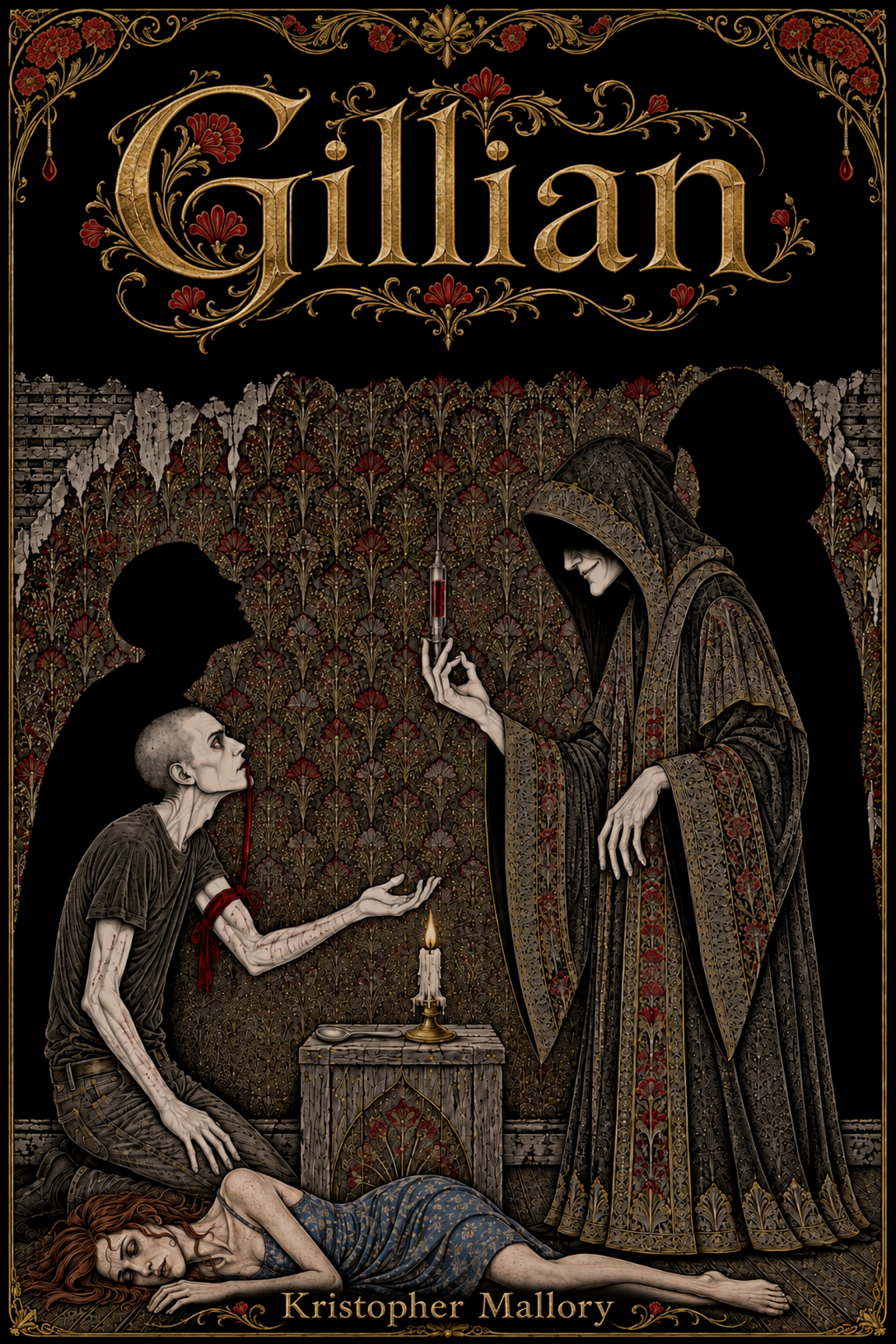
Gillian



Kristopher Mallory

Gillian

by

Kristopher Mallory

Gillian

A Dark Fairy Tale

Copyright



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Gillian

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Special Thanks

For fairytales.

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Gillian

“Choose life.”

~ Renton, Trainspotting

Liquid death boiled as the candle flame scorched the bottom of a silver spoon. Using a hypodermic needle, the Alchemist loaded the poisonous brew into a syringe, leaving the impurities caught in a tiny ball of cotton. A black sweatshirt hung loosely off his body like a robe, the hood casting his sallow face in shadow. He twirled the needle in a bony hand, then poised the sharp tip over the track-marked arm of his most loyal customer.

Jackson bit down on the end of the tourniquet tied around his bicep and pulled it tight. Like magic, the outline of thick veins protruded at the crook of his arm, each bulge scarred from abuse and infection. He nodded to the Alchemist, and the needle penetrated his skin.

As he took in a sharp breath, his jaw released the band, and the familiar burn began its journey. A soft moan reminded him that Gillian sat beside him. She reached out and stroked his shaved head, a syringe still stuck in her flesh, dangling like jewelry. Jackson turned to embrace her, but the first wave of the drug hit hard and sudden. A tsunami of pleasure swept him into the waiting arms of oblivion.

