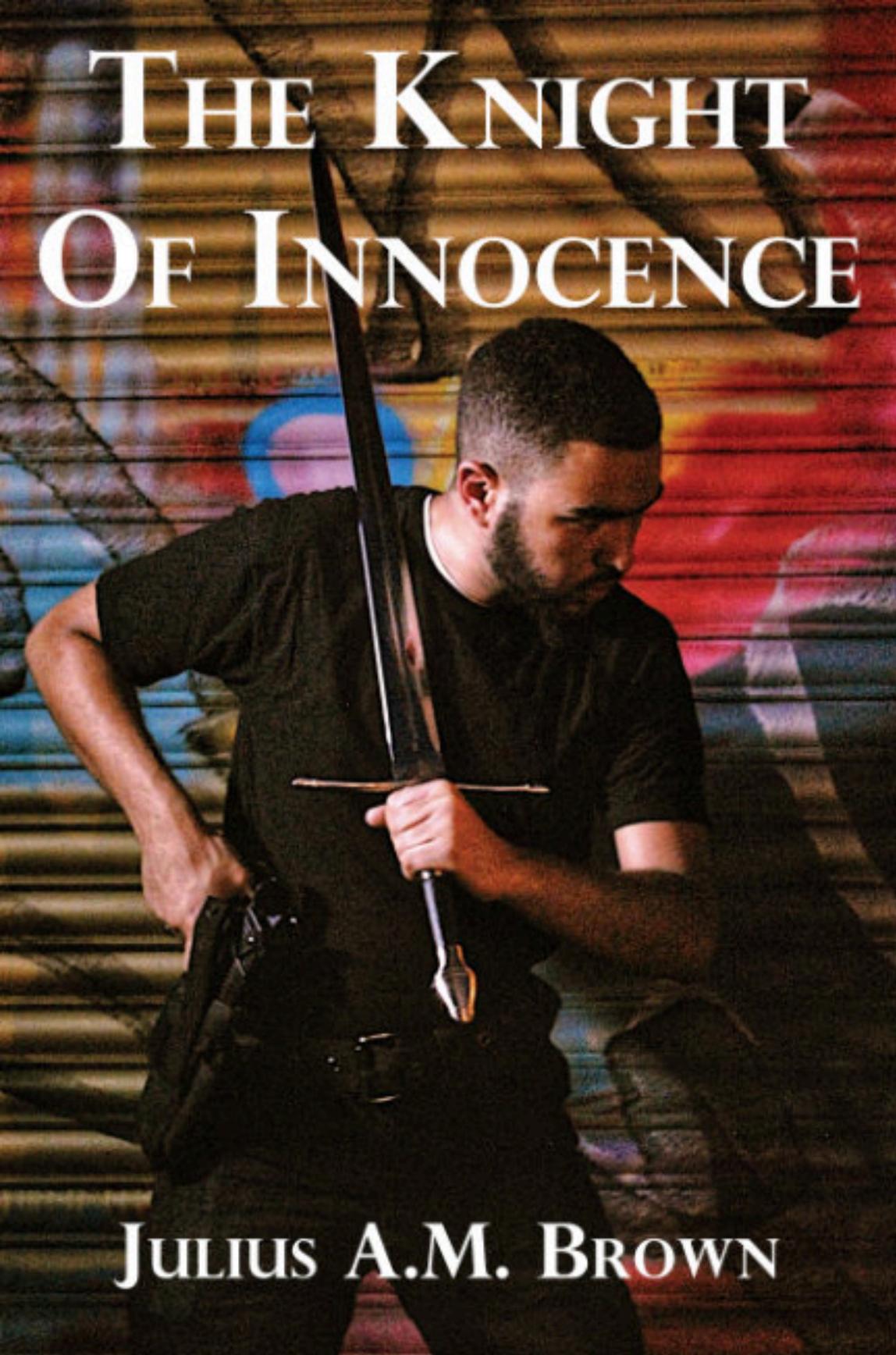


THE KNIGHT OF INNOCENCE

A man with a beard and short hair, wearing a black t-shirt, is shown from the waist up. He is holding a long, dark sword vertically with both hands, looking down at it. The background is a wall with horizontal wooden planks and colorful graffiti. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's features and the sword.

JULIUS A.M. BROWN

THE KNIGHT OF INNOCENCE



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Salem, NH

The Knight of Innocence

Julius A.M. Brown

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Dedication

To my mother, Gertrude S. Diggs, who first taught me to read. To my grandmother, Helen M. Diggs, who encouraged my imagination. To my grandfather, Franklin R. Diggs, who inspired me. To my wife, Adrienne D. D. Brown, who pushed me to share my work with the world. To my son, Julius A.M. Brown Jr., who personifies my every hope and dream.

This book is for you.

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CHAPTER 1

MY BACK HIT the glass door, and I had to dive to my left when a couch came soaring at me. I managed to barely get out of the way of the second piece of furniture to be flung at me tonight. The glass doors behind me exploded outward, and somehow I knew I was going to be blamed for it. It wasn't my fault this school decided to have an office with glass walls. Who the heck builds a high school with glass walls? No one! One ticked off student with a rock and that's the budget for the year. I rolled twice and then settled into a crouching position.

Two hours ago I was sitting in my favorite bar and grill with a burger on the way. That's when the news came over the television above the bar. Now, all the other patrons were pissed when the pay-per-view fight was interrupted by local news of the recent vandalism of a local high school, but I on the other hand was downright irate. I paid for the burger that I'd never get to eat and drove over to the high school in question. What do I find? A fully dressed yet still half-naked girl cowering in a corner with her strapping young boyfriend shoved into a trash can. Then of course there was the minotaur with lust in his eyes staring at the girl. Why couldn't it just be vandals that were vandalizing a high school?

The minotaur that had just thrown the couch at me bellowed in anger so loud that the remaining glass shook. "I heard you the first time," I said as I stood and leveled my sword before me. It was four feet long from the tip of the blade to the pommel with a cruciform cross guard. If you looked at the blade closely, you could see an inscription. "See this sword? Yell all you want. Either give me the girl and leave or I will have to kill you. Any other options went out the door with the couch."

The minotaur stomped his left foot and scraped it back across the ground. His chest muscles pulsed under the ripped-up football jersey he was wearing. He snorted and yelled in a surprisingly wheezy voice, "She's mine!" That's when he lowered his horns and charged me.

“No, no, no,” I yelled. I started to jump out of the way, but the bastard leapt forward into a diving tackle. He hit me square in the chest. It was a miracle that his horns were too wide to impale me. The air was blasted from my body as we exploded through the glass wall out into the night. We passed the landing of the main office and were in free fall over the almost two dozen stairs that led to the parking lot.

My brain told me I was going to die if I didn’t do something. My gut told me that my brain was right. I wrapped my arms around the minotaur’s neck and arched my back with everything I could muster. I flipped him over me and turned as much as I could.

The ground came flying at us. When we crashed the minotaur was under me, and I smacked against his head and chest. I bounced off him and kept flying backward. My head smacked against asphalt as my momentum sent me tumbling across the parking lot. The passenger door of a red Dodge Charger crunched in as I crashed into it. I didn’t want to get up after that. There are some things that seem pointless, but there was a girl at the top of the stairs scared out of her mind, and her boyfriend was probably hurt. I climbed to my feet as the minotaur came stomping toward me. My sword had landed between us.

I grunted and charged toward the monster. The minotaur roared and charged me. He ran over my sword and closed on me so fast that I wondered if he had even felt that fall. His head dipped down so he could gore me, but I jumped. Using his head as a springboard to clear the rest of his body, I dropped into a forward roll across the ground. The asphalt ripped through my jeans as I skidded on my knees across the parking lot. Blood trailed from both of my legs, but I had my sword again. The monster turned on me in an instant. He threw a punch, and I had to scramble to my feet to get out of the way. His fist added a new pothole to the parking lot.

At 6’2” and about 230 pounds I’m a big guy, but let’s face it, I’m human. I was the underdog here. The minotaur was ten feet tall and weighed six or seven hundred pounds of solid muscle. I wasn’t trading blows with him, but I wasn’t backing down either.

“Come at me, you walking barbecue plate,” I yelled. He did, and I couldn’t have been happier when he reared back for a punch that would knock me clear out of the school district. I dove forward beneath his swing.

I rolled back up to my feet and spun around with my sword slashing across. The blade of my sword cut through the muscle of his leg with ease. He went down with a howl of pain. When he hit the ground the parking lot shook, and I almost lost my balance. I leapt at his back with the intent of stabbing him through the heart, but just as I did the minotaur rolled over. He caught me in two powerful hands and started to squeeze me as if he was trying to get the last bit of toothpaste out of me.

“You die now human, just like every other stupid monster hunter.”

“I’m not a monster hunter,” I wheezed. My ribs were straining. I had one last chance, so I drew my sword back and plunged it straight down at the minotaur’s throat. There was a sound of steel scraping against stone as I buried my blade to its hilt in the monster’s throat. Blood gurgled from his mouth, and his eyes bulged just as the life drained from them. His grip loosened, and I fell onto his chest. I just lay there for a moment coughing and gasping for air.

When I rolled off the minotaur onto the ground, something terrifying surged through my body. There was no pain, but I felt a piece of my life fade away. In the back of my mind, I could feel something akin to the loss of a distant cousin or a friend of a friend. It just felt wrong, like tearing a page from a thick novel. I closed my eyes as I felt my soul shake and quiver. The number thirteen was burned into my mind. I got up and wrenched my sword free of the monster’s throat.

I was going to go up and rescue the girl, but she and her boyfriend were walking down the stairs. They looked a little banged up, but they weren’t hurt. I waved them over. “You guys okay?”

The girl nodded, but the guy looked past me. His eyes filled with anger, and he shoved me. “You messed up my car, shithead.”

I looked down at where he touched me. This guy was my height and a bit more muscular than I was. I was used to that. I wasn’t used to being shoved by people that I had just saved. “I’m sorry, what?” I asked.

He got right in my face and yelled, “You dented my car.”

“Yeah, with my head after I dented the ground the same way.” I touched the back of my head and showed him my bloody hand.

