

Memories of a Ghost

by

Joe DeRouen

Copyright © 2012, Joe DeRouen

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Visit Joe's website at www.JoeDeRouen.com

First Printing: July 2012

ISBN forthcoming

Chapter 1

“Claire, I said your baby’s going to be okay,” echoed a far away voice, but she could barely comprehend the words. “I found the heartbeat. You were lucky this time. Your baby’s fine.” She shook her head, still not understanding.

Her eyes hurt, burned like they were wrapped in sandpaper. She blinked against the light, shading her eyes with her hand, focusing on an angelic face surrounded by beautiful blonde curls. The face slowly swam into focus, but she saw only confusion in the deep green eyes that stared back at her.

“Claire,” said a voice, but the lips of the woman staring at her didn’t move, “I know you don’t want to listen to me, but we’ve known each other for over half our lives, and I think I’ve earned the right to speak my mind. And besides that, I’m your doctor, and it’s my *job* to make sure you have a happy, healthy baby, and that’s not going to happen unless you take care of yourself.”

Where was the voice coming from? She blinked, wrinkling her nose, comprehension slowly dawning as the woman in front of her did the same. She was staring into a mirror. She turned away from her reflection, and the world came at her in a rush.

She was in what looked like a hospital room, stark and sterile and white and smelling of antiseptics, lying flat on her back. Her shirt was hiked up around her chest. The mirror she’d been staring into hung from a wall covered in diplomas and certificates, and she was surrounded by computer monitors and various pieces of machinery. Her stomach felt funny, and a quick glance down the length of her body found a carefully-manicured hand holding an electronic paddle pressed tight against her belly.

The hand, she saw, sported neatly manicured nails and connected to a white-clad arm, and her eyes followed the arm up to a torso. The torso spread out to the body of curvy brunette with soft brown eyes and a smile that could light up even the darkest of rooms. The woman wore a white lab coat and carried a stethoscope around her neck, and the badge over her pocket identified her as “Dr. Greenwald.”

“Claire,” said the woman, moving the paddle away from her belly, “talk to me.”

Claire. That was the third time the woman had called her that. But that wasn’t her name, was it? She suddenly realized that she didn’t know what her name was, didn’t know anything.

Her heart beat staccato against her ribs. “Dr. Greenwald...” she managed to stutter, her mouth struggling to form words. “I don’t know who –“

The woman cut her off. “What’s with this *Dr. Greenwald* crap?” she hissed, a wave of pain flickering over her face. “Claire, I’m trying to help you. He’s going to kill you, or your baby. And then how would you feel, knowing you could have done something to prevent it? How would I feel, knowing my best friend in the whole world...that she...that I...” She hiccupped into her hand, falling silent.

She started to respond, but whatever she might have said was drowned out by the shrill whine of a police siren. Her head pounded in beat to the noise, and white spots danced before her eyes. Without thinking, she pulled her shirt down over the sticky

gelatinous substance that covered her stomach, swung her legs over the side of the table, and stumbled to her feet.

The office swam in her vision and her knees buckled. She lurched backward into the table, nearly losing her footing. Her legs felt like lead weights, and she had to concentrate to put one foot in front of another. She kicked off her shoes – strappy black high-heeled things – and managed to gain her balance.

“What are you doing?” Greenwald yelled, grabbing her arm. “Claire, you can’t just leave.”

But she had to. She had to get out of there. The siren, closer now, mixed with another, and both pierced through her skull like hot needles. It was almost deafening now, and it was all she could do not to scream.

She pulled hard against the doctor, but Greenwald wouldn’t let go. With a strength that surprised her, she pushed the woman away. Her arms wind milled through the air and she stumbled backward, tripping over her own feet to land flat on her back across the linoleum-tiled floor.

Bolting from the office, she darted past an elderly nurse and through two double-doors, before finally bursting into a room containing half a dozen women in various states of pregnancy staring at a television mounted on the wall. They all turned as one away from Dr. Phil extolling the virtues of an examined life to stare at her, their eyes mirrors to a soul that she wasn’t even certain she possessed.

A hand wrapped around her wrist and she spun to meet her attacker, instinctively bringing a knee up into his stomach. It was someone else in a lab coat – a blonde haired man no older than forty – and he doubled over in pain, falling motionless to the floor as she brought her both fist down into the back of his neck.