***

The drug-induced dream played like a movie. Scenes flashed by as Jackson floated above himself, a mere spectator to the glimmer of nightmarish events.

Flash

Gillian was on top of him. She kissed his neck and tore at his clothing. Her body gyrated and thrust, while the Alchemist and several other afflicted souls sat around the drug house. The dead-eyed fiends groped at the two lovers, drool stretching from scab-covered lips.

Flash

They walked together through the warm summer night, peering into parked vehicles as they went. Gillian stopped. She placed her finger to his lips. The wind blew back her long, auburn hair, revealing a mischievous grin as she threw a stone through the side window of a caravan.

Jackson dove in, slicing his already scarred arms on the shattered glass. He rifled through the center console. Then Gillian tugged at his waist, cursing.

The car alarm had sent a man rushing like a minotaur from a nearby townhome. Jackson tried to brandish his weapon as a warning, though he had reacted too slowly—a fist landed a crushing blow against his face, knocking him aside.

Gillian turned to run, but the man caught her by the dress, ripping it as he pulled her closer. His hands wrapped around her neck. Her complexion turned purple, tongue protruding from her gaping, soundless mouth. She clawed at the hands killing her.

Knife in hand, Jackson rushed the man from behind.

Flash

The spotlight of a circling helicopter swept the streets and alleys as sirens drew nearer. Out of breath, Jackson and Gillian ran into the front yard of a small cottage—his grandmother's house. He hid behind the bushes below a bedroom window. Sweat poured down his face as he used a blood-covered blade to pry out a familiar pane of glass.

As a teenager, he had done that very same thing a hundred times. Nana had forbidden him to see Gillian, so sneaking out was the only way they could spend time together.

Red and blue lights illuminated the block as a police cruiser turned the corner. Gillian ducked behind Nana's thick lilacs. Jackson took a chance and climbed up the stucco. He fell through the window into his childhood bedroom. Then he quickly reached down and took Gillian's hand, pulling her up the wall just as the spotlight from the cruiser scanned the house.

They held their breath. Jackson wondered what prison would be like. He imagined officers kicking down his grandmother's door, guns drawn. They would rip Gillian from his arms and carry him away in cuffs. The blood on his hands was proof enough. Jackson couldn't handle the thought of never seeing Gillian again. Maybe the cops would shoot them both dead? At least then they would still be together.

The purr of the engine faded as the police continued their search. Gillian let out a relieved sigh, and Jackson pulled her close, breathing in her scent. His heart rate slowed as the high tapered.

As long as she is mine, everything will be all right, he thought.

He found comfort in the sound of her steady breathing and slipped into the waiting darkness. Though he slept, part of him felt Gillian's warmth fade in the night.

Shortly thereafter, the screaming began.

***

Jackson was startled from a bad dream by Gillian kicking him in the ribs. In the nightmare, Nana had been calling for him, and though he'd wanted to go to her, his body had refused to obey.

Gillian kicked him again. He swatted her away, wanting to slip back to sleep, but his arms were too weak to defend.

He mumbled, "Let me be."

"Jack, get up. We have to go. We're in real trouble, baby."

"I'm tired."

Voice trembling, Gillian said, "This is bad. This is really, really bad."

As he lifted his head from the floor, a sliver of sunlight shining through the crack in the curtains triggered an unbearable pounding in Jackson's skull. The left side of his face stung from temple to chin. His entire body throbbed. Worse, the sickness churned the rotting contents of his stomach. He needed a bump more than he had ever needed anything in his life.

Confused, he glanced around the room at the various baseball trophies and first-place blue ribbons, all of which had his name inscribed in gold leaf.

His eyes went wide. "How did we get to Nana's?"

Gillian sighed and fell backward on the bed like a rag doll. She shook her head.

Flashes from the previous night came crashing back. *No,* Jackson thought, noticing the dried red stains on his hands.

“Gill… Gill, you all right?” He rolled onto his knees and brushed her hair from her pale face.

Voice barely audible, she said, “Dead.”

“It was self-defense. That guy was going to kill you.”

Jackson thought about the beast that had attacked them. He strained to remember what happened, but a thick fog covered his memories. All he recalled was slashing and stabbing like a madman, doing everything in his power to protect Gillian.

“Besides,” he added, “we don’t know for sure that he’s dead.”

“Not him,” Gillian said, her eyes dark and unsettling. “While you slept, I killed the thing pretending to be your grandmother.”

Jackson swallowed hard. “What?”

Gillian stared at him.

The weight of her words felt too real, too dark to be a ruse. Nana couldn’t hear very well. She wouldn’t have known someone had broken into the house unless one of them had left the room during the night.

Gillian’s hands trembled, and her blue sundress was damp with sweat and blood.

“Show me,” he said, doing his best to hold back the sickness screaming to be free of his throat.

“We should leave, baby.”

“We will. But first I need to see for myself. I hope you just had a nightmare, too.”

Gillian nodded. She stood and led him from the safety of his childhood treasures.