“I just got that car. You had better be able to pay for it.”

“So you have nothing to say about the minotaur? The huge monster that attacked you? The one I just saved you from?”

“What do you want, a medal? The fucking cops would have done that but without messing up my car. In fact, let’s call them. You had better have insurance.”

As he fished out his phone, I turned and walked over to his brand-new car. I took my sword and poked through one of his tires. He screamed. I walked around to the other three and repeated the process. Then I smashed through the driver’s window and popped the hood. I stuck the blade of my sword through the GPS screen while I was leaning in. The young man ran over to voice his opinion once again. This time he punched me. He had a good strong punch. I hit him with an uppercut that lifted him into the air, and when he hit the ground, I put a size-fourteen work boot into his gut. Then I opened his hood and slashed every tube and wire I could see.

I took his cell phone and ground it into the parking lot. I turned to the young lady with my most polite and sincere smile. “Want to call your parents for a ride?”

She nodded.

While she called her parents, I went over to the minotaur’s body. It was already breaking down into the basic elements of the mortal world. Bone to earth, blood to water, and flesh to grass. Mixed in with it all was a clear odorless gel. Some people call it slime, but those of us in the know call it ectoplasm, the byproduct of existing in a world that is not your own. It was shifting back to the world from which it came, our sister world, the Second Earth. In minutes, all evidence that monsters exist in the world would be gone. I said a prayer over the body and returned to the girl.

“What was that thing?” she asked me.

“Do you really want to know?” She nodded slowly. I looked her in the eye and said, “It was a creature called a minotaur. It had a mother and father like you. It was a monster, and it had a soul.”

She looked at me with a skeptical expression. “A monster? Monsters aren’t real.”

“Monsters are as real as you and I. Are you religious?” I asked. She nodded. “Well tonight you met a monster. One day, hopefully a long way off, you will meet an angel. They’re real too.”

She smiled at that. A little light in the darkness is good. “Well what about you? What are you?”

I sighed and said humbly, "I'm a knight." I took her phone and ground it into the asphalt the same way I had done her boyfriends. Climbing into my old, beat-up Dodge Prospector, I turned the ignition. My truck creaked and clanked before it turned over. The cab rattled for a moment, and then I pulled out of the parking lot into the street. I drove through the streets of Baltimore, Maryland in the moonlight, thinking about that girl and her boyfriend. I thought about what must be going through both of their heads. It's hard when you first find out.

Ignorance Is Bliss. I have said it, you have said it, and just about every person in the civilized world has said it. That's why it is literally the worst curse ever placed upon humanity. Ignorance keeps us from seeing the world as it really is. Ignorance keeps us from learning the lessons our ancestors taught us. Ignorance keeps people from trusting what they know deep down in the core of their being. Ignorance has us make fun of, shun, imprison, and utterly disavow anyone that tells us the truth.

The truth is that we are not alone. The truth is that most people only see half of the world around them, if that much. The truth is that magic exists. The truth is that the bible is missing a lot of information. The truth is that everyone is right about their religion and wrong at the same time. The truth is darkness. The truth is scary. The truth is anger. The truth is painful. The truth may get you killed.

If you still want to know the truth, then I will give you what I know. First off, do not forget what you already think you know. Now take everything you have ever dismissed as childish, myth, fantasy, or blasphemy. It's all true! Not right but true. It is all connected. The Bible, the Quran, Scientology, the occult, Dungeons and Dragons, yesterday's crossword puzzle, Disney, Walmart, Atlantis, dinosaurs, the Loch Ness monster, and yes the fortunes inside of fortune cookies. Every bit of information that we have as a whole is connected to the truth. It has all been distorted, changed, and watered down so that people can be happy. So that we can be ignorant.

It sounds like a conspiracy theory, but it isn't. We did it to ourselves. Have you ever heard a rumor at your job about you? I bet it had an ounce of truth to it and ten gallons of fiction, right? Ever see that anywhere else? Like when you played telephone in kindergarten? You would think growing up would stop the confusion, but it just made it more vicious,

right? The longer you are exposed to the curse the worse it is. But don't worry. It's easy to overcome. Just take your head out of your butt. You aren't always right! You aren't the smartest person in the room!

We are all children, and will be until we grow up and stop acting like we are the only intelligent beings on this planet. Monsters exist. Fairies exist. Vampires and werewolves exist. They are living right here with us, but most of us will never know it. Why? Because *Ignorance Is Bliss*.

Everyone has heard the creak of a door and thought it was the wind. Everyone has seen a scary shadow on the wall and thought it was a coat rack. Everyone has smelled something rancid and thought it was just something their kid spilled. But it's not the wind; it's a goblin sneaking into your house. It isn't a coat rack but a satyr stealing your beer. It's not a spill that you smell but a troll about to eat your family. Monsters are real. They always have been.

How do I know all of this? I am a Knight of the Crucifixion, the first true order of knights. You have heard of Jesus and the twelve Apostles. Well some things were purposefully left out of their tales. One hidden bit of knowledge was that Jesus gave each of his twelve followers a sword that represented an aspect of humanity. The swords didn't grant them special abilities or powers, but the swords did grant them a chance to fight back against beings that would harm any of God's children. The Apostles became the Knights of the First Order of Christ. When a knight retired or died, their sword was passed on to a person that represented the aspect that it was meant to defend. The knights that came after the original twelve were forever known as the Knights of the Crucifixion. I don't know who decides if someone is worthy of a sword, but they aren't human. They are probably angels, and I am guessing they take their orders from their boss.

Four years ago, I begged God for a chance to stop something horrible from happening. He gave me that chance by giving me a sword. Now I am a Knight of the Crucifixion and a member of The Church. The Church is a secret organization that has existed for thousands of years. It is not controlled by any particular religious faith or government, but it has its connections to just about everything. Its mission is to maintain the balance of power between humanity and the other beings of the world, to protect the entire world from supernatural evil, and not to pay me.

Seriously, I just found out I was supposed to be paid for this, and I haven't seen a check in four years.

My name is Michael White. I won't tell you my whole name because that can get you killed. I am the owner and sole employee of White Knight Construction. I am a part-time private investigator. I am the grandson of a Paladin. I am a Knight of the Crucifixion. When you have a problem that seems too big for you, when you think the police can't help you, when the shadows are surrounding you, or when you hear something go bump in the night, just ask for help. I will be there.

If you don't believe me that's fine. But on the off chance that I am right, if you have ever seen something dart away in the corner of your vision, if you have ever felt a presence that you couldn't find, or if you have ever heard something go bump in the night then keep reading. You might learn something.

The Knight of Innocence

CHAPTER 2

I GOT HOME and took a shower. My water heater works whenever it feels like it, so the warm water became ice-cold the moment I stepped under the shower head. The anxiousness of battle washed away along with the sweat and blood. The warm water came back just as my teeth started to chatter. When I got out of the shower, I looked at myself in the mirror.

Like I said, I am 6'2" and 230 pounds of evil-ass-kicking-awesomeness. My body has a runner's build of lean flat muscles that I got from getting my butt kicked by my grandpa while he taught me the business. I'm an American of the black variety with light skin. For simplicity, I keep my hair cut bald on the sides with a fade on the top. The only jewelry I have are a small stud earring in my left ear and a gold chain that holds a crucifix around my neck.

There are runic tattoos on my back, neck, arms, legs, chest, and stomach. The ones on my back run across my shoulders, down my spine, and around several random spots that I think are chi points. In my short life I have managed to get a few fading scars on my chest, face, legs, and stomach. On my left shoulder, there are five puncture wounds in the shape of a clawed hand. It shows no signs of fading. I don't have six-pack abs, but I keep trying to get them. Oh well. Maybe 200 sit-ups a day isn't enough.

I grabbed some shorts and went to bed. It felt like I had just closed my eyes when my alarm went off. Morning was here already, and I felt like crap. Today was supposed to be a big day for me. I did my usual 200 push-ups, 200 sit-ups, and 200 squats. No matter how much I do, I never really look like I am in shape.

Once I was done working out, I went into my kitchen pantry. I opened it and looked around at enough boxes of allergy medicine to last anyone else a lifetime. I would go through them in a couple of days.

On the floor was a clear storage bin; inside were the protein bars that my best friend, Aaron, made me keep. They were made from a bunch of plants that don't sound like grapes or watermelons and a bunch of chemicals that supposedly are healthier for you than the nutrients in grapes or watermelons. They smelled like fresh cow pie and tasted like a cow ate a cow pie then crapped it out again. I ate one, and having survived that attempt at suicide, I reminded myself that the life of a knight was supposed to be filled with peril.

Finally, I got dressed in a pair of jeans, a gray tee shirt, and a cheap pair of sneakers. It was the nicest stuff I had to wear since I don't spend much on everyday clothing. I clipped my gun and survival knife on my belt and pulled my shirt down to cover them. Then I grabbed my jean jacket, keys, and my sword before heading to the door.

My phone rang just as I was leaving. I looked at the screen and didn't know if I should be happy, sad, or terrified. The screen showed me a picture of an old man flipping me off as I tried to take his picture. I answered, "White Knight Construction, Michael White speaking."

A hard voice edged in mirth came back to me. "So, you finally came up with a name?"

"I figured I would go with what I know. My name is White, I'm a knight, and I do construction," I said. "What can I do for you, padre?"

"It sounds good, kid. The news this morning had some idiot talking about how some guy with a sword hacked up his car. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" he asked. There was a hint of laughter in the voice of Gregory Greycast. He was a catholic priest and one of the hardest men I had ever met. I had known him for a little over a year now and had come to love most of our conversations.

"Nope. All I did was save some dumb kid and his girlfriend from a minotaur and then got yelled at by the dumb kid. I don't remember hacking up a car," I said.

"Good. Did you see anything else last night?" he asked me. His tone had changed. The mirth that lined his voice had vanished.

"No. What's going on?" I asked.

"You at home?" Priest Greycast asked. I told him yes, and he told me to check the news. I didn't have cable, internet, or a converter box for my TV. "Get a paper. It's best if you see it for yourself. Call me back ASAP."

