

# Hell's Fury

By Scott Dokey

## Part One: The Reckoning

## Chapter 1

Michael was afraid to fall asleep.

He knew what would happen; knew what waited for him behind the black curtain in his mind. The nightmares would come again to stab at his sanity and torment his soul. His greatest fear? That sooner or later the dark abyss would open before him and he would be plunged headlong into the void, never to return.

It had started two weeks ago, these episodes of madness, when the Master of Dreams invaded his mental sanctuary uninvited. His visits always left Michael cold and shaking; disturbed and violated. Morning would never come soon enough, when the light of the sun vanquished the horror, at least temporarily, and he could live again. But even in the brightness of the day he could feel the icy tentacles of the Night Beast waiting in the shadows just out of reach. Anxiously and eagerly it waited.

Michael lay there with the covers pulled over his body up to his chin, like he had done as a young boy afraid of the alien shadows that danced on his bedroom wall at night so many years ago. If only it was that simple now—a simple fear with a simple explanation. No. He knew it was more than that; more than anything rationale that could be reasoned away easily. It was evil, pure and sinister, undaunted and relentless. And it wouldn't stop until he was destroyed.

Feverishly Michael fought the Mind Demon, repeatedly sending it scurrying back into the shadows in defeat. But his body was weak from the war that had been raging in his soul, bringing about a wave of anxiety until panic set in. His throat burned as he gasped in gulps of air, trying to keep up with the demand of his rapidly beating heart.

Then, almost as if a switch had been thrown, his body shut down. His breathing eased, his heartbeat steadied, and the lead weights that hung on his eyelids found their way to the bottom of his pupils. Darkness came in and his surrender was complete.

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Anxiety surged through Harold as he reached for the door. He knew what to expect, and took a deep breath to prepare himself for the barrage that awaited him every day when he came

home from work. He thought briefly of running away so he could find somewhere to hide. Maybe he could call Sharon and tell her he had to work late? Or that traffic was backed up and he didn't know what time he'd be home? At least that would delay his submission to the torture that assuredly waited for him. But he was already home and any thought of escape was futile. He picked at a little speck of paint that was chipping away from the door frame and immediately wished he hadn't. It was just one more thing that his 'loving' wife would incessantly nag him about until he fixed it, and even then she probably wouldn't be satisfied until he had repainted the whole house. He sighed as he turned the handle, praying silently that today would be different. He should have known better.

His fears were not disappointed as he immediately heard the screams and yells coming from his teenage sons fighting, and the bellow of Sharon's voice telling them to stop. Couple that with the distinct smell that she had clearly cooked their dinner more than a little too long, while getting caught up in another screaming fest that was usually unnecessary, and you have the makings of a wonderful evening at the Wagner house. Then there was the crying infant in the corner, the newest addition to the household about a year ago. Little Casey had been quite a surprise. Usually you had to have sex first in order to have a child. It was almost as if God had looked down on Harold Wagner and said to himself, "I don't think Harold's life is exciting enough! Let's throw a little more chaos into the mix!" It was amazing that Harold hadn't either been committed to an institution or blown his brains out yet.

He shouted a little louder than usual, just to make sure everyone heard him. "Honey, I'm home!"

"Thank god!" Sharon cried as she rounded the corner from the kitchen. "Can you shut those boys of yours up for just a minute? They're about ready to drive me nuts."

Harold dropped his eyes solemnly and whispered under his breath, "Happy to see you too, dear." He then proceeded toward the family room where he found his youngest son, David, secured tightly in a headlock given by his oldest son, Jared. Cries of anguish and pain were coming from him as Jared refused to let go.

"Ok, the two of you, stop it now!"

Jared looked at his dad with sweat dripping down his forehead. You could tell that they had been going at it for quite some time. "But he started it first!"

"I did not!" was David's reply through clenched teeth.

“I don’t care who started it! I said stop! Now!”

Reluctantly Jared loosened his grip on David’s head. David spun away and tried to catch his breath. Just when it looked like the melee had come to an end, David drew back and sucker-punched Jared right in the back of the head. Jared whirled around quickly, his fist ready to come crashing down on his brother’s face.

But Harold had had enough. In the blink of an eye, he snatched both boys’ arms and held them firmly apart. He glared at both of them. “I’m going to tell both of you this, one time, and one time only. I am not in the mood for this tonight! If you don’t straighten up right now, both of you, you’ll be sorry. Do you understand?”