Splintered wood—what was left of the coffee table—was strewn about the living room. The sofa and recliners were overturned. The old television had been smashed, a phantom image still rolling underneath the static. The entire room, even the ceiling, was speckled red.

“I saw her for what she was… I used your knife… but she didn’t die easily,” Gillian said.

In a state of shocked disbelief, Jackson ignored her and followed a trail of gore to the basement door. The steps descended into pitch black. He tried the light switch, clicking it off and on, but the darkness simply laughed at him.

A ghostly cry echoed from the grim depths. *"Please, help Nana, Jackie! Help me, I'm diiieeennng."*

Jackson blinked at the reaching shadows. "What do you mean *she didn't die easily?* Gill, what did you do?"

Nana's voice wasn't real. Hallucinations were common with his mix of narcotics, but this all felt different, like a fading dream trying to come back. He pinched himself hard enough to prove he wasn't still dreaming.

Gillian crept up behind him with a flashlight and shone it down the stairwell. "Look," she said.

At the bottom, a chalky white foot with long, yellow nails rested in a pool of congealed blood. Jackson thought he saw the dead toes twitch. He tried to convince himself it was just a trick of the light.

"You've seen them, Jack," Gillian said. "When death courses through your veins, the truth becomes clear. But she was different. Something was wrong with her. It wasn't your grandmother."

The hair rose on his arms. Jackson couldn't deny that he knew what she meant. Sometimes people are more than they appear. A picture of the Alchemist formed in his mind. He shook the thought away, then slowly descended the creaking stairs.

Nothing in his life as a degenerate drug addict had prepared him for the carnage in the basement.

"Oh, Christ," he said.

The woman who raised him lay desecrated in a pool of black gel. The skin of her arms and legs had been sliced open, exposing the muscle and tendons beneath. She had been scalped. The white of the skull perfectly matched the white of her rolled-back eyes. Her neck had been slashed open, and her tongue had been pulled through the wound in a grotesquely comical manner.

“She didn’t die easily, Gillian? You fucking *flayed* her!”

“A monster wore her skin. I swear. Baby, let’s… let’s take the rest of the jewelry and go. No one knows we were here.”

Gillian dangled a necklace in front of the flashlight. Clasped to the thin, silver chain was a heart-shaped pendant, adorned with a translucent black diamond. The light refracting from the gemstone created nightmarish shadow creatures that danced along the walls of the stairway.

“I’m keeping this one,” she continued. “It’s special. You can pawn the rest.”

She turned away, leaving Jackson alone in the dark.

“I’m sorry, Nana. Gillian didn’t mean to hurt you. It was the dope,” he cried to the dissected corpse. “Please forgive us.”

Eyes adjusting to the darkness, Jackson stared at the mangled body. Her wrinkled face reminded him that she had lived a long life. He wasn’t sure how old Nana had been, certainly over ninety, maybe over a hundred.

He remembered the day they’d met. Jackson was seven, and Nana had stood next to him at his mother’s freshly dug grave. Even then she had seemed ancient.

“You shall come live with me, Jackie,” she had said. “I raised your mother and your mother’s mother. I taught them to take proper care of their bodies, but silly children always refuse to listen.” Tears welled at the edge of her eyes, but her voice grew furious. “Opium! A ridiculous way to die! Things will be different this time—yes, very different! Now, come along, child.” Nana had grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the casket.

She had worn that heart-shaped diamond pendant. In fact, he had never seen her without it around her neck. Now her neck was practically gone.

Nana deserved better. But what could be done? She was dead, and he believed it was all his fault.

“I’m sorry.” Jackson turned away and raced up the stairs after Gillian.

Room by room, they tore through bookshelves and drawers looking for anything of value.

Jackson found a revolver under Nana's mattress. He flicked open the cylinder. It was loaded. After slapping it closed again, he stuffed it into his jeans.

Gillian emptied the jewelry boxes into a duffle bag. It would be enough to keep them high for a very, very long time.

Will it be enough to make us forget what we've done? Jackson wondered.

"One more thing, then we can go," Gillian said, walking into the kitchen.

Jackson followed. After extinguishing the stove's pilot light, she turned on all the burners. The rancid smell of natural gas quickly drove them from the house.

***

Gillian sought refuge at the only place they were welcome. The Alchemist allowed them to hide out in the condemned house and kept them supplied with as many drugs as they could handle, provided they forked over cash, of course.

Jackson pawned all the stolen goods, save for the necklace and gun. Money wasn't a problem, but the explosion in the suburbs was all over the news. To his relief, the newscasters made no mention of the mutilated old woman the police had surely found in the basement. He hoped the whole thing would be forgotten in a few days.

The Alchemist claimed the police had listed Jackson as a person of interest, that his face was plastered on fliers stapled to telephone poles around the city.

Worried one of the fiends would give him up, Jackson begged Gillian to skip town, perhaps find a place to hide out in the forest.

Pressing another needle into her arm, she said, "Where would we go, baby? We don't know how to survive outside of the city. Besides, we've got to be close to our medicine. Unless the cops tack on a reward, we'll be safe here."

