my hand, you fucking faggot?”

Denton merely smiled. His hand remained outstretched.

Monty pushed Denton’s hand down. “Stop it.”

“You don’t want to do that,” she said to Randolph. “Trust me.”

“He don’t want to start any shit with me, either.”

Monty continued peacemaking, Mrs. Randolph continued scolding. Denton continued smirking. George continued getting madder and madder. Their voices started as a low rumble but quickly grew into an avalanche of words and movement, of posturing and preening. Gauntlets were thrown, challenges and counter challenges issued.

The door to Nicholas’ room flew open.

“What the hell’s going on out here?” It was Adrienne.

“I’m sorry,” said Mrs. Randolph, “we just came by to see Mr. Nicholas and pay our respects - ”

“Pay your respects?” Denton said. “He’s not dead.”

“Maybe he should be,” George Randolph said.

“All of you stop it,” Adrienne said. “Everybody get the hell out of here. Now. All of you.”

“But all I wanted to do was tell him - ”

“I don’t care what you came to do,” Adrienne hissed.

“Don’t you talk to my Momma like that.”

“And don’t you wag your big fat finger in my face.” Adrienne stood her ground and her pale green eyes seemed to sharpen and glow as her anger grew. “I want all of you out of here by the time I count to five!”

“I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Randolph interrupted, “but it just wouldn’t be Christian-like to leave without saying good bye to Mr. Nicholas - ”

“Out,” Adrienne said. “Now.” She took Mrs. Randolph by the arm and started to gently lead her away, but her grasp was broke by a quick chop from the large hand of George Randolph.

Adrienne swung back, Monty jumped forward to intercede, and Mrs. Randolph lost her footing and fell to the ground in a heap of polyester, cotton, and patent leather.

“Jesus - ” Monty went to one knee and started to help the woman up, but again, George Randolph was there to intercept her.

“Back off,” he growled. He helped his mother to her feet, who was still slightly shaken and mumbling something about it being unChristian-like to be grabbing older women in hospitals.

“You bitch.” Randolph turned his attention to Adrienne. “My Momma came here outta the goodness of her heart - ”

“I don’t care why you were here,” Adrienne said. “You get your momma and your ass out of here now.”

George Randolph met Adrienne’s gaze for ten seconds then broke it off.

“This ain’t over,” he said. “This ain’t over by a long shot.”

“Bring it on, redneck.” Adrienne’s jaw twitched and her lips broke into a defiant and mocking smile to reveal her white canines.

In the distance, dark shapes of security guards could be seen coming down the long hallway.

“You’re dead,” George Randolph whispered under his breath. “You’re one dead bitch.”

The air left in the hallway was charged with the emotional electricity from the confrontation, and all parties remained silent as the guards escorted Mother, then son, then dark mute followers away.

As they moved down the hallway, George Randolph turned and looked over his shoulder. His bloodshot eyes were bright with rage, his beard and lips alive with a vicious smile, and when he met Adrienne’s gaze, everyone could see the hate and anger. Everyone could read the three words that he silently formed with his lips.

You are dead.

Six

“What a day.” Denton exhaled and folded himself into the overstuffed burgundy leather armchair behind his desk. He threw his keys, his wallet, his pills, and his dog-eared paperback into the center drawer then bumped it shut. “I’ve been searched, frisked, radared, x-rayed, threatened, threatened again, and to top it all off my best friend is dying.”

He reached for the stereo remote and mashed the button hard.

Slow, gentle piano music began to fill the firehouse. A Debussy nocturne. Like a fragrant incense, the soft music spread throughout the room.

“I’m sorry, baby.” Monty rose and made her way toward his desk. “I know this is gonna be rough for you. For us.”

“It’s just that feeling of helplessness. First because I can’t help him and now this chick Adrienne.”

“You’re just gonna have to relax and let go.” She continued her walk. When she reached his desk, she sat down on the corner of it. “I love you more than any man on this planet, but you’ve got to give up this need for control. Whether it’s me going to San Francisco or Adrienne taking care of Nicholas, you’ve got to realize that you can’t really control anything in this world.”

Denton growled and adjusted himself in his chair. It squeaked, argued, and finally relinquished to his command.

The nocturne continued. Monty reached out and patted his hand. He did not flinch, for he was used to her touch. She was one of the few people in the world he would allow to touch him.

Nicholas Shanley was the other.