We both hung up. I put my sword in my baseball bag and headed out. My apartment is on the ground level of an old building near the center of town. There are four units to my building, so I have two neighbors above me and one beside me. The neighbors rarely interact with me, and I don't blame them. Most nights I come home covered in my own blood and with claw marks all over my truck. No sane person should want to deal with a neighbor like that.

The exception is Mrs. Faraday, who was always happy to see me. Mrs. Faraday lives next to me and is 87 years old. Her husband is even older than she is, but he lives in a home on the other side of town. She is a kind old lady with a few medical problems but nothing that has kept her from living alone. She never says much and just sits outside with her lawn ornaments. She has thirty or forty garden gnomes. She always waves just as she did today when she saw me running over to my truck.

"Michael, where are you running off to so early? Another job interview?" she asked.

"No ma'am. I am just off to run a few errands. Do you want me to mow your lawn this weekend?" I asked her.

She looked around at the shared lawn. The grass wasn't tall, but I know she liked it trimmed so she could better appreciate her gnomes. The landlord would come out to cut the grass every two weeks, but it had rained right after his last visit, and he wasn't due back for a while.

"Oh, if you wouldn't mind. If my Peter was well he would take care of it," she told me. "But your allergies, please take plenty of medicine before you do."

I chuckled. "I will, I promise. Also, if you want to go see Mr. Faraday this weekend, I would be glad to take you," I told her.

"That would be lovely. He loves when you tell him about your adventures," she said as she clapped happily. I waved and drove off to the nearest gas station.

I bought a paper and sat in my truck to look through it. There was a lot going on in the city the next few days. Nothing major. The Orioles were away this weekend. There was an art exhibit opening today, but a stone statue of a gladiator had gone missing from the exhibit hall, and as usual there was a lot of local government crap. I called up Priest Greycast and asked him what I was looking for.

“See that article about the dead guy found at Bear Creek?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Guy was strangled. Cops say he was also covered in claw marks.”

“Since when do animals strangle people?” I asked.

“Right, but it gets worse,” he said.

“How?” I asked.

“Get your ass over here first. It gets worse, but it gets a little more worse before that,” he told me. Priest Greycastle didn’t give me a chance to argue and just hung up. I revved up my truck and hit the road.

CHAPTER 3

ROLLED DOWN to 409 Cathedral Street and into the parking lot of a large Catholic Church. Well, the word large doesn't exactly cover it. This church takes up two city blocks. Its full name is the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but it was better known as the Baltimore Basilica.

The Cathedral is a monumental neoclassical style building whose main entrance is designed as a classical Greek portico with a double hex style pattern of columns. Behind the columns, you can see a pair of cylindrical towers rising to the sky. The church has existed since the early 1800s, and until recent years more priests were ordained there than at any other church in the U.S. That change may or may not have something to do with me showing up in town.

I walked up the front steps and into the entry hall. There were two people there. One was a deacon that immediately looked at me as if I was an intruder. The other was an older woman named Hillary who smiled at me from behind the visitor's desk. I smiled, waved, and spoke very politely.

"Hi," I said. "Is Priest Greyshadow in?"

Hillary started to nod and say something to me, but the deacon cut in. "He is, but why are you here?"

The deacon was an older man and as pious as any other Sunday Christian...or Catholic in this case. Don't misunderstand – not all the people in the world that follow Catholicism or Christianity are assholes, but a good number, just like with every other religion, exist. He was in his early forties, tall like me, broad shouldered, and black. I remembered his name was Darrel, and like most people, he did not like me. I have a winning personality, but sometimes people just don't warm up to you.

"Well, Darrel," I said.

"It's *Deacon* – show some respect," he said.

Older guys are really protective of their titles. I let him have it. "Well, *Deacon*, he asked me to come over and have a chat. You know, red phone business and such," I said with a smile. Darrel started to say something, but I leaned to the side and said to Hillary, "You can let Priest Greycastle know I'm here."

Hillary smiled and picked up the desk phone. The Deacon calmly shoved me back around to face him. I saw something in his eyes but diverted my gaze slightly. He was angry, but he hid it well. "Young man, do you think you can just walk in off the street and demand to see Priest Greycastle?"

"It's *Sir, Deacon*, not young man," I said. "Mutual respect. Try it."

"You do not belong here," he said in a soft voice.

"It's a church. Anyone that was created by God is welcome here," I said. "In fact, I think I have proof of my divine creation right here." I reached over my shoulder into my bag and pulled out my middle finger for him to admire.

His eyes went wide, and I saw rage flash over his features. "You don't deserve what he gave you," he said through clenched teeth.

"Well, I can't argue with you there. But you have no right to judge me. That's his job. Read your bible," I said.

Hillary spoke up, "Head on back, Michael. Father Greycastle is waiting for you in his office."

"Thank you, Miss Hillary," I said.

Darrel and I exchanged glances. I walked past him into the church proper and marched back to the offices. The last office at the end of the long hall said in black letters 'Priest Gregory Greycastle.' The door was cracked open. I knocked.

"Just get your ass in here, kid," said a voice that was already exasperated with me. I wasn't supposed to knock. Priest Greycastle hated it when I knocked, so I did it every time I came to his office.

I walked in and found two men looking at me. The first was Priest Gregory Greycastle. He was an older man, somewhere between sixty and a hundred. His head was bald, but he sported a devilish goatee of wizardly white hair. Priest Greycastle was wearing his clergy blacks with his white collar. He was an average-sized man with a lean build. Scars could be seen on his head, face, forearms, and hands. His fists had

been broken so many times in his youth that they were gnarled, large, and warped. I am sure they had broken even more jaws. He was sitting behind his desk with a cigarette that he wasn't supposed to have burning in the ashtray.

Priest Greynshadow pointed at me and said, "This is him, Michael White. Michael, this is Detective Garrett Clay." There were two chairs in front of Priest Greynshadow's desk. In the chair on the right, the one I prefer to sit in, was a man wearing a cheap suit. When he turned to look at me, Priest Greynshadow pointed to my bag and shook his head.

"Hello Michael," Detective Clay said as he stood up. He held out his hand to shake mine. We traded grips. He didn't try to crush my hand, but he had an ironclad grip. He was a little taller than me and more muscular than I was. His blond hair was in a buzz cut so sharp that it could slice you open. He was a handsome guy with a confident, calming smile. He was the kind of guy women would like, men wouldn't trust, and that I had grown up in fear of.

"Hey," I said. I caught his eyes flicker up and down for an instant. He was sizing me up. He let go of my hand and went to sit back down. "I'm sorry. Could I have that seat?" He looked at me for a moment as if I was a little strange, but he moved over to the left chair. I thanked him and sat down in my spot. I put my bag on the ground beside my right foot as far from this man as I could manage.

"Now like I was saying, Detective, I don't do that kind of stuff anymore. Pretty much I just preach, tend to the flock, get drunk, rinse, and repeat," Priest Greynshadow said.

"I understood that the first time, Father. I just want to know if you have any ideas about what happened," the detective said. He tapped the manila folder that was closed on the desk.

Priest Greynshadow opened the folder and began going through the contents. They were crime scene photos. He picked up each one and took a long moment to examine it before setting it to the side, right where I could plainly see them while sitting back in my chair. The pictures were of either a very good horror movie or a gruesome crime scene. There were four or five bodies piled on each other in one picture. Some were ripped apart by the limbs and joints. One was simply split in two, and not the way you would think—there was a front and back picture.

"This was all in one warehouse?" Priest Gregory asked. The detective nodded. "Well, like I said, I don't do P.I. work anymore. As of the Baskin case, I haven't taken a case outside the interest of The Church. But Michael here, I taught him most of what I know. He could help you."

The detective turned to me and asked, "You're a P.I.?"

I shrugged. "The priest helped me get my license, but I have never taken a case," I said. Priest Greyshadow thought that it would be good for me to get my private investigation license. It had been time-consuming, but it was good training. Plus, it gave me an excuse to be armed at all times.

"How long have you had the license?" he asked.

"A few months," I said.

Detective Clay gathered the photos and closed the folder. "No offense, but I need someone that isn't wet behind the ears," Clay said.

"The kids good. He has a bad habit of solving problems," Priest Greyshadow said.

"It wasn't his name in the department's Rolodex, it was yours. I need experienced eyes," Clay said. He stood up to leave.

"The bodies were all of young people, right? Some teenagers and some just a bit older?" I asked.

Clay stopped halfway to the door. "Yeah. How did you know?"

"Some of the clothing on the females was pretty bright and flamboyant. Some had bunches of bracelets, and there was a pacifier on a necklace around one of their necks. They were at a rave," I said. Detective Clay sat back down. "There were three different scenes in those photos. The time stamp shows them as days apart. I am guessing you found claw marks on some of the bodies. Puncture marks as well, like something bit them, but the bite doesn't match any known animals?"

"Yeah, we were racking our brains over it. Father Greyshadow's name came up as knowing about stuff like this," he said. "Occult stuff, religious yahoos with god complexes."

"Nope. Just monsters," I said.

"Someone would have to be one to do this," Clay said.

"No. Monsters as in real monsters did this. Things with claws and fangs," I said.

Clay looked at me like I was an idiot. He stood up and walked to the door. "I knew your name before this case came up, Greyshadow. My

father had mentioned you when I was growing up. Said you were a loose cannon and a nut job. This was a waste of time," he said. He left and slammed the door closed.

"Just had to throw it out there, didn't you?" asked Greycastle.

"I don't see the point in lying about it. Either he believes the truth or he doesn't. His personal perceptions aren't my problem. My problem is that people are dead, and the monster behind it is going to kill again."

"Kid, you need to get your shit together. We lie about this all the time. Since you came back from seeing your grandfather, you haven't been yourself. I know Frank didn't tell you to start running your mouth," Priest Greycastle said.

"Nope, but keeping magical beings a secret has worked out so well for us. We live in a world of fairies, vampires, werewolves, and wizards. Doesn't it bother you that less than a tenth of the world's human population knows that?" I asked.

"Kid, it isn't our job to tell the world. It's our job to defend it," Priest Greycastle said.