Both boys looked at their dad fearfully. They knew very well if they pushed him right now they’d both be sorry. Almost in unison they both responded to his question, “We understand.”

“Good! Now both of you to your room until dinner is ready.”

Both boys stomped off together. The slamming doors upstairs told Harold they weren’t exactly happy at the moment. *Oh well.*

Fortunately the rest of the night went pretty much without further incident; although the tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Dinner was eaten in relative silence, with the only words spoken being “Can you pass the salt?” and “May I be excused?” Even little Casey could sense the emotions in the room and kept pretty quiet.

Ten o’clock rolled around and the boys headed off to bed, leaving Harold alone with his wife to watch their favorite comedy. Hopefully a little irreverent humor would put both of them in a better mood and the troubles of earlier would disappear. But halfway through, a loud buzzing sound made Harold turn his head toward the recliner in the corner of the living room, where his lovely wife was leaning back and snoring loudly.

The bitter taste of revulsion crept into his mouth as he looked at her. The beautiful and elegant woman he had married fifteen years ago had long since died. She was now replaced by a lazy, unkempt and overweight sloth that had let her body go to hell. At last check she had gained over 40 lbs. and now tipped the scales at almost one hundred and eighty pounds.

Even as he thought this, his eyes wandered down to his own gut which protruded from underneath the white t-shirt he was wearing. He had always been a little on the big side—he was big boned. But sadly it had grown a little over the years. Harold blamed this on Sharon as well.

Because of her he had given up a lot of things that he used to do. The gym that he used to work out at regularly was now a distant memory. The net on the basketball hoop in their driveway had disintegrated a long time ago, not from use but from the elements, and he had not been inclined to fix it. In short, Harold had lost his passion for life, and his dreams had faded into oblivion.

Sharon jolted awake in the recliner as Harold's hand shook her gently. "Why don't you go up to bed, Hon?"

A disoriented look passed over her face for a moment. *Like she had never fallen asleep in the chair before!* Then a pained look replaced it for a second as she swallowed and squeezed her eyes opened and shut a couple of times.

"Are you okay, Hon?" Harold asked more out of common courtesy than real concern.

Sharon's reply was course and scratchy, "I don't feel too good. I think I'm coming down with something."

*Of course you are dear.*

"Mind if I go up to bed?"

*Of course not dear.* "No, not at all."

"Don't stay up too late, ok?"

*I'll stay up as long as I damn well please!* "I won't."

Harold watched in disgust as Sharon stumbled up the steps, moaning and groaning every step of the way. Then he sat on the couch for a while, flipping aimlessly through the channels. He tried watching a couple of movies, but couldn't get into them. Even a basketball game on ESPN did little to excite him.

So, in desperation, he turned to his trusty computer for comfort. After checking his e-mail and visiting a couple of regular sites, he decided to do a little surfing for something interesting. A little turned into a lot, and two hours later, after Harold had had his fill of internet porn and cheap thrills, he finally turned off the computer and headed upstairs to bed.

Quietly he took off his clothes and laid them on the floor beside the bed. Slowly he crawled under the covers, careful not to disrupt his wife's sleep. She wasn't snoring now but if he disturbed her, even slightly, that could change in an instant. Then he wouldn't get any sleep.

Within a few minutes Harold found himself approaching the brink of the sleep world. As he prepared for the night's journey, one thought kept reverberating through his mind—*Oh, how I wish my life was different!*

## Chapter 2

The rays of sunlight dancing on Harold's eyelids brought him fully awake. He rubbed his eyes for a moment, giving the rest of his senses a chance to catch up. The unmistakable smell of beer wafted to his nose and he was startled as he took his hands away from his eyes and realized that he was lying smack-dab in the middle of a flesh-sandwich. On his right side lay a beautiful naked blonde, while an equally beautiful brunette lay naked on his left. Each one was lying on her side so that her backside touched Harold's legs slightly. A big smile spread across his face as he looked toward the ceiling.

"God, if this is a dream, please don't wake me up!"

He glanced over at the nightstand next to the bed. Empty beer bottles adorned the top of it and immediately brought a sharp pain to his groin as he realized he had to piss like a racehorse. "Don't move girls," he whispered. "I'll be right back."

Less than dexterously, he crawled his way to the foot of the bed and made his way to the bathroom. After a couple of minutes he felt fully relieved and ready to enjoy the beauties in the next room. He was in the middle of every guy's fantasy and just thinking about it gave him an instant hard-on.