Dr. Greenwald stood in the doorway, her face a mix of fear and confusion. “My God, Claire,” she breathed, her hand flying to her mouth. She held a red leather purse in her other hand, clutching it protectively against her chest. “What did you do?”

She stared down at the man lying unconscious at her feet. She had no idea. And then the siren stopped. Just like that, the siren stopped, and all was quiet again, and the world around her seemed to calm down, to stabilize, if only for a moment.

But she knew she couldn’t stay here, knew that if she did she’d have to admit that she wasn’t this Claire person, and, inexplicably, that thought terrified her. She didn’t feel like a Claire, or anything else for that matter. She felt nothing but fear.

Greenwald slowly moved toward her, like a timid mouse approaching a sleeping lion. She reached out a careful hand while two nurses moved behind her, kneeling to tend to their fallen colleague.

“Claire,” said the doctor, her eyes darting back and forth between her and the fallen man, “I just want to help. Let’s just go back to my office and talk.”

And then there were strong arms encircling her from behind, pinning her hands to her side. She felt a sharp surge of adrenaline flood her system and before she even knew what she was doing, she was moving. She stomped down hard with the heel of her foot, crunching unsuspecting toes beneath. Her attacker howled in pain and let go.

Her arms free, she spun on her assailant, a towering, beefy man clad in a blue smock. She drove her hand into his red, fleshy nose, feeling it snap beneath her strike. Blood exploded from his face as she swept his legs out from under him, watching fascination as he flopped like a dead fish to the floor.

Greenwald was moving toward her, but she was already pushing out through the glass door that marked the exit to the building. From the outside she could see that it was a free-standing clinic of some sort, surrounded by offices of various sorts and sizes on all sides. There was a laundromat next to it and, across the street, a grocery store and some other small businesses. Perhaps half a dozen houses stood across the intersecting street, hidden behind a grove of silver maple trees. She took all of this in as she tried to get her bearings.

Spinning from the building into the cool, crisp morning air, she sprinted past a startled couple getting out of a tiny blue minivan, past a dentist's office and a Salvation Army building, and out onto the street, the rough pavement stinging her stocking feet. And then she saw the source of the sirens that had so alarmed her earlier.

Three police cars, an ambulance, and a fire truck blocked access on both sides of the four-lane road, surrounded by onlookers gaping at the collision that had apparently happened just minutes earlier.

A pink-haired teenaged girl sat crying on the curb, a fireplug of a policeman hovering nervously nearby, taking her statement. Less than ten yards away stood the subject of her distress. A white Ford Taurus sat askew across two lanes of traffic. Its grill and hood were covered in bright red blood, like a paint job only half finished and still sticky wet. Bits of hair and shattered bone flecked the tires and the pavement, creating a grisly mosaic of colors. Whatever the teenager had hit was surely dead.

A trio of paramedics huddled around something just a few feet in front of the vehicle. Forgetting her panic, fascinated by the scene unfolding before her, Claire sidled past the onlookers. A man lay sprawled across the road, his eyes rolled back in what was left of his head. He was covered in welts and bruises, and some looked older than could have been caused by the accident. Bits and pieces of him were missing, spread out across the road for all to see.

Mesmerized, she began pushing through the crowd. As she approached one of the paramedics rose from the ground, calling something to the fireplug cop across the street. The other paramedics followed the first EMT's lead, and together they removed a large black tarp from the ambulance and methodically unfolded it over the dead man.

A blonde-haired man in a red rugby shirt and tan slacks pushed through the crowd, flashing a badge as one of the policemen tried to challenge him. He knelt beside the paramedics, exchanged a few words, then excused himself and walked over to the fireplug cop and the teenager.

Claire (she rolled the name around her tongue, tasted it, digested it, and it still didn't feel right - but she had to think of herself as something) slowly disengaged herself from the crowd and walked to the side of the street. Thirteenth Street, the sign said, just past the corner at Persimmon, where she'd come from.

She watched as a tall, pale man dressed in a dark suit accompanied by a smaller man in an apron slipped through a pair of giant oaks on the other side of the street. They resembled a caricature of the magicians Penn and Teller, if Penn were graying at the temples and a little taller and broader, and Teller even shorter. Penn looked immensely put off by just being there, while his partner merely looked inconvenienced. They whispered back and forth, casting sidelong glances across the street, but their words stopped and their expressions changed to that of concern the moment their eyes connected with hers.

