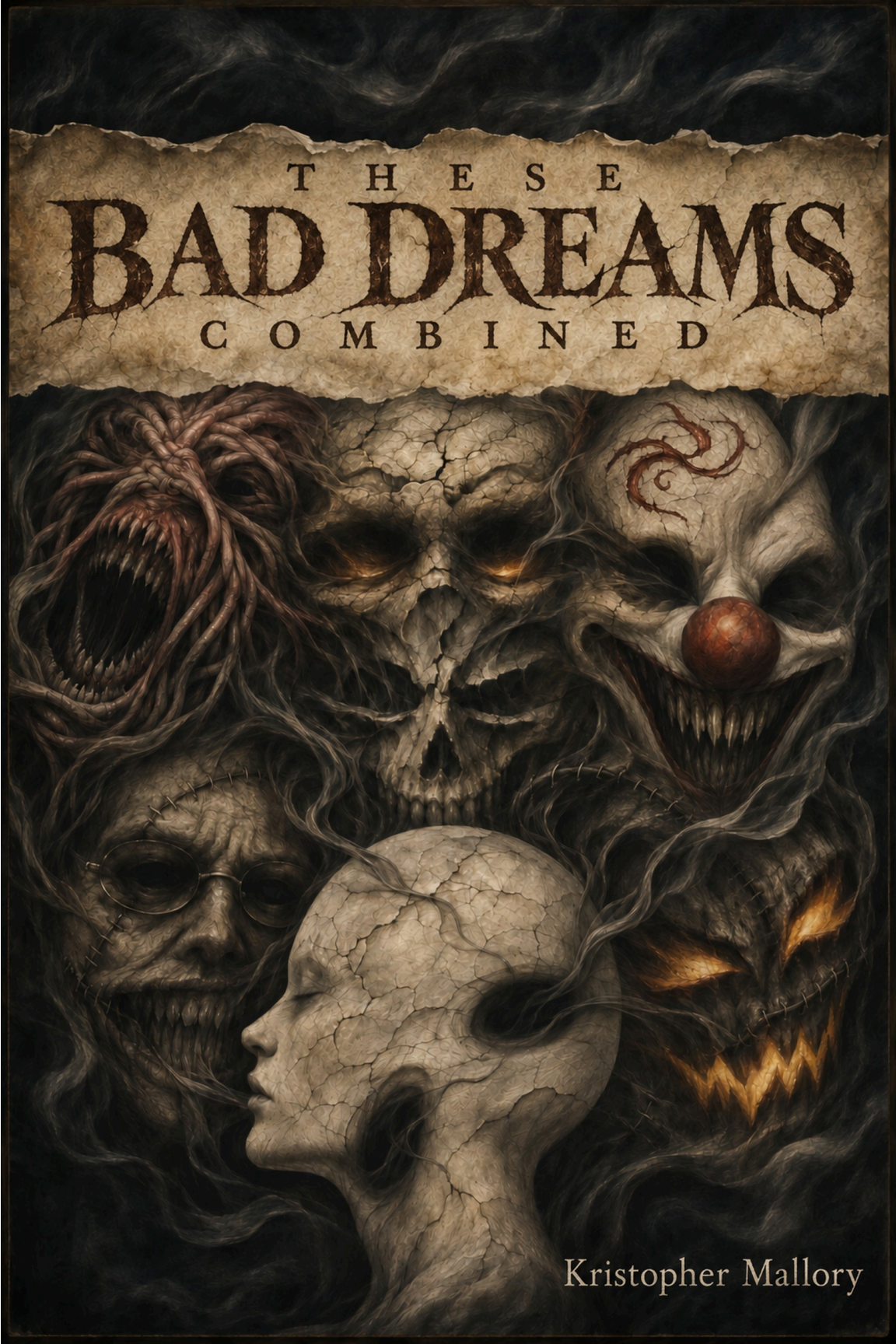

THESE
BAD DREAMS
COMBINED
Kristopher Mallory

These Bad Dreams Combined

by

Kristopher Mallory

These Bad Dreams Combined

A short horror story.

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www.StealthFiction.com

These Bad Dreams Combined

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Other Releases by Kristopher Mallory

The Diary

A Gift Of Bone

Ruined Sheets

The Scarecrow Corpse

Attempted

Watchtowers of Carthage Key

Another Small Burn

The Absinthe Smuggler

The Special Christmas Ornaments of Mr. Everett

The Death Agreement

Mega Millions

I Know What They Are

What People Are Saying about Kris's Stories

The Death Agreement:

"This is all so confusing and mind blowingly awesome." – *Jesslikewoah*

I Know What They Are:

"This is absolutely amazing. Has me a bit paranoid as I get deja vu quite a bit, hopefully not too many good futures have passed me by..." – *Niamhel*

Master Stargazer:

"Hands down one of the best short sci fi books I have read, and I have read a lot." – *rickamente*

These Bad Dreams Combined:

"I have no idea WTF is going on here, but I'm fascinated!" – *ali3443*

Dedication:

Dedicated to Debbie B. Thanks for all your help.

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These Bad Dreams Combined

Truth.

“There are moments when even to the sober eye of reason, the world of our sad humanity may assume the semblance of Hell.”

~ Edgar Allan Poe

Chapter 1 – Confusion Terror Acceptance

Confusion, terror, and acceptance are often the feelings I have as I'm pulled from one bad dream into another.

Suddenly I find myself lying down in a dark room. I realize that it's my bedroom, thank God, but even so, this doesn't always mean I'm safe. To be honest, there's no way I can say for certain that some evil isn't about to decapitate me…or worse.

Most people don't know this, but sometimes horror has a time limit. For me, it's about an hour.

The problem I deal with is that I might still be dreaming. The Doc calls it 'false awakening.' It's a condition in which a person can't distinguish between being in a dream state and being awake. From time to time I experience type III, the most severe form of the condition. And it means that for an hour after waking, I'm completely screwed. The best way to describe it would be part temporary insanity and part living hell.

So that's who I am. That's what I deal with. What usually happens next is this: I attempt to catch my breath. I lean over and switch on the lamp, then grab a notepad and pencil. If it's a goodnight, the light will instantly come on, and I'll still be safely in my real bedroom. On a bad night, though—well, I would rather not talk about a bad night because anything could happen.

On this night, it could go either way. I take a deep breath, and I write down my experience.

The clock seems to be stuck at 2:12 A.M. I keep hearing terrible noises coming from the attic. Right above my head, to be precise. I think it's that dark, faceless thing that was just chasing me. Or is it something else? I don't know. I don't want to know. It sounds as if it's ripping through the ceiling. They like to attack from above. There's no way to defend myself. No way to fight back. All I can do is wait. If a hole appears, I'm finished. I'm feeling absolute fear. I could be wrong. I could be wrong about everything. Maybe nothing is in the attic. Maybe I'm just writing so fast

that the time on the clock hasn't changed. Maybe the noises are only remnants of my dark imagination. The thing was so horrible that my subconscious mind is trying to keep it hidden. Are pieces of the ceiling falling? Is that a claw? Is that a growl? Dear God, help me. I'm falling apart.

The tip of the pencil snaps from the pressure of my fervent attempt to scribble the words. Not that it matters. All that could be written was written, leaving only the original question: Is this really happening?

This is a collection of nightmares intertwined with an account of the previous day. I'm not sure which, if any, of these events are real, so I need someone to help me decide. There's got to be someone who knows if my actions have consequences. Someone other than myself to tell me if my life is still worth living.

I hope that someone is you. Those answers are in your hands. Judge me. Tell me if all of this is in my head. Tell me if you think I'm fully grounded in reality or living in a nightmare. Tell me what I should do. I'll humbly accept your answer without a second guess.

Of course, all of this depends on you being awake, being real. This could just be a waste of time. So take a quick look in a mirror. Ask yourself if you are real. Ask yourself if you're awake.

Are you sure?

Chapter 2 – Child's First Nightmare

I'm seven years old, and I'm in complete shock. Pitch black, the air is freezing, and I'm dangling from a rope. Even though I'm hanging on as tight as I can, I've no idea how far above the ground I am. Somehow though, I know that if I slip, the drop will kill me. I don't know how I got here. My hands are like ice, and I feel that I'm seconds from death.