As he walked back into the bedroom his chest was puffed out like some sort of animal trying to impress a potential partner in a bazaar mating ritual. He climbed back into the bed enthusiastically. "Ok girls, time for a little fun!"

Neither of the ladies stirred. Judging from the amount of booze that had apparently been consumed, Harold figured that they were probably passed out. But he was determined to change that. His hands traced the curves of the slender brunette's hips behind him, while he nibbled on the neck of the blond in front of him. Still no movement issued from them. *I guess I wore them out!* Harold thought, feeding his male ego with pride.

Harold turned up the intensity a little and reached around and massaged the blonde's breasts while he backed himself up to the brunette and began to grind on her. Still nothing.

Becoming a little frustrated, he slid his hand down the blonde's stomach until he came to the sweet spot between her legs. He pulled her slightly toward him so that he could reach her better.

Her head drifted toward Harold and a cry of horror flew out of his mouth as the girl's

dead eyes stared up at him. A trail of blood had dried from her nostril to the corner of her mouth. The other nostril still had a trace of a powdery white substance showing, indicating the presence of drugs at their little 'party' last night. A small glint of light attracted Harold's eyes to the razor-blade on the nightstand next to an undisturbed line of cocaine waiting for its next victim. For a second the thought entered his brain that that hadn't been there a second ago.

Terror ran rampant through Harold's mind as he leapt out of the bed. As he did so the body of the other girl fell sideways on the bed. The same dead eyes that belonged to the blond now resided in the head of the brunette. However, instead of a trail of blood on her face, he saw a multitude of bruises covering the girl's neck.

A scene started playing itself out in his mind, but it didn't quite seem like a memory. It was more like a scene from a horror movie, and Harold was the lead actor...

He saw the three of them partying together, a heated mixture of drugs, sex and rock and roll. He watched in his mind as he enjoyed the full pleasure of the two girls in his bed, their bodies all covered with sweat. He saw the blond bowing her head, almost in reverence, as she sniffed at the white powder eagerly. Then, as her body started convulsing violently and the blood started to run, the brunette became hysterical and started screaming.

He pictured himself at that moment grabbing her by the throat to calm her down, but in his anxiety his grip had become as strong as death, and in the course of a few seconds the two girls lay dead in front of him. Then dizziness brought on by fear and anxiety overcame him and he fell between the two bodies and passed out.

After the initial shock of what he imagined might have happened subsided, Harold snatched up the phone and fumbled with trembling hands to dial 911.

A middle-aged woman's voice answered almost immediately, "911-emergency."

Harold thought that he had calmed down, but as soon as he heard the voice on the other end of the line he flew into hysteria. His sentences were rambled and incoherent, "They're dead, both of them! I don't know what happened! I just woke up and they were there! I can't believe—

"Calm down, Sir. Take a deep breath and tell me what happened. Let's start with your name."

He did as instructed and tried to compose himself. He had to force his words to come out slower, "My name is Harold."

"All right, Harold. Why don't you start from the beginning and tell me what's going on."

“That’s just it! I don’t know what’s going on! The last thing I remember was falling asleep last night next to my wife. And this morning I woke up and there were two naked women in bed with me. At first I thought they were just sleeping, but they aren’t. They’re dead!” He could feel the terror rising back in his throat as he finished that last sentence.

Apparently the woman on the phone could sense it too and knew that she might lose him at any time. “Can you tell me where you are, Sir? We can have an officer there shortly to help.”

“I swear I didn’t do anything!”

“I’m not saying you did, Sir, but if there are dead bodies present we need to get an officer there immediately. Can you please tell me your address?”

“It’s 1917 Leer St.”

The phone went silent for a short second before the dispatcher spoke up again. “I’m sorry Sir, but I’m not showing a 1917 Leer St. anywhere on our map. Are you sure you have the address correct?”

Harold’s terror was promptly replaced with irritation. “I’m positive! I’ve lived here almost ten years now. I think I know my own address.”

The woman’s voice, however, remained calm and professional, “But, Sir, we don’t even have a listing for a Leer St. in Los Angeles.”

“What do you mean you don’t—” He stopped in mid-sentence as those last few words registered in his brain. “What did you just say?”

A hint of confusion was heard in the woman’s voice, “I said that I’m not showing a Leer St. anywhere in the city of Los Angeles.”