“Alright,” he said. “Have her do whatever she needs to do. Tell us what we’re supposed to do, what schedule she’s got worked out and I’ll follow it.”

Monty slid across the desk and into his lap. She bent over and kissed him on the forehead.

“You’re a good man, Denton Ward.”

He growled again.

“I’m outta here.” She rubbed her lipstick off him with the tip of her thumb. “It’s getting dark out and Adrienne wanted to meet over at Nicholas’ about 7 or 8.”

“Alright.” He squeezed her hand, then took it and put it to his lips. “I’ll see you later.”

“You gonna be okay?”

He exhaled and looked at his bottle of pills, looked at the decanter of vodka on the bookshelf. “I’ll be fine.”

“I love you,” Monty said.

“I love you too, baby.”

Monty slid off his lap and then skipped over to her desk, grabbing her keys, her cell phone, and the rest of her assorted gear on the way out the door.

“Don’t forget to re-arm the alarm, babe,” she said.

“I won’t,” he said. “Now get outta here.”

The front door slammed, and he heard the scuff of her oversized boots on the front sidewalk that led to their driveway. He heard the rumble of an ignition switch and then the headlights of her Jeep Wrangler illuminated the rows of books that lined their office. A squeal of tires, an electric gate opening and closing, and Denton Ward was alone.

The music continued, the notes cascading across the floor like so many scattered stones. He opened the drawer, found the particular bottle he was looking for and shook out two, no three tablets, a staccato rattle discordant with the legato piano piece.

He dry-swallowed them, wincing as they went down. He put his hand over his heart and swallowed again. He felt the pain as they went down.

He reached into the drawer again and pulled out the dog-eared paperback he’d been carrying all day.

It was a well-thumbed paperback, full of smudges and pencil marks and yellowed pages, and Denton thought it was beautiful. The cover was the color of beach sand and the author’s name and title were stamped in bold, black letters across the top. *Steinbeck. The Grapes of Wrath.*

The cover was a painting of a man and a woman, possibly his wife. Because it was a watercolor, there were no well-defined lines, no boundaries, and all the colors seemed to collide and wash into each other. It was a bright summer day and the couple stood side by side and looked across hills and fields of white flowers. In the distance, near two old Model-T jalopies, children played against a background of deep forest green.

It looked as if the family was at the beginning, the middle, the end of their journey, and were taking a rest, stretching their legs and allowing the children to play for a bit, breaking the monotony of the road. Geometric furrows dug deep in the rich earth lining the crest they stood upon.

Denton closed his eyes and the focused beam of his desk lamp became the sun. He could feel the warmth on his cheeks, and the heat went deep into his muscles, his bones and relaxed him. The breeze from the air conditioning became the summer wind against his cheeks and the low hum of Monty's computer was the song of the cicada. He took a deep breath and longed for the scent of wildflowers and the laughter of children at play.

He opened his eyes and was returned back to the firehouse, but not for long. He opened the book and he began to read.

Tom Joad was walking down a familiar road, a road he hadn't seen in years. The new shoes that the prison had given him were tucked under his arm, along with his new jacket and an old box turtle he'd caught. The red Oklahoma dust felt good between his toes. The sun was hot on his back and he was sweating up a storm. He took off his hat and wiped his brow. After years of separation, after miles of travel, he was finally back home where he belonged, but something was wrong. His home was deserted and his family was gone.

The cotton fields that they had labored over for so many years were growing wild, the vines and plants engulfing the house and the yard. The house was tilted to one side, knocked off its foundation by man and bulldozer.

Tom knew that his world was changing, falling apart, and that from this moment on, he could count on nothing ever being the same.

Denton closed the book, closed his eyes, and then he cried, his soft sobs echoing in the empty firehouse. He cried because he knew exactly how Tom Joad felt.

Nothing was ever going to be the same.

Seven

Monty ran her hand across the smooth leather that covered the steering wheel of the Jeep, letting her fingertips brush the butter soft skin. She took a deep breath and tried to distinguish the scents that filled her nostrils as she made her way across the Howard Frankland Bridge.

Salt, from the waters of Tampa Bay that surrounded her.

Exhaust fumes, from her fellow travelers.

The soot and sour odors disgusted her almost as much as cigarette smoke, but she didn't complain because she couldn't stand to put the roof up on the Jeep.

She preferred it down, where the wind could caress her cheeks like a lover, run its hands through her short hair, buss her glossed lips. She looked up and saw the full moon centered in a cloudless night, she looked to her right and saw that moonlight reflected in the waters of the bay, a hundred thousand shards of broken mirror floating on the surface of the black waters.