She nodded out before Jackson could protest. Safe wasn't a term he would use to describe the den of horrors in which they were trapped. Addicts came and went all hours of the night, most too strung out to know what was going on, yet still capable of spilling someone's guts if it meant them securing another fix.

The Alchemist couldn't be trusted either. Jackson had caught him greedily eyeing the necklace that Gillian refused to take off.

Gillian was the worst of them all. She was different somehow, completely despondent most of the time. After spiking a vein, she would sit on the floor, staring at the rats crawling around the discarded containers of rotten food while other beasts with beady, red eyes stared back from the holes in the walls. For hours, she mumbled to herself, slowly rocking back and forth.

Jackson wanted to escape the trauma of that night, but not through the needle. Dope was like quicksand, though, and Gillian seemed as if she preferred to sink.

He tried to keep his head clear and discovered how difficult it was to fight the sickness. He might have found the strength if not for Gillian tempting him back to the dark side.

When Jackson was coherent, she acted as if he were invisible. He hated it, but he realized Gillian was lost in the real world. They could only be together in that fantasy realm where consequences never matter, and Nana wasn't dead. So once again, he rolled up his sleeve and accepted the Alchemist's terms of surrender.

Stoned out of their minds, they sat next to each other on a stained mattress in the graffiti-covered bedroom. The lock didn't work, and junkies would stumble in from time to time. Jackson had to fight them off, threatening them with his knife or pistol.

During the night, the bravest pressed their luck. They crept in, hungry for a piece of Gillian, only to retreat when she attacked them like a rabid wolf. She was always ready, happy to rip flesh from bone.

After each attempted assault, she seemed more alive, more like her old self. Then the needle would come out again, and she would regress back to mindless mumbling, the siren-like chant forcing Jackson to join her.

Drinking condensed soup directly from cans and sipping brown water from the bathroom sink barely kept their bodies alive. It seemed that every day Jackson poked a new hole into his belt.

As for the drugs, Jackson had reached his peak. He worried the next shot might be his last, and only took enough to keep the sickness at bay.

Gillian, however, refused to slow down. Spurred on by the violence of ripping another addict's face to shreds, she pulled the syringe from her purse, then loaded the biggest fix that he had ever seen.

Jackson wanted to stop her, but the Alchemist had already injected a dose of death into his arm. "Don't," he uttered.

Gillian grinned. "Nana told me to do it."

Nana, Jackson thought.

He had loved her so much. She had been his family once. Consciousness dimming, he watched the massive hit flow into Gillian's ravaged vein, and then the darkness took him.

The next morning, he found her lying in the tub, puke dripping from her chin, bugs crawling over her body. He swept the roaches off her cold flesh, picked her up by the arms, then dragged her back into the bedroom.

Jackson draped her arm over his shoulder and held most of her weight. He tried to get her to walk around the room. "Gillian! Wake up!" He slapped her face. "Come on, you have to move." She protested, but Jackson wouldn't relent until she was mostly taking steps on her own.

"You almost died!"

She laughed. "So?"

After that, the days and nights blurred together. Regardless of the ways Jackson struggled to curb her use, Gillian kept injecting herself with ever-increasing amounts. During the day, he watched her closely, making sure she stayed away from the Alchemist. Eventually, he needed to get himself

right; then, while he was too high to stop her, she purposely overdosed once more.

Again and again, Jackson revived her. Gillian's temperature was never as warm as it should have been, and her complexion never changed back from the sickly gray color. He hadn't witnessed anything like it before. No matter what he tried, her usage increased, and so did her madness.

What had begun as drug-fueled mumblings had turned into full-blown rants. During her worst bouts, Gillian raved to the junkies about Jackson's dead grandmother. They listened to her preach, nodding along in agreement when she claimed that a wraith haunted her, that the old woman never left her side no matter how deep she stuck the needle.

Jackson had had enough. Using a roll of duct tape, he tied her up, binding her hands behind her back. It was the only way he knew to protect her.

The intervention didn't work. After he had fallen asleep, she broke free and purchased more dope. The Alchemist was always happy to oblige a paying customer.

Distraught, Jackson finally gave up. *She needs to hit rock bottom. Then she'll let me save her*, he thought. Though he despised himself, he refused to interfere with Gillian's downfall any longer. He turned away from her pain like every junkie turns away from his or her own suffering.

Even when the infection set in, and the wounds on her arms festered, he remained silent. Even when bone and tendons were exposed, maggots biting at the dead skin, he kept himself on the outskirts of her insanity. Still, she refused to stop, shooting up whenever she could. All the while, she rubbed at the gem around her neck and swore Nana was a monster.

When the money dried up, the Alchemist's goodwill disappeared. Gillian refused to trade him the heart-shaped necklace, and they were forced back onto the streets.

"I need more, Jack. You don't understand!" She pounded her fists into his chest. "You promised you would always take care of me!"

Gillian's plea finally broke him. "How?" he screamed, ashamed. "You won't let me!"

"Find a way!"