I scream for help.

In response, other people scream back at me. The voices come from far, far above. The echoes bounce all around me, letting me know I'm not in a void. The voices are distorted, and I can't make out what they're saying. What I hear isn't so much screaming, but more like the cheering of a psychotic mob.

I wonder what I could've done that would cause them to treat me this way. There must be a reason why they hate me. I beg for help, but no help comes, only more cheering.

The voices trail farther and farther away. I realize they're lowering the rope deeper into the abyss.

My hands are still slipping, and in this pitch-black darkness, my mind is screaming, *hold on tighter!* My burning fingers loosen against my will. I scream again. More cheering, more bloody cheering.

I can't take it. I'm about to give up. The mob knows and celebrates louder.

This rope is my only friend. I'm clinging on for dear life. As much as I dread losing my grip, what I'm more afraid of is finding out why they have done this to me.

My feet touch *something,* and I recoil. I instinctively pull my legs up to my chest. But the rope continues to lower, and once again something touches me. This time I can't pull away, so I let go, finished.

Instead of an endless drop, it was only the ground that had reached out to me. Now a prisoner of the dark, I curl up in a ball and rock back and forth. Where is my mother? Why hasn't she come to rescue me?

I hear something lurking in the darkness. I stay very still because I know that it will devour me.

I wait, but nothing comes.

Reluctantly, I stand up. The ground feels like dried clay under my bare feet. Even though I can't see in the solid darkness, I want to know my surroundings. I walk forward until my fingertips touch what feels like stone. Feeling around, it extends in both directions. I follow the wall and make a mental map of my position. The angle is concave, and I'm walking in a circle. The air is musty and stale.

Suddenly I know. I'm in an old, dried-out well. I feel as if I've been down here many times before. There's more to all of this, some meaning, but I can't remember. As if waiting for me to make the realization, I hear the thing in the dark again. The sound is clearer. It's the hissing of snakes.

Hundreds of them are drawn out by the smell of fear. *Please don't*, I beg. As soon as the thought comes, the snakes attack. They latch on, fangs pumping venom into every wound. I pull them away, but for each one I rip off, two more latch on. There's no pain—for that I'm grateful—but I still fight with all the strength that my seven-year-old self can muster.

As they overrun me, trying to cover every inch of my body, I remember something important. I'm not afraid of snakes; the snakes are afraid of me. Let them bite. It doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt.

I quit fighting. More snakes latch on, and I leave them withering on the wounds. I realize that I was only ever scared of the darkness, and I only hate the people above.

The snakes let go and disappear back into the holes from which they came. I've passed their test. But the people above are still laughing like they always do.

So this time I do something that they would never expect. This time I laugh back.



Chapter 3 – Things Forgotten

It’s been a little over an hour since I woke up. My room is still my room. The clock is ticking away just fine. Most importantly, nothing came crashing through my bedroom ceiling. Nothing tried to torture and kill me. In other words, it was a good night.

I somehow managed to get close to five hours of actual sleep. The upside is that I’ll actually be somewhat functional at work today, which my boss will surely appreciate. The downside is that the day will consist of a series of distinct events that will tick by slowly, instead of passing in one blur like it normally does. I’ve gotten so used to those blurry days, and often I welcome them because time passes faster, making my job bearable.

Looking out the window, it’s still dark. The weather is nice, so I decide to go for a jog. The Doc says it’s a wonderful way to get rid of built-up stress. Trust me, there’s a lot of built-up stress that I would love to get rid of. Since it’s a part of my ongoing treatment, I try to get a run in at least once a day. It got me in the best shape of my life. Sadly, it hasn’t done a single thing to help with the stress or the nightmares.

Once back home, I take a hot shower, make a quick breakfast, and then sit down in front of the television to watch the end of some bad western movie while I wait for the early morning news. I don’t mean to bore—I never claimed that my life was exciting—but for someone to know me, they need to know everything. My life isn’t much different than any other white-collar worker. I dress the same. I act the same. The only real difference is that I have darker circles and very bloodshot eyes.

Something on the coffee table catches my attention, an envelope I don’t recall seeing before.

“What the hell?”

The return address confirms that it’s from the Doc’s office. It’s already been ripped open. Puzzled, I take out the letter and start reading.

I expected another lame message from my insurance company, packed full of excuses as to why they’re not going to cover the cost of this or that.

Instead, it's a letter that I'd been hoping to get for a very, very long time.

I read that I've been accepted into a clinical trial for a new treatment option. I'm to meet with the Doc who'll issue me the prescription. The meeting is set for today. I look at the clock and realize that if I don't leave right away, I'll miss the appointment.

How could I have forgotten reading something this important? The answer is the short-term memory lapses I suffer from. It's another one of the many dysfunctional side effects of my overall sleep disorder. The lapses happen from time to time, usually because of my constant lack of sleep, but sometimes they can be triggered by too much sleep. It's a no-win situation.

As I'm grabbing the keys to my car, the memory abruptly comes back to me. The letter was in the mailbox when I had come home from work yesterday. I threw the junk mail away and left the acceptance note lying on the table.

Mystery solved.

It's always a relief when I remember what I'd temporarily forgotten. If I had tossed it after reading, then I would've missed the appointment for sure. God help me if I ever win the lotto. I might forget all about it by the next day and never turn in the million-dollar ticket.

Joking aside, it's not a big deal. Of all the side effects of my condition, short-term memory loss ranks close to the bottom. The memory does come back to me eventually.

Chapter 4 – 36,000 Feet And Falling

Smoke in the cabin! No one is panicking, no one except me. I don't know what the hell is going on. Then I see someone taking a drag from a cigarette, and realize it's the source of the smoke. A few rows forward, a majority of the passengers have either a cigarette or cigar in their hand. This is strange because smoking aboard American commercial airliners was banned in nineteen eighty-three.

The flight attendant comes over, having witnessed my moment of panic. She's dressed like she belongs in the nineteen sixties, same as everyone else. She asks if I want a pillow. I tell her no, and then I ask her where we're going. She says we will reach our destination soon. Then she walks away, leaving me wondering if she purposely didn't answer, or if she simply misheard my question.

I'm in the aisle seat, my wife is in the middle, and our young son is looking at the wing out the window. I hate flying with them. What if something bad happens? What if?

A stewardess screams from the back of the cabin. I look over my shoulder and notice a few of the crew members fumbling with a fire extinguisher around the galley. A tiny blue-tinted flame is licking up the wall.

They're about to make a horrible mistake, and I want to yell out, but my voice is frozen in my throat. One of the attendants begins spraying at the fire. Immediately, the flames triple in size. Small popping noises erupt from the panels above. The fire is now in the wall.

I find my voice and scream at them for being so stupid. Class-A extinguishers only make an electrical fire worse! But they're not listening, and the wires inside the wall continue to burn. The more they try to stop the flames, the worse the fire becomes.

My wife asks if we're going to be all right. She's scared, but she's not crying like a lot of the other people aboard. I say we're going to be fine. It's my fault—I could've warned them sooner—but they have it under

control now. My son smiles. He says that he's glad I helped save the plane. I lean over and hug him, and I whisper something into his ear to let him know how much I love him. I'm doing what I can to show my family that we're fine, but in my head I'm counting.

It takes fifteen seconds for an electrical fire to consume a galley's wiring system. This causes a rapid decompression. People are terrified and fighting to get the oxygen masks over their faces. Behind the screams and the noise of the rushing wind, I hear the hydraulic failure happen. Without hydraulics, a Boeing 777 slows to less than 150 knots, stalling speed. Then all four engines cut out, and the plane does an uncontrolled pitch to the left. There's a feeling of weightlessness as the G-force disappears. I've lost track of time, and the only truth I remember is that from thirty-six thousand feet, a plane in free-fall will hit the ground in—



Chapter 5 – For Night Terrors Take Two

One of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling of the Doc's waiting room has reached the end of its miserable life. The flickering of the bulb is giving me a migraine, and I can't stand it much longer.