She reached over and turned up the stereo. She had one of her favorite driving CD's in the player; Jeff Buckley's "*Grace*". He sang like an angel, his alto voice vibrating with love and ache and loneliness, and Monty always turned it up full volume to cover up the *thump-thump-thump* of her knobby tires on the hard concrete highway.

She turned the sensitive steering wheel with a single finger and found herself heading toward downtown Tampa. She'd bear straight down Kennedy until she reached Dale Mabry; a zig and a zag after that and she's be at Nicholas' Hyde Park condo.

She grew bored and restless at the never-ending succession of red lights, so she picked up her cell phone and hit a speed-dial number.

A connection, two rings, and then an answer.

“Yo?”

“Yo Adrienne.” Monty did her best Sylvester Stallone imitation. “How you doing?”

“Hey missy,” Adrienne said. “What’s up?”

“Well I’m bored shitless at all these red lights going down Kennedy, so I thought I’d call you and see if I could pick us up anything. You still got a hankering for good Chinese food?”

“That sounds brilliant, but I’m already way ahead of you.”

“What?”

“The good folks at Takee Outee have already dropped off many, many quarts of Chinese goodness for us to sample and attack with various degrees of skill with our chopsticks.”

“No way.”

“Way.”

“You rule.”

“But of course.”

“This is gonna be so cool.” Monty hooked a right onto Dale Mabry and started south. Piccadilly Cafeteria, Krispy Kreme donuts, various gas stations and convenience stores passed through her field of vision as she spoke.

“Yes, it is.”

“I do have one question for you, though.”

“You’re a P.I. – it’s your job.”

“How did you know about Nicholas?”

“What? He’s a patient, I’m a nurse, there you go.”

“Doll face, you are gonna have to lie a lot better than that.”

“Why Miss Monty - ” Adrienne affected her best Scarlett O’Hara - ”I do believe that you are a rascal and a scoundrel for accusing me of such deception.”

“Spill it.”

“Alright, alright,” Adrienne said. “You got me. I won’t spill all the beans but let’s just say that Nicholas helped me out a long time ago and I made it my business to keep up with him. You know how he is – he collects strays sort of, and I was one of them. I got friends at the various hospitals, and asked them to keep an eye out, and they did and when he showed up, I showed up and just happened to volunteer my services.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Den will be glad to hear that you have an altruistic side as he's not entirely convinced that you're on the level.”

Adrienne snorted. “He’s one to talk, with the fees that he charges to do that hocus pocus of his.”

“Now, now,” Monty hooked a left and began her trek toward Hyde Park. “Don’t be dissin’ my boyfriend.”

“Hey – I heard what you said about him in meeting, so I know it all ain’t sunshine and roses.“

“Yeah but - ”

“Wait a minute, babe.”

“What?”

Adrienne growled and Monty could hear the squeak of nurses clogs across a hardwood floor.

“Something outside. Some noise.”

“Knowing that neighborhood, it’s probably some rich bitch walking her little poodle or something.”

“No kidding.” More movement. “Can’t see a thing. Well no wonder – looks like one of the damn streetlights is out. Good grief.”

“For all the money Nicholas pays for that joint, you’d think they would at least keep the streetlights working.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Adrienne said.

Monty shook her head as she laughed, which made it harder for her to put on her hands-free headset. She adjusted the bulb in her ear and let the microphone dangle near her lips.

“Can you hear me okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Adrienne said. “You’re fine. Even above all these dogs yapping, I can still hear you.”

“Serious? Lots of them?”

“They are going apeshit.”

“God,” Monty said, “I hope no one’s sneaking around out there.”

“Probably just a raccoon or something.”

“Be careful,” Monty said. “I’m about five away.”

“Please,” Adrienne said. “If I can survive hooking on Nebraska Avenue, I can survive a burnt out streetlight, a barking poodle and a rabid raccoon.”

A peal of laughter from both women, then a crash – the sound of glass shattering – and then a scream.

“Addy?” she hollered. “Adrienne?” Monty held the small microphone next to her lips. “Adrienne? Can you hear me?”

No answer.

“Dammit.” She stomped on the gas pedal with her Doc Marten boot. The Jeep lurched forward, then began to accelerate. She drove with one hand on the wheel and the other on the horn. Three quick bursts told the gathered cars that she was going to run the four way stop.