I couldn't argue with him. Defending the world from the supernatural was our job. I was just sick and tired of keeping it a secret.

"It was the guy from a few months back. It's his M.O. Throw a rave, gather young people, summon demons," I said.

"What are you going to do?" Greycastle asked.

"Go take a look at this murder at Bear Creek. They could be connected or not. But either way, if there is a monster killing people, I am going to find it and deal with it," I said.

"Keep your phone on and keep your head straight. I know you want to get this asshole, but you dying doesn't help. I'll let Aaron know you might need him. You want to call in the wizard?" Greycastle asked.

"Yeah. This was her case. She came to us for help, and with a wizard summoning demons to his beck and call, I'm going to need back up," I said. I grabbed my bag and headed for the door.

"Michael, what's so different about today that's got you in such a get up and go mood?" he asked me.

"Kerri-Lynn is coming to see me," I said.

The Knight of Innocence

CHAPTER 4

I UNLOCKED MY truck, got in, and pulled out into traffic. I had a few hours before Kerri-Lynn was going to arrive. She had insisted on coming to see me even though I had basically told her that I didn't want anything more to do with her. Kerri-Lynn knew me better than anyone, and she knew the truth—the truth being that I wanted everything to do with that girl. That I always had and always would. Being a knight had gotten in the way. I told her that I could never do her justice, and that I was sorry for wasting her time. She had called me a week ago and told me she was coming to see me whether I liked it or not.

"You should focus on the road," a calm voice said from my passenger seat. I nearly jumped out of my skin. I swerved into the next lane and had to get control of my truck before I ran up on the median.

I had locked up my truck and gotten back in alone. Now there was someone sitting in my passenger seat telling me how to drive. When I looked over, I found a man that seemed relaxed and easy going. He wasn't a young man or an old man. He was physically fit without having bulging muscles. He wore the same white shirt and jeans that he always wore. His brown hair was playfully messy, and he sported a close cut beard. I called him Bill, and when I first met Priest Greycastle he called him Fred, so now we both called him Bill Fred. I didn't know much about him, but to me if Priest Greycastle was my handler for The Church then Bill Fred was my handler for the Knights of the Crucifixion. He was a hard guy to deal with, but if I was meant to understand angels, I am sure someone would have mentioned it by now.

"You scared the crap out of me," I said.

"That's how you want to start this conversation?" he asked me.

"No! I would like to start it in a restaurant, over breakfast, and with a tall cool glass of O.J. Instead you have to do the whole 'I'm magic so let me screw with the human' thing," I said.

He laughed at me and said, "I guess it could be a little annoying."
"A little? I could have hit someone," I said.

The mirth faded from his features. "Do you honestly believe I would have allowed that?" he asked in a flat voice.

I swallowed hard. The last thing I wanted to do was insult an angel that was charged with making sure I protected people. "Nope. Never crossed my mind," I said.

He looked at me and flashed me a smile of perfectly white teeth as he said, "I didn't think so."

Bill Fred creeped me out most of the time. Correction: all the time. He is an actual angel that could probably kick my butt with his mind, maybe even kill me. Whenever he smiles, you just want to buy him a beer. Oh yeah, angels drink beer. Bill Fred prefers Bud.

"I won't keep you, Michael. You already seem to be on the case," he said.

"The lake? It's connected with the rave murders?" I asked.

"That's not why I am here. It's Garret Clay," he said.

"The detective?" I asked.

"Be careful with him. He isn't what you think he is," he said.

"I knew it. I knew he couldn't be trusted," I said. From the moment we shook hands I had a bad feeling about him.

"Michael, do not go looking for a new problem when you have enough problems staring at you," he said.

"Problems like what?" I asked. When he didn't answer, I looked over and saw that Bill Fred was gone. I shrugged. It wasn't past breakfast time at McDonald's yet, and I was ready to call it a day.

CHAPTER 5

GETTING TO BEAR Creek and back wouldn't be a big deal. Since it wasn't past breakfast time, I got myself four bacon egg and cheese biscuits. They were on sale two for \$3, so for seven bucks I had an orange juice to go with it.

Bear Creek Park was one of the recreation areas in east Baltimore built around Bear Creek, just a short one-hour drive in morning bumper-to-bumper traffic. I got to the park, and there was no one around to be seen. That was strange. The paper said the body had been found two days ago near the shoreline. I spotted an area that was blocked off with crime scene tape.

I drove down to another part of the park and parked right in front of a sculpture of a hawk. I found people galore here. Now this seemed right. A nice day with a clear sky and people living life not three hundred yards from a supernatural murder. I grabbed my bag and walked back toward the scene.

There was a trail that led me back to the taped off area. I got there and looked around before ducking under the tape. The tape went around some trees, a bear statue, and a long wide stone block with a placard on it to encompass an area of about the size of an average one-car garage. There were hearts and initials carved into the trees surrounding the area, and every so often, I noticed a discarded square of plastic. This was a place people came to be alone.

Now that I had a handle on the layout, I needed to check a few things. I entered the area and checked out the normal stuff first. There was blood on the ground in several spots and something else. I bent down and touched a brown substance. It was hard and gritty, like cement. I looked at the big block of stone and read the placard. It said 'Black Bear, *Ursus Americanus*.' The statue was sitting on its butt on the other side of the clearing. That was a pretty heavy prank to pull off. I didn't

see any evidence of a mass exodus from the area, so whatever happened had been confined to the victim and the murderer.

Next, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and settled my mind. When I opened my eyes, I opened something else along with them. I opened my mind's eye. I am not a wizard, and I do not understand how magic works, but I can sense magic and the supernatural. It takes practice and a lot of getting used to, but anyone can do it. You start by remembering that your mind will try to trick you. *Ignorance Is Bliss*, and because of that, your mind will always try to hide the obvious from you with a simple explanation. You have to fight it.

I could feel the wind coming off the water. It was a cool air, but I could clearly see steam rolling off the closest part of the lake. There was no dew on the grass. I smelled blood and something else. It smelled like concrete or stone. Probably the brown substance from earlier. The trees surrounding the area were rustling with lush green leaves, but the murder scene was littered with fallen brown ones. There was magic used here, and it was powerful. I started to get dizzy, so I closed off my senses. I rubbed the bridge of my nose as a headache began to start.

There was a sharp snap to my side and a grinding sound from behind me. I felt something large and heavy enough to shake the ground coming at me from behind. I dropped low and looked over my shoulder. Then I jumped out to my left as an 800-pound bear statue came barreling at me. I did a sidelong roll so that I came up to my feet facing the bear statue. It was made of shaped black stone with crime-scene tape wrapped around its neck, and somehow it was moving just like a real bear would. It had too much momentum to stop, but when it wheeled around on me, it dug in and skidded into a charging position.

I got to my feet and employed Michael Combat Rule Number One: shoot first. I drew my handgun and took a stance just as the bear statue came to a grinding halt. My gun of choice is a .50 caliber Desert Eagle. It's a miniature hand cannon that I used to put holes in anything that needs to stop trying to kill me. This bear statue may have been made of stone, but it was currently trying to kill me. It charged and I fired three rounds. One hit it in the left shoulder, one hit it in the left arm, and one blew off a chunk of its back. But it kept coming.

I backed up and unloaded four more rounds as I backpedaled. All

of my shots hit, and I saw stone go flying away as pebbles and powder. Still the bear charged. My back hit the stone block that the bear was supposed to be on. The bear swung at me as I jumped and rolled onto the block. The bear's claw sliced into the placard and cut through the stone beneath as if it was paper. It raked across with its right arm to rip huge trenches into the stone block. I kept rolling until I was as far back as I could get then readied myself in a kneeling position. I didn't have another magazine on me because a .50 caliber shell should have stopped almost anything, but I was dealing with magic. I needed iron or silver rounds, which were expensive. The rounds I had were lead, and though they did a lot of damage, they did nothing to magical beings other than piss them off.

The bear reared up on its hind legs. It was seven and a half feet tall with arms thicker than my chest and made of stone. As much as I didn't want to, I reached over my shoulder into my bag and closed my hand around the handle of my sword. Power, pure and raw, rushed over me. It's not something that can be described correctly by any mortal. I felt memories surge through me. The joy of the first time I rode a bike without training wheels, the joy of the first time I rolled a natural 20 in Dungeons and Dragons, and the joy of the first time Kerri-Lynn ever smiled at me. I felt the pride of my mother when I graduated high school, the pride of my grandpa the first time I changed a tire, and the pride of my family when they found out I was going to become a knight. I felt the power of something greater than I ever could be, far greater, focused into me. I felt the power of faith.

When I drew my sword, its blade bathed the clearing in white light. My sword was a four-foot medieval-styled long sword. The handle was wrapped in black leather. The cross guard was a simple crossbar of silver with rounded ends. In the center of the cross guard was a blue gem, and on the rounded ends were similar gems. The blade was just over three feet long, broad, and sharper than any sword should ever have been. I could easily manage the sword in one hand, but baseball is my game, so I took a right-handed batters stance with it.

The bear statue swiped at me with its left paw, and I jumped over it. It came back around with its left and right together. I leapt over them and charged at the bear. I planted a sneaker on its snout and leapt out

into the open clearing. I landed and dropped into a roll to put some distance between us. I took a good look at the stone that the bear's claw had cut through and reminded myself that one hit from this monster and it was all over. I rushed forward as the bear was turning and slashed from my waist up over my right shoulder as I passed the stone bear. The sound of metal hitting stone rang clear, but my sword cut deep into the flank of the turning Ursa. I turned as it roared in pain. It was a sound akin to an actual bear but filled with the sound of stone rubbing against stone. I looked at the wound my sword had left and saw liquid stone ooze from it like blood. It wasn't hot like lava—it was just stone converted to liquid.