Without any other options, Jackson suggested that they fall back on the oldest hustle in history until he could find a more permanent solution to their problems.

Gillian agreed. She promised him no matter what happened, this time would be the last time.

Jackson knew it was a promise that wouldn't be kept, but lying to himself had always been so much easier than accepting the truth.

***

Jackson sat at the bar staring at a reflection he resented. A machine pumped smoke that swept across the neon-lit floor. Crumpled dollar bills littered the small stage. The music pulsed through his body, reminding him of the first time the Alchemist had opened his vein.

"We got a treat for you tonight!" the DJ said into the microphone. "Please give it up for Anastasia."

Gillian walked around the stage to the beat of a kick drum. Holding on to the dance pole, she leaned back and looked out over the crowd. The strobe lights flashed on the heart-shaped diamond pendant.

"That girl's something, isn't she?" Jackson asked the man on the stool next to him, amazed at how Gillian's makeup hid the worst of the damage. Long, white satin gloves covered the places where the flesh had rotted away.

She was gorgeous.

Jackson remembered how she had looked in high school, back before drinking led to pills, pills to powder, and powder to needles.

The man sipped his drink, transfixed on Gillian's swaying hips. She slipped out of her dress. Her naked body twisted like a serpent around the pole.

Jackson leaned closer to the man, breathing in the smell of cigarettes mixed with cheap cologne. “Anastasia told me that she’d like to get to know you better. She said you could have her. She said you could do *whatever you want*.”

The man sat in silence, still mesmerized. Jackson waited. He knew better than to press.

When the song was over, Gillian collected the money on the stage, then walked back behind the red curtain.

The man downed the rest of his drink. Head bowed, and spinning a gold wedding band between his fingers, he seemed to contemplate the offer. After a moment of silence, he whispered, “How much?”

***

Smoking a cigarette outside the motel room door, Jackson listened as the headboard crashed into the wall, over and over again, a fake moan of pleasure following each thud.

Jackson stared contemptuously at the cars going down the block, the drivers scanning for a date. Everyone knew the place charged by the hour.

One day it will all be behind us, he thought.

He crushed out the cigarette and banged on the door. “Time’s up, pal. Get dressed and get out!”

When the headboard continued to thud, but the moaning had stopped, Jackson cursed under his breath. He threw open the door, drawing the gun from his waistband. Leveling it at the back of the man’s head, he said, “I told you to get out.”

The man lay on top of Gillian, shaking. She clawed at his back with one hand; long trails of blood oozed through the sheets. Jackson swung, striking him in the head with the barrel, but the man did not stop.

Gillian cackled. Her other hand was wrapped around the man’s windpipe, holding him on top of her. The man had been struggling to free himself, but was trapped between her legs.

“Let him go!”

She released his neck, thrust her fingers deep into his eye socket, and pulled his face down. The pillows muffled his scream.

Jackson grabbed him by the arm and threw him to the floor. Blood flowed down his chest from the puncture wounds in his throat. His dislodged eye rolled across his cheek, dangling by a thread of optic nerves.

Gillian lunged after the man.

Jackson grabbed her by the hair and threw her back on the bed. A tuft of flesh ripped free from her scalp.

Gillian kicked back the bloody sheets and smeared the red gore over her breasts. A low-pitched growl rumbled from her parted lips.

“Gillian! Stop!”

The man tried to pull himself up but slipped in the growing puddle of blood. The eye slid back and forth across his face. “She… tried to kill me.”

Jackson kneeled. He pressed his hand to the wound in the man’s neck, but when the blood continued to pulse between Jackson’s fingers, he shook his head.

The man’s terrified expression told Jackson that he knew it was the end. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. His limp hands fell from Jackson’s wrists, and his head lolled forward. The eye in the socket seemed to be locked on Gillian, still rubbing his blood all over her body, while the other stared at the bloody carpet.

“Wrap him up in the shower curtain and leave him in the bathroom,” she said.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” Jackson clenched his fists. He stood and turned toward her.

Gillian traced a bloody circle around her navel. “To feel alive.”

“I can’t help you on my own! We need *real* help!”

“Help? I’m okay, Jack. Nana is with me. She was lying in the bed next to me the whole time that monster had his way.” She laughed. “Besides, you can’t blame me. Nana told me to do it.”

“We have to run far, far away… somewhere people won’t know us. Rehab!”

Gillian laughed again.

“We can get through it if we stay together,” Jackson said.

She shook her head. “It’s too late for that.”

“No, it’s not. We’ll get clean. We’ll find work… rent an apartment… be a family. Please, Gill.”

“I said it’s too late, Jack. Look.” Gillian held up her left hand, waving it like a magician. With her right, she dug her fingernails into her wrist, hooking a vein with her thumb. She slowly pulled out the long strand, then reached for another.

Jackson retched.

“There’s no pain. I don’t feel anything anymore. Do you wanna know the truth about your grandmother, baby?” Gillian caressed the gem around her neck. “Nana told me everything. She was already dead. Had been for a long time before we broke in that night. Now I’m dead, too. I’m a monster wearing Gillian’s skin, and her rotting flesh itches so badly.”