She made it through without a scratch and without the red and blue lights of the Tampa Police Department behind her.

“Thank you God,” she whispered. “Adrienne!” she tried again. “Adrienne!”

She heard nothing but the roar of traffic and the screams of a woman still minutes away. She heard the sound of her horn as it sliced

through the night air and the rumble of furniture being thrown in the small condominium.

“Please God,” she whispered. “Please hang on.”

She yanked the wheel right and the Jeep careened into the driveway of the complex. Blocking her way was a neon striped wooden arm that stretched the width of the driveway. She rammed it, it snapped, end of story.

One speed bump ignored, two speed bumps ignored, she threw the Jeep into *Park* outside the building.

“Adrienne?” she hollered into the phone, she hollered into the night air. “Shit.” She untangled herself from her phone and threw it into the empty seat beside her. She yanked open the glove compartment and pulled out her gun. One snap released it from the worn brown leather holster. Another click opened the chamber. She saw the glow of six live .357 Magnum bullets. She snapped the cylinder back into place and kicked the Jeep door open.

She hit the ground running, moving quickly through the complex and up the stairs, one flight, two flights, three flights, then finally the fourth, where Nicholas resided.

She kicked open the fire escape door and looked down the hallway.

Nothing.

No one.

No sound.

Monty held the gun so tight that she could feel the checkered walnut grip dig deep into her sweaty palms.

In the distance, the creak of a slowly opening door.

She flattened herself against the wall and ran toward the door. She raised the gun to eye level and the barrel landed squarely against the forehead of a myopic, balding man with a bad comb-over. His eyes grew large and his mouth opened but no sound came out.

Monty thumbed the hammer back into place and lowered the gun.

“Dammit,” she whispered. “Get back in there, shut the door and call 911.”

The man did not move.

Monty reached into her back pocket, yanked out the leather wallet and flashed her badge.

“*Now.*”

He closed the door and Monty continued her journey toward Nicholas’ door.

“Please God.” She cocked the hammer back again. “Please.” She stood across from the door, raised her gun, then with one swift kick, nearly took the door off its hinges. It struck the wall with a thud, which ricocheted through the apartment, through the building.

“Adrienne?”

No answer.

Monty kept the gun out in front of her as she moved down the hallway. She did as she was taught, watching the corners, watching the edges. Her breath came in great gasps and burned as it left her body.

Movement.

In the living room.

Monty prayed, raised the gun, spun into the room and saw the color red.

Red on the hardwood floor, gathered in a pool that shone brightly under the fluorescents.

Red on the white gossamer curtains, splattered in long broad strokes, like a Jackson Pollock painting.

Red in the eyes of the devil before her. The devil wore a faded camouflage fatigue jacket and dirty blue jeans and combat boots barely held together with knotted laces. His hair was long and black and matted with small bits of twigs and leaves.

“Freeze!” Monty pointed the barrel of the Magnum at the devil’s head. The devil growled; it was low and guttural and wet. He turned to face Monty and she saw red again. Red on his lips. Red on Adrienne’s throat.

When Monty first saw her friend, the first thing she noticed was her feet. One had a clog on it, the other didn’t. Both were floating in mid-air, as if she was performing some sort of Vegas illusion. The other clog was on the ground, on its side, covered in blood.

She was held in a gruesome embrace by her assailant, her back bent, her neck exposed, her throat ripped open, her blood flowing freely down her chest. The blood ran red down his cheeks and neck and when the devil looked at Monty, he smiled and his sharp white canines seemed to shine.

“I said freeze!” Monty brought the gun to his attention by adjusting her aim.

The devil wiped the dull green jacket sleeve across his lips. He looked around the room, as if to admire his handiwork, then down at Adrienne, as if to make sure she was dead.

A slow, cruel smile passed across his face and he dropped the lifeless body to the ground. It landed with a dull thud and it echoed throughout the small condominium like a cannon shot.

“Son of a bitch - ” Monty blinked away the sweat and pulled the trigger. The sound of the .357 deafened her immediately.

He did not move, did not flinch.

She fired again.

Out of her peripheral vision, she saw a piece of plaster hit the floor. Another miss?

In the distance she could hear sirens.

She seemed to be underwater. Every action, every reaction, seemed to take forever. The hopeful aiming of the gun, the squeezing of the trigger, the trajectory of the bullet, the striking of the target.

Nothing.