I check the waiting room for something heavy I can throw at the fixture. If the Doc asks about all the glass shards, well, I figure I'll pretend it was already like that when I got here. Knowing him, though, he'll say something like, *'don't bullshit a bullshitter, son,'* and then add the cost of a replacement bulb to my bill. Probably two replacement bulbs, just to teach me a lesson.

Not seeing anything worthy of the job, I consider my shoe. As I'm chuckling at the thought of actually trying to explain why I took it upon myself to finish off the dying light by means of a size-twelve projectile, the Doc opens the door and asks what the hell I'm laughing at.

"Nothing," I say. "Just daydreaming."

He half-apologizes for the wait. I follow him through the door and take a seat on the couch.

The standard questions are asked: How many hours of sleep? How many false awakenings? Any more sleep paralysis? How many lucid dreams? Have I been recording my nightmares? Still running? Still taking the medications? Depression issues? Thoughts of suicide?

I answer everything exactly the same as I did on my last visit. "Not much has changed," I say.

After recording my answers on his clipboard, he asks the big question: "What about the night terrors? Have you had any more of those?"

The damned night terrors—*pavor nocturnus*—are the main reason why I sleep in a locked room every night. I've experienced four since the last visit, but for some reason, I lie. I tell him that I've only had one minor episode.

The Doc wants all the details. As I'm recounting what I remember, his demeanor changes as if he can relate to my fears.

In case you're unfamiliar, night terrors typically occur during non-rapid eye movement sleep. To an observer, someone suffering an episode will appear extremely frightened. Gasping, moaning, and screaming are common. Sometimes the person will get out of bed and harm themselves or others. Sometimes even fatally. It's often impossible to fully wake them. After the episode, the subject can settle back to a true sleep. Often, the incident can't be recalled.

"I woke up on the floor in front of my bedroom door again," I say.

He asks how I know I wasn't simply sleepwalking.

"The tips of my fingers were bleeding from trying to claw my way through the door, Doc."

"Oh," he says, making another note on his clipboard. I have to give it to him. He has a knack for being under-dramatic.

The Doc tells me that he knows it's been a tough road. He hands me a glass of water and asks if I see the glass as half full or half empty today.

Slowly pouring the water onto the floor, I say, "This is how I see the glass." I hope he gets the point. I need help, and I need it now.

I'm sure the concern he has for me is genuine. Having known him for a long time, I might go so far as to consider him a friend. Yes, he has been trying to help, but nothing is working so far. And it's looking more and more likely that nothing ever will.

"All I want to do is to find a way to live a normal life. If something doesn't change soon, I might end up inside an institution."

"I know," he says. "I've pulled some strings to get you in the trial. This new drug is promising for people in situations like yours."

Acceptance into the trial is the best news I've heard in years. I'm so excited at the possibility of a new start I almost want to kiss him.

The Doc wants me to keep up with the journal. He doesn't want me to lose hold of my experiences, the good ones—however rare—or the bad ones.

"Because of the nature of dreams," he says, "the harder you force yourself to recall everything, the quicker the substance begins to blur and

change, leaving only a vague imprint of what's really there. So don't push it, all right?"

I know exactly what he means. After a dream, the picture never seems complete. When I write down what I remember, one moment it makes sense, then it's gone. I try my best to relive it, and the edges begin to crack. Then I discover a point where there's a contradiction; my brain attempts to reevaluate everything. Then the center falls out and the context is torn away, leaving a black hole in the experience. Inside that nothingness is where the important answers have fallen.

"If this works," he says, "you'll never have another nightmare again."

He hands me the prescription, tells me to take two before bed, and wishes me luck.

Amen.

Chapter 6 – Snowflakes

Imagine a snowflake falling from the sky; that's me. I'm the snowflake. I'm floating down to the earth. The night is dotted by the haze of city lights below. The wind pushes me in one direction, and then another. I continue to fall, and now I can make out the shape of individual buildings. Falling further still, I have an idea of which section of town I'll land. A gust hits me, changing my course for a final time. I'm between two buildings. Is it going to be in an alleyway? Yes. There are people below me. Three people. A snowflake's lucky to land on people. But I miss them, landing softly on the ground. That's all right. How great it is to be a part of this perfect white blanket of snow. The dream of safety suddenly crashes in on itself. All around me, the ground is turning red. Before I can despair, I become red too.

I'm the woman. The man dressed in a white baker's uniform is still holding the knife but not attacking. He's just leaning against the wall and watching as his partner rips at my clothes. His all-white uniform is contrasted by a black ski mask, black leather gloves, and black combat boots. The man on top of me reaches back, and he hits me in the face again with the butt of his gun. I don't feel the pain anymore, but the taste of blood is growing stronger as the colors drain from the world. I'm able to keep my wits even though the world exists only in shades of gray. The demented baker had been following me. I had hoped he only wanted money, so I'd dropped my purse and ran as fast as I could. I frantically searched for someone to help me, but the baker was so close behind. In the distance, I saw a man standing under a streetlight, and I screamed for help.

I'm the assailant. I hit the bitch again since she seemed to like the last one so much. I know she's trying to retreat into her whore mind, but I won't let that happen. I want her to understand why I'm doing this. How stupid the bitch must feel. She looked so relieved when she saw me under the streetlamp. I couldn't resist a smile when she screamed out for my help. When she dove right into my arms, I laughed. Even then, she didn't

realize who I was, the stupid bitch. I hugged her close, whispering that I would protect her. Either by my voice or by my smell, she finally remembered me. But it was too late for her. I grabbed her by the hair and pulled her into the alley.

I'm the observer. The ski mask itches, but this is the most fun I've had all week. He's working her over so good I don't even have to get my uniform dirty. How many times has he slammed her head into the concrete? Beating people isn't my style, not unless they ask for it, so for a split second, the thought crosses my mind that I should kill him for how cruelly he's treating the lady. But I don't. Torturing someone is fine as long as you end the suffering when you're done. She had really thought I only wanted the purse. Then she ran right into the trap. Shivers ran down my spine when he said, *'Remember me, bitch? We're going to have a fucking blast!'* And man, oh man, we sure are.

I'm the bystander. I'm peeking around the corner. Four in the morning on Christmas Eve, I saw a woman dragged into an alley. The one on top of her is screaming, telling her how much he hates her for what she did to him. The one in the mask reminds me of a stone gargoyle. I want to help, but I'm scared. No, I think. The only thing to do is to hide here…keep filming everything with my phone. If only the damn snow would stop messing up the shot.



Chapter 7 – Getting Better All The Time

Normally I hate when it takes me an hour to find parking, but not today. Today is a good day. Normally I hate when I have to walk by ten people who all give me a fake-friendly reminder that I'm late for work, but not today. Today is a good day. Normally I hate hearing the water-cooler gossipers blabbing on and on, but not today. Today is a good day. And normally I hate absolutely everything about this job, but not today—no, no, not today.

Perhaps the enthusiasm is premature. Those pills that the Doc gave me are experimental. They may not even work. Right now, though, I'm experiencing something that can only be described as hope. Hope is a feeling I don't have often. I've got to say, it's a great feeling…the best feeling.

Looking around my small cubicle, I'm surprised to see the stacks and stacks of papers that have piled up. It's a backlog of work that I had no intention of ever doing. Not even this brings me down.

I do wonder how I haven't been fired for lack of performance. Honestly, with a job such as this one, the idea is to find and maintain the absolute bare minimum of work without catching the attention of upper management. When you find the sweet spot, it doesn't look like you've been slacking off, but rather that you've been overworked and you're doing the best you can just to keep up! I probably look like a company rock star. But I'm not the "go-to-guy," or "Mr. Dependable." The truth is I'm a joke. That's all right, though. So is almost everyone else.

Feeling inspired, I dig into the mountain of meaningless paperwork, hell-bent on making it disappear. Coworkers walk by and do a double-take when they see the frantic pace at which I'm working. I flash them a maniacal smile. Most walk away in shame or fear.

The mess quickly vanishes. I knocked out five days' worth of work, and it's not even lunchtime. Somewhere in the background noise of the office, my Boss's Boss is chewing out some bum. My name is mentioned.