The first time he heard it had stopped him short. The second time almost floored him. Without realizing it, he flopped back onto the bed, almost landing on top of one of the girls. He flinched as he felt her cold flesh against him. Right now that didn’t concern him as much as the fact that he actually lived in Indiana and not California.

Meanwhile, the dispatcher tried desperately to keep him on the line. “Stay with me Harold! We’ll have someone there shortly! Just stay on the line and we can trace the call! Everything will be all right!”

But even as the woman was speaking, the image of Sharon sprang into his mind. Immediately he dropped the phone on the bed. Quickly he threw on a pair of sweat pants and an old t-shirt and flew out of the bedroom in search for his wife. The hallway echoed loudly as he

frantically called out her name, hoping desperately for an answer.

Harold stopped dead in his tracks when he came to the end of the hall. The stairs were missing! Well, they weren't actually missing, per say. They just weren't there! Normally Harold would have found himself running down a flight of stairs to the first floor right about now. Instead he found himself at the entrance to a cavernous room.

Slowly he ventured out into the spacious abode. A meticulously polished black marble floor reflected the sun peering through the skylights overhead. The brilliant white walls were offset by various pieces of fine art, while rich leather furniture decorated the entire room. The faint scent of chlorine hung in the air, and Harold noticed a pair of huge glass doors to his right that lead out into a patio. A huge swimming pool beckoned to him from beyond.

What caught Harold's attention the most, though, was the photograph hanging on the wall next to the patio doors. He recognized the picture immediately, or at least part of it. It had been taken on his wedding night. There was no mistaking it. The tux was the same, his hair was the same, and even his goofy smile was the same. The woman standing next to him wasn't. In the place where Sharon's image should have been, there was someone else. Instantly Harold recognized her as the dead blonde woman in the bed.

Suddenly he became very nauseous as he bordered on the verge of total hysteria. Apparently he had killed his wife, only it wasn't really his wife...and he wasn't really here...and none of this was really happening...

Harold did everything possible to try to bring himself back to reality. He shook his head from side to side, closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He even repeated the phrase, "this is all just a dream", over and over again out loud. But when he opened his eyes again and saw that everything was still the same, he knew with horror that this had become his new reality.

He began walking slowly through the rest of the house, hoping to find some answers, but not even sure what the questions were anymore. Rounding a corner, he came to the front door. Firmly he grabbed the handle and braced himself for what he might find behind that door. Sweat began to bead on his forehead as he tried to convince his arms to pull open the door. He let go for a moment and backed up a space. Finally he took a deep breath and counted to three. On three he pulled hard and the door flew open.

The scene outside was lush and ripe, not like the eight inches of snow his real home in

Indiana had the night before. The bright noon sun was a solitary figure in the blue sky above. Birds chirped happily. Squirrels chattered to each other like gossiping women. Harold thought that this place would be paradise if not for the horror that rested inside.

A squad car pulled up in the driveway behind, what he assumed, was his black BMW. Harold watched nervously as the officer got out of the car and began to walk toward him. He was the biggest, darkest man Harold had ever seen. The skin that covered his massive tree trunk arms and thick neck was almost pitch-black. The short mustache under his nose and the mirrored sunglasses that he wore gave him a very menacing aura.

A slight grin could be seen on his face as he reached the steps directly in front of Harold. He stood looking down at Harold, even on the bottom step, and Harold guessed that he was at about 6'8" and weighed at least 300 lbs. He knew instinctively that this guy could squash him like a bug in a second.

The officer stood silent in front of Harold for a minute or so, obviously surveying the situation. His mouth then opened, and a deep, raspy voice came out, "I got a call that there was a problem here."

Harold's voice, on the other hand, was filled with terror and squeaked as he talked, which only made the cop smile a little more. "I don't know happened! I didn't do anything! You gotta believe me!"

The cop's demeanor instantly changed to something very somber. "Why don't you show me what the situation is, Boy, and then I'll decide what to believe?"

A hard lump rose in Harold's throat as he opened the door wide to allow the officer in. The man's arm brushed slightly against Harold's hand as he walked by, and Harold could feel an unnatural amount of heat generated from the officer's body. Harold just stood there like a statue, while the behemoth walked around the living room for a few minutes. With an irritated look he gestured to Harold, "Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to show me the bodies any time soon?"

Harold swallowed that lump with difficulty as he made his way past