

CHAPTER ONE: IN THE COMPANY OF DREAMS

Sally Reiser bolted upright from sleep and clamped her teeth on the scream in her throat. Despite the chill of the dark room, sweat ran in rivulets along her temples, down her back, between her breasts. It soaked her matted blond hair. Her knotted muscles ached.

A nightmare, she told herself, hoping it was so. Already, the details evaporated, leaving her only disjointed words and images, and a feeling of overwhelming dread.

Dead leaves, she keened within herself. Dead leaves in the wind.

Nightmares, she thought. Why won't they just go away?

Sally slid from the bed, willing her muscles to loosen, and staggered across the creaking wood floor to the bathroom. She didn't look at the time. Why bother? The dreams always came in the deep night, and sleep was impossible afterwards.

She showered, begging the spray to rinse the dry, dead leaves from her soul. She thought about monsters, and the hidden meanings of dreams, and for the hundredth time acknowledged the real monsters she had built in her life. She knew they would all catch up to her. One day as she wrenched awake, her eyes wide and a scream in her throat, she would fail to scrub the details from her brain. She would remember. Even under the warm spray of the shower, she shivered at such a thought.

Later, she pulled on jeans and that frazzled high school sweatshirt that still fit after fourteen years. Her clothes were easy to find in the dark; she just scooped them up from where she had dropped them whatever number of hours ago. She plodded downstairs, the house still dark, and started the cheap Proctor-Silex coffeemaker in her shotgun kitchen. Sally leaned against the refrigerator, hugging herself and staring at the building black dribble within the carafe. Her eyes were accustomed to the dark; its monochrome details revealed themselves the way friends share dirty little secrets.

She tried to blank her mind, to drown her thoughts in the squelch of dark liquid, but

phantoms teased her, fading impressions of empty trains and of a guttural language, perhaps German. Mostly, though, she felt threatened by leaves, dead leaves in the wind.

Coffee in hand, Sally moved up the barrel of her narrow kitchen to the glass-enclosed porch at the back of her house. There she dropped onto her porch swing and steeled herself with her cup's steaming energy.

The porch light burned as it always did at night, illuminating a screen door held closed by a loop of coat hanger. Because of the light, the porch windows revealed not her tiny, snow-covered back yard, but the sad reflection of a slumping woman as careworn as the creaking swing on which she sat. The woman stared back at Sally from hard, chiseled features. That face had once smiled prettily for the boys, and that body had once stood straight-shouldered and confident at the cusp of adulthood. The owner looked older than a mere fourteen years out of high school.

Sally sipped her coffee and stared at the thing that long years had made of her. She stared as if to face the woman down.

Yeah, she thought. That's me. Devoid of purpose, lost to dissolution. Sometimes Sally hated being a writer. The apt, if depressing, descriptive phrase was never long from her grasp.

Her mind returned to the shadows of monsters, guttural monsters on trains. Of course, those were monsters of the unconscious mind. She had plenty of real ones to cope with. That, as always, led her to Michael.

The thought of him defeated the porch light. Her sight turned inward, to a brooding gray like thunderheads.

Michael was a wound that refused to heal. He bled over all Sally was. She came back to that last day with him, there in the Greyhound bus station over twelve years ago. It rushed upon her as if in present tense, her porch swing becoming the hard metal bench at the station. Oblivious travelers once more swarmed around her. She was there.

Michael sat beside her on the bench, one ankle crossed over a knee, an arm resting across Sally's shoulders. It hung there not in affection, but on guard. He spoke with a smugness that frightened her. From across the gulf of time, she listened as she had listened then. "They call the place Millennium City. It's run by a guy named Jack Kordish. He's a self-made minister, a kind of modern prophet, from what they say. The whole place is built on faith, and isolated from distraction. It'll do you good."

Yeah, right, Sally thought, her face burning where Michael had slugged her an hour before. She had brought it on, she supposed, questioning his decision to clean out their bank account and move to this commune in the wilds of Montana. She had known what would happen before opening her mouth. She had known he wouldn't take backtalk lightly.