Praises of how hard a worker I am, how I should serve as an example, something about the possibility of a promotion. No applause is necessary. Thank you.

With nothing left to do today, I switch between looking at funny cat pictures on Reddit and reading all the success stories of people in the trial for this new medication. Based on all the research, it looks like this might really cure me.

"Wow!" a girl behind me yells. I jump and bang my knee. Hell, I nearly fall out of my chair. I twist around to see the person whom I had every intention of ripping a new asshole.

It's the new girl, the cute one that I never had the nerve to speak to. My anger blinks out of existence, leaving me completely dumbfounded.

"Ouch," I say.

Ouch? Ouch, really? Idiot.

She's one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen, and I just know I've got this stupid expression on my face. To top it off, I'm trying to pretend like I don't know that she knows that I almost fell flat on my face.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"Ye-um-yes," I stutter.

"You sure? I really didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm fine. I didn't hear you walk up."

"You had all that work on your desk this morning. How did you manage to finish?"

"Was in a mood. Needed to channel some built-up energy. You're new here, right?"

"Yes. I've been here a little over a month now. I'm stuck trying to learn this payroll system."

This isn't bad. Am I having an actual conversation? Take it slow.

"Oh, I remember that. If the server wasn't bolted down, I would have thrown it out the window. Want some help ripping it out of the rack?"

Her eyes light up, and she laughs. She's supermodel gorgeous: tall, slender, green eyes, blonde hair, and a great ass. She's well out of my

league but…

She's smiling. I'm smiling, too. Haven't done that in a long time.

"You're funny. Looks like we have a few things in common," she says, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

"Like we're still working here."

"Still here," she agrees.

And still smiling.

I fell victim to judging a book by its cover. I never bothered to say hello because I didn't think she would consider exchanging a greeting with someone like me. But here she is. Up close, I see a tender innocence in those green eyes.

Say something funny.

"You might end up employee of the year, having made it this long without quitting."

That wasn't funny.

"I would love to leave, but I can't. I'm a single mother."

Kids? Kids are all right. The way she said it…

"Rough divorce?" I ask.

"Widowed."

Way to go, idiot.

"I'm sorry."

"It happened a long time ago. My son wasn't even a year old."

Surprised I haven't completely blown it, I decide it's time to take a chance and do something I haven't been able to do since high school.

"Well," I say, trying my best to keep eye contact, "since you're going to be here for a while, I wouldn't mind giving you a few tips that can make life at the company bearable."

"Really? That would be great."

My heart is beating so fast I feel like it's about to explode when I ask, "Can we talk about it over dinner?"

As soon as the words are out, I brace myself for rejection. It won't bother me. The day's been going so well, and just knowing I found the

courage to ask was a huge step for me.

She blushes. The word ‘No’ is forming on her lips.

“Yes,” she says, “I’d love to.”

Chapter 8 – Laundry List

Dreams turn into nightmares, and nightmares get worse over time.

If someone had told me when I was younger to stay away from all things related to horror, I might not have ended up with this twisted imagination. Since no one bothered to give me that excellent advice, maybe that's why all the monsters that scared me as a kid pop up in dreams, which turn into nightmares, and like I said, nightmares always get worse.

The best way to start a list is through the words of an old children's song:

One, two, he's coming for you. Three, four, better lock the door. Five, six.… You've heard this; you know what's next. Mr. Freddy Krueger, this will forever be stuck in my head; when I hear *seven, eight,* I get a sinking feeling because I know you're close by. *Nine, ten, and I'll never sleep again.*

A special thanks to Mr. Jason Voorhees. As a child, I wanted to go to a summer camp. That was until I saw you for the first time. Now I dream of a lake, and I know you will show up with a hockey mask and machete.

Mr. Michael Myers, I run as fast as humanly possible. You chase, but never run. You travel at a slow and steady pace. Right before the blade of your knife finishes me off, I wonder how you manage to always catch up.

Mr. Thomas Hewitt, otherwise known as Leatherface, that chainsaw of yours has come at me more times than I would like to admit. Captain Elliot Spenser, you opened the box and became Pinhead, leader of the Cenobites. You showed me what Hell really looks like. Mr. Charles Lee Ray, affectionately known as Chucky, you were just a doll that wanted to be my friend. I still don't know why you needed to steal my body as well. Because of you and the one they call Puppet Master, any and all dolls will forever scare the shit out of me.

Zombies, both fast and slow, have had me trapped in schools, malls, farmhouses, police stations, fast-food restaurant bathrooms, and on the

rooftops of apartment buildings. Sometimes I hear your quiet moans of hunger, but other times you scream for brains. The worst fear takes over when you manage to take a bite of me.

Speaking of the dead, have you ever found yourself walking down the corridors of a poorly lit morgue? Have you ever met an undertaker who can only be described as *The Tall Man?* He keeps an army of dwarf zombies as company, and a flying silver sphere that enjoys drilling through people's skulls.

None of them have been around as long as you, Mr. Impaler. Vlad, you dined on the blood of your enemies, burned their bodies, and left behind countless rows of stakes, each with a human head, a warning to everyone. Dracula is the worst, but vampires are never fun to meet unless you have a wooden stake or some holy water handy, which I never do. Wolfman, I don't often see you, but I hear you howling in the woods. All the radioactive creatures from the fifties, I try to fight, but you keep mutating and never stop growing until you can crush everything.

To the Dark Lord, the one of Legend, you and your human flesh-eating goblins once had me caged and ready to be tossed into a pot of boiling stew. Damien, I try to stay on your good side, but you manage to manipulate me into doing your evil bidding. To Satan himself, and all your fallen angels, you succeed in turning Earth into Hell. Even you, God, sometimes, when we meet, you have your hand on the lever of a trapdoor. We both know where that chute goes.

Mr. Daniel O'Grady, why did you steal the Leprechaun's bag of 100 gold coins? What is funny to adults can scar a young child for life. Krites, the nasty little critters, will pick your bones dry if the Bounty Hunters can't stop them. Why did you ever have to become that rolling ball of death that left skeletons in its wake?

Mr. Mummy, you never scared me, but I hope you aren't offended. I've found myself locked in your sarcophagus before, and that made me wet the

bed. Mr. Gravedigger, I hear the dirt hitting the casket as you bury me alive. Death, please don't use your scythe again.

I'm even scared of puppies sometimes. I know Cujo and experienced the pain of rabies. Fluffy, I still don't know what you are, but there are times when I see those claws coming out of that chained crate. Isaac and Malachi, I've been to Gatlin, and I've had to run through the cornfields. Randall Flagg, you have walked in more worlds than anyone can fathom. You bring pain and death. Pennywise the Clown, I know they all float; I don't want to go into the sewers. I've met you all in a world that had been destroyed by the super flu, Captain Trips, on the order of the Crimson King.



Chapter 9 – Maximum Lucidity

I wake up, but I don't open my eyes right away. While lost in the darkness, I try to remember the dream, but I'm unable to recall any details. I feel groggy. It isn't like the normal grogginess of not enough sleep. No, this feels more like I've slept too long. Not that I'm complaining. Oversleeping is far better than the alternative.

Eyes still closed, I wonder how long I've slept. My internal timekeeper insists that when I look at my wall clock, it will be ticking past 1 PM. If I'm right, I'll need to come up with a believable story for my boss. On the other hand, I might get a pass since I did such a commendable job yesterday. I might even get away with taking the whole day off. That would be nice.

I crack my neck and stretch, struggling to get my eyes to open. It's still pitch black. I blink. Something is wrong. Had I slept through the whole day? Is it night again? Did the pills do this? The Doc told me to keep a record of everything: nightmares, dreamless nights, thoughts, feelings, and most importantly, any side effects I experience while on this medication, so I reach for my pad and pencil, but they are not there. That's the least of my worries, considering that my desk isn't there either.

"What the fuck?"

I sit up and realize that I'm not in my bed. I'm on a strange couch. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I take a quick look around. I don't recognize anything at all. This isn't my house.

Great.