“Don’t say that. You are just dope sick. We can get through this, I promise. Everything is going to be all right.”

Jackson laid his head on her chest, cradling her in his arms. Her body was so cold, and her heart beat so slowly that he wasn’t sure if he could really hear it at all. “Nana forgives you for what you did. I forgive you, too. And I love you, Gillian.”

“She doesn’t forgive me. She said I took away her link to life and now she’s punishing me like *a silly child*. I don’t care, though. The necklace is mine.”

Gillian slid from Jackson’s embrace. Blood glistened on her naked body as she limped across the room to her purse. The makeup had been smeared away in different places, exposing the bruised flesh beneath. Jackson could only watch as she cooked up the last bit of her stash and injected it directly into her neck.

Pupils constricted to pins; she crawled across the bloody floor like a wounded animal. Jackson cringed as she pulled herself back into the bed and cuddled next to him.

“Wake me from the nightmare when you are ready to leave, Jack. We can sell his wedding ring to buy more death.”

Jackson held her cold body for hours, staring across the room at the dead man, eyes unblinking. He wasn’t sure if the stench came from the corpse or from Gillian.

All his life, he had never subscribed to the supernatural. He wanted to believe her affliction was a combination of mental and physical illness, some sort of disease that doctors could treat, though his mind couldn’t rationalize the way she had changed. The things he had seen defied all logic. His last hope was to accept that something, some dark force, had power over her.

“Gillian,” he whispered. When she didn’t respond, he thought of his grandmother. “Nana? You were an addict just like the rest of us, weren’t you?”

He traced the black heart pendant with his finger before gripping it tightly in his palm. Jackson yanked the necklace, breaking the silver chain.

Gillian lurched forward, eyes wide and bloodshot. She clawed at her chest, screaming in inhuman retching sounds.

Jackson clasped his hands to his ears in an effort to drown out the horror. The piercing howl went on forever.

Déjà vu struck, and he remembered hearing the same horrific scream from that night—Gillian must’ve ripped the pendant from Nana’s neck.

Eventually, her lungs gave way. She sank back to the bed, a slight smile lingering on her blue lips. Jackson pulled her closer. Her muscles clenched under his hands. Spasms contorted her into a twisted mess. Her body twitched and lurched, spine cracking as her back arched further and further backward. After what seemed like an eternity, Gillian finally went still.

Jackson cried. He wondered again about the diamond clamped in his hand. It held life somehow. Why would such a thing exist? For what evil purpose? A word passed through his mind, though he didn’t know the meaning, or where the thought had come from: *Revenant*.

Like all addicts, Jackson refused to confront the reality of a lost supply. Wiping away the blood and tears, he said, “I don’t care what you are, Gill. I need you.”

He told himself that he could learn to control her, to mask the rotting flesh, and to curb her dark urges. He put the pendant back around her neck and waited.

When Gillian did not stir, dread set in. He called her name, but she did not answer. He shook her, but she would not wake. He tried again, and again there was only cold death.

Jackson screamed.

He begged for her to come back. He pleaded for the life together that they had always planned. All the while, he knew it was too late. Hard and fast, they had lived the junkie lifestyle. Their relationship had always been destined to end in suffering.

There has to be a way, he thought.

His mind went through a dozen impossible scenarios, as if life were a fairy tale and the sleeping princess could still be saved.

In the real world, there was only one option: suicide.

Jackson placed the gun barrel to his temple. While looking over Gillian’s lifeless body, he took in a last breath, his eyes pausing on the sparkling black gem.

Suddenly, he knew the answer.

Jackson lowered the gun and kissed Gillian for the final time. “This isn’t goodbye,” he said, then fled the motel with the heart-shaped pendant firmly grasped in his palm.

***

Jackson stumbled through the dark alleys of a city he no longer recognized. Shuffling through the dregs, he stared at the nickels and dimes in his palm. It wasn’t enough, no matter how many times he counted. It wasn’t enough. The rules had changed. Money could no longer pay for what he needed.

Looking for his next fix, he considered breaking into a car, maybe a house, if he could gather the nerve.

That might work, he thought. The alternative was doing what he had promised himself he would never do again, and the memory brought a horrible taste to his mouth.

He shuddered. Promises, after all, were meant to be broken.

Now that Jackson no longer used a needle, he simply went through the motions, living life on the streets because it was the only life left for someone like him.

He still sought a high, though he had finally come to terms with the fact that it was never the dope he craved. What he needed was something else altogether. His true addiction cost him more, and was harder to come by, than anything the other wandering addicts could possibly imagine.

Each day, he forced himself a little farther down the path to hell for a chance to get closer to the demons he desired—each deed slightly more horrific. But when the feeling came, Christ, it felt so good.

A silhouette appeared in the alley, surrounded by a dim, red glow cast down by the neon sign of the strip club. Jackson stepped back into the cover of darkness, terrified.

He listened closely.

The figure came toward him, footsteps growing louder and louder, then stopped suddenly in front of the shadow of the dumpster.