It felt as if someone had walked over her grave. Pushing past a pair of Goth girls and a red-haired boy, she took off in a run down Thirteenth, brown and red leaves crunching beneath her feet, ducking down a side street and disappearing through a copse of trees.

Chapter 2

Out of sight of the two strange men, she still couldn't stop running. Her agitation turned to blind panic as she ripped past a weeping willow into someone's front yard, then took off down the sidewalk in a mad dash to find cover.

Narrowly avoiding a huge green Suburban as it backed out of its driveway, she leapt through a rose bush, ignoring the painful stabs of thorns ripping and tearing at her legs, and ran blindly into suburbia. She ran past dogs, fences, even a startled mailman, not stopping until she could no longer catch her breath, until exhaustion brought her to her knees in a spasm of tremors and vomiting.

Brushing her fingers through her hair, trying to rid herself of the sweat cascading down her face, she took stock of her surroundings; there were two sets of slides, a jungle gym, five wooden benches, and a long row of canvas swings hanging from a freshly-painted metal frame. She was in a park and, judging by the color of the leaves, it must be early fall.

The sweet smell of gardenias and honeysuckle filled her nose, and she suddenly realized her thirsty she was. Frantically searching the landscape, she spied a water fountain across from the swings, next to a dilapidated set of restrooms and a dying oak tree.

Forcing herself to pad across the grass, she almost collapsed as the ice cold water forced itself up through the fountain and into her dry but grateful mouth. Taking gulp after greedy gulp into her stomach, she drank until she could drink no more, and then promptly threw everything up. She dropped to her knees, retching. Tears clouding her vision, she watched as whatever she'd had for lunch pooled in the grass before her.

Struggling to her feet, she pushed through the door to the men's bathroom and stumbled to one of the sinks. Splashing her face with cold water, she tried to calm her pounding heart. Backing away from the sink, her eyes found the huge, tarnished mirror that took up most of the wall, and a stranger stared back at her.

Her short blonde hair formed curls on either side of her head to frame her face, setting off her emerald green eyes. She had high cheekbones, and would probably have been considered attractive if not for the black eye and swollen lip. She wore a blue sweater with pink ruffles on the sleeves and a pair of too-tight blue jeans. Both were covered in vomit.

The doctor said she was pregnant. If that were true, she mustn't be too far along. Her stomach was flat, and she had the body of a runner. She stood maybe five foot six or seven, and probably didn't weigh more than one thirty, one thirty-five, tops. She had a hard time gauging her age, but she guessed late twenties to early thirties.

If only she had a name to go with the image.

Searching the pockets of her jeans for identification, she came up empty. And then she remembered the purse that Dr. Greenwald had been carrying. It must have been hers, and she'd left it behind. Stupid! She was without money, without an identity, and without any idea how to find out who in the hell she was, and she'd just left her purse. And, somehow, she didn't think she'd be welcome back anytime soon.

Claire. Claire what? She was willing to think of herself as Claire, at least for now, but she needed something else to go with it. Claire Smith? Claire Jones? How about that red-haired girl on *Six Feet Under*, Claire Fisher? Hey, at least she remembered watching television. That was something. But the name didn't feel right.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, staring at herself in the mirror, but eventually she noticed a watch on her wrist. It was fifteen until two. The timepiece sported a huge Mickey Mouse head and used his little gloved hands to tell the time. She slipped the watch from her wrist, flipped it over, and studied the back, hoping for an inscription. But that would have been too easy. It was completely blank save for some scratches in the metal where someone had used a screwdriver to pry the back off the battery compartment.

The act of fastening the watch back around her wrist brought the realization that she wore both an engagement and a wedding ring. The ring, also without an inscription, was a simple, unornamented gold band, while the engagement ring sported a full-carrot diamond with a princess cut setting. So she was married. If she could find out there she lived, maybe her husband could help her regain her memories.

She slipped out of the bathroom and took a few sips of water from the fountain, this time able to hold it down. Her stomach grumbled. She knew she'd need to eat soon but, without money, the chance of finding a hot meal seemed alarmingly slim.

A Family Dollar store, a car wash, and a Lucky C Mart gas station lay perhaps a dozen yards away, on the other side of the road where the park met the pavement. Maybe she could steal a candy bar or some beef jerky there, or dig through the garbage for scraps. And then, once her appetite had been sated, go about solving the mystery or who she was and why she's lost her memory.