I don't freak out like most people would if they woke up not knowing where they are and don't remember how they got there. It's happened before, and chances are it will happen again if this medication doesn't work. While not used to this, I am prepared.

Because of the intensity of my sleeping disorders, I've lived by a series of rules that have kept me relatively safe.

The first rule is sticking to a routine that will help minimize the negative consequences of a sleep-walking dream gone bad. Part of that routine is going to bed each night at a set time, and only going to sleep in my own room. I always lock myself in. I always sleep alone. It's safer for everyone.

The second rule is to stay in my room each morning for an hour after waking. As I've said before, even if I wake up and find myself in my room, I may still be dreaming. These episodes, when I think I'm awake but I'm actually still asleep, last a short period of time. I can snap out of it any time before then, but it's rare. During these events, everything seems very, very real. It's only when a nightmarish element oozes in that I'm forced to accept I'm sleeping. When I leave that room an hour later, I feel safe knowing that I won't have an episode.

The interesting part is when I wake up and I find myself in an unfamiliar environment. Some part of my brain remembers these rules. I know that I'm not where I should be. Normally, when this revelation happens, I snap out of the dream instantly. Sometimes, though, I don't snap out of it. I stay under, and I get to spend some time in a state known as lucidity.

I've entered that state now. I'm aware that I'm in a dream. But I have control and can do whatever I want.



Chapter 10 – Everything I Love Is Gone

The desiccated bones of a dead bird are lying in a small heap on the desert ground. There are a few dusty black feathers that have not yet been blown away by the wind, entangled in the bones. They make me think that the skeleton I've been staring at once belong to a crow. I have a feeling the bird has been dead for a long, long time, but places like this have a way of destroying things quickly, so maybe the corpse has been here only for a few days, or even only a few hours.

As I'm considering this, the wind picks up. The howling across the expanse dislodges some of the feathers from the resting place. They are carried off into the void. Soon there will be nothing left, for as the driving wind continues to whisk away the feathers, so too will the shifting sand swallow the skeleton. For that, I'm sorry because there's this strange sensation, like the crow and I have something in common. It may be that we're both lost and doomed to be forgotten, but I know there's more to it than that.

While I stare into the empty eye sockets, I realize why people are really scared of death. It's not because they don't know what happens next. The real question is: if we have immortal souls, why don't we remember anything that came before we were born? Since living things have no recollection of a *before*, the odds that we will have a recollection of an *after* aren't in our favor. Existence is over in the blink of an eye, and when it's gone, it may be gone for good. But what if this crow did have a soul? Does it even know it was ever here? It probably doesn't, which seems to make perfect sense and no sense at the same time.

In the open, the sun's burning light is intensified. I can't stand here forever, but I've not found the strength to move on yet. I don't know if I can. My mouth is parched, and I feel as if I may die of thirst at any moment. And yet I have an odd, irresistible urge to spit. So I do. What little liquid I muster is quickly sucked up by the dry earth, leaving only a small, damp outline where the drop landed. My outlook changes slightly at the

sight. Maybe I'm too pessimistic. Maybe there's something that came before life and remains after death: an outline, a thought, a feeling.

Something.

Maybe all that's left is a memory that there was a memory.

A memory that there was a memory. A memory that there was a memory. The line becomes stuck on repeat in my head as I scan the cloudless sky, wondering which way I need to go. A revelation should be coming, but it doesn't.

A memory that there *was* a memory? I'm staring at the crow again. I look away and see the outline of my life has fully dried now. Somehow that helps to push the thought from my mind.

I need to walk. I was headed somewhere, but I can't recall the name or place. I can't even remember which way I was going when I stopped for the crow.

I slowly scan my surroundings. There's nothing. Only the repeating pattern of a vast stretch of cracked, dry clay. Because it's all the same, and I know it's likely I'll die of either starvation or desperation, I pick a direction at random.

One foot in front of the other, I begin my march to the horizon.

Desert, desert, and more desert. I walk for longer than I think possible. And then the desert is gone, and I'm in a town. I don't remember seeing the town. I don't remember walking into the town. I'm just here, and I know this is the place I need to be.

Although there aren't any signs of ghosts, the town has a haunted air. There isn't much left. Most of the structures are either burned-out shells, or the walls have crumbled from old age. One by one, I explore the buildings that appear safe enough to enter. I even venture into a few that seem like the slightest breeze will cause them to collapse. Still not a single sign of life. This place is a remnant of a time forgotten.

There's an eeriness that's nearly as suffocating as smoke. I want to leave. I would rather be back in the desert than spend one more minute in this dilapidated town, but I keep looking because I have to. When I get to

the center of town, there's a beautiful young woman there. But something is wrong. The girl is lying on the ground, spread-eagled, and naked.

Cautiously, I approach. My mind screams that it is a trap.

She hasn't seen me yet, so I take the time to study her. She has gorgeous flowing black hair, and it's in stark contrast to her perfect pale white skin. Tears run down her cheeks. She doesn't move, and then I notice that her arms, legs, and neck have thick, rusty shackles around them. The shackles are attached by a short length of chain to steel posts that have been driven into the ground.

No sign of other people, so I move closer. The woman senses my presence, or hears the dirt cracking beneath my boots, and her head slowly turns toward me, and she looks me directly in the eyes.

Even though she's crying, it isn't fear or pain. I see pleasure.

Without warning, my soul lights on fire. As her eyes lock on mine, holding me captive, I feel my thoughts are being probed. Our minds meld into one another. She speaks to me without speaking. When I reply, my lips aren't moving. The conversation happens in a split second, and yet it seems we have been together for an eternity. Everything is shared and known, but I can only comprehend and translate a few tatters of meaning:

'You are alone,' she says.

We are all alone.

'Free me. We can be together.'

Why did the town leave you?

'Everything I love is dead.'

I don't understand.

'Everything I love is dead.'

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

'Free me.'

I want to know what happened here.

She transmits the feeling that she has been waiting for me for longer than anyone living could understand. Memory flashes in my mind. Eons ago, when this nameless town had a name, evil, spiteful people chained an

innocent girl because of illogical and outdated beliefs. “Witch,” they cried. “Witch!” Believing the town had been cursed by the girl, they abandoned it, leaving it to rot in the sun, and they left her to rot along with it.

‘Now you know. Free me.’

I grab the stake holding down her right leg, and I pry it out of the ground. As her leg is freed, there’s an almost imperceptible change in her expression—so very beautiful but somehow less innocent.

An ominous look in her glimmering eyes makes me question if perhaps she isn’t a victim at all. But the girl banishes the thought from my mind. Those who did this are the guilty. Of course they are. She is the one hurting. I’ve been sent to free her.

I pull the second stake, freeing her left leg, and she changes again. Her shiny black hair fades to a dull gray color, which matches the petrified wood of the town. Her smooth, porcelain skin becomes worn leather. And yet she continues to change, transforming into disgusting decay on decay.

Witch! I know the truth. *Witch!* I know I have been deceived.

‘Free me.’

It’s a demand. I fight to resist, but her power over me is too strong. I pull the third stake from the ground, freeing her left hand. The thing continues to change.

What are you?

‘I am Romans.’

This can’t be.

‘I am Romans for I am alone.’

Mother of lies!

‘Free me.’

Please, no!

It smiles, if cruelly curling, bleeding lips over rotting, sharp, yellowed, broken teeth, can be called a smile.

It says nothing else to me. It doesn’t need to. I’ve done enough. It reaches over and pulls out the stake holding down its right hand. It changes again into a dark and shapeless void. The dead crow flashes in my mind.

It rips off the neck collar. With the last bind broken, the true form is now revealed as pure evil that can’t be witnessed directly.

It rushes at me, screaming.

With the spell broken, I run. It is close behind. Its breath at my back. I hear it gaining and push myself to go faster, and faster still. Just when I think there may be hope…

Sudden Darkness.

Meaningless Darkness.

Eternal Darkness.

I feel like there’s this important memory I once had. I don’t know why, but I stop walking. I see the desiccated bones of a dead bird lying in a small heap on the desert ground. There are a few dusty black feathers that have not yet been blown away by the wind, entangled in the bones. They make me think that the skeleton I’ve been staring at once belonged to a crow.