I ducked as the bear struck out at me. I parried another blow and left a long cut on its right arm. More liquid stone gushed from the new wound. I darted to my left, and when the bear swiped at me, I spun around back to my right and plunged my sword into its knee. It howled and backhanded me with such force that my sword ripped through the stone leg. I hit the ground and the bear fell over. Its ruined leg was bent inward, half ripped off, and useless. I struggled to get up into a sitting position. I saw blood. My shirt had been ripped open in several lines going from my left side abdominal muscles to my right shoulder. The cuts were deep enough to bleed and need stitches but not deep enough to have sliced bone or organs. The hit certainly was hard enough to break a few of my ribs.

I struggled to get to my feet, and so did the wounded bear statue. I was up first, so I went on the attack. I charged, and when the bear swung at me, I skidded to a stop to let the stone claw pass me. Then I cleaved down into its left shoulder. The arm fell lifelessly, but the bear snapped its maw up at me. I tried to jump back, but the earth beneath me was slick with stone blood. I started to fall but managed to get my sword up. The bear's head surged forth, and I thrust my blade as I fell. My sword entered the monster's mouth and erupted out of the back of its head.

I braced for what was going to happen next. The reason I shoot first is not because I want God to sort out my problems but because there is a price to be paid when using one of the Twelve Swords of the Apostles. Some beings have souls and some do not. When you kill a being, any being, with a soul by using one of the Twelve you lose a day from your life as

punishment, and the amount of days was burned into your own soul. Last night I had lost my thirteenth day when I killed the minotaur. I readied myself to lose my fourteenth. The bear's eyes flared with otherworldly light. Its blue hue clashed with the white light of my sword. The lights raged like little torches and then darted away into the distance. The light of my sword faded away as well. Nothing else followed. The creature had no soul, and that meant that I wasn't going to lose a day.

I pulled my sword free and breathed a sigh of relief. I had killed a monster and not lost a day of my life. Awesome. This was going to be a good day.

"Drop the sword and put your hands in the air!" yelled an angry voice from behind me.

The Knight of Innocence

CHAPTER 6

I STARTED TO turn slightly and the person behind me yelled, “I said drop the sword and put your hands in the air.” I called back, “No chance you are just a park ranger and not a guy with a gun, is there?” I heard the sound of an automatic weapon chambering a round. I lowered my sword to the ground and lifted my hands over my head.

“Now the bag,” the voice said. I pulled off my gear bag and tossed it down to the ground. “Don’t move. Cover me—if he moves shoot him.”

So there were two guys. The talkative one came down and flipped my hands down behind my back one at a time as he handcuffed me. He spun me around, and I came face to face with Detective Clay. I hadn’t recognized his voice, probably because of the mix of adrenaline and the headache from opening my mind’s eye. The timber of his “cop” voice had thrown me, too. I looked past him and noticed that he was alone.

“Where’s the other guy?” I asked.

“What other guy? I just said that cover me shit because I figured you were stupid enough to believe it,” he said. Well, I had fallen for it, so arguing was pointless. He took my gun and my knife before patting me down. “On your knees.”

My brain started working harder than usual. The bad guy had me in cuffs and had a loaded gun somewhere on him. Fight or flight would be the normal reaction, but I wasn’t doing anything that would leave my sword exposed to the enemy. I have no idea what kind of crazy super evil someone could do with a bad attitude and a holy relic forged by God.

“No,” I said. I had to buy some time. I could rush him, but with the cuffs on and him armed, that would be a short-lived defiance.

Detective Clay looked at me with a smug smile on his face. “Oh, really?” he asked as he kicked one leg out from under me and pushed me down to my knees. I grunted as I hit the dirt. “I followed you. I figured

you would lead me to more bodies. I didn't really expect you to be dumb enough to go back to one of your crime scenes, but here you are."

"My crime scenes? You asshole, this is your crime scene," I said. He hadn't taken my cell phone, but that wouldn't help since I couldn't see the screen.

"Now that's a new one. Blaming the crime on the cop that busts you," he said. He walked around me and picked up my gear bag. He tossed my knife inside along with my gun after ejecting the magazine and checking the slide. He picked up my sword and held it for a moment. He came back around to stand in front of me. "Now, I'm not about to take you in and have the department worrying about my sanity. So, you are going to tell me how you made the sword glow and how you made the statue move."

"Really? You want to play this like I'm the bad guy?" I asked. He had my sword in his right hand and my bag in his left.

"Seriously, kid, is it a button, some sort of special oil, what? And the bear, is it animatronic? Where is the real one, and who was controlling that one before you broke it?" he asked.

I looked up at him with the intent of spitting in his face. I didn't like this guy in the first place, and it turned out he was the bad guy. He had gotten the drop on me, and this was going to be it, killed by a bully. I can't say I didn't already know that was how it was going to be, but I never expected that bully to be a cop. I looked him dead in the eye and filled my mouth up with a morning's worth of allergy-related snot and spit.

God may be vengeful, and then again he may not be. God may be merciful, and then again maybe not. I can't say because I have never met the guy. Despite that, I do know for a fact he has a sense of humor. I prayed all of my life for a superpower. I didn't really care what it was as long as God gave me something that let me fight back against the numerous bullies I faced every day of my life. Something that gave me an edge over my oppressors, or at least let me escape the constant beatings that I was handed by bullies for as far back as I can remember. Instead, when I got my sword, I received an ability that not even the other knights had. I gained the power of Insight. A superpower I absolutely hate!

When I readied my super loogie, I looked Detective Clay dead in the eyes. Confusion swept through me, the same confusion that had been in

me since I was a child. That confusion made me angry, and the anger made me violent. Violent towards others, when I didn't want to be. It came from my father. He and my grandfather both served on the police force. My father was a tough cop and a tougher father. He ruled the house with the back of his hand. He was a monster. It didn't matter how much of a good kid I tried to be or how well I did in school. My father would come home from seeing unexplainable murder after unexplainable murder, and he would drink. Then he would beat my older brother, my mother, and me.

My father hurt me, so I hurt others. My brother and I started working out. We fought back and lost. He beat us even more then, and I kept taking it out on other kids. My grandfather, whom never hurt me, would come over and try to help us. But my grandfather was old, and he couldn't always protect us. It was a living hell, until one day when my father came home, picked up his gun, and took his own life right in the living room. He left us broken and with a little sister on the way. I tried to be good for my family, to stay out of trouble, and grow up to be a good man like my grandfather. But here I am looking at the same strange shit that had driven my father to beat his wife and kids. Here I am facing his monsters and his demons, and all I want is a drink. Here I am turning into the monster that I spent my life fearing and running from.

They weren't my thoughts. They were Detective Clay's thoughts, his fears, and his pains. I felt every beating he received and the torment inside him as he beat up other children that were smaller than he was. I felt the anguish of getting stronger to protect yourself only to fail and use that strength to harm others. I felt his fear of the unexplained and of the darkness he feared was inside himself. I felt the fear he had of Gregory Greycast and of me. Even more pressing was his need to explain what he had just seen before he completely lost his mind.

I swallowed the super loogie. Somehow, I had managed to mix bile with it. I lowered my head and remembered what Bill Fred said. I had looked at this man as a problem when I shouldn't have. I'm a knight, not a saint. I have my faults, and bullies, or rather the fear of them, is one of them. "Detective Clay," I said, "let me tell you the truth. About a lot of things."

CHAPTER 7

I TOLD DETECTIVE Clay about the world he lived in, the one that he had been ignoring up until now. I tried to stick to only the pertinent stuff. First, I explained *Ignorance Is Bliss* to him. Next, I told him that I was a knight but not about my order or The Church. Then I told him about magic, monsters, and demons. The tutorial ended by explaining that I did not understand the stone bear or have anything to do with the mass murders other than failing to stop them several months beforehand.

Detective Clay listened to all that I had to say. He laughed at some of it, and he kept threatening to arrest me. Eventually he sat down on the stone block and thought about all that I had said. I was still on my knees. The adrenaline from the fight was gone, so the cuts along my abdomen and chest were aching. I wasn't too worried about the pain. I was more worried about what Detective Clay would do. He looked at my sword, and he kept looking at the statue I had destroyed.

"Do you have any questions, detective?" I asked.

"Why the hell should I believe anything you say?" he asked me.

I thought about it. "Why should you? You shouldn't. I could just be some nut job that doesn't want to go to jail. I could be a serial killer. I could be the host of a hidden camera show that wants to prove cops are gullible," I said. "You should just go home and hug your family as hard as you can. But after that you should look up why every culture in the world has a word for dragon, goblin, ogre, and troll."

He looked at me with wide eyes filled with anger. He got up and came over to me with the same expression he had when he walked out of Priest Greysadow's office. He grabbed me under my arm and hauled me up to my feet. Then he took off the handcuffs. I turned to look at him, and he said to me, "You have to prove it."

"Huh?" I asked.

“You have to prove it to me. The monsters, the magic, the...all of it,” he said. “Prove it to me.”

My head was pounding and my chest was on fire. “How? I can’t do magic. I’m a knight—the sword is magical, not me,” I said.

He rubbed his hand over his head in frustration. “Then how about a monster? Show me a monster,” he said.

Now that I could do. It would be risky, but I could do it. “I can, but not until 8 pm tonight,” I said.

“Now,” he demanded.

“What? Do you think I just have a vampire on speed dial? Tonight I can show you. I can show you a lot, but you have to leave them alone afterward. They are citizens of the city, and you are sworn to protect them. They don’t all go around hurting people.”

Detective Clay ground his teeth for a long minute. “Okay. But until then I keep your weapons,” he said.

“Not the sword,” I said.

“All of them. Until you prove to me that what you said is true, I keep your stuff,” he said.

Without my sword I was a target, and something had already taken a shot at me. I couldn’t let him keep my sword. “You can’t just confiscate my sword on suspicion,” I argued.

“Call the cops. See who they side with,” he said.

He had me over a barrel. I needed my sword, but it looked like I was going to have to play his game. I nodded to him and said, “Fine, but I want your word that you will return my gear tonight, and you will let no one else know about it. It’s an artifact from God, and I don’t feel like telling my boss I lost it.”

He held out his hand to me. I took it. “You have my word on the monsters being left alone, as long as they aren’t hurting anyone, and on your weapons, but you have to show me a concealed carry permit for the gun,” he said.