"Excuse me," echoed a voice from behind her, "but could y'all help me? I seem to be lost, and I know my wife and kids must be awfully worried."

Claire spun around and came within a hair's breadth of driving her fingers into the man's throat. There had been no one there seconds earlier, she was sure of it. But he seemed more or less harmless. Maybe he'd been hiding behind the tree.

His skin, a dark shade of mocha, looked almost like coffee with just the hint of cream. His jowly face quivered as he studied her in return, kind gray eyes searching her own. He stood maybe six feet tall, was pudgy around the edges, and, save for a few patches of graying hair around the sides of his head and a huge bushy moustache, almost completely bald. Wearing a pair of yellow Bermuda shorts and a short-sleeved t-shirt that showed a Mastercard and exclaimed 'The Master is in Charge', he was dressed completely at odds with the season, yet inexplicably didn't look the least bit cold. A pair of leather sandals completed the ensemble.

"Who are you?" she whispered, letting her hands fall to the side.

"You'll talk to me?" he asked, genuinely surprised. "It's been ages...I mean, they usually just ignore me. Treat me like a hobo or something worse. I miss my family."

"But who are you?" she repeated, watching his eyes.

"Yes, you're right. Where are my manners? James Cross, ma'am, but you can call me Jimmy. Just here from Chicago visiting my wife's kin, but I seem to have lost my way. And you are...?" He let the question hang there, waiting for her response.

She waited a heartbeat before answering. "I'm... Claire. Claire... Fisher," she added, taking the name of the character from the HBO series. It would have to do for now.

"Pleased to meet you, Miz Fisher," he beamed, holding out his hand. When she didn't take it, he shrugged and shoved both hands in his pocket. She could swear she saw him shiver.

Taking the lead, she dropped down on one of the many benches littering the park and patted the green metal beside her, inviting him to join her. He surprised her by shaking his head slowly and taking a few steps back.

"That usually doesn't work out too well for me," he said cryptically, shrugging his shoulders. "But you go ahead and take a load off, I don't mind."

She stared up at him, finally shrugging her shoulders in return. "So where's your wife and kids?"

"Wish I knew. It's funny. Last thing I remember, I was leaving the house to run an errand and then, wham, here I am. Been wandering around here for hours, but I can't seem to find no one to help me. Like I said, pretty much everyone has ignored me. I mean, everyone but you."

They were interrupted by the appearance of an older woman, maybe in her early forties, jogging past them with her Great Dane. Seemingly just as oblivious to the cold as Jimmy, she was dressed in a tight pair of spandex running shorts and black jogging bra, and a blue water bottle hung from a loop around her waist. She paused for a moment to sadly shake her head in their direction before continuing down the path, her eyes glued to the beaten earth before her.

"See what I mean?" Cross said slowly, his eyes following the jogger and her dog as they disappeared from view. "They just ignore me. Usually don't even look. Not my fault I'm lost, and not my fault I'm black."

That brought her thoughts back to the dead man in the street. Had she known him, or maybe even witnessed the accident? Maybe that would explain her amnesia, but it didn't make sense. Why would she walk into the Doctor's office after watching this man get run over and *then* suffer a mental breakdown a few minutes later? It just didn't add up.

"Illinois hasn't always been friendly to the black man, I'll tell you that," he continued, working up a head of steam, "but Arkansas' a lot worse, and we've only been here for three days."

They were in Arkansas? She searched her memory and came up blank, other than the fact that the state capital was Little Rock, that Wal-Mart was headquartered in Bentonville, and that Bethel Transportation, a huge shipping business that specialized in imports and exports, operated out of Fayetteville.

She wished she hadn't been so quick to run away from the clinic. At least Dr. Greenwald knew her, could maybe even help her. If only she hadn't left her purse. Identification notwithstanding, she was hungry, and you couldn't get food without money.

"Miz Fisher, are you listening to me?" said Jimmy Cross, hovering over her. "You look a million miles away. I told you, I really need to find my family. Can't you find it in your heart to help me?" He was practically in her face now.

She didn't know this man, and didn't like him being so close. She moved to push him away, but he jumped back as if he'd been bitten by some invisible snake lurking under the bench.

"Look, Jimmy, I'll help you if I can, alright? But right now I'm having some problems of my own. I'm starving, for one thing, and I'm lost, and I'm flat broke. So give me a break, alright?"

He cocked his head to one side, considering something. "I think...yeah, it's probably still there. Couldn't have gone anywhere, now that I think of it."

"What's probably still there?"

"Right over there," he pointed past her, to the base of a towering red maple tree. Its looming branches spread out toward the sky like fingers reaching for the sun. "About a yard to the right of that tree, maybe a foot or two down. An old mason jar filled with coins. Saw a couple of kids bury it there earlier today, maybe an hour or two ago. And right now, it seems like you need it more than they do."

How long had this guy been hanging around the park? She shook her head, and then dropped to her knees beside the great maple. Using her hands, she began to dig.

Chapter 3

Mr. Kingfisher stood at the top of the stairs leading down into the dark basement, assessing the damage. The radiator had been completely ripped from its foundation and both the chair and the cellar door were in splinters, not to mention that poor Mr. Fuller lay in a pool of blood at the bottom of the steps. The radiator could be fixed, that was for certain, and the door and the chair could be replaced, but he wasn't sure what they could do about Mr. Fuller's neck.

They'd been together for years. He really would be sorry to see him go, though he secretly suspected that they were probably better off without him. After all, it was on his watch that Connor West had escaped. Mr. Fuller was only the fifth associate they had lost in all their years of playing the game and he'd only been with them since the late eighties, so, all in all, they'd had a good run. And they'd eventually find someone to take his place, just as Mr. Fuller had replaced Mr. Houseman before him.

He walked slowly down the stairs, long legs carefully stepping over Mr. Fuller's body. The damage was much worse up close. Mr. Fuller's nose had been broken, and a wild spray of blood had stained the basement's cement walls and floor.

Kingfisher still wasn't sure how West had managed to get close enough to Mr. Fuller to break his nose, let alone his neck. They had grossly underestimated the man, and that mistake had cost them dearly. West was dead and, with him, his secrets. He was, after all, the last of his line. But what was done could be undone.

Their employer, however, saw things differently. The man had been on the verge of hysteria before Kingfisher had managed to calm him down. In fact, come to think of it, things might end up being easier this way. Now that the mortal coil had been shed and was no longer a factor, they could use other, more convincing methods to extract the information that Mr. Scratch so sorely needed.

Mr. Quarry crept down the stairs and into the light, nudging him from his reverie. He carried a toolbox in his left hand and carefully traced the staircase banister with his right. The man was short and unassuming, and he didn't talk much, but he was a fount of arcane knowledge. He definitely brought his share to this game they were playing.

"Mr. Quarry," he greeted, with a curt nod of his head. "Are we ready?"

"That we are, Mr. Kingfisher," Quarry answered in a deep baritone. His eyes shifted to the body of the ground. "We've quite a mess, haven't we?"

"Indeed, but I have complete faith in your ability to set things right again."

"Indeed," echoed the smaller man, sitting the toolbox to one side and tightening his apron. "I'll certainly do my best."

Quarry dropped to his knees and began riffling through the toolbox. He withdrew a handful of candles, a matchbook, a length of chalk, and a small bottle of salt. Mr. Kingfisher knew he didn't need a copy of the incantation; he'd long ago committed all of the words to memory.

Kingfisher watched as his partner surrounded Mr. Fuller's body in wide circle of salt before drawing a chalk pentagram around the circle. He adorned each of the star's five points with one of his candles, carefully lighting each in turn, starting with the northern-most point and working left to right.

“There,” he said finally, clapping his hands against his apron in a small cloud of chalk dust. “The preparations are complete. Are you ready, Mr. Kingfisher?”

“No time like the present, Mr. Quarry,” smiled Kingfisher, exposing a row of bright white teeth which, he was proud to say, were still his own. “Point position?”

“Absolutely,” Mr. Quarry returned the smile. His teeth, in contrast, were not so bright, but that only made sense with his diet. Still, he’d have to find a way to tactfully mention to the man that he might consider brushing and flossing more often. After all, they mustn’t scare off the clientele.

Kingfisher watched as Mr. Quarry sat cross-legged at the northernmost point of the pentagram, next to the fallen Mr. Fuller’s head. He seated himself at the south end, ready for his partner to begin the calling. Thoughts of what they had done mere hours earlier in this basement filled his head as Mr. Quarry chanted arcane phrases in Latin.

A hovering ball of light winked into existence, floating above the middle of the pentagram, slowly spreading out to take on the visage of Mr. Fuller. The man looked confused and scared, his eyes the size of saucers. The ghost looked first at Mr. Quarry and then at Mr. Kingfisher before finally speaking.

“You can see me now, right? You can hear me?” he gestured helplessly at his bent and broken body lying before him. “I’m dead, and West’s gone.”

“Obviously,” Kingfisher smiled, clucking his tongue. “We hadn’t thought you twisted your neck like that all by yourself.”

The ghost winced, would probably have blanched had he been anything more than non-corporeal mist. But he wasn’t, so instead he stuttered an apology and then reminded Mr. Kingfisher that he was, in fact, dead, and had probably suffered enough for his lapse in judgment in turning his back on their prisoner.

“That’s all well and good,” Mr. Kingfisher replied sternly, for he was never one to brook excuses, “but how did it happen in the first place? Did he have help?”

“I don’t think so,” admitted the ghost, shrugging helplessly into the stale basement air. “I went to change the radio, and the next thing I knew, he was behind me with that chain. And then I was here,” he gestured expansively with his arms, “and he was going through my pockets and unlocking the handcuffs. He broke through the cellar door, and that was the last I saw of him.”

Mr. Kingfisher had sat patiently through the dead man’s explanation, growing ever most frustrated with their former colleague’s ability to follow simple instructions. He had told the man time after time not to listen to the radio. It only served to offer Connor West a distraction and made their job all the more difficult.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?” the phantom admitted, fear in his voice. “I know, you said no radio. I just got bored, that’s all, with you two,” he gestured at Mr. Quarry, who sat silently with his eyes closed at the point of the pentagram, “off God knows where, and...”

“As you should well know,” Mr. Kingfisher interrupted, giving him a half-bow, “God has very little to do with it. You’re certainly not going to heaven, after all, though I should also think you’re not quite ready for hell yet either.”

“What’s going to happen to me?” the ghost whispered, his eyes flickering toward the top of the stairs. “I’ve tried to leave, but I’m stuck here. I can’t get any further than the cellar door.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Soon enough you’ll leave this room.”

“But how? Can you put me back inside my body?”

“Hardly,” Kingfisher smiled. He rose to his feet and withdrew a paper-wrapped drinking straw from one of his pockets. He began to unwrap it. “You’re dead. But you *will* be with us, Mr. Fuller.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the apparition pleaded, backing away. The heel of one foot brushed the line of salt and sparked, and a cry of pain spilled from his non-existent lips. “Hey, I can’t get out of here. What are you doing?”

Mr. Kingfisher stepped forward, almost but not quite breaking the chalk outline. He crumpled the paper wrapper in his hand and dropped it to the cement floor, then slid the straw between his lips and began to suck.

“What are you doing?” the ghost repeated, as, quite against his will, he began to move toward the edge of the circle. He turned to Mr. Quarry. “For the love of God, what’s he doing to me?”

Mr. Quarry remained silent, eyes still closed, though the hint of a smile played across his lips.

“I’ve already told you,” Mr. Kingfisher said, between sucks, “that it really has nothing to do with God.”

His appetite was raging now. He nodded in satisfaction as Mr. Quarry’s eyes opened and he swept his hand over the chalk and through the salt, breaking both barriers in an instant. The ghost formerly known as Mr. Fuller screamed helplessly as he was sucked into the straw, swirling and swimming in a brief lightshow that would have put even the best Fourth of July fireworks celebration to shame. And then he was gone, Mr. Kingfisher’s hunger sated once more.

Letting the straw fall from his lips, he politely raised his hand to his mouth before allowing himself to burp. The spirit had been fresh, and it had been more than a week since his last meal. All he wanted to do now was lie down and let the food digest, but there was still work to do.

He watched in satisfaction as Mr. Quarry, now on his knees, withdrew a worn leather satchel from his toolbox. His partner opened the bag to reveal two rows of gleaming bright surgical instruments. He carefully withdrew a number three scalpel, measured Mr. Fuller’s finger, made a clean slice, and popped it into his mouth.

Mr. Kingfisher had dined, and now it was time for his partner to do the same, but oh how he hated the wet work. “Mr. Quarry, I think I’ll leave you alone with your meal,” he intoned, half-bowing as he walked toward the stairs, “that is, if you don’t mind. I have other business to attend to.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Kingfisher,” said Mr. Quarry, his eyes rolling back in his head as he feasted.