Chapter 11 – Embrace The Dream

When you're lucid, you're dreaming, you know it, and you can control the outcome. In these dreams, I can do almost anything. For most people, the first thing they like to do when they become lucid is fly. Not me, though; I want to find a weapon.

A kitchen is as good a place as any to look for something to defend myself. Being lucid doesn't mean it's going to be smooth sailing. Because I'm prone to such severe nightmares, this cozy-looking cottage could, and probably will, turn into a burnt-out clown house of horror. If it does, I should be as prepared as possible.

In the kitchen, I consider my options: Frying pans, glass bottles, fruit. I consider trying my luck at making an object appear. I would like a gun, but I'm afraid that if I try to force an outcome, I might end up with something I don't want at all. A wooden knife block on the counter catches my eye. I decide to go with the large butcher's knife. It feels nice and heavy in my hand.

I am curious why my mind has brought me here, so I leave the kitchen and look around. As I'm exploring, I pass pictures on the walls of people whom I have never seen before. Nothing is familiar at all, which makes it difficult to analyze the symbolism of the dream.

So far, things are going well. I have not yet been attacked by any creatures. The ceiling has not burst into flames. The carpet has not turned to glue. The walls have not begun to cave in. It's nice considering how badly the last few lucid dreams turned out.

Perhaps the medication the Doc gave me is working?

Nothing on the first floor seems to be of any importance, so I think about having a quick flight after all. I'm lucid, so I might as well enjoy myself. I head towards the front door but stop when I suddenly see a strange-looking pale glow coming from the upstairs hallway.

I hesitate. Outside, or upstairs?

I really, really should go outside, move away from this potential danger. It's the better choice, safer. But what if there's something important upstairs?

I knew this would happen. This is how it always happens.

Walking up the steps, looking for the source of the light, I keep trying to change my mind. I know going up there is a bad idea. At the top of the staircase, one of the bedroom doors is slightly ajar. A soft, dancing white light is being projected onto the hallway floor.

The choice already made for me. I can't turn back. Slowly, I push the door the rest of the way open because if I make any noise, the Devil will rain Hell down upon me.

The light is coming from an old television set. Only static is on the screen, the white and black nothingness that is found on channels where a signal doesn't exist.

The room is dead silent. Either the television volume is turned all the way down, or it doesn't work. But to me it feels less like regular silence and more like I'm in the vacuum of space where the concept of sound is but a myth.

Scanning the room, everything feels smaller. On the bed there's the shape of a person. Only it's not a person at all. Defensively, I hold up the knife. I expect the thing to jump up and attack me.

But nothing happens.

The thing in the bed doesn't move, and neither do I. The thing is waiting for me to make a mistake. It wants me to walk closer, the same way that the Big Bad Wolf wanted Little Red Riding Hood to come closer. The thing has deep red, glowing eyes, just like a wolf. Those eyes are partly hidden by strands of tangled blonde hair which hang over most of its face, masking its most hideous features. The thing's slow breathing sounds like a low, persistent growl.

The thing is being still. So, so still.

An almost uncontrollable urge to run hits me. I want to get far away from the thing, but I know that if I do run, it will jump up and catch me by

my neck. The thing would rip out my spine and tear the rest of me apart, piece by bloody piece. So I don't run. I stand and watch it very closely, ready to use the knife.

I'm so goddamn tired of being chased down, torn apart, eaten, burned, buried, and a thousand other bad things that I would rather not describe. Why must every dream I have devolve into this? I'm stuck between all the horrible things that have happened and all the horrible things that will happen if I can't find a cure. I'm angry because I hate waiting for the inevitable pain. If the thing is going to hurt me, it needs to happen soon. The anticipation is too much to bear.

Hope isn't completely lost. I'm lucid, so I have more than just the basic emotions that often play a role in how a nightmare ends. In this state, I can make a choice. I can use logic. I can find a way to run, or I can find a way to fight back. Maybe even win.

Fuck this. Pushing the anger aside, I choose to fight. With newfound determination, I gain the courage to approach the thing. I mentally command it not to move. Each step seems to take longer and longer, as if the distance between the thing and me is growing. But I continue on, managing to inch my way over to the bed.

I lean down and stare directly into the evil red eyes.

"Tonight, you don't win," I whisper.

The thing stirs, but just a little, as if it's only partly aware that I've invaded its lair. This is the first time I've ever dreamed of a sleeping monster, so maybe that is a good sign. Maybe I do have this under control thanks to the pills.

Once more, I telepathically transmit the order not to move. The thing seems to listen. I consider studying the features of my adversary, curious about what has been pulled up from the darkest depths of my imagination. But any further hesitation on my part will make this nightmare worse. I choose to end this here and now.

I close my eyes and plunge the knife down to its hilt.

The thing’s body twitches but soon stops.

“Tonight, I win.”



Chapter 12 – Winding Down

“I’m not sure what I am,” I say to the man sitting across from me at the diner, “but I have a theory.”

The man, unsure of whom I’m talking to, tries to ignore me.

The only way to express my theory is to dive into quantum physics. I explain that an electron not being observed doesn’t exist as a particle at all. Only by observation does it take on those qualities.

I take a sip of coffee and then say, “I’m a personification of that idea. When I’m not interacting with you, you aren’t existing. I’m an Observer. *Nothing, and I mean nothing at all, happens unless I see it happen.”*

The man looks at me like I’m insane.

I shrug and stand up to excuse myself.

“Well, it’s just a theory,” I say in parting.

My eyes move away from him. In my peripheral vision, I see the man slump forward in his chair. As I scan the rest of the diner, other people pop to life as I momentarily gaze upon them, only to slump back down when I turn away. The effect is like a puppeteer picking up the manipulator of a marionette doll, strings tightening, then going slack again as then laying it back down.

Walking out of the diner, the dead silence bursts back to the sounds of a busy city street. Everything picks up exactly where I had left it. Cars are moving, birds are flying, the crowds of people who were standing limp are now going on about their lives. They don’t know that, for the entire time I was enjoying my coffee, they had ceased to exist.

I’m not sure why people have the marionette effect while everything else simply stops. A group of birds will freeze in the sky if I don’t look directly at them. Cars that are going 60 miles per hour will come to an instant halt if I turn away. Only people act as if they have lost something without my observation. It might be because of the human spirit, but that is only a guess.

In the distance, the green glow of the tower on the edge of town shines brightly. It looms over the city, standing more than five times the height of any other building. It is very difficult to describe the feelings it evokes. Every time I see it from this distance, I'm reminded of the majestic Emerald City beyond the field of flowers. It's an amazing sight. But I'm the only one who notices that it exists.

On the highest floor of the highest spire, there is a circular room. The walls are made of glass. I spend most of my time there. Every part of this city is within view. The whole city is able to live while I watch from that room.

Every time I blink, the world dies. Sometimes I wish I could be one of the observed. That can never happen, so I sit in a chair and watch out a window, letting people live a life where they never know that I'm the only thing binding them to existence.

I hear a knock on the door directly behind me, and I scream out in sudden terror. I think I've lost my mind. The concept of a noise coming from behind is completely alien and impossible. The knock comes again. I turn to face the insanity, hoping nothing will be there.

A frail man stands in the doorway, his expression sad and quizzical. I don't want him to be real, so I turn back to the window, giving life once again to the city below.

The man speaks. Not possible, I keep telling myself. He says, "Life is grand until the world crumbled behind you."

As I watch the city, he claims to be a Watcher of Watchers. Without him, he tells me, I don't exist. I don't want to believe him, but he keeps disappearing from one spot and reappearing in another. This is how I must appear to the people in the city, I realize.

I ask him why he has come to visit me.

He says that a Watcher of Watchers served from the highest mountain in my province, and it was his job to look over all of his Observers.

"Others?" I ask.

With a single nod, this Watcher of Watchers confirmed my suspicion that there are others like me. I'm relieved I'm not alone.

Looking out the window, I see the mountain of my Watcher of Watchers. One could see a thousand miles in any direction from there. I imagine he is in a tower even grander than mine.