But, Michael's behavior had eroded her patience. He had developed a habit of disappearing, often for days, and his vanishing acts had come to define the last year of their two-year marriage. Sally had suspected philandering. She had never imagined the truth of the marathon, often impromptu Bible study groups and their growing hold on her husband. Fundamentalist Bible thumpers and her Michael Adams? The same carelessly agnostic Michael who had accepted a Jew as his wife? He had claimed to care little about her background, admitting only that it leant her an exotic flavor. Now, in hindsight, his courtship seemed a mask, an act to leash her, dropped away when no longer needed. He had changed from attentive lover to the monster her mother had warned her against: a

Jew-hating gentile wrapped in inarguable rightness, badgering her to "Repent!" Repent from what? From not being him?

He had become this doomsday prophet person, convinced that the world would end that year, the turn of the millennium. What had bred such gross paranoia? God only knew, but Sally, he claimed, would soon face perdition because her people had murdered Christ. She was evil in Michael's eyes, an "other" to be converted or trampled, whichever worked. Only baptism could save her, and she had refused that ritual. So doing, she no longer deserved the simple human decency his religious doctrine prescribed. Michael hated her, and treated her accordingly.

Well, that kind of attitude cut both ways, she had thought from his side on the bench. She was done with playing the faithful wife. She had nothing to show for it but a numb face and rising bruises. Michael had literally beaten down her love.

Knowing her mood, her husband guarded her. He had shadowed her to the restroom, and had held her around the waist as they walked through the terminal. But, why imprison her if he hated her so? He had already taken their money, what little there was. Did he hope to reconcile by brainwashing her into his despicable fringe faith? Was that what he wanted, a doll lobotomized by dogma and fear?

Their gate began boarding. Michael led Sally into the line, holding her by the arm. Her elbow throbbed beneath his fingers. He continued his blathering religious monologue as if she cared what he said. He had always liked the sound of his voice.

He handed the bus driver his ticket and waited to pass through the gate. Sally held out hers, fingers trembling so that the flimsy paper rattled. Then, grimly, she folded it back into her hand. It was so clear to her, this crux of her life. From years in her future, sitting on a swing of her cold front porch, she saw herself doing it, heard her younger voice.

"I'm not going."

"Excuse me, Miss?" The driver blinked, his hand still poised to accept the bit of paper.

"I'm not going," she repeated with greater strength. She looked at Michael and licked her lips. He still held her arm. "I'm not going, and you can't make me."

"Sally..."

"Take your hand off me."

Michael's eyes were glacial. His fingers dug into her flesh. He caught the bus driver's disapproving stare.

"She's upset," he murmured, but his voice had a gravelly edge. "Give the man your ticket, honey. Your luggage is on board."

"You're hurting me," she complained, and pushed away.

His grip on her slipped, but recovered. "Honey, you're embarrassing me. Get it together, and get on the bus."

The driver spoke up. "Now maybe you ought to hold on a minute—"

"Mind your own business!" Michael snapped. Sally felt his coldness twelve years later, and shivered. He grabbed at her other arm. She twisted away and fell into a startled old woman behind her. Michael's hands lashed out and snatched her back to the gate.

"God damn it," Sally yelled, "can't you understand? Let go of me!"

"Get on the bus, you bitch, or I'll kick your ass through the door myself!"

"Leave her alone." Two young men had come to the front, leaving their places in

line. They stood inches away, brows furrowed, shoulders squared.

Sally twisted again, emboldened by support. She punched at Michael's chest. Without the slightest change of expression, he released her, and she fell to the floor on her backside.

"Fine." He snorted. "Stay, if you want." He looked around at shocked faces, then down at Sally. "I don't need this. I don't need you. But, you're my wife, Sally Anne Adams. Eventually, you'll do as I say. Anything else is bullshit."

He turned away scowling, and stalked to the bus.

On her porch, her forgotten cup of coffee cooling in one hand, Sally blinked. The terminal around her faded, but the porch did not lighten.