“Deal,” I said. We shook hands, exchanged phone numbers, and I told him where to meet me. He left, and I hurried back to where The Rust Bucket was parked in front of the statue of the hawk. At least that’s where it should have been parked. My truck was still in the same spot, but the hawk was gone. I checked the inscription of the pedestal, and

sure enough a hawk statue should have been there. Someone had stolen the statue but left my truck alone. I would take any win I could get.

My chest hurt too badly to wear my seat belt, but I still hightailed it home. I made good time considering traffic and nearly passing out on the way back to my apartment. I stumbled from my truck to the door and somehow managed to get inside. Pulling my shirt off, I walked into the kitchen. I opened the first cabinet, grabbed a bottle of alcohol, and dumped it over my wounded chest and abdomen. Then I grabbed an industrial-sized first aid kit from under the sink and went to the living room. I fell on the couch and started treating my wound. Antiseptics, more alcohol, and then bandages. That's all I remembered before I passed out.

The Knight of Innocence

CHAPTER 8

THERE WAS A knock at my door. I ignored it. My head was pounding, and I felt like I was exhausted. Not to mention that my chest was on fire. There came more knocking, and I ignored it again. I leaned over and lay on my couch. My soft, comfortable, warm couch. Then someone started knocking harder. I grunted as I got up. I walked over to my door, and like every tired human ever, I opened it with the intent of killing whoever was on the other side.

I opened my door slightly and started to yell, but the words froze in my mouth. There on my doorstep was every fantasy I ever had in my short life. The sun flashed off Kerri-Lynn Briscoe's golden skin. She was barely five feet tall in her sneakers. She wasn't a thin woman, but she wasn't fat. Her body had found that comfortable area that all men love but never admit to. Her hair was done in fresh tight braids then pulled into a ponytail. She had on the standard nerd traveling gear of jeans and a tee shirt. The shirt was one of mine, a Green Lantern shirt that she had taken years ago. It had shrunken since then, or maybe her breasts were just better looking in a men's 2XL. She wore tight jeans that showed off her hips, butt, and the rest of her perfectly sculpted legs. Her dark eyes were framed perfectly by fire engine red glasses.

I may have been struck silent, but she wasn't. She looked me in the eyes and said, "Hey Mikey! Did you miss me?"

I replied in a calm and cool fashion. "I...um err...eh yeah...um ah..." I said with a suave resolve.

"Okay, sweet talker, your mama taught you better than to keep a guest at the door," she said.

The human ability for speech reasserted itself in my brain. Consonants and vowels lined up, and I was suddenly able to perform simple speech again. "Come in," I said. But I said it like it was my idea, not as if it was in response to the mention of my mother. I'm not a child.

I opened the door and her eyes went wide. She looked at my chest and back to my face in a quick motion. "What the hell happened to you? Go sit down," she ordered. I moved and did as I was told. She carried in five large plastic bins, two duffle bags, and a backpack. She tossed it all beside the door, locked up, and then came over to me.

"Did you even try to clean this?" she asked as she started going through the already open first aid kit. She sat on my cinder block and board coffee table as she worked. She moved back and forth between my hallway closet, my kitchen, and my table. She complained that my cabinets had more painkillers than a hospital, and they did. Aaron saw to that. My kitchen wasn't for food—it was for medical supplies.

After cleaning the wound, disinfecting it, smacking me on the head for squirming, and telling me I was being a big baby, Kerri told me to stand up. She wrapped bandages around my chest and waist. She did the same with the cut along my arm that I hadn't noticed. After that, she had me sit down, and she pounced onto the couch next to me with her knees folded beneath her.

"So how did you do that," she asked.

"A bear attacked me this morning," I said.

"I thought you fought monsters. Bears are bad but not monsters." She held up a hand and then went back to the bags she had thrown to the side. She dug around in one for a few seconds, and then she came back over to me. "Except this bear, he isn't bad," Kerri said as she set an old teddy bear in my lap.

I looked down at the black and brown bear. It had brown fur with tufts of black here and there. The marble eyes had been a matched set of green with black pupils, but one had fallen out to be replaced with a black button. He wore overalls, and there were patches of cartoon superhero emblems on them: GI Joe, He-Man, Silverhawks, Thundercats, Transformers, and Voltron. The strap across its chest that held a matching shield and sword across its back was new. Other than that, he looked exactly as he did when he was sitting on the bookshelf of my old home.

"Horace?" I asked. "You brought my old teddy bear?"

"Yeah. Since you were being such a big baby about me coming and how dangerous your life was I figured you could use a body guard. I fixed him up. I have another marble for his eye on order. I even gave him a

sword and shield so he can keep you safe from the big bad monsters.” She ruffled the tuff of hair on the bear then kissed me on the forehead.

I set the bear to the side of the couch and cleared my throat. “It was made of stone. The bear that attacked me. Someone animated it,” I said in a matter of fact tone.

“So a wizard? Witch? Warlock?” she asked.

“All of the above. I won’t know until I call up Eden,” I said.

“Eden?” she asked as she scooted closer and propped her face against her hand.

“Yeah. She is one of the resident wizards in the area. Pretty powerful and smart. She’ll know,” I said.

“So Eden is pretty,” Kerri said.

“Yeah,” I said. Then I realized what had just come out of my mouth. I panicked and tried to correct myself. “No, I mean she is pretty powerful, not pretty and powerful!” I said.

“So she isn’t pretty?” Kerri-Lynn asked as she slid closer.

I thought about it for a moment. “Well, yeah she is pretty, but not like you. She’s older than me and kind of hates me,” I said.

“So you do think she is pretty?” she asked me.

I was stuck between a rock and a hole that was getting deeper by the second. I was used to dealing with monsters, not women. Monsters were scary, but Kerri scared me more than any monster. Women are hard to deal with when most of your experiences with them have been them wanting to castrate you.

“Kerri—” I started to say, but she cut me off.

“Michael, I just drove all the way from Virginia to see you, and you are telling me that you need to talk to a pretty woman? Boy, if you don’t get your head on straight right now I am going to make you wish that bear had killed you today. You haven’t so much as hugged me since I got here,” she said.

I turned to her with the intention of hugging her, but when I lifted my head, I found her face inches away from my own. She kissed me like she had been waiting for me all of her life. Her lips wrapped around mine as she took my face in her hands. Kerri floated over to me and fell into my arms as if she belonged there and nowhere else. My arms closed around her to hug her with all my strength, and the world around us melted away.

There was no pain, there were no monsters—there was nothing but her. Nothing but us. Kerri-Lynn took away everything that was wrong like she always had. As a child, she had warned me about the boys that wanted to beat me up, and she had bloodied more than a few girl's noses for teasing me. As a teenager, she had come to every one of my baseball games, played in every Dungeons and Dragons game, and been there every time someone sent me to the hospital. She had waited for me to get over my fears and to come back to her.

Kerri was my saving grace. She was my light in the darkness. I had been hated by every man, woman, and child in Virginia except my family. Everyone except her. She loved me and I loved her. We even shared a birthday: February 29th, 1992. When she looked at me, I felt like everything was possible. When she laughed, I knew that there was a God. When she cried...I would kill anyone that made her cry.

I lifted her into my arms and carried her into my bedroom. Our clothes fell from our bodies to the floor. I laid her down and slid my body between her legs. She looked at me, and her eyes met mine. There was no flash of Insight, and I prayed to God for it. I wanted to see what could have created this girl short of God forging her out of clay. But all I saw in her eyes was happiness, happiness to be with me. I leaned in to kiss her just before I entered her.

"KNIGHT!" a booming voice said. "KNIGHT OF THE FALSE GOD!" it continued. "I HAVE BUSINESS WITH YOU!"

Kerri looked at me, and there was confusion in her eyes. I looked at her not knowing what to do, but then something caught my eye. There was a tear in the corner of her left eye. I got up, got my pants on, and went to my closet. I put on an undershirt and grabbed my Louisville Slugger baseball bat, knocking the weights off it. I grabbed the pistol that I used as a backup and clipped its holster to my left hip. I walked into the living room and picked up my Orioles baseball cap.

Kerri followed me into the living room. She was getting dressed as fast as possible. "Michael, what's going on? Who was that?" she asked.

I put my cap on and pulled the brim down to cover my eyes. I slung my bat over my shoulder and put my hand on the doorknob before saying, "Someone that has no idea how violent nerd rage can be."

CHAPTER 9

THERE WAS A man standing beside a black sedan with an open back door at the edge of my sidewalk, roughly fifteen yards from me. He was older than I was by two decades at least. I judged his height at around five and a half feet tall, and he was thin as a rail. There were bags under his eyes, and his face was drawn. His hair was pulled into a ponytail of dark brown and gray. Of course, his clothing had come straight from Men's Evil Warehouse. A black shirt was tucked into black dress pants. To complete the ensemble, he wore a charcoal gray long coat with a matching fedora. I always get the stereotypical jerks that dress like cartoon characters. If there was any question remaining whether he was a wizard or not, the five-foot oak staff he held was enough to convince me.

The two goons with him looked like your standard henchmen from any movie you can think of. They were dressed in Men's Evil Warehouse's fall line of black short sleeve button downs, dress pants, and athletic casual shoes. I had heard that look was all the rage this year. In fact, I was sure I would see it on most of the henchmen this season if I lived through it. I had armor and a bulletproof vest inside, but in my rage I had neglected them. At least I had remembered my baseball cap.

"I'm going to say this once: I am going to stick my foot up all three of your butts if you don't leave right now. This is my home. My neighbors have a strict rule about me bringing my work home," I said.

"Well that wasn't witty at all. I had heard you were witty, but you just sound like some thug," the man in black said.

"Typically I go find the bad guys. They don't come to me," I said.

"Typically I hear about you being backed by a female wizard and a vampire. I know why one of them isn't here. Where is the witch?" the evil wizard asked.

"Not here and not important. You came to see the knight; well here I am. Say what you have to say while you still have teeth in your mouth."

"I had come prepared to be entertained, but this thuggish report isn't worth my time," he said.

"Well you caught me at a bad time for banter. We could reschedule, but since its high noon already I say we get on with the showdown," I said.

"Never let it be said that Michael White wastes time. But I am not here to fight; I came to talk," the wizard said.

"I'm sorry, you seem to know me, but I have never seen you before, sir. Did you Facebook stalk me?" I asked.

"Oh, my apologies, we haven't formally met. My name is Alistair Dyhart, and I'm a wizard. I am here on behalf of our mutual acquaintance, Mr. Ophalistic," he said.

"I'm sorry, who?" I asked.

"Ophalistic, the demon you hit in the face with the hammer at the rave several months ago," Dyhart said.

I remembered a few months back when a short, foul-mouthed lady wizard had led me into a fight with a demon in the middle of a rave. She had blown it up with a grenade. Something wasn't adding up. That demon was dead. I had seen its body burn. Then again, I was dealing with the supernatural, so what the hell did I know.

"So you are the jerk that invites people to parties and then summons demons in the middle of the dance floor," I said.

"Yes, if you must say it so mundanely. I prefer to think that I presented my associates with the entertainment they requested," he said matter-of-factly.

"How about we just cut to the chase. You came to talk, so talk," I said. I wanted Dyhart to talk—I needed him to talk. Rule number one when dealing with villains: monologues are your friends. Let the bad guy tell you his plans. It makes it easier to thwart them later...and you get to say 'thwart'!

"I want your sword," he said.

I was expecting a lot more information than that. "No," I said.

"Mr. Knight, before you say that, you may want to consider this. The statue that attacked you this morning was deliberately enchanted to attack you. The young boy that died there died trying to protect his young lover. I have her and two other girls. Give me your sword and I will let them go. Refuse and their blood is on your hands," he said.

Amendment to rule one when dealing with villains: sometimes monologues also reveal how twisted they are. The bastard had three hostages and was bargaining with their lives for my sword. This meant I couldn't just shoot him, because now I had to find these girls. My day was getting complicated.

"Why?" I asked. Now I needed to think. I didn't have my sword, and once he found that out I was expendable and those girls were dead.

"Simple. You are a human," said Dyhart.

"Same as you," I said with a smile.

"Let me expand on my previous statement. You are a normal human. You have no special powers, no magical aptitude, and are very much mortal. Without that sword you are no threat to me," Dyhart said with a sinister and knowing smile. He was right on some points. I was a normal man. I was mortal. I could die just like anyone else.

"You come to my home. You tell me you have people held hostage. You admit to killing for entertainment. You demand I hand over my sword to you. I thought you were smart, but you obviously don't understand the can of whoop ass you just opened," I said. I took my bat off my shoulder so that he could see what I was holding.

"A bat. You came out here with a bat?" he asked.

"I like bats. They break bones pretty easily."

Dyhart held his hand out toward me, and I got ready to move. He lowered his head but made no move to attack or threaten me. His eyes opened wide when he looked back up at me. "The sword isn't here. Where did you hide it? Where is it?"

"Why would I tell you, jerk?" I said.

We stared off, and I started doing math—distance, age, and the odds of goons one and two being willing to take a bullet for their boss. I wanted to go for my gun, but I had a problem killing people. Call it conflict of duty, call it humanity, or call it cowardice. I have never taken a human's life. God gave me my sword to protect an aspect of humanity. How was I protecting it if I was taking human lives? As evil as Alistair Dyhart sounded, his blood still ran red, and he was a child of God. Someone had to stop him, and I would, but not by killing him. He was the monster, not me.

"You don't know, do you? That officer...the bag he took from you had your sword," he said with a spurt of laughter. I didn't reply. "This

is perfect. The police want to stop me and have no idea how to do so. Then they solidify my plans by crippling the one man in the city that could pose a threat to me!" He broke out into evil maniacal laughter, a huge 'bwahahaha' that needed some serious practice.

Behind me, I heard Kerri snicker. "Really? Every villain you ever rolled up for us in Dungeons and Dragons could give this guy pointers on evil laughter. Shoot him. Twice for monologing," she said.

I couldn't help but smile. Kerri was awesome. She had no idea how deep in trouble we were, but she had my back. Alistair Dyhart mistook my smile for something it wasn't. His smile faded and a scowl returned to his face.

He scoffed at me, "You still think you can stop me? I have hostages. I have power. I have allies, both human and demonic. I even have the powers of Jezebus. What do you have?"

"A baseball bat and a size fourteen boot that I bet is a perfect match for your butt," I said. "Oh, and that whole chosen warrior of God thing. Remember that?"

"Your false god. He picked a muscle-bound fool for a champion. That shows his inferiority," Dyhart said. I was shocked. No one had ever called me muscle bound. I didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted. "Well it doesn't matter. Without your sword, you are no threat to me. In fact, you aren't even worthy of my time." Then he flicked his hand as though he were waving me away. Normally I wouldn't care, but in this case, a sphere of green fire came at me.

I slammed the door shut behind me and used the momentum to spin out of the path of the fireball. It passed me, and I felt its heat wash over me. The fireball hit my door and blasted a hole in it the size of a baseball. Kerri was in there. She could have been right behind the door and have a hole in her gut right now. I turned and charged the wizard and his goons. Before I could close the distance, they drove off in their black sedan. It didn't have a license plate. I ran back to check on Kerri. When I opened the door she was standing there, dressed, and with no holes in her that weren't supposed to be there.

"You alright?" I asked. She nodded and I took a step toward her. Something caught my leg and pulled it right out from under me. I hit the ground, and suddenly I was being dragged across the yard. I tried

to turn over, but whatever had me lifted me into the air and held me upside down. I couldn't see anyone. There were no goons, no monsters, not even a giant gorilla. I looked up at my leg and saw a rope around it. No, not a rope. A tree root.

"Holy crap," said Kerri.

I craned my neck to see her and saw something that was out of the ordinary. Lawn gnomes, dozens of them, had surrounded the ground beneath me. Some were raising their hands and wiggling their fingers. Others were rubbing their hands together, and the more they rubbed the more fire I could see sheathing their ceramic mitts. I thought of the bear statue and got the feeling that this was the same type of magic.

I tried to wiggle free but couldn't, so I did a sit up and grabbed hold of my trapped leg. The root wouldn't budge. I dropped my bat so I could take hold of the root in both hands. It tightened the moment I touched it. My fingers wedged into the vice grip of the enchanted plant. There were flashes below me, and I panicked when I felt the heat around me rise.

"Mike!" Kerri screamed. I pulled with all my strength and screamed as the first of the flames reached me. My body jerked in pain, and that gave me the push I needed to break the root apart. My shirt, pants, and body became sheathed in flames as I fell. When I hit the ground, I scrambled and rolled as much as I could. The fire died away, and I escaped with only minor burns.

I started patting myself down to make sure all the fire was out when a jet of flames came at me. The flames barely missed me as I fell back into a roll. Dozens of multicolored, bearded, pointy hatted, ceramic gnome lawn ornaments had come to life and were wielding magic. My hand closed around my bat, and I struck the closest gnome with a back handed swing. It shattered like a cheap lawn ornament...which I guess it was.

Gnomes were magical beings. Not exactly fae and not human. They were like dwarves. I wasn't sure if they looked like their lawn ornament counterparts, but I knew they possessed power over earth and fire. So these constructs, created in the mythical image of the noble and powerful gnome, were probably magical powerhouses.

As I stood up, another root took hold of my right leg and pulled it out from under me. I fell on my back as another gnome shot a jet of fire at my face. Before the flames hit me, I rolled up and away from them. Then

I smashed the little fire gnome with my bat before trying to break free from the root. Fire hit my back, and I rolled onto the ground to put it out. I tried to swing at the new attacker but found my arm gripped with another root. My free hand snatched up the bat, and I tried smashing anything within reach. The gnomes started moving back, and more jets of fire came at me. Tangled up like this left me unable to dodge, so flailing about was the only defense I had. More roots snaked up from the ground at me, and I was pulled at awkward angles. My legs were pulled in opposite directions, and I gritted my teeth in pain.

A root closed around my throat. I grunted and had to drop my bat so I could try to pry my throat free. Desperation set in as I struggled against the magical strength of the root. The heat of small fires were building around me as I was pulled in four different directions. The root around my neck finally broke, and I gasped for air just as a jet of flame passed over my face. My nose was burned, and my lungs took a hit of fire and smoke.

My left hand swung down to my hip, and I grabbed my pistol. Then I started filling gnomish fire starters with lead. They were close enough that I couldn't miss. Four shots took out four of the bastards, but then my gun clicked empty. Undaunted I flung my gun and took out another gnome. There were still too many left, and I had only broken some of the ones shooting fire. I sat up to try to free the rest of my body. That's when the ground shook and five thick, powerful-looking roots erupted from the ground around me and started to entrap my body.

Those roots were as thick as tree trunks at their base. They thinned slightly every few inches until they were spear points sharp enough to pierce through my flesh. Five of them spaced around me in a star like pattern towering above me and threatening to close around me. The ground beneath me began to crumble. The air around me became hot, violently hot, and in the back of my mind, I felt something old and dark. The animated garden gnomes had started this, but something else was in play. These roots. This heat. This was a claw from Hell, and it was here to drag me away.

I couldn't move. I couldn't fight back. I was hurt and I was unarmed. I was done for.

There was a bark and a gnome head exploded. There was another

bark and another gnome bit the dust. Gunshots rang out in rapid succession. Each shot was followed by a ceramic explosion. I heard a magazine eject, and a half-second later another baker's dozen of animated pyrotechnic gardeners were smashed to pieces. I looked over to see Kerri in a weaver stance picking off targets faster than I could blink. The second her gun ran empty she ejected her magazine and slapped another into it. She killed each gnome with a single shot, and I didn't know if I should be excited or terrified.

She looked at me after she had finished off all the gnomes and said, "No power in the verse can stop me."

I was excited. Definitely excited.

The magic around me died away, and the hot air began to cool. I still felt that ancient power in the back of my head. It didn't feel angry, just patient—like it had all the time in the world to wait for me. My limbs pulled against the roots binding me, and without magic backing them they broke away. When I got up, the ground beneath me felt like it could crumble away at any moment. Stepping aside, I kicked one of the claw roots. It was still as strong as a tree. There was still magic coming from it, and the more I felt it the more I missed my sword.

I looked off in the direction the wizard had fled. He had threatened my city, my home, my neighbors, and my girl. I walked over to Kerri as she eased her black gun into her holster. "What is that?" I asked.

"It's a Baby Desert Eagle. I heard my favorite superhero carries one that's a little bigger," she said with a smile. "Iron rounds mixed with silver jackets. I keep a magazine of incendiary rounds in my purse just in case."

I dragged her inside and locked up before I started asking questions. "First, thanks for saving my bacon," I said.

"Not a problem," she said.

"Second, where did you learn to shoot like that?" I asked.

"From my daddy when I was ten. You're the one that didn't learn to shoot until you were eighteen. I've owned a gun since I was eleven."

"Okay, I didn't know that. But third, where did you get that kind of ammo?" I asked.

Kerri walked over to one of the plastic cases that she had carried in. This one had wheels, so she just had to pull it. She opened it and my eyes went wide. Inside the storage bin were boxes upon boxes of ammo.

Silver jacketed rounds, iron shells, white phosphorous rounds, and explosive bullets. Thousands of rounds, all in .50 caliber size. Redneck Christmas was here!

"Where the heck did you get all of this?" I asked as I dropped to my knees and started looking over my new treasure horde.

"Care package from your Grandfather," Kerri said as she walked over and opened up her backpack. "But this is from me."

I managed to pry myself away from the ammo, and my eyes met something of pure beauty. In Kerri's hands was a Desert Eagle of the same design as mine. The difference was that this one was blinged out in chrome. She handed it to me and the weight felt familiar. I took aim and the balance was perfect. She laid out a holster, laser sight, and extra magazines.

I set down my new favorite thing in the world and pulled my old favorite person in the world in for a kiss. Our lips met, and she started to fall into me. Kerri caught herself and pushed away. "Hold it. Shouldn't you figure out what to do about everything that just happened first?"

She was right. Baltimore was still in danger. Every knight was given a territory to look over. My Grandpa, Franklin White, wielder of the Sword of Justice that was given to Peter by Jesus, was in charge of the Eastern United States. From the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean, he was the man that stood between good and evil for both the mortal and the magical worlds. He had assigned me to look after Maryland.

This problem wasn't just in my territory, it was in my city. I made Baltimore my home because it was a hub for supernatural activity and the home of my favorite baseball team. It needed people that could intervene whenever some nut job decided to play super villain with magic or when a supernatural being decided coexistence with mortals was unacceptable. It had a few good Samaritans, but when it came down to it, I was the only one that could say it was his job to step up and push the bad guy down.

I got up and went over to my bookcase. There were about six dozen books crammed on the top shelf. My hand reflexively reached for and pulled out a large thick tome with a brown cover. On the front of the book were the symbols for most of the standard religions in the known world. Mixed with them were the symbols for most of the known organizations of Second Earth. All those images surrounded a broken cross set in gold. I opened it just as Kerri sat down next to me.

"What's this?" she asked.

"The monster manual," I said.

"What? This doesn't look like a Dungeons and Dragons book to me," she said.

"Not that Monster Manual. The Church keeps records of every type of creature they encounter," I said. "Fey, cryptid, demonic, celestial, ectoplasmic, demigod, old world, and even extra dimensional. They update it every few years if there is significant new information. It's literally a book about anything not human. An actual monster manual."

"Holy shit, are you serious? You have a book on actual monsters?" she asked.

"Yes. Alistair Dyhart gave me a name," I said. "Here it is, Ophalistic." There on the page was a picture of the demon that I had thrown down with six months ago. I thought he was dead. Apparently he had survived.

"It says here that Ophalistic of the Thrall is a true demon with power seated in sin and frivolity," Kerri said. "He has power over fire and regularly associates with two other demons: Anfalar the Beast Bringer and Jezzepus the Stone Caller."

"He did have two other demons helping him," I said. I looked up Jezzepus, and his picture matched the demon whose throat I had slit on one of my first missions in Baltimore. "Jezzepus is able to breathe false souls into earth wrought golems. Any stone can become his vassal, and if the stone is fashioned after a creature, it gains the natural abilities of the muse."

"So the gnomes were animated by this guy?" Kerri asked.

"No. I killed him. I am sure of it," I said. I had lost a day of my life for it, which still bothered me. Why did that demon have a soul?

"It says he is a true demon too," said Kerri. "What does that mean?"

I turned to the page explaining demons. Past that page was another page that explained true demons. We read it together. Demons were any being that was born of chaos and malice. They were barred from the earth unless specifically invited by one of our world's inhabitants. They drew their powers from the suffering of those in Hell. A true demon was created with a soul. The only being capable of doing this besides God or Jesus was the Fallen Angel Lucifer. True demons drew their powers directly from Lucifer as Angels draw their power directly from God. The

only way for a mortal to kill a true demon is with one of the twelve Swords of the Apostles or to strike a killing blow while they are on the plane in which they were created. Any other time they would be destroyed would result in banishment back to their original plane of creation.

My spine began to tingle. I had killed one of these true demons, and it had drawn its power straight from the Devil. More pressingly, I needed my sword to kill the other two. Now that sword was in the hands of a police officer with no idea of its importance. I had to get it back. I had to get myself moving.

The adrenaline from the fight was wearing off. I could feel the burns on my body, and the injuries from this morning hadn't healed yet either. Luckily, I could trust in the runic tattoos that the Church had placed on my body to heal me while I worked. I would have to rely on my own stamina as well. There wasn't time to wait for my body to fully heal.

I got up and loaded my new gun and several of its magazines. In the kitchen, I opened one of the drawers. There was a spare key underneath the top of the compartment. I tossed it to Kerri. "I have to get some business done. You will be safe here, but if you want to go out just lock up behind you. Keep your cell on and your gun handy," I said.

"I should come with you," she said.

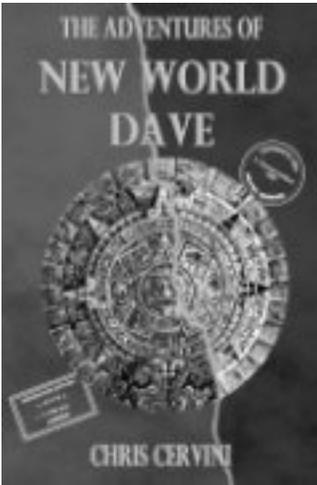
"No. Not right now. I need to meet up with a wizard. But I am going to need every bit of help later if you are up for it," I said.

She nodded. I went to my room and grabbed a new shirt. This one was dark blue. Kerri walked me outside, and for the first time I noticed the Red Dodge Journey that she had shown up in. I got into The Rust Bucket and hit the road. It was time to see a lady about a demon.

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The Adventures of New World Dave

Chris Cervini

In the spring of 1519, Hernán Cortés arrived at the shores of Mexico to conquer the Aztec Empire and claim its gold for Spain. That's what the history books tell us. But sometimes, right in the middle of the history we know, somebody goes and does something to change one important detail, and the world is never the same...



A Third Kind

J.C. Campbell

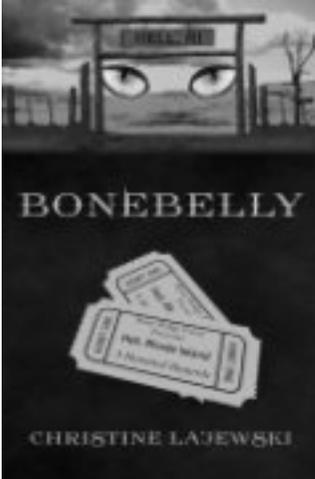
He was to have been an immortal undead, to have power and strength like he'd never known in mortal life. The Vampyrs lied. When he awoke he was something else, a creature so foul they abandoned him to die alone in a crypt. When the local ruling Vampyr clan realizes what is living in their midst, they come in force to destroy Kaleb and wipe every last trace of his existence from the face of the earth.



Time Starts Now

Michael Walsh

Professor Cal Sutherland's research on time travel elicits snide remarks from fellow philosophers and rejection notices from journals. Even Cal would admit that time travelers probably aren't real—until he encounters one inside his neighbor's burning house. Cal soon learns that, while the past cannot be changed, there is much a time traveler can do in the past. Unfortunately for Cal, this includes the possibility of dying there...



Bonebelly

Christine Lajewski

A sinner transformed into a hideous creature, with an unfortunate craving for human flesh, condemned to a private hell in a wooded corner of Rhode Island; An outdoor haunted attraction—the creature's only respite from his suffering; Two young aspiring graphic novelists trying to record it all. Will the sinner find redemption by stopping the evil he chose to ignore so long ago...

"A few months ago I couldn't pay my electric bill. They cut my power. It was cold, and I had a box of Pop-Tarts in the cabinet. It was the only food I had, and I figured I could use the sword to power my toaster. I hooked my jumper cables up to the sword and toaster, and then I put a little will into the sword. My toaster spat white fire, my Pop-Tarts were vaporized, and I learned that science and religion don't mix."

"You used a holy relic, a conduit of mystical power, to run a toaster?" Eden asked.

"I really wanted Pop-Tarts," I said.

"God can't be real. At least not your god. What god would put that kind of power into the hands of an idiot!"

In Baltimore, young people attending illegal raves are being killed by the dozens. The police are baffled by the dismembered bodies, barrels of human blood, and missing persons reports that are piling up. Magical beings are walking the streets, and there is a sorcerer plotting to unleash hell on earth. With Baltimore about to become a playground for demons, the mundane and magical communities turn to the one man in the city sworn to defend them. Michael White isn't the hero you deserve, need, or want, but he is the one willing to work on holidays and weekends. Armed with a magical sword that works when it feels like it, a desert eagle—because he can't hit a target—and a network of friends better suited for the job, can Michael Franklin White prevent an evil wizard from opening a portal to Hell in his city?



About the Author: Julius A.M. Brown is a lover of fiction with a degree in Criminal Justice. He lives in North Carolina with his wife, their son, and their dog.



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