I ask why I'm being told all of this.

He tells me the Watcher on the mountain is gone. He said that every Observer in this province had been frozen, which means all the people in all the cities around had also stopped.

I want to know how long ago this happened. I need to know. The Watcher of Watchers tells me that he's been searching for a long time. He says, from his perspective, it's been over five thousand years.

What he's saying can't be true. It just can't. If the rules are the same for me as they are for all those I observe, then that means I and everything I care about have been nothing for a very long time.

The night sky agrees with his story. The stars are in a different position than they were just a few moments ago.

"You shouldn't have come."

The Watcher of Watchers tells me there are others above the Watchers. He says there are others above those as well. Two levels up, there's an Overseer that oversees the world as a whole to keep it spinning on its axis. Three levels up, an Entity controls the star systems in our region of space, allowing all the stars to burn. Four levels up, an Intelligence keeps the galaxy spinning as a whole. Above that, maybe there's a God that allows our universe to expand into infinity.

"Even then," the Watcher of Watchers says, "God may just be a pawn like the rest of us."

He says that he's long past his expected lifespan, and that he desperately wanted to find me so I would know these things.

"Why come? Why disturb our unknown sleep?" I ask. "The sun will continue its journey regardless of what happens on our tiny insignificant planet."

“We’re the last,” the Watcher of Watchers says. “You’re the last of your kind, and I’m the last of mine.”

This man has come to rob me of the hope that I once had.

“How is that possible?” I demand.

“A Watcher became unhinged. She grew to hate her role with such fervor. She warped the truth, attempted to convince others that our purpose meant nothing. Insanity spread, infecting all, leading to the suicide of all the Watchers.” He bowed his head. “As the last Watcher of Watchers, I’ve traveled in search of each abandoned post. One by one, I locate the Observers and bring them back. It’s my duty to complete the work that the cowards chose to abandon.”

“You allow each Observer time so they can keep their part of the world alive?”

The Watcher of Watchers nods. “When an Observer dies, I track down the next one, and the next one. Now only you and I remain.”

“Oh, how things change.”

“What happens now is up to you. I will watch, but my time is drawing to an end. If I die, you’ll never know it happened.”

I stare out the window, looking at the city, and the Watcher of Watchers stands behind me. I wonder if there’s any reason to go on. After all, this is the only place left in the world that still exists. By now, the people in the city below are realizing that no one outside of town is reachable. Internet, phones, power — it’s all stopped. It had been five thousand years since the rest of the world died, but to them it just happened.

“How did the other cities handle the sudden change?” I ask.

“Each was different,” the Watcher of Watchers replied. “Most went through a period of chaos. Factions may emerge. There will be war and suffering that will last until a generation passes. Until the truth that the rest of the world which existed has faded to myth, there will be those who suffer. Once the past has been forgotten, a new history may form. There will then be peace until the Observer can no longer observe.”

“The world has wound down,” I whisper. “I wish you hadn’t come.”

The best we can hope for is a few hundred years. Most of that time will be filled with the suffering of the people.

Even now I see fires breaking out all over the city. People are running through the streets, smashing windows and fighting. There is nothing I can do to help them. The Watcher of Watchers and I both look on in silence. Maybe the Watcher who corrupted the rest had it right all along? Oblivion must be better.

I look at the Watcher of Watchers, and he knows what I'm thinking. He's seen it before. After a moment, he nods his acceptance.

I pick up the chair, smash the window, and take a deep breath of the cold air that comes rushing into my tower. I know it will be the last thing I enjoy.

"Goodbye," I say, then jump.

I'm falling, and I'm existing. Still falling. Still existing. I see the Watcher of Watchers leaning out of the broken window, tracking my body as it rushes towards the ground. He could turn away at any time, and everything would stop. But he doesn't turn away, and I keep falling and existing.

Close to impact now, but still my eyes are locked on him. Any second I'll hit the ground. What I see next, which I'm sure is going to be the last thing I ever see, is the last Watcher of Watchers jumping, too.



Chapter 13 – Child's Last Nightmare

The pills were my last hope. I'm in the first dream since seeing the Doc, and I've already had to fight off one monstrosity. Maybe there is no help for a twisted mind like mine. There's no choice now except to see where this nightmare is going to lead.

Two before bed is what the Doc said.

I dip my hand in the pool of blood, then begin to paint a smiley face on the wall. I do this because it's started to go bad, and I don't want it to get worse than need be. Lucid nightmares are like an acid trip; as soon as you wonder what it would look like if the walls bleed, they start to bleed. If you worry about your face melting off, it melts off. With hallucinogenics, if you experience a bad trip, sometimes it is best to redirect your attention to something positive or fun. Maybe the activity will calm you down enough to escape the nightmare. If you don't relax, the world can escalate into uncontrollable insanity. Painting a smiley face is positive and fun, even if you do have to paint it with blood, right?

"Yes, a happy face," I whisper as I use the palms of my hands to make bloody eyes.

Yes, yes, yes, she said. Yes, yes, yes. She said, yes.

It is becoming more difficult to focus with these strange words and rhymes echoing in my head, and I'm having a tough time trying to remain in control of my emotions. I think about waking up, and that thought is quickly growing into a need. I haven't needed anything in my entire life as much as I need my eyes to open.

Confusion and terror. Will not accept. Delusions and errors. Have to admit.

I lean my forehead against the bloody wall. It feels wet and sticky. I envision it soaking into my brain and contaminating my thoughts.

I think something other than the handprint eyes is watching me, another mocking smile in the dark.

Forgot the forgotten. Forgot for a reason. Remember the forgotten. Forget all your reason.

Normally, comfort can be found in being aware that a chance of salvation is gone. Not tonight, though; tonight I'm dreaming madness. Something inside of me snaps, and I bang my head against the wall, over and over again, hoping that will wake me up. It doesn't.

Who is there? Not alone. Two lived here. Two lived here, in this home.

"This is only a nightmare," I say. "Soon it will be over."

Two before bed.

"No!"

Yes, yes, yes, she said.

"Please, please, wake up."

Something is standing behind me. I can feel the mass drawing me in, daring me.

Confusion and terror. You need to look. You need to see. You need to look, see, and believe.

"I don't want to see. Stop it. Just stop it!"

Remember the forgotten. Forget all your reason.

"I don't want to remember."

Two in this home; you are not alone.

Tears mixed with blood rip a path down the sides of my face. It is time to confront what fate is waiting for me.

The worst possible thing comes to be.

A small figure stands in the doorway—a young boy with blonde hair and blue eyes. He is wearing purple dinosaur pajamas. I feel a dread unlike anything I have ever experienced. I have never seen this child before, but I know his face. And I know his name too. Only I don't know why, or how, I know these things.

And then, like a shot to the chest, I do.

"Dear god, no."

"Mommy?" he asks.

"No, no, no, no, no."

Two before bed. Confusion and terror. Yes, yes, yes, she said. Remember the forgotten and forget all your reason. Who is there? Two live here. Two live here, in this home. You don't look, don't you see, you don't believe.

Instinctively, I reach into my pocket. My hand tightens on a bottle of pills. My trembling hand squeezes tight.

Take two before bed, the Doc had told me. Take two before bed, and the nightmares would stop. I never took the pills because I never got the chance. Why didn't I take the pills?!

Because she said yes. She said yes and... and...

"Where's my mommy? I want my mommy."

I ignore the child's question. I need to think. My body becomes cold and numb as the shock sets in. I panic.

Something is going horribly wrong.

Think. THINK!

She said yes, and then... and then...

Oh, please no.

The child in the hall begins to sob.

What is happening!

Drinks after work.

Yes, she said, *yes, I'm free tonight.*

I'm remembering the forgotten. I'm remembering the picture she showed me.

Two live here.

Her son. The child in front of me.

There is blood on my shaking hands, blood drying on my face, blood dripping down the wall. And there is blood on the thing in the bed, only now it doesn't look like a demon. Now it looks like the girl from work.