A year later, after the divorce, Jack Kordish changed his commune's name from Millennium City to Base Apocalypse, sure that the final battle between good and evil would begin in his back yard. He wasn't all wrong. The authorities discovered his illegal stockpiles of weapons and, after a bloody standoff, seventy-six members of Kordish's cult died in a fire they probably set themselves.

Michael Adams was not among them.

No, Sally thought, but he should have been, the son of a bitch.

Sally felt a familiar, soft warmth at her ankles. She looked past her coffee and into the marbled blue eyes of her early morning companion. "Good morning, Ghost," she said to the cat, and stroked the short, white fur along his back. He purred, and shoved his head against her hand. Sally scratched him under his chin.

Her coffee gone cold, she returned to the kitchen with Ghost at her heels. He knew the routine. He paced figure eights on the worn linoleum floor, raising a bell-like serenade of mews until she placed his breakfast of kibbles before him. While he ate, Sally replenished her cup, then left the kitchen for her marginally larger living room.

She clicked on the television and settled down on her lumpy couch for the morning news. But the news wasn't on. It wasn't yet morning. Her face sagged at an infomercial on hair replacement therapy, and she reached for the remote. A moment later, she landed at a black-and-white Jimmy Stewart movie, and let her fingers rest. She sipped her coffee and watched, but little penetrated her mood. Jimmy and Jean and Claude were devoid of their intended goodness; they were little more than marionettes in some meaningless monochrome caricature of ... of what? I'm boneheaded, impenetrable, Sally thought. She was locked in a blackened tower, unable to listen, to feel, to trust. As much as she hated to think so, she met the whole night's world with wariness.

Well, no, that wasn't true. She trusted and loved her Eulie.

Her eyes turned to the ceiling beneath her baby's room. Poor, sweet, damaged Eulie, her six-year-old treasure, the rock that had altered the destructive course of her life and had shown her the true face of God. Such great work for such a damaged child, a child whose obvious retardation made strangers squirm. She owed her Eulie for everything good in life. Without him and the love he made possible, her dissolution would be complete.

She looked from the ceiling to the cup cradled in her hands, to the wrists just outside the frayed cuffs of her sweatshirt. She stared at the jagged scars bisecting the blue lines of her veins, evidence of a past conversation with God.

God, she thought with bile. A sadistic cancer on nature. He was not the God of her childhood, the God who had nurtured Israel in the desert, and had time and again

forgiven weakness in his creations. Sally understood a disciplinarian God who punished reckless, hedonistic girls. She did not begrudge him her tight finances, her terrible luck with men, or even his curse of a fearless, tactless, and frightening mother. But what monster assaulted an unborn child, scrambling his brains just to get at Mom? On Eulie's birth, Sally had turned her back to such a God. She wished she could deny him completely, convince herself he had never really been. Then she could ascribe her baby's tragedy to anonymous, comforting randomness. But, her mother's work was too well done. Sally could not deny her God, but she could insist on hating him.

Ghost leapt to the couch. He stood staring at her with bright, blue, curious eyes.

"Can't sleep," she told him. "Nothing new, huh?"

The cat kneaded the cushion beside her. Good ol' Ghost. Always armed with perspective. If you can't sleep, you can always pet the pet.

Sally took him into her arms. She buried her face in his warm fur, smelled his freshness and listened to his purr. Such a friend, Ghost. She shoved aside monsters and dreams of monsters. She shoved aside vindictive gods. For a few minutes, anyway, she lost herself in Ghost and his abandonment to pleasure.



She shot over the dark landscape of upstate New York, the thin line of State Road 12 guiding her north out of Lyons Falls. The highway was a luminous ribbon winding through thick forest, vanishing from time to time beneath trees, always reappearing at some unexpected angle in some unexpected place. Following that line had at first been a game, but Rosa Vasquez had been airborne for more than an hour. Curiosities were now mundane. She yawned at the tranquilizing view through her windscreen, and looked at her watch.

04:30. Just the look of that hour made her yawn.

"On approach, Agent Vasquez," the pilot said via intercom.