“Buyin’ or sellin’?” the man asked.

Jackson knew the voice. His heart raced, but he did not move from the darkness.

“You can’t hide from me.” The voice was gruff, as if the man had smoked two lifetimes’ worth of cigarettes.

Jackson was cornered. It was impossible to escape with the way his limbs were shaking.

Besides, why run?

Nothing could hurt him anymore.

He took a hesitant step out of the darkness, feeling the strands of long, dingy hair stuck to his face, wet from perspiration, or worse. Though his clothing was ragged, the T-shirt and jeans stained so badly that the original colors could not be guessed, Jackson wore the dirty tatters of a brown corduroy jacket almost proudly.

"Buying," he said.

"You look a mess, boy."

Jackson shrugged. Yes, he was a mess. He should go home and clean up.

When had Nana thrown him out, anyway? Months, years, or decades ago? He couldn't remember how long he had been on the streets, but he still remembered Nana's expression when she found out Gillian had turned him into a junkie.

Gillian.

The Alchemist, much older than Jackson remembered, stared through him with unreadable eyes.

Jackson anxiously shifted his weight from foot to foot. The itch was growing stronger, the urge more intense. The scabs on his face were driving him insane. He reached up and scratched until his fingers came away wet, exposing the part of his skull above his right eye in the process.

The Alchemist took a step back. "It's been a real long time. Guess you've been shooting up without me?"

"No."

"Then what happened? Where's that girl of yours?"

"She's with me."

The Alchemist laughed. "Well, I still got what you need," he said. "But you ain't got nothin' I want," he added, looking Jackson over from head to toe.

Jackson's skin crawled again, but it wasn't from withdrawals. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

Soon, Jackson thought. *The fix is coming soon.*

"Maybe you do," the Alchemist said, and pointed at Jackson's chest.

Jackson looked down at the black heart pendant hanging around his neck.

Footsteps approached from behind.

Ah, yes. Finally.

Nana stepped up to his left, her tongue still pulled through her neck, twitching. Gillian stepped to his right, her head twisted back from rigor mortis, skin several shades of black decay.

“What do you say then? Trade?” the Alchemist asked, holding up a bag of death.

“Do it, Jackie. Do it, do it, do it,” Nana whispered.

Gillian’s grip tightened on his arm and, in turn, his hand tightened around the pistol.

“We’re family now, right?” Jackson pleaded, the gun sliding out of his pocket.

“Yeah, Jack, of course we’re family,” the Alchemist said as he walked toward Jackson with a needle gripped in a pale, bony hand.

THE END.



About the Author



Born near Baltimore, Maryland, Kris has been writing short fiction since he was a kid. First sharing his ramblings on Stealth Fiction and then on Reddit, where most of his stories were posted to r/nosleep. His stories have been featured on The NoSleep Podcast, Chilling Tales for Dark Nights, Tales to Terrify, and Horror on the Rocks. The recording of The Scarecrow Corpse, read by Markiplier, has been heard hundreds of thousands of times. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife. And occasionally, he turns into a strawberry.

More stories: StealthFiction.com

What's Next?

LET ME TELL YOU HOW I LOST MY EYES

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Coming one day. Maybe. Probably not.

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Hear It Read Aloud

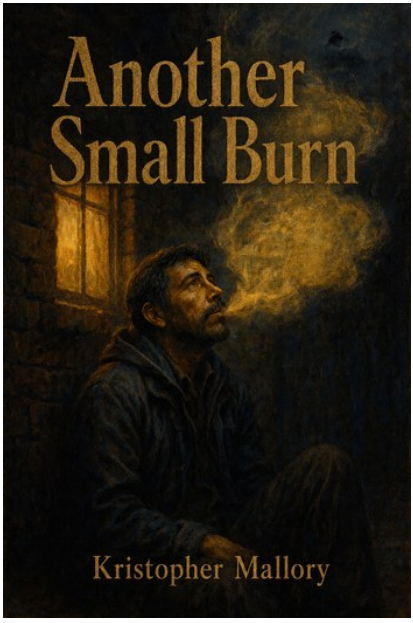
Some stories are better heard in the dark.

Gillian has a complete full-cast reading in digital voices: Michael C. Vincent narrates, and every other character has a voice of their own. It runs 40 minutes and it's free: play it online, or download it as an MP3 or an audiobook with chapters.

It was first read aloud on Chilling Tales for Dark Nights in October 2015, and later on Horror on the Rocks. Those readings are on the same page.