The forgotten memory flashes in my mind. I remember following her back to her house when the babysitter had called to say she needed to leave early. I remember thinking it was a ploy to end the date because she was having a bad time. I remember she laughed and invited me in. We sat on

the couch and talked. It was getting late, well past my normal bedtime, but I'd forgotten because it felt so nice being with her. I remember I told her I had to go. She asked me to wait while she checked on her son. She went upstairs. My eyes were getting heavy, but I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye. I wanted to kiss her so badly.

I was happier than I had ever been.

"Is mommy sleeping? Tell her to wake up. Tell her. I'm scared."

Please let this just be one long nightmare. Is it possible that I didn't wake up at all today? Maybe I never saw the Doc, or got the pills, or went to work? Maybe I never met a girl?

I force myself to hear the sound of an alarm clock in my head. All I need to do is wake up. Just wake up. *Wake the fuck up!*

There is still hope, even if all that happened. Even if I did get the pills and meet the girl, then is it possible I fell asleep on her couch when she went upstairs? Please let her be on the way down right now. Let her wake me up. *WAKE UP!*

Or did she come down to find me asleep on her couch, and leave me there to sleep?

Am I asleep in hell, or did hell follow me?

As all the possibilities cycle through my mind, any shred of reason and sanity is lost for good. Nothing matters anymore.

Between sobs, the child tries to ask questions about his mommy. I smile and tell him that everything is all right. I tell him that mommy was really, really tired, and she's sleeping. While I'm talking to the child, my hand is searching for the knife that is tucked behind my back. Once I get a firm grip, I ask the kid a very important question:

"Do you ever have bad dreams?"

Knife in hand, I walk slowly towards him. I'm close enough that he sees my clothes, hands, and face are stained a dark crimson. I wonder if he knows that it is what's left of his mother. At what age can a child understand the concept of evil?

As if it matters.

I should feel sorry for the poor kid, and in a moment of self-reflection, what I really feel is... well... nothing. The child, though—I'm sure he's feeling plenty. He looks like he wants to run, but he's frozen solid with fear. And now there's a wet spot forming on the front of his tiny dinosaur pajama bottoms.

How embarrassing.

He shouldn't worry too much about it, though, because I'm only a step away from him, and all of this will be over soon.

Do you ever have bad dreams?

That was the question.

An important question indeed.

The terrified look in his little eyes tells me that yes, yes, he does have bad dreams, and I've become all of these bad dreams combined.

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?

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Coming one day. Maybe. Probably not.

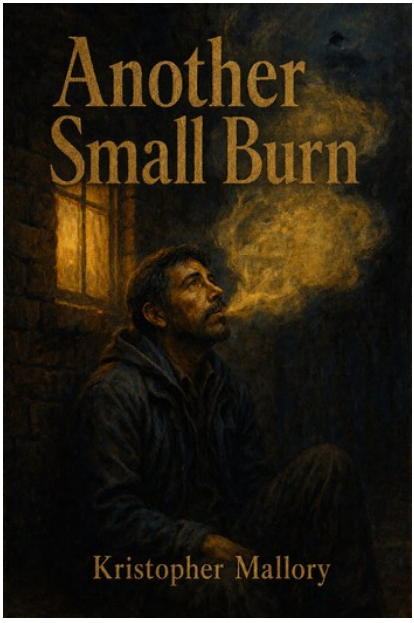
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Hear It Read Aloud

Hear These Bad Dreams Combined read aloud in its own Stealth Fiction narration, free at StealthFiction.com.

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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.

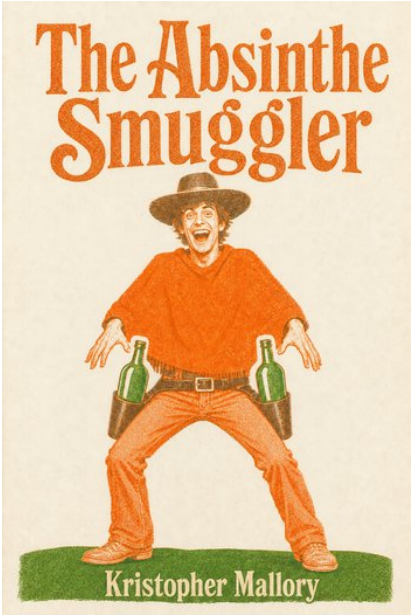
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Carlos can burn any memory into magic, the way everyone can now; the hard part is choosing which ones he can live without.

~~~~~

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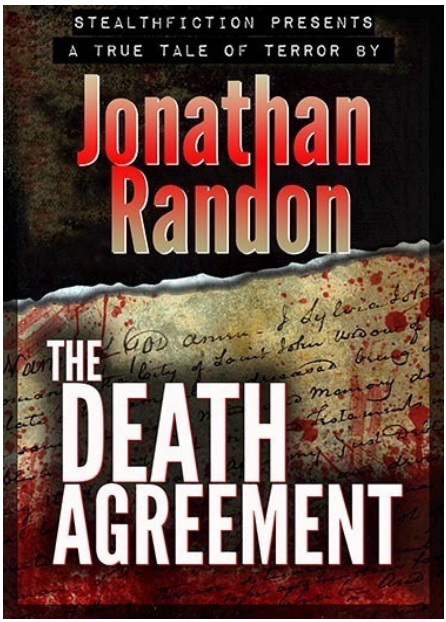
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Christmas Eve, a blizzard, and Hank agrees to sit with old Mr. Everett, twenty-two-time winner of the town's decoration contest, who insists he is not going crazy.

~~~~~

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

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

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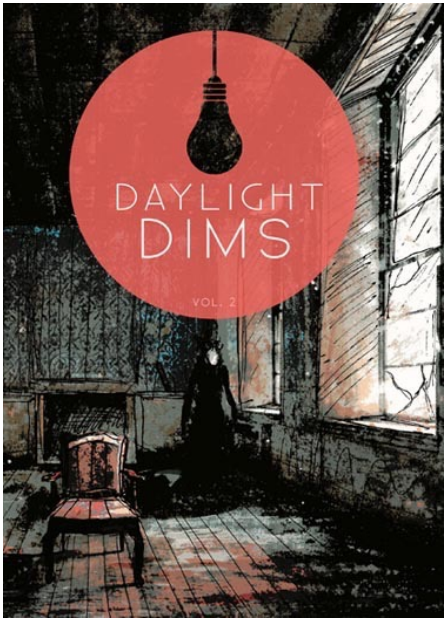
We made a pact. He lived up to his end by dying. I tried to live up to my end by following The Death Agreement.

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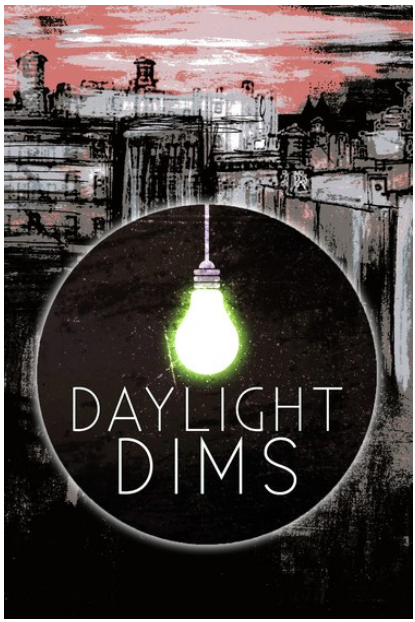
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Darkness descends again. Daylight Dims Volume Two features thirteen stories that cross the genres of surreal, dark fantasy, and heart-pounding dread. This annual horror anthology is guaranteed to twist your perception of horror. From the common, comfortable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

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Praise for Daylight Dims Vol. 2:

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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 Stealth Fiction.

~~~~~

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

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"This is a fantastic horror anthology. All 13 stories are exquisite. The book was not what I expected initially, as I thought that it might be all vampire or werewolf tales. Not so! These are original stories from authors of the macabre. From dark fantasy and pure suspense to classic horror tales, it shows the extraordinary scope of fantastical fright fiction. The stories in this anthology are a tour de force of fear, which will haunt you, terrify you, and stay with you." – S. Mahaffey, *"neverjudge"*