She nodded from her seat beside him, her eyes never leaving the windscreen. The pilot was New York State Police. She didn't know him and didn't want to. He had picked her up in an Albany Wal-Mart parking lot, of all places, after a cryptic but urgent phone call from her agent-in-charge in these hinterlands. Whatever was up was the thing, she knew. Her people didn't snatch her across state for nothing.

She felt her stomach rise as they descended toward the earth, toward blue and red lights flickering just off the highway. Two police cars jammed a dirt track next to a shadowed barn. Other cars crowded the scene, sedans, a pickup truck, and one large van crowned with dead emergency lights. Someone waved a flashlight not far from the vehicles. The helicopter landed close to him in a roar of flailing rotors.

"Thanks," Vasquez said to her pilot, tapping his arm. "I'll get my own ride home." She minded her bulging parka as she climbed to the ground. She didn't want it snagged on some protrusion from the aircraft. That would be embarrassing.

The man with the flashlight intercepted her. He was dressed just as she in a heavy parka, gloves, and boots. Vasquez thrust out one hand, the other clutching her hood against the cyclonic whirl of snow from the rotors.

"Rob Banks!" she shouted above the noise. "*Que pasa, mi compañero!* It's been a long time!"

"A year, three months, and some uncertain number of days," the man shouted as he

pulled her away from the ship. "You should never have taken that promotion, Rose! You left me with a gray, humorless crowd, and they're no pleasure to look at, either!"

The helicopter leapt skyward. In moments, it was gone, its booming rotor noise chasing its wake. Vasquez straightened on the dirt road and pulled her coat tighter around her. "I missed you guys," she said. "Too much paperwork down in Albany."

"I bet. At least, we suffer under the pile you shift down to us."

"Ha! *Touché*. What's the deal, Rob?"

They walked toward the cars, Vasquez relaxing as the snow, bereft of its helicopter agitator, settled back to ground. Banks pointed to people and vehicles as he spoke. "The whole cast is here, Rose, minus the villain, of course. We got your rattled local gentry over there, came out to visit his horse about eight hours ago and found an aught-9 Lexus blocking the road. Inside the Lexus, Mr. Alvin Whitmire, age forty-three, of New York City. At least, that's what his license and registration say. Bullet right through the head. Very fresh. Rigor gives us squat in this weather, but lividity has time of death at no less than ten hours. Gun in his lap, but the forensics guys are skeptical."

"Bet you a dollar the gun's untraceable."

"No bet. Anyhow, the horse owner calls the sheriff, who calls the troopers, who call the FBI. That big fella over by the Lexus is Captain Hardiman, New York State Police. You're here at his request."

"Why? Sounds like a standard, unembellished murder to me."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to blurt out the spoiler." Banks gestured with a flourish toward the huddle of uniforms near the Lexus. Vasquez took his hint and walked up to the group. She rummaged in her parka's cargo pockets for her bureau ID.

"FBI, Albany," she said. "I'm Vasquez, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of Terrorism."

The uniforms shifted, acknowledging her presence. The tallest man looked her up and down with narrowed, but humorous eyes. "Good morning, ASAC Vasquez. Have a nice flight out?"

Vasquez threw her hands palms up. "It was fair. Could have stood with an in-flight movie. You're Captain Hardiman?"

"Sure," the man said. "Sorry to snatch you out of bed like that, but it's your directive, not mine."

"Oh?" Vasquez raised an eyebrow. Hardiman had said the first intriguing words of the night. "So you wrangled up a state chopper, one that surely had other things to do, landed it against all FAA and law enforcement guidance in a Wal-Mart parking lot to get me, then flew me way out here to the frozen left pinky of New York, all on a say-so I didn't even know I gave. I'm impressed, cap." She stepped close to the Lexus. Red and blue lights cast ghastly illumination against the mangled shell of Alvin Whitmire, still slumped in his driver's seat.

Hardiman crunched snow until he stood beside Vasquez. "We I.D. him as a hardware specialist for Intel Corporation, working with IBM. They say he honchos a special team developing some bioelectric microprocessor crap. Revolutionary. Fast stuff."

"You're suggesting an industrial crime?"

"Just filling in the info."

"Are the forensics people done?"