Listen free at stealthfiction.com

More from Kristopher Mallory



ANOTHER SMALL BURN

This quiet horror short is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

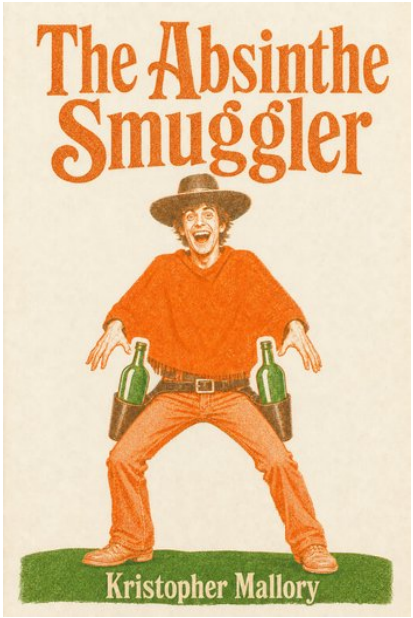
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Carlos can burn any memory into magic, the way everyone can now; the hard part is choosing which ones he can live without.

~~~~~

Praise for Another Small Burn:

"That would make a fantastic Novella or novel, I was sad when it ended and wanted more." – *smoore*



THE ABSINTHE SMUGGLER

This comedy short is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

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A teenager on holiday in Madrid promises his friends two bottles of the green fairy, and customs turns out to be the easy part.
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THE SPECIAL CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS OF MR. EVERETT

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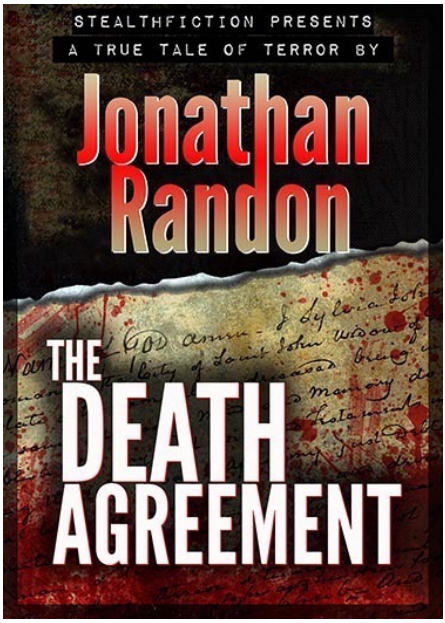
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Christmas Eve, a blizzard, and Hank agrees to sit with old Mr. Everett, twenty-two-time winner of the town's decoration contest, who insists he is not going crazy.

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Praise for The Special Christmas Ornaments of Mr. Everett:

"Quite a story, mixing snowy Christmas magic with delightfully dark humored chills." – *leavnsoon*



THE DEATH AGREEMENT

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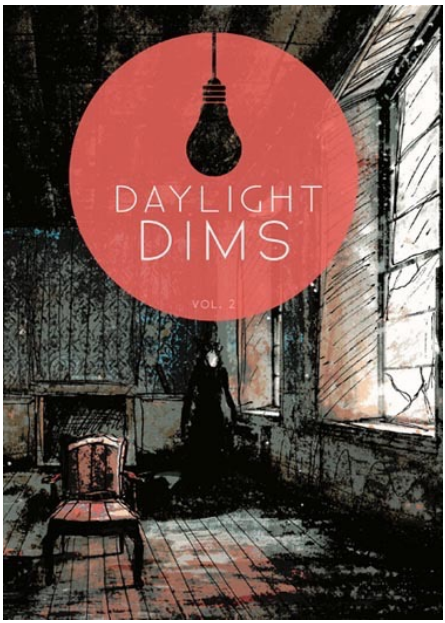
We made a pact. He lived up to his end by dying. I tried to live up to my end by following The Death Agreement.

What you will find within these pages is a true recounting of a man's life as seen through my eyes. It's almost an impossible task when some of what you see can't be real and what is real you may refuse to see… My name is Jon Randon and I'm going to tell you a story.

Praise for The Death Agreement:

"This was one of the best things I've ever read." – *GrandMoffJed*
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DAYLIGHT DIMS
VOLUME TWO

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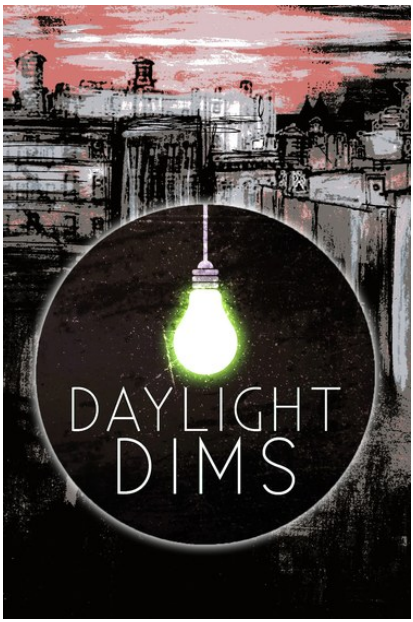
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Darkness descends again. Daylight Dims Volume Two features thirteen stories that cross the genres of surreal, dark fantasy, and heart-pounding dread. This annual horror anthology is guaranteed to twist your perception of horror. From the common, comfortable tropes to the more taboo, these handpicked tales have a literary aspect designed to showcase what true horror can be.

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DAYLIGHT DIMS

VOLUME ONE

Second Edition — now with two new stories from the editors.

This horror anthology is now available. For more information on this book, please visit the Daylight Dims website.

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The editors chose 13 stories from over 100 premium submissions. DD contains some of the best horror around.

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