Mr. Kingfisher turned without another word and headed up the stairs. The day was still young and there was much work to do. Still, he thought, pulling a small stoppered vial containing the soul of a stillborn baby from his inner pocket, there’s always time for a little dessert.

Chapter 4

Somewhere in southern rural Missouri, the ground rumbled. A two-hundred year old oak tree fell to the ground in a cacophony of thunder and dust, sending crows and cardinals racing into the sky and squirrels and rabbits running for cover. Red foxes scurried deeper into the forest, and deer ran toward where the woods thinned out to meet the highway.

A passing semi-trailer hauling gasoline, confounded by the sight of a dozen white-tailed bucks and does flooding into traffic, swerved to avoid hitting the deer and instead slammed headlong into a minivan containing a vacationing couple with their two-year-old twin daughters, killing them instantly. The semi jack-knifed over the van and careened into the side of a hill, exploding in a rain of metal and gas.

Fueled by the gasoline, the fire spread quickly. The explosion instantly incinerated half of the trailers in the park on the north side of the road while simultaneously setting ablaze the trees leading into the woods to the south. A thick, black smoke rolled across the highway, covering everything in its path, choking out the few animals remaining in the wild and the trailer park refugees who sought escape from their burning homes.

Beneath the forest floor, something had rolled over in its sleep. Even dreaming, it relished the destruction it had caused in the world above. But a thought nagged at it, tugged at it, and it couldn't seem to be able to get back to sleep again. Its eyes fluttered open, but quickly closed of their own accord. It didn't want to wake up, but something jostled it, prodded it, and it felt hungry. It had slept a very long time and yearned to stretch and feel the wind at its back once again.

Long ago, when the world above it was all forest, it had roamed the Earth as a man. He had lived. He had loved and hated, hungered and fed, lived and died and then lived again. But that was so very long ago. While he had been powerful when he was alive he had only grown in power upon his death, and, for a time, had ruled the lands from as far as the eye could see. But he had made mistakes, careless lapses in judgment that his enemies had used to usurp his control and defeat him.

They had buried him far from his homeland, a shame that he'd carry with him for eternity. He still remembered the curse; not until the living and the dead both walked the Earth as equals would he be freed from the earthly prison to which he still found himself bound. Finally that had happened, at least for an instant, and it had been enough to stir him from his long and dreary slumber. But would it be enough to allow him to break free of his centuries-long prison and once again roam the world above?

He pushed tentatively against the rocks and dirt surrounding him, marveling as he felt the debris that had been his prison for so long move away. He pushed again, harder, and felt his crypt give, and the spirit was soaring up through the dead branches and rocks and sediment that had surrounded him in his grave. And there it was; the sun, the glorious sun, beating down upon his fleshless body, filling his void with a raging furnace of heat.

But the criteria of the curse hadn't entirely been met. He still wasn't whole. Indeed, the dead and the living had both walked the Earth together, but only for the briefest of moments. The curse had been set aside long enough to stir him from his

endless slumber, perhaps, but not enough to give him back his body, or even most of his power. For that, he sensed, he would need to seek out whatever had caused the rift between those who had hot blood flowing through their veins and those that did not, and make the tear permanent.

Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to drift upon the breeze that circled down and through the trees. Floating into the sky like a feather on the wind, he spun into the air, enjoying the freedom so long denied him. He couldn't go far, for he was still anchored to the earth that had held him for so long, but it was enough. Like a wolf that's caught the scent of a hare on the wind, he had the trail. And he could follow it, though not without a host.

He called out to one of the few animals still lurking in the burning forest; an old wolf recently separated from his pack. Brother wolf, he called, come to me and together we will feast on the innards of man, together we will take any female that catches our fancy, and together we will rule the great forest that lies beyond this one, feasting on the world and the very stars that hang in the sky.

The wolf came, of course. Who could deny him? He moved into the predator's body, snapping his teeth at the smoke, enjoying the stinging bite of it in his nostrils and the sheer animal power of his ferocious jaw. And then he was running through the forest, moving like lightning on all fours, speeding south and away from the flames, toward the one who had managed to splinter the threshold between the living and the dead just long enough for him to break free.

Muscles rippled beneath his wiry frame and he howled with sheer pleasure. A coyote darted from his path, and a mother groundhog and her babies hurled themselves into their hole. He paid them no mind, for his hunger was focused on something much more important than dinner. The world would soon be his again, and he was going to enjoy every last second of it.