"Them and the line detective, about ten minutes ago. The medical examiner's behind

us, fuming like a sidelined diva because we haven't released the body."

Vasquez leaned close to Whitmire's head, which lay against the window frame of the driver's door. Half of it was missing. More accurately, half of it was splattered elsewhere in the car. "Entry wound's on this side. Lots of blood on the console and passenger's seat. Splash on the passenger window. They shot him from here, then propped him back up."

"That's about right. We dug the bullet out of the passenger side door."

"Why'd you call us, cap? Looks local to me."

"Over here." He tramped around to the grill. He took a big flashlight from a pocket of his parka and directed its beam onto the hood. Someone had spray painted something across the metal:

DANIEL 12:4

Vasquez groaned.

"We got a fly from you guys a couple weeks ago," Hardiman said. "You asked we keep an eye out for religion-based criminal activity."

"Anybody have a Bible handy?" Vasquez asked, expecting no answer.

"Keep secret the message and seal the book until the end time; many shall fall away and evil will increase," Hardiman said. He shrugged at her stare. "We've been here for hours. Plenty of time to look it up. Anyway, I figured this sort of thing, you guys are better equipped to handle it than us."

Vasquez grunted. "The X-Files was fiction, cap." She turned away from the car, looking for Banks. "Anything other than the body and the car? Tracks, that sort of thing?"

"Our boys have been over the place like bloodhounds. We have two sets of footprints angling across that bean field, but they end in a drainage ditch lined with gravel."

"Smart little perps. Rob! Over here! Look, Captain Hardiman, you know the deal. We're experiencing a nationwide rise in faith-based initiatives, to be flippant about it. You get Agent Banks and his two men, and you have the courtesy of Bureau labs if you want. I want reports on all aspects of your progress and I want my people in on any interrogations once you round up the perps."

"Okay," Hardiman nodded, his tone cautious. "What about information downhill?"

"I'll round up what I can and send an agent to advise you. Understand that you aren't the only one dealing with this. Rob," she said to her approaching friend, "I need to wake up another dozen agents and get them into the Albany office. You think I could use your digs?"

"They're only mine as long as you say so," the agent answered, grinning.

"Good. But we'll have breakfast first. I can't shout people out of bed on an empty stomach."

"Thanks," Hardiman said, following her to Banks's car. "This kind of business is way over the top. You guys handle it all the time. That Waco thing, and the Freeman, and those other millennium crazies ten years ago." He watched, frowning, as she dropped into the proffered sedan and hugged her coat around her.

"I'm not doing any favors, cap. This thing is of interest to the federal government. Of course, if it turns out to be hopped up teenagers with guns, you're on your own."

"Fair enough."

"Now, if you don't mind, I'm cold, I'm tired, and I'm getting hungrier by the second."

Banks closed her door, shutting her off from the bitter night. The trooper raised a hand to his parka hood in salute, then turned back to his crime scene.

"So, what do you think?" Banks asked as he turned the car around.

"I don't know. It's probably lowbrow thugs, or maybe a coke deal gone bad. I mean, it's been half a day, Rob. Wouldn't we expect someone to claim responsibility?"

They drove along the dirt track back to SR12, then Banks turned south toward Utica. "I don't know," he mused. "These kinds of things always creep me out. Political terrorists, I understand. Terrorists for money, I understand. Religious freaks, they don't make a lot of sense, not even according to their own rules. There was this guy--"

"Rob, it isn't even daylight. Could you wait until after breakfast to tell your gory story?"

Banks mugged umbrage. "I wouldn't say it was gory. Not in a Wes Craven way..."

He glanced at her now and then as they sped along the highway. She remained wrapped in her coat until the heater reached baking temperatures, then she relaxed, and stretched like a cat. She suppressed a grin as Banks averted his eyes.

"We'll be back," he said, drumming the steering wheel.

"I know."

"This one feels that way."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Their Bible scholar. He isn't done, you know."

"No, he isn't. It's only a matter of whether it's our problem, or Hardiman's."

They rode in silence a while.

"It's nice seeing you again," Banks said.

"Not so nice for me, amigo. Not with *mierda* like this."