

REM
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Chapter 1

After so much sex, Rand wondered whether he would be able to make it into work that afternoon. He opened his eyes slowly. Clear light from the morning sun slanted in through Venetian blinds, casting striped shadows across the floor. A warm breeze carried sounds of waves gently lapping against a beach only a short walk from the house. He could smell the salt air wafting in the windows. And if he tilted his head just right, he could see the green fronds of palm trees dancing against a blue sky.

The room was perfect: white carpet, white walls, thin white curtains drifting lazily with each breath of air. Rand rolled over to gaze at the only thing in the room that wasn't white; the tanned body of Cecile contrasted pleasantly with the Egyptian cotton sheets.

His movements woke her up. She blinked twice and then looked up at him with stunning blue eyes. *How is it after making love all night her makeup is still perfect?* Rand thought, gazing down at her. *The wonders of modern technology,*

“Hey you.” she said softly, one corner of her mouth rising in a smile as she brushed a lock of blonde hair back from her face. She crossed her long arms and stretched, forcing her rounded breasts together and upward. “You were amazing last night.” She blinked once more, slowly and seductively, and then propped herself on her elbow. One hand gently pushed on Rand’s shoulder, laying him flat on his back. He did not resist. Cecile ran a finger along his cheek, down his neck and across his solid chest. “How about one for the road?” She leaned forward and kissed him, gently at first, and then harder with more intensity.

Rand lifted her away and gazed into her eyes for a moment. “Absolutely.” He smiled, and then pulled her back down. Her nipples felt hard and her breasts firm against his bare skin.

And then he woke up.

“Dammit!” Rand refused to move, hoping he might fall back asleep and into the same amazing dream. The effort was doomed to failure. Sunlight filtered in past and the dingy, lime green curtains. He pounded his hands against the bed. “Damn!” When the last images of Cecile slipped from beneath his lids, he finally conceded and opened his eyes. The digital clock resting on his thrift store dresser read only eight, but the room grew warmer with each passing minute. The June day promised to be another scorcher in Hollywood. He would never get back to sleep.

Rand threw the sheet off his twin bed and grabbed a notebook from the old cable spool turned nightstand. He stole it from the rear yard of an electrical contractor who made the mistake of leaving his gate open one evening. It had been a pain in the ass to roll uphill to his tiny apartment, but he felt it gave the place a harsh, industrial look, something he hoped would inspire creativity alongside the stop sign and Highway 1 marker tacked to the wall.

White room...Cecile... tan, round breasts...palm trees...beach...warm breeze. Rand wrote a few words in the notebook, enough, he figured, to help him remember the dream later on when he filled in the details. His therapist had told him to write the dreams down, and then bring the notebooks to their sessions where they would discuss what his subconscious might be telling him. Rand questioned whether the exercise benefited him as much as Dr. Onifur claimed it did, but continued recording the dreams for other reasons. Even if he never told another one to the shrink, he figured a few of them might make great screenplays some day. *Who would I get to play Cecile?*

He tossed the notebook onto the spool, the pencil rolling off and adding to the debris covering the floor, and flopped back on the bed. The metal frame squeaked, and the air forced out of the mattress carried with it the smell of a previous owner. Or maybe it was his sheets. *Fuck...guess it's time to do some laundry.*

The rising heat in the room finally forced him out of bed. He sat on the edge, surveying the disorder surrounding him. The one redeeming feature of his tiny apartment was that nothing sat more than a few steps away, the sink conveniently located in the bedroom just outside the bathroom door. Supposedly the building on Vista Del Mar once housed a monastery or some kind of religious retreat, and whoever finally broke it up for apartments ensured no one got more room than absolutely necessary. *But how many other guys can get a beer out of the fridge without getting off the couch?* He rubbed his eyes and headed for the shower.

Most of his wardrobe consisted of two colors: Best Buy blue and Olive Garden tan. This morning, he pulled a blue polo over his head and pinned on a yellow nametag. He moussed his blonde hair and ran a hand through it. Since he worked in the video and computer game department, he could safely arrive at the store sporting a bed-head look. But the next day when he donned a green apron, he would have to bring it under better control.

Rand caught his black helmet by the chinstrap as he headed for the door. His fifteen year-old Honda Rebel barely qualified as motorcycle by any stretch of the imagination. But it cost only five hundred and got him where he needed to go, even if not in the style he desired.

He paused as he left the apartment, glancing back into the four hundred square feet of room he called home. "I've gotta get a different life." He slammed the door shut and headed out into the heat.

Chapter 2

“Dude, what’s with the notebook?” Vince dropped heavily into the plastic chair across from Rand in the break room at Best Buy. The mop of red curls on his head flopped forward, covering his eyes. With a flick of his head, he threw the mass back far enough to reveal his freckled face, at least for a few moments, until it started sliding back again. For some inexplicable reason, it seemed as though Vince was incapable of raising his hands high enough to comb the unruly locks, and as a result spent most of his day flinging his head back and forth. When he first started working at the store two weeks ago, Rand thought his new coworker might have been on the verge of an epileptic fit. While intervening time reduced that fear, some lingering doubt still remained.

Rand glanced up from his notebook, pencil still poised over the paper, and eyed the kid slumped in his chair across the folding table. His body seemed so limp that he might slide onto the floor at any minute. *Red hair...limp body...no face*, he wrote in the margin of the paper. Vince might make a good character in a screenplay some day, one of those dorky guys that gets killed after only five minutes on the screen, *and no one seems upset about it*.

“Fall back position.” He looked back down and kept writing.

“On your back position! Dude!” Vince snorted at what he must have thought an incredibly funny joke, and then flicked the hair back that already threatened to cover his face yet again.

“Fall back position.” Rand shook his head. “Dumbass,” he added under his breath.

The braying laughter finally trickled away. “Fall back from what?” Vince asked, appearing slightly interested.

Rand rested his hand on the notebook and leaned back in his chair, deciding whether to pursue an actual conversation with the idiot across the table. “What are you planning to do with your life? Work here?” He made a circle in the air with the eraser end of his pencil, taking in the blue-shirted employees wandering in and out of the room as breaks came and went.

“Um...well...no...guess not.” Vince’s hair covered his eyes. He seemed to hide behind it as he thought. “What about you?” The formerly obnoxious voice sounded slightly sheepish now.

“Me?” Rand scoffed, glancing around the break room. “I’m getting out of this hole. I didn’t come to LA to work at Best Buy. I came here to be an actor, man.” He returned his attention to the notebook where he had been filling in the details of a night spent with Cecile. “And if I don’t end up acting in the movies, then I’m sure as fuck gonna be writing them.” He took a breath and held it, as if trying to bolster his own confidence that something would really work out as he planned. After all, two years passed by since he moved Los Angeles, and he still sold video games.

“Yeah.” Vince flicked his head, throwing the hair back from his face once more. “And I’m gonna screw Jenna Jameson.” His snorting laughter filled the room again as he pushed his chair back from the table, forcing his feet deep into his untied, oversized Converse. He somehow managed to lift his skinny, boneless body out of the chair without ever taking his hands from his pockets, and loped off toward the Pepsi machine.

“I hope he trips on those dumbass shoelaces,” Rand mumbled to himself. A startled voice and a crash, and he looked up to find that, to his amusement, Vince had. He laughed and wrote under his previous notes, *Dies in the second scene*. Then he continued filling in details about Cecile.

“Whatcha’ writin’?” Mica’s hand on his shoulder nearly made Rand jump out of his chair.

“Nothing. Notes for a movie.” He flipped the notebook shut as quickly as possible.

“Can I see?” She slipped into the chair next to him and playfully pouted her bottom lip. Mica’s green eyes were almost as striking against her dark skin as Rand had dreamt Cecile’s to be, but her figure could not be considered quite as alluring. Still, they had been seeing each other on and off for nearly a year, and she felt, if nothing else, comfortable. Plus, she owned a car. Not much of a car, but it beat the hell out of riding his bike in the rain. And since they worked at the same store, he could usually get a ride out of her.

“Nah, it’s nothing, really.” Rand stuffed the notebook into his backpack and dropped the bag onto the floor. “Piece of shit, actually. Shouldn’t have even written it down.”

Mica leaned away from him and crossed her arms. Her head rocked from side-to-side, the signal that Rand would shortly hear something he did not want to. “If you can’t show it to me then...”

“Want to get something to eat after work?” He cut her off to avoid the rest of the lecture. Since before meeting her Rand’s goal had been to write a screenplay, and yet not once did he amass the courage to share his scribbling with anyone. Mica endlessly pestered him to let her read some of it, and he grew sick of hearing about her acting degree from UW in Seattle, which, she reminded him, totally trumped his community college in Indianapolis. She was right, of course, and he knew she really wanted to help. In fact, her sincerity felt nearly as irritating as his own lack of confidence. Dr. Onifur was helping him work through both issues.

Mica narrowed her eyes, cocking her head to the left, and then stood. “Fine,” she said, “but this time you’re buying.” She bent over and kissed him on the cheek, and he felt her breasts

rub against his shoulder. Then she turned and walked toward the swinging door leading to the sales floor.

Rand watched her well-rounded hips sway sensually as she left the room, bringing a smile to his face and warm feeling to his crotch. *It'll be worth dinner.*

He pulled the notebook back from his bag and opened it to the account of Cecile. *Her nipples felt hard and her breasts firm against his bare skin...*

Chapter 3

The bright red bicycle had brand new tires. Unfortunately, it was a girl's bike, one that formerly belonged to his older sister. His dad repainted the frame and oiled the chain and bearings, frankly more than he expected from the old man. But still, a girl's bike?

Better than nothin' I guess. Rand finally had some wheels under him, a little taste of freedom. He felt as though he could go wherever he wanted to in Indianapolis. The air blew through his long blonde hair, and he sped up heading west along East 49th Street. Any breeze felt refreshing, even one of his own creation, considering the August day topped out over ninety, the still air stifling in the city streets. He could smell fresh tar in the cracks in the pavement, tacky under the summer sun, and it sucked at his tires every time he crossed a joint making a popping sound.

On Central Avenue he took a sharp left, back-peddling the break and squealing the rear tire on the cement. An old black lab at the Pierson's house on the corner dragged itself reluctantly from under the shade of a tree near the porch, as though obliged to bark once at the child riding by. By the time he passed the next two yards, Rand glanced over his shoulder to see the dog already retreating once again to lie on the cool cement.

After three long blocks, he skidded to a stop in front of 4525. His best friend, Hunter, lived in a two-story house resembling all the others along the street, a basic craftsman style box. The distinguishing feature of Hunter's house was its lavender siding, with pink flowers painted along the door. The poor kid tried desperately to avoid letting anyone else from school see him walking home to it.

Rand hopped off the bike and ran onto the lawn. Despite the fresh coat of red paint, he promptly dropped it on the grass and leapt up the five cement steps in only two. Then he banged on the storm door. The metal frame of the screen rattled, amplifying his knock to sound twice as loud.

Hunter answered immediately, throwing an "I'll be back later" to his mother over his shoulder. She chose the color of the house and painted the flowers, and he avoided letting anyone from school see her either.

"What's up, dude?" he said, pushing past Rand on the porch. "You gotta bike?" He jumped all the way to the sidewalk and began his obligatory inspection. "Dude!" He turned around, his face distorted and his tongue hanging out. "It's a girl's bike!"

"Yeah...but it's still fast. And it's red," Rand protested as he sauntered down the steps.

Hunter glanced from Rand to the bike and back again. He cocked his head and sneered.

"You're not a fag, are you?"

"Fuck you, dickhead." Rand pushed him on the chest, but being the smaller of the two the effort became more symbolic than effective.

"Fuck off!" Hunter pushed him to the ground. Then he smiled meanly, his eyes narrowed. He tipped his head toward the garage. "Come and see my new bike."

Shit! Rand could never seem to one up his friend.

Hunter rolled up the garage door and wheeled out a new BMX. The black frame sported a white checkerboard pattern, and the tires were knobby and wide. "Let's ride along the river by campus and try some jumps." Without waiting for an answer, he stood on the pedals and wheeled down the driveway. Rand grabbed his bike and struggled to catch up.

The street sloped slightly uphill as it approached Meridian, and Rand struggled to make up the head start his friend had on the newer bike. Fuck him! Why does he always get the best? Fuck! he thought as he pedaled. Sweat rolled down his back as he hauled up the incline.

At the top of the hill the stoplight changed to yellow. Hunter leaned forward on his bike, obviously trying to get through the intersection before it changed to red. "Hang on!" Rand shouted, "I can't make it!"

"Pussy!" Hunter shouted over his shoulder and he sped toward the light.

Rand pedaled as hard as he could, but he would never make it. The light would turn red any second. I hope he gets hit by a bus...the fucker...

The light changed as Hunter entered the intersection. Rand saw him glance left and then right as he did so. Then he saw his eyes widen as he leaned further forward on the handlebars, the muscles in the shoulders visibly straining even through the white t-shirt.

A city bus ploughed through the intersection, and Hunter was gone.

Rand sat up straight in bed, gasping for breath. The sheet beneath him had been soaked with his sweat.

A shaft of orange streetlight slipping in between the curtains sliced through the darkness of Mica's bedroom. He leaned forward resting his face in his right hand, breathing deeply to calm himself.

“You okay, baby?” Mica’s hand rubbed his arm. “You have that dream again?”

Rand took another breath and nodded. Then he realized the visual acknowledgement would be useless in the dark room. “Yeah” he grunted. “Same one. Hunter.”

“It’s not like it was your fault, baby. You know that.”

He longed to convince himself that Hunter’s accident had not been his fault. Rand blamed himself since that day over ten years earlier. Somehow he knew that if he had never wished for the bus to come through the intersection right then, it would not have happened.

Mica’s touch disappeared, and he felt the bed shift as she rolled away from him. He glanced over to see her spooning a pillow in the dim light. The sight of her naked back evoked a flash of lust, but after the dream he failed to sustain it. He leaned his chin on his palm and stared at the blade of illumination cutting the room in two.

“Why don’t you call him tomorrow?” Mica’s voice sounded sleepy and muffled by the pillow. “Doctor says it’s good for you to talk with him.” She yawned. “Not like you have to work until later. Even with the time diff…” her voice trailed off.

An imagine of Hunter from before Rand moved away from Indianapolis, when he last saw him – sitting in his wheelchair, alone, in a sterile white room – made the hair on his back prickle. Or maybe it was the chill as he dried off. Either way, even though Dr. Onifur said it benefitted both of them he did not want to talk to his old friend, to reawaken more old memories.

He glanced once more over at Mica. She seemed to be asleep. The sheets under him felt too wet to lie back down on. “Gonna take a shower and head home.” He rolled out of the bed and started grabbing his clothes off the floor. “Okay?”

Mica grunted something unintelligible.

Rand skipped the shower and pulled on his shorts, slipping the t-shirt over his head. The air seemed somewhat less stuffy outside the apartment but still hotter than should be allowed by law at night. The heat did not deter him from clipping on his helmet before mounting the motorcycle. Hunter's brain damage taught him that lesson.

Rand stood on the kick-starter. The tiny engine on the Rebel whined as he revved it, instead of emitting the low rumble he desired from a real bike.

Just as he started to pull onto the street a city bus roared past the parking lot walls, so close that it made Rand pull back on the bike. His heart raced as he listened to the hum of its tires die off down the empty street.

Shit! The thought of Hunter sitting in his room at the home flashed through his mind. He nodded his head as he pulled onto the dark street, knowing he would call him.

Chapter 4

Both the front and rear wheels crushed the brand new BMX bike. It lay in the middle of the intersection, a tangled little heap of bent metal and rubber. The bus came screeching to a stop about a half a block away. Grey smoke and the smell of burned tires drifted slowly in the hot air.

Rand could still picture the scene over a decade later as if it were yesterday. Memories played in the back of his mind as he sat on his couch, staring blankly at images of Judge Judy and her entourage of staged defendants dancing across his television screen. He left his bike lying in the middle of 46th Street. By the time he got there, several cars already stopped, passengers and drivers leaning out the windows, all simultaneously calling 911 on their cell phones. Some took pictures. *Of what?* Rand wondered as he ran toward the front of the bus.

When he arrived, he saw what caused the commotion. Hunter's youthful body had been transformed into a crumpled mass of flesh and protruding bone, shredded by the bicycle rack on the front of the vehicle. One of his eyes dangled from its socket. He gasped for breath, barely clinging to life. The Hispanic driver sat petrified and wide-eyed behind the wheel of the bus. It looked as though he leaned back, still pressing on the brake. The man crossed himself and unclipped his seatbelt, and then stumbled down the steps to the street. "*Dios mio!* He is still alive!" The driver lifted Hunter's bloody body from the rack and laid him in the street. That was when he stopped breathing. The driver leaned over listening for breath, and when none came, started performing CPR on the small body. Blood trickled across the pavement. Rand felt himself sway, he tried to catch the bent bike rack as he stumbled, and then everything went black.

"*Let's talk to the defendant,*" a man in crisp, black suit said on the television. The words snapped Rand back to reality. He blinked to bring the screen back into focus. An overweight woman in a sweatshirt seemed upset by Judge Judy's decision. Rand rubbed the sleep from his eyes with his left hand.

By the time he and Mica finished having sex, Rand only slept for an hour or so before waking from his nightmare at her apartment earlier that morning. Once he got home, drank a diet Coke, and watched music videos on Youtube, he might have caught another hour before the pounding heat invaded his tiny space once again waking him off the couch. Now he sat with another Coke in his hand, both of them sweating before an old electric box fan in an effort to forestall the hot day.

Rand idly dragged the address book across the screen of his cell phone with his thumb as he procrastinated calling the Eastpark Rehabilitation Center. Some days Hunter could speak, and

some days he could not. The effects of his brain damage changed unpredictably from week to week. Some of the doctors found it unbelievable he could function without life support after so many years.

The paramedics awaked Rand while lifting him onto a backboard. His eyes fluttered open in a state of panic before remembering where he was. Then the real panic set in. "Hunter!" he screamed. "Hunter!" With his head strapped to the board, he could not locate his friend.

"It's all right," the paramedic told him, her voice soothingly calm. "He's being taken care of. Let's see how you're doing, okay?"

Her hands prodded every inch of his body in a search for injury, but the only think she found was the lump on the back of his head where he hit the pavement after fainting. One of the other paramedics kneeled down as she rolled his head over to inspect the wound. "Cop said that bus was running ten minutes ahead of schedule. What's the chance of that?"

"Damn unlucky for the kid," the nurse attending to Rand replied.

His phone beeped with an incoming text message, and Rand swept it away with his thumb. Then he focused and located the E's in his address book. He muted the television and tapped send. *Don't let him be able to talk to today, please.*

"Eastpark Rehabilitation Center. How can I help you?" a nasal voice answered.

"Johnson Wing nurses station please," he answered. An elevator music version of the Rolling Stones "Satisfaction" occupied the line while he waited.

"Which patient would you like to speak to?" The new voice sounded much more pleasant and perky.

Rand pictured a young blonde nurse in a tight white outfit knowing it was more likely the woman suffered from lack of sleep and wore scrubs to work. He shook his head to clear the

distracting image. “Hunter Goff.” He chewed on this thumb. “How’s he doin’ today?” he asked, guiltily hoping incapacitation.

“Oh, he’s sitting in his chair admiring the view. Let me go hook up his phone.”

Shit. Rand suffered through more of the doctored Stones while he waited for the nurse to walk down the hall to Hunter’s room.

Soon she was back on the line. “Who should I tell him is calling?”

“It’s his friend, Rand.”

He heard the nurse repeat the name, and Hunter grunted in acknowledgement. “You two have a nice chat,” Rand could hear her voice fading as she left the room.

The next sound was a phlegmy gurgle as Hunter sucked air through a poorly healed trachea. “How’s it going, Hunter?” Rand asked, trying to sound cheerful.

“Ay wis’ ay was fuk’in’ ded.” Hunter’s words sounded forced past his broken jaw. “Oo shud’a let me die.”

Fucking Dr. Onifur. Rand took a swig of the Coke, and then leaned over resting his forehead on his hand. Sweat trickled down his back in the hot apartment. “Shit, don’t talk like that, man. I just wanted to see how you were doing.” *Damn,* Rand thought to himself, listening to Hunter’s gargled breath on the phone, *why did this have to happen?*

Chapter 5

“Do you know what you want?”

The man at the table in front of him had burrowed into some book, and Rand wondered whether he even read the menu yet. But the Tuesday crowd at the Olive Garden on Brand and Broadway drifted in particularly slowly that evening, and boredom threatened to suck him into

somnambulance. Prodding the balding man into choosing his entree proved his only option for entertainment. *Do these guys really think a comb over looks good?*

The man looked at him over the half lenses of his reading glasses. He was probably in his forties, slightly overweight. *Maybe on a business trip?* Rand conjectured, playing a guessing game to keep his mind busy. The man's irritated glare accompanied by pursed lips did not bode well for a tip, but Rand would work on that later, after dessert.

The man set down his book and picked up the menu. "The lasagna. Bring me the salad dressing on the side, no peppers. And a diet Coke." He jabbed the menu back at Rand as though to say, 'of course I know what I want, you twit.'

Rand accepted it graciously. "Diet Coke and some bread sticks. Right away."

The man blinked slowly and returned to his book. Rand scanned the room. This customer and an older couple were his only tables so far that night. *I'm screwed!* The tips he would get barely made it worth his time coming in. *Eh, not like I've got anything else to do.* He flashed the balding man a smile and headed for the kitchen.

By the time the order of lasagna arrived the man ensconced himself back into his book, having barely touched the salad and ignoring the breadsticks completely. Rand set the plate on the table. "Hot plate," he warned. The man's eyes flickered toward him and then back to the text. Rand surveyed his section again. The older couple left him a dollar, and the fat man who replaced them ordered the all-you-can-eat soup, salad and bread sticks. He glanced down at the customer before him, calculating the odds of increasing his tip. "That must be a really good book. What's it about?"

The man looked over at the lasagna and sighed loudly. Then he tipped his head forward and swung it around, staring over his glasses at Rand. He displayed the cover of the book

prominently for Rand's review. *Lucid Dreaming*, it read in large white letters. The outline of a man stood amid radiating white lines on a background of stars. The subtitle below it, *Change Your Life in 30 Days*. Rand stifled a snicker and tried his best to feign interest. "Lucid dreaming? What's that all about?" *Sounds like something from the National Enquirer*, he thought.

The man narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't understand."

Rand appraised his section one more time. The fat man poked a pudgy hand into the basket of breadsticks, selecting one from the mound and dipping it into his soup. No new tables had been seated in the interim. "Try me." He applied his best actor's smile.

The man blinked several times in rapid succession, as though dislodging a speck of dirt from beneath his lids, and then removed his glasses. "Lucid dreaming, young man," he spoke sarcastically, "is a process whereby one trains his conscious mind to awaken during sleep so as to alter the outcome of his dreams. Those whose consciousness is sufficiently developed," the man's eyes seemed to appraise Rand and his lip sneered slightly, "can actually alter their dreams, thereby altering the effect they have on one's waking life." He stared into Rand's eyes for a moment, and puckered his lips. Then he started shaking his head. "You wouldn't get it," he said, with a flip of one limp hand. He returned to his book.

"That sounds really interesting," Rand forced out. *Sounds like a crock of shit*. "I hope you enjoy your meal." He took a step back casually, trying desperately to avoid the appearance of fleeing the table. As soon as his back faced the man he rolled his eyes. *Whatever, dude*.

The fat man ate for over an hour and a half. Only two other tables were seated in his section that night, but he managed a decent tip from the family of five, making sure to bring crayons for the kids and talking the parents into a glass of wine.

When he collected the check from the man reading only a dollar-fifty remained for the tip. Rand counted his meager take from the night. *By the time I split with the busboys and the bartender...fuck.* His mind drifted back to his discussion with the little man as he stared at the change in his hand. *Maybe I can lucid dream myself out of this lousy job.*

He threw his apron into his backpack and let the metal exit door slam behind him.

Chapter 6

The green, fluorescent bulbs illuminated the hallway with an eerie glow. Some of the fixtures had broken away from the ceiling and dangled from their wiring at one end, casting light in Rand's eyes so that he held a hand in front of his face for shade. All the lights blinked on and off randomly. It looked as though a bomb went off in the Eastside Rehabilitation Center, and no one bothered to make repairs or clean the mess. Mold covered the walls in large swaths, and water dripped from the ceiling. What the hell happened here? A rat scurried along the wall, dodging from one pile of debris to the next.

Rand could not recall traveling back to Indianapolis. And even though the hallway reminded him of the one at the center, other than the state of disrepair, something else seemed strange. In among the flashes of fluorescent light discoloring the scene, a glow of blues and reds danced above every door way. He stepped forward out of the darkness of the lobby and into the hall, pushing aside a light fixture that hung in his way. The vinyl squares under his feet felt slippery from the slime growing in the puddles of water dripping through the ceiling tiles.

Entering the hallway he found that the red and blue glow emanated from a television mounted in the wall over the first door. In fact, every door seemed to have a similar set. Initially he ignored the screens, until several paces down the hall a particular image caught his

attention: his house in Indianapolis, the back yard. A party took place. Children in hats danced in a circle, holding hands.

The celebration, the people in attendance, all the images on the screen seemed familiar. With the only sounds in the hall the dripping of water and the click and hum of the florescent lights, the show on the television brought a modicum of comfort. Rand leaned forward, standing on his toes to study it.

The party was his tenth birthday party. Hunter, Kaitlin, Emily, everyone he knew, all of his best friends, shared it with him. His own image danced across the screen. What that fuck? Rand looked at the wooden door in front of him. Strips of the veneer had fallen away, the brass knob dented and scratched. He reached out for it, pulling his hand back at the last minute as though it might get burned, and then gathered his courage and grabbed the knob. The metal felt cool to his touch. He turned it, hearing the latch slide inward with a click.

The door swung open a crack, and from inside the room came the sound of children's voices. He pulled it closed and stepped back, staring in surprise. With one more glance up toward the screen, he unlatched the door again, swinging it wide open.

The room contained a window to another world, his world, his world of the past. Inside it was a warm July day in Indiana, and children played and enjoyed themselves. His mother approached the cake with a knife. Fuck me...

Rand turned to the door across the hall. Above it, the screen showed a scene from his high school graduation. He pushed the door open, and out poured the words of Tom Harrison's valedictory address.

Rand smiled and ran down the hall, pushing aside the dangling lights and opening nearly every door. Soon daylight poured into the hallway from the openings, accompanied by the

familiar voices of his past. At one door he paused to admire the naked body of Sara standing in his dorm room his freshman year in college, but decided to leave the door closed when he saw her heading for his bed.

Soon only three doors remained closed, and the hall felt warm and inviting. He spun, laughing, to find what gift he would discover next, and saw the twisted metal of Hunter's bike lying at the intersection of 46th and Meridian. Rand fell back against the opposite door, staring in horror at the scene on the screen. He dropped his bike and ran toward the front of the bus. His twelve year old self approached the bumper and stood on the verge of seeing the horror Hunter had become when Rand leapt forward and up, reaching for the power switch on the television.

He missed and changed the channel instead. With a push of the button, all the screens in the hallway went to static, and the light from the rooms disappeared along with the happy voices emanating from within. Even the fluorescent lights died. The hall lay bathed in shadow, the only light coming from the white glow of the monitors.

The screen above him began to clear, and the static formed into a fuzzy image. Through the haze he could see Hunter astride his bicycle, on the other side of the street, past the red light, his middle finger held high in the air toward Rand. A city bus passed quickly between them, and when it was gone, Hunter remained.

"Hunter!" Rand shouted and barged into the room.

The twin hospital beds sat empty, as did the wheelchair resting between them. Only the flickering fluorescent light from the bathroom illuminated the depressing scene. "Hunter?" Rand asked softly. "Hunter?"

He stepped past the wall of the bathroom to look inside. "Hunt..."

A sinewy arm grabbed him from behind, around the neck. A black knife held before his face cut his view of the room in two. Rand felt a strong body pressed against his, the chest muscles higher than his shoulders. Oh fuck...oh fuck... All he could focus on was the broad blade of the knife.

“What are you doing here?” a voice asked. Rand thought it came from behind him, but it sounded distant, barely discernable, as though someone called to him from another floor or from outside.

Rand coughed. The arm around his throat tightened in response. “I...I...I don’t know.”

“You shouldn’t be here.” The knife waved back and forth in his field of view.

His eyes followed the blade. He tried to twist his shoulders, testing the grip of his captor, but it only strengthened. “Why shouldn’t I be here?” he asked. If he tilted his eyes down, he could see the hand gripping the knife. The skin was black, the back covered in ragged, thick hairs. The muscled arm holding him looked the same.

“This is not your world.” The voice seemed closer now, as though it honing in on his location.

“Not my what? What do you want?” Rand struggled to free himself.

“Think you can change the past, do you? I should slit you open...pull those memories right out of you.” Rand stiffened as the knife’s tip played across his jaw.

The voice came from right over his shoulder now, the breath harsh and cold on his ear. In the bathroom mirror he caught a glimpse of eyes glowing orange. And a face. It looks like...

Rand twisted down and to his left, breaking free of the arm. He spun and pushed himself off the wall, making a quick turn toward the door and the hallway. As he did do, he looked over his shoulder at the creature that had held him.

It was Hunter, or had the muscled body Hunter might have given the chance to grow up normally. The creature wore no clothes, its skin black and covered in ragged hair. But the face, the face was Hunter's, or might have been. Its features seemed fluid, and even during the few moments he saw it, the face warped and changed. He could not be sure who it resembled.

Rand yelled and ran for the door. He burst into the darkness of the black hallway, and then...

The room around him was black. Something covered him, pressed against him. "Fuck you!" he yelled, and scrambled out from under the damp sheets.

Mica screamed. In one smooth motion she rolled over and turned on the light, grabbing her mace and holding it in the air. When Rand's eyes adjusted, he could see she pointed it at him. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Mica screamed.

Rand stood naked in her bedroom, his skin covered in sweat. He looked around, expecting the black creature to step out of the darkness in the corner. He felt exhausted, out of breath. But it had all been just a dream.

He collapsed onto his knees, dropping forward onto the edge of the bed. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he heard Mica ask him again, her voice more calm. The mace spray clattered on the surface of the nightstand when she dropped it. He felt her hand on the back of his head. "That dream again?" she asked.

Rand took another deep breath and held it, and then let it out slowly. He looked up at Mica, feeling like he had run ten miles. Sweat trickled down his neck and back. "No," he managed to gasp, "This dream was different."

Chapter 7

“Lucid dreaming? Why would you want to know about that?”

Dr. Onifur sat slouched in his chair, his Birkenstocks resting comfortably on the coffee table in his office. The therapist might not emulate what would be considered professional standards in most circles: graying pony tail, t-shirt, corduroy jacket, sunglasses that looked like something from *The Matrix*, and he smelled of pot more often than Rand did. The things he really did have going for him were he was cheap, let you call him Doc, and every now and then he actually said something useful, just not too often. So Rand would come by every other week when he could afford it, or more often once a month. He would never apply the word ‘therapy’ to his sessions with the Dr. Onifur, at least not with any of his friends. He viewed it more as someone to talk with, someone to bounce ideas off of when he needed to. Someone to fill in for part of what he left behind in Indiana. And the Doc never judged anything you said to him.

“I saw a guy reading this book about it. This loser eating by himself at the restaurant the other night.” Rand shifted in his chair, draping his right leg over the arm, so as to get a better view out the window. The sun scorched the parking lot outside the strip-mall office. Thankfully the Doc could afford air conditioning. “The guy seemed to think he could change his life with it.”

Dr. Onifur coughed, and Rand noted spots of blood on the handkerchief as he stuffed it back into the pocket of his cords. “So what’s this really all about? Changing your life, or your past?” He sat motionless in the chair, staring at the beige wall across the room. Rand could not recall ever seeing him without his sunglasses. If he were meeting him for the first time, he might have guessed the Doc was blind.

Changing my past? The words resonated from the dream of two nights ago, an image of the black creature flashed through Rand's mind. He shook his head to clear it. "No, Doc. It's just that I keep having that dream, the one where Hunter gets..."

"Wasn't your fault." Dr. Onifur's voice broke into Rand's sentence. His head never moved.

"Wasn't... what?" Rand tried to recollect his thoughts.

"I keep telling you, it wasn't your fault. You need to let that go." The Doc sighed and straightened up in his chair. He turned his head lazily toward Rand.

"Yeah, I know," Rand protested. "But I still keep having the dream, and I wake up the next morning feeling like shit." He swung his leg off the arm of the chair and turned away from the shaded eyes of the doctor. "I thought that if I could, I don't know, change that dream, maybe it would help me get past it."

Dr. Onifur exhaled heavily through his nose. Rand glanced over to see his brow furrowed above the sunglasses. "You have any other dreams to talk about?"

Rand had not written anything about the last dream in his notebook. Besides the fact he did not want to talk about it, with anyone, he saw no future for it as a movie script. "Nope, nothin'."

The Doc sighed again. "I gotta tell you, I think the whole directed dreaming thing is a crock of shit." He grabbed a pack of cigarettes off the table next to where his notebook lay unopened and pulled one out. He took a long drag of the smoke when he lit it, and then released a plume slowly up toward the ceiling, his head tilted back against the headrest. The hand holding the cigarette flopped down on the arm of the chair, and he remained quiet for so long Rand wondered if he had fallen asleep.

“Um, Doc?”

“Just give me a minute.” Dr. Onifur responded. He coughed again, and then took another drag of the cigarette. “Okay, you want to direct your dreams, this is what you gotta do. We’re talking about this Hunter dream, yeah?” His head lolled toward Rand, apparently looking for acknowledgement.

“Yeah, the Hunter dream. Right.” When the Doc’s head turned back toward the ceiling, Rand rolled his eyes. *Does this guy even listen?*

“Okay, so this Hunter thing. Before you go to bed, take about ten minutes, and think about how you want the dream to end. Tell yourself that when you have this,” he spun his hand in the air, leaving circles of smoke, “this...event, that you’re going to be aware of it. Get that message into your subconscious.” He sucked on the cigarette, blowing the smoke out through his nose. “And then, when you can feel yourself in the dream,” he looked over to Rand, “I mean really in it, you know?” He waited for Rand to nod. “Then, tell yourself ‘I’m in a dream.’ Repeat that over and over. After that, just make it go however you decided you wanted it to go before you went to sleep.” He shrugged and took one last drag of the smoke before crushing the cigarette out in the ashtray. “Make sense?”

Not really, Rand thought. “Yeah, sure. Decide before I sleep, try and be aware, message to subconscious, make it real, tell myself I’m dreaming.” Rand nodded slowly, attempting to appear thoughtful. “Sure, I can do that.”

“But you’ve gotta be in REM sleep in order to dream. You know what that means?” The Doc pointed a finger at Rand, the nail yellowed with nicotine.

Rand shrugged his shoulders. “Not really, Doc. I mean, I’ve heard of it, but that’s about it.”

“Rapid eye movement. That’s the stage of sleep when your dreaming happens.” He laced his fingers over his stomach and slouched down in the chair. “You’ve gotta get a good hour and a half, two hours tops, before the dreaming starts, at least at the beginning of the night. You’ll get more of it toward morning. But if you disrupt your REM sleep, not sleeping long enough, some drugs,” he patted his jacket pocked curiously and then returned his hands to his stomach, “you’re not gonna dream.”

Rand thought he was beginning to understand. “Makes sense.” He nodded his head in affirmation even though the Doc had returned to starting at the wall.

“And don’t think you can make it happen the first time.” Dr. Onifur snorted and cleared his throat. “Some of those nuts take years trying to figure it out.”

Great. Rand took out a twenty and threw it on the table, on top of the still closed notebook. “Thanks, Doc. I’ll give it a shot and let you know what happens.” He stuffed his wallet back into his jeans. “Next time.” He held out his fist horizontally to the Doc.

Dr. Onifur knocked it with the knuckles of his own balled hand without ever looking up. “Stay real.” he said.

As Rand stepped toward the swinging glass door, he smelled the Doc already lighting up a doobie. *Pothead fucker.* The heat from the parking lot started him sweating immediately when he slipped outside. “Shit.” He clipped his helmet on, making him feel even hotter. *First dream I’m gonna make real is that fuckin’ beach house...with that babe Cecile.*

Chapter 8

Talent Needed! the link read.

Rand clicked on it. *Hm, not really*, he thought. Yet another ad for an online talent agency, some group that probably wanted two or three hundred dollars to place your resume and headshot on their “list”, and then you would never hear from them or anyone that supposedly checked their “list” ever again. He had been down that road several times when he first moved to Los Angeles and since learned how to spot such postings at a glance.

The door of the tiny apartment hung open in an attempt to cool the room down after the June day. A breath of breeze stirred the curtains in the adjoining bedroom, only enough to emphasize how hot the room would be when it gave out. And if anything the summer temperatures were doomed to climb ever higher.

He grabbed his Budweiser stuffed between the red couch cushions and took a swig, resisting the urge to chug the cold brew despite the heat. Swishing the liquid in his mouth, he stared at the label wishing he had another six-pack. *Probably shouldn't waste the money*. He stuck the half empty bottle back into the crack in the sofa to insulate it from the evening heat and make it last.

Tapping the touchpad on his laptop, he paged down through the postings added since he last checked Craigslist in the morning. Not much new stuff showed up: a couple of student films he could put in for, but he had done quite a few over the past two years. Although they never paid, he gathered some usable clips for his demo disc. At this point he needed some cash.

Not ready to do porn...yet. He continued browsing the posts. One for a movie about a skateboarder caught his attention:

Cinmagraphics is currently holding open auditions for a comedic adventure about the development of a new skateboard company. Some previous on-camera experience in television, film and/or stage is preferred

Seeking – Male actors/non-actors between the ages of 17 and 25 for lead roles as skateboard designers/performers. MUST have moderate to advanced skateboarding skills.

Project Duration: 6 weeks. Project Location: Vancouver, B.C. Pay: \$50 per day

Status: Union and Non-Union accepted

Submit headshot and resume to the above Craigslist email. Serious (and Funny)

Actors only!

It sounded good. He was a year older than the age range sought but figured he could pull it off. And the position paid, even if not that well. He would have to drag out the skateboard and refresh his mad skills, but that would hardly be considered work.

Rand adjusted the age on his resume down two years and attached it to a query email along with a headshot sent to the Craigslist address in the posting. “Guess that’s a day,” he said, taking another swig of the beer. The clock in the corner of his computer screen read twenty after eleven. After digging under the couch cushions for the remote, he clicked on the television and waited for Jay Leno to come on. If he shifted forward to the front of the couch, he could have pushed the television buttons by hand in the tiny room. But that would defeat the purpose of having the remote. With the drone of perfect voices in the background as the eleven o’clock news wrapped up, he settled back into the cushions and surfed the Internet.

By the time Jay’s monologue began, Rand had stripped off his blue Best Buy shirt and khakis. He sat in front of the fan wearing only his boxers and wishing for air conditioning. Just the thought of it made him feel cooler, which he felt grateful for. “There’s nothing I love more than stupid criminals,” Jay said from the tiny screen before relaying the story of a man getting stuck in a roof vent while trying to rob a liquor store. The man dropped his cell phone and hung

from the ceiling the entire night until the owner opened up the next day. Rand snickered... *dumbass*... and continued surfing while Jay moved on to mocking politicians. Through the uninsulated walls Rand heard the girl next door watching the Tonight Show also, which was better than listening to her having sex on the couch while he sat there alone.

He checked his friends Facebook status updates and then browsed his email, deleting the ads for Viagra and cheap home mortgages and ignoring most of the rest. Jay interviewed a zookeeper who brought a bunch of animals with him. Rand turned down the volume so he could listen to Youtube links his buddy Calin sent, but none of them seemed to catch his interest. The walls of the dark room danced with the blue-green glow of the television.

As he paged through the tiny pictures accompanying the list of videos, the bizarre assortment of images made him think about dreaming, and from there his mind drifted back to his conversation with Dr. Onifur the day before. Rand watched briefly as the zookeeper placed a vulture on Jay's arm, and then drained the rest of his beer. Without a glance, he tossed the bottle over his shoulder directly into the trash can behind him, like he did a hundred times, before bringing up Google. He typed two words into the search engine: lucid dreaming.

At the very top of the page was a site, lucidreams.com, from New World Lucidity, Inc. *Looks like a lot of shit*, he thought while scrolling through the excerpts from various books on lucid dreaming.

About halfway down the page one of the chapter titles caught his attention: The Practice of Lucid Dreaming. *What the hell*. He clicked on the link, followed by screen after screen of experience and tips on lucid dreaming technique, a sort of how-to guide for novices. He turned the television volume down even lower as he read.

The first topic considered preventing premature waking. “Concentrate on senses other than vision,” it said, “or look at the ground to keep yourself engaged in the dream.” If you awaken prematurely, it said to “play dead”, “remaining still until REM sleep reasserts itself.” *Right*, Rand blew a puff of air past his pursed lips, making a buzzing sound, *tried that with Cecile. Didn’t fucking work.* Awakening at will, dream control, manipulating your dreams. The screens went on and on.

Rand’s eyelids grew heavy by the time Jay welcomed his second guest. Before he said goodnight, Rand’s head flopped back on the couch, fallen fast asleep.

Chapter 9

Jay Leno placed the vulture back on his arm.

“What the hell?” Rand wondered, finding himself staring the bird in the face.

“Oh relax,” the bird said in a parrot-like voice, “you’re just having a dream.” The crowd roared with laughter.

“Now get that ugly bird out of here,” Jay said, “and take the vulture with you.” The applause sign flashed to life and the crowd clapped their hands as Rand stood to leave. “Shake Jay’s hand,” the bird told him, and Rand automatically extended his arm to the host. He said goodbye and then waved to the audience on his way out, grinning broadly.

The faces of the studio crowd began to dissolved and fade around the edges. Kevin Eubanks’s theme music sounded progressively distant in his ears. “Don’t you remember what the book said?” the vulture asked him, his voice becoming deeper and more human. “Watch the floor.”

Rand stopped and looked down. The wooden parquet came into focus, the spaces between the pieces of wood solidifying from fuzzy streaks to well-defined lines. "It works!" he said to the bird.

"Of course it does, now keep moving." Behind him the applause grew louder.

A hand reached from behind the curtain and pulled it aside for him. He stepped though into the darkness backstage.

The bright light blinded him, reflecting off the recently tilled light brown earth on which he stood. The weight of the bird on his arm vanished the moment he stepped through the curtains. And his clothes changed too. The jungle vest and khakis he had been wearing on the set now became a pair of loose, blue cotton pants only reaching to his mid-calf along with a loose shirt. What now?

Rand looked up and saw that his dream world changed. Gone was the set from Jay Leno and the Tonight Show. He found himself standing in a field, probably in southeast Asia. At least, it looked like the Asia he knew from Rambo II and other action movies. Families in pointed straw hats worked in groups off in the distance; he could hear snatches of their speech, but could not understand any of the words. Behind them further still rose tall, slender mountain peaks, rounded at the top. The countryside shone with incredibly bright green vegetation, but there were no smells. It was like watching the scene on television.

Even as he glanced from tree to mountain to straw hat, the scene began to waiver and fade. "Watch the floor," he could hear the bird speaking in his head. He focused on the dirt under his sandaled feet, picking out one clump of loose earth. "I'm in a dream," he said out loud. The ground along the periphery of his vision stabilized.

Feeling more confident in his ability to control the dream, he ventured forward a few steps. His fixation on the ground led him suddenly into the rump of an ox. He looked up startled and found himself gazing into one of its large, brown eyes as the animal looked over its shoulder at him. "You need to plough this field," the ox said.

Rand blinked, staring at the face of the talking beast. The eye appeared human in its shape and detail.

"Plough the field," it repeated.

Rand looked at the animal's rump to which no implement of any sort was attached.

"With what?"

The ox raised the brow over its large eye. "With a plough, of course."

"But..." Rand began to protest.

"A plough." The animal let out an exasperated sigh.

Rand focused on the hind end of the animal. A plough. From the air, a plough and harness materialized attached to the ox. He glanced over at the family in the distance to see whether anyone had noticed; they still seemed busy with their work. Fearing he would lose the dream, he focused back on the ox. "Better," it said.

He walked to the backside of the rough plough and laid his hands on the two, wooden handles, just like he had seen farmers do on television shows. Now what? "Okay, let's go," he said to the ox. The beast did not move. "I said, let's go."

"There are mines in this field."

Rand stepped back. "What?"

"Landmines." Rand had to step back up to the plough to see the animal's eye over the wooden harness resting on its shoulders. The ox stared back at him, calmly chewing.

He could see them now, dotting the field with clumps of three wires sticking up out of the soil. They were everywhere he looked, and it made him wonder how he had even reached the ox without stepping on one. The only area that did not appear to have been mined was where he and the animal stood. Even the spot he had been standing in only a moment ago contained the trip wires. "Where did they come from?"

The beast stopped chewing. "I put them there." The animal appeared to smile, and its features wavered. For a moment, the faced looked like Hunter's, but there an orange glow rested behind his eyes. "Now plough the field."

"But the mines." Rand glanced around at the mass of tripwires. They seemed to be everywhere now, dotting the soil so thickly that they must have been stacked on top of each other.

"Pease. Fo' me?" he heard Hunter's voice. He looked up, and the ox's face now clearly resembled Hunter's.

Rand took a deep breath and laid his hands on the plough. It's a dream. Make it what you want. He released the pent up air. "Okay, let's go."

The ox with Hunter's face stepped forward, the plough digging into the earth. But the ground in front of them cleared of mines as they moved across the field.

They kept speeding up, faster and faster. Soon Rand ran to keep up with the plough, barely hanging on so he would not be left behind. The ox laughed with the voice of Hunter from when he was a child as it loped across the field, brown earth flying from the single metal blade it dragged.

Rand stumbled on a clod of soil. His fingers slipped from the handles of the plough. “No!” he cried. “Wait.” But the animal moved on, running even faster now as he no longer pulled him as well.

He heard the clicks as the ox’s hooves tripped the wires on the mines, but still it ran forward. Its laugh became deeper and echoed across the field, as if they were in a large cave instead of the open air. “Stop!” Rand scrambled to his feet.

The last thing he saw was the face of Hunter, crying, as the animal looked one last time over its shoulder. Then the field erupted in flames.

Rand woke with a start. Conan O’Brian sat behind his desk on the television, gesturing with his coffee cup. A trickle of drool ran out the corner of Rand’s mouth and down his shoulder. He instinctively reached over to wipe the spittle off his skin when suddenly he remembered the dream. “Whoa!” He leaned forward into his hands.

A cascade of feelings and emotions washed over him. A wave of ecstasy accompanied his recollection of controlling the dream, but it was counted by the guilt of seeing Hunter die yet again. The two storm fronts collided in his mind, and his head throbbed. His stomach disgorged the Budweiser on the floor in front of the couch.

“Oh, fuck.” Rand grabbed his Best Buy shirt off the couch and wiped his face. Then he shrugged and used it to wipe up the vomit as well.

As he knelt down to clean the last traces from the linoleum surface, something drifted by the entry to his apartment. He had left the door open while he slept.

“Chanice?” he called out, expecting the girl next door to answer. “That you?”

No response came. The light in the hall flickered.

Rand finished cleaning the floor and then stood to close the door. Before his fingers touched the knob it slammed shut, the edge whooshing past the air not far from his face and catching his right hand. He grimaced, looking down to see that the latch cut the skin on his knuckles as it swung past. He threw down the soiled shirt and cradled the wound.

Rand stared at the now closed door, his only exit from the apartment. “What the fuck was that?”

Chapter 10

Wish I could will these dishes off the tables.

Two of the busboys called in sick to the Olive Garden, and since Rand’s section sat mostly empty the manager suggested he bus them himself. The upside would be that he got to keep all the tips. The downside was that he had to actually do it.

After being able to change his environment in the dream the night before, he wondered what it might be like if he could do it in the real world. *Guess there’s no chance of that.* Still, considering the Doc thought it might take him months to acquire the skill to direct his dreams, and he had done it so quickly, who knew? *Right?* He laughed and shook his head at the thought, and then reluctantly started loading plates into the grey, plastic tub.

“Looks like you slept like shit last night.” Calin came up behind him and dropped two water glasses onto the pile of dishes accumulating in the tub. “Hope it was for a worthy cause.” He put two fingers up to his mouth and waggled his tongue up and down in between them, and then walked off with a leer on his face.

Rand stared down at the glasses deposited in his bin, and then back to the retreating form of Calin. *Fucker.* He moved the glasses aside and continued adding plates to the stack.

After waking from the dream and heaving his guts onto the apartment floor, Rand barely slept. Fortunately he schedule at Best Buy did not include a shift for the following morning, and he figured he could sleep in. But the expectation melted away when the California sun started baking the tiny apartment, turning the old building into a human-sized roaster oven. Even with the fan on he figured it would have only been a matter of time before a plastic thermometer popped out of his belly. So he packed up his laptop and went to Starbucks. Although the air conditioning and an iced latte greatly improved his mood, it only had a minimal impact on his lack of sleep.

Rand lifted the plastic tub of dishes onto his hip and headed toward the kitchen. The older Asian couple in his section just started into their linguine marinara and fettuccine alfredo, so he figured there would be five minutes to take a break before they asked for something else. The rest of his section sat empty at the moment. “Watch my table for me for a minute will ya?” he asked Calin who passed him coming out of the kitchen, turning through the swinging doors with a tray full of pasta. “I’m taking five in the alley.”

“Wait a sec...” Calin’s protest got cut off as the door swung shut.

Payback for the glasses. Rand hoisted the tub of dishes onto a stainless-steel table by the washing machine, leaving it for the thirty-something social hermit that spent his whole shift loading the steaming contraption in silence. The man was mainly bald, save for a three-foot ponytail laying down the middle of his back. The small fringe of hair that ran up over his ears quickly descended into a beard that seemed nearly as long. Rand heard the guy was a Gulf War vet that had been homeless before landing the job but could never get the guy to talk, not even to verify his past. Even so Rand kept notes about him in one of his books, thinking he might make

a good serial killer in a screenplay some day since the only reason for his grooming habits had to be he was hiding from someone.

Rand stepped out the back door into the early evening, hoping that the fresher air might make up for the heat. Even from across the parking lot he could sometimes smell the dumpsters baking behind their wooden enclosure. Fortunately the wind blew from behind him and kept the noxious fumes at bay. He leaned against the cinder block wall of the restaurant and watched the sun setting behind the Glendale Galleria across Broadway. The jet streaks lacing the sky were glazed with orange and red in the setting sun, evoking a feeling of flames dancing high above him.

Seek out particular things or conjure them while you are in a lucid dream. Snatches of sentences from the website on lucid dreaming floated through his head as he watched the vapor trails drift across the sky. *You can use dreams to seek answers to problems and fulfill your waking desires.* Rand stuck his hand into his pocket and felt the stub of pencil he used to jot notes in his book in between tables; the oddities of the customers often provided ideas for eccentric characters, both for his screenplays and acting classes.

He pulled the pencil out and gnawed on it, a habit picked up when he stopped smoking the year before in an effort to preserve his looks for acting, certainly not for any health reasons. Something clicked in his head as he chewed the eraser, and he held the pencil in front of his eyes, staring at the pink nub on the end. *What if I could dream a movie?* So far his waking ideas had not led to much success. Maybe his subconscious could be more creative than his conscious mind. *Just let my mind go wild...see what happens.* It would be great to finally wave a manuscript under Mica's nose. He gazed back up at the cloud streaks in the sky.

“Get your ass back in here, you got a table being sat.” Calin’s voice yanked him out of his reverie, the slam of the metal fire door providing the definitive mental finale. Any thoughts of storylines fled from Rand’s mind.

He glanced at the pencil stub once more and stuffed it back into his pocket. *Eh... who am I kidding.*

Chapter 11

When the elevator doors opened, the blast of heat nearly knocked him off his feet.

Rand awakened amidst the wreckage that had formerly been the laboratory at the surface. Something inside told him that he could not leave the facility. The answer to the question of what brought him there lay down below, in the burning caves that now stood before him. The single elevator was the only way in or out of the deep passages, so he immediately followed it down. Actual escape would only come after he solved the riddle of this place.

The only weapon he could find in the broken lab was a crossbow. Odd, he had thought, finding such an ancient weapon on the floor next to a pile of electronic equipment. But it’s better than nothing. He held it before him, and drew back the string, fitting a large metal bolt into the frame.

As soon as he stepped out onto the floor of the cave, the elevator’s doors closed behind him. With a slap of a metal and the whir of electric motors, he could hear the lift retreat up the shaft. He pounded on the doors, noticing only then there was no call button on the side of the iron frame. Shit! Nothing could be done now; he committed himself to his path. He turned quickly back to the caves, and then looked over his shoulder one more time at the double, metal doors. Guess I’ll worry about that later.

The caves were brightly illuminated by pools of burning liquid scattered about the floor of the main cavern. Across the room he saw a door cut into the far wall. What he sought lay in that direction. He started walking toward it, crossbow at the ready.

The heat felt unbearable. Sweat dripped from his face and ran down the back of his neck. Halfway across the cavern he paused, crouching on his knees and setting his weapon gently on the floor. Before taking his hand off the crossbow, he glanced once around the room. He appeared to still be alone. Flames rose from the pools of liquid in red and orange streaks against the stone walls. The black smoke rising from them filled the ceiling of the cavern with dark clouds, obscuring the room's ceiling and recalling images of a setting sun.

He took off the shirt of what appeared to be a white jumpsuit, and proceed to rip the long sleeves away from the main body of the cloth, hopping it would cool him down. The prominent muscles in his chest flexed as he tore a slit halfway down the front of it. His tan skin glistened in the bright light from the flames.

As he readied to put the shirt back on, his ears caught a sound of shuffling behind him, a sound of nails scraping lightly against rock and dirt. He dropped the shirt and lifted his head. The speed of the sound increased. Whatever made it had started to run.

Rand grabbed the crossbow and spun just as the black creature sprang for him. Its claws scraped across his chest as he fell backward, leaving only three scratches instead of the deadly gashes he knew the monster intended. He rolled to his left and rose back to his feet in an instant, his weapon facing the evil beast.

The creature resembled the form of panther, but the head seemed too large for its body and each foot bore only three toes. When it snarled, yellow teeth glistened beneath eye sockets appearing empty yet following Rand's every move as he stepped lightly to his left. The cat paced

in a circle opposite him, as though the two engaged in a macabre dance. “What the fuck are you? Some ugly cat?” Rand mocked the beast. Its ears perked up in response, as it clawed grooves into the rock floor.

The cat turned to its right, and Rand responded by circling back the same way. The animal grew more agitated, stepping back and forth, apparently searching for an opportunity to lunge again.

Rand glanced at the wooden crossbow. I’m in a dream, he thought, this will do anything I want. He imagined the ancient weapon as something more, something powerful. It began to vibrate in his hands. “Well, come and get me you fucker.” He lifted the crossbow to his chest, and the beast accepted his invitation.

In a flash of movement the black body was in the air, its claws extended toward him. Rand released the trigger of the crossbow. But it was no ordinary bolt that now shot from the weapon. With a flash of light it flew forward, embedding itself in the beast’s chest and propelling it backward through the air. The animal screamed as bolts of lighting spread from its body, reaching down into the burning pools and causing their flames to shoot skyward in an explosion of light. A moment later the animal crashed to the floor and the lighting stopped. It was dead.

Rand held the crossbow before him, staring at it with amazement. “Now that’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout!” He flipped his middle finger at the body of the cat and mounted another bolt into the weapon. Then he proceeded across the cavern, leaving his shirt in the dust.

Compared to the brightness of the cavern behind him, the opening of the room cut into the stone wall appeared dark. But turning the corner of a short passage, he could see the glow of a dim light. He waited a moment, cocking his head and listening, his right ear turned toward

the hallway. Nothing. The room appeared to be empty. After another moment, he stepped inside.

He slipped along the wall of the narrow passage, keeping his body as much out of sight as possible while still holding the crossbow at the ready. As the hall turned to the left, he could glimpse into the room beyond. There, on a pedestal, rested a glass globe made of crystal. It provided the only source of light in the room. He leaned, trying to see around the corner before moving into the chamber. Doesn't look like anyone is here. He took two more steps forward, and passed through the entrance.

Images danced about inside the globe. From where he stood, they appeared to contain people. He lowered the weapon and approached the stand, bending down to peer at the pictures. One of the people looked like him, the others those in his life: his mother, friends, and, of course, Hunter. A bus raced across the globe and smashed into Hunter on his bicycle. Rand closed his eyes and turned away.

"You killed my pet," a gravelly voice spoke from behind him.

His eyes widened and he turned to see a man standing in the gloom of the hallway. Rand stepped behind the modicum of protection offered by the pedestal and tried to focus on the intruder. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm the Watchman," he said. "I own this place." The figure stepped forward into the blue light cast by the globe. He wore sunglasses, and the hair that formed his long ponytail barely crept up over his ears before descending to a beard covering his chest. Watch upon watch banded his right arm. Rand could suddenly hear them ticking when the man stepped into the room, the sound bouncing off the rock walls. "Think you can change your past, do you?"

Rand glanced back down into the crystal sphere. He could see himself having dinner at him home in Indianapolis. A happy time. Hunter sat at the table with him. "I could change it with this." He reached out to grab the globe.

"Oh no," the Watchman said, "I'm afraid that belongs to me."

Rand looked up at the Watchman. "Fuck you," he shouted, "I'm taking it with me."

The man began chuckling, shaking his head back and forth. "I don't think so," he spoke through the gravelly laugh. The sound of the watches grew louder in the small room; it felt like they pounded directly on Rand's brain. "You see," he said, holding up his right arm to display the timepieces covering it, "Your time is up."

The Watchman took off his glasses, revealing eyes that glowed orange beneath. The sound of ticking grew louder still, threatening to split Rand's skull in two. "No!" he protested, holding a hand up to the side of his head and squeezing his eyes closed tightly. When he opened them, the face of the Watchman had changed. It resembled Hunter's, and the skin turned dark in the blue light. "Hunter?" Rand asked.

The gravelly laugh filled the room. The sound of the watches sounded overwhelming. Before his eyes, the creature's face morphed once more into something new: a long thin jaw protruding from a narrow skull, the eyes a bright glow from deep recesses. "Hardly," was the only word it spoke.

"Fuck you!" Hunter raised his bow and shot, knowing now what kind of damage it could do. He pulled the release, and with a flash of light the bolt flew forward. The creature caught it easily in one black hand. "Hardly," it said shaking its head. It held the bolt out before him, and Rand watched the metal melt and run onto the floor. "You don't understand," the beast said, flicking the last of the molten metal onto the stone, "I own this place."

Shit! Rand grabbed the globe and ran for the door. Dodging the creature, he easily made it into the passageway, but as he sprinted across the cavern floor his steps began to slow. His legs felt like they were filled with lead; he could barely lift them. He looked down at the floor to see he barely managed to move forward.

The sound of footsteps approached from behind. He knew the creature would catch him. The elevator doors seemed miles away. On each side of him the flaming pools flared ever brighter. His eyes were glued to the floor that now appeared to have stopped beneath him. He could pick out the tiny cracks and pieces of stone covering it.

The vulture's voice from his previous dream echoed in his head. 'Watch the floor,' it had said to prevent him from waking up. I need to wake up...un-focus. He forced himself to stop running and look up. He could hear the footsteps behind him getting closer, but rather than look back he stared into the flames coming off the pools. Orange tongues danced and twirled in tall columns. The image began to grow fuzzy in the heat.

The room around him grew quieter. He could barely hear the footsteps now. His vision narrowed until all he could see were two orange dots of light before him. The crystal globe slipped from his fingers, and then everything went dark.

Chapter 12

“Hm.” Mica flipped the final page face down and laid it on the stack sitting on the end table by her couch. Rand drank the fifth bottle of the six pack he brought over while waiting for her to finish reading, hoping she might be impressed.

He spent the previous two weeks writing the first draft of a screenplay based on his dream inside the cave. Granted, he had to build the storyline from the beginning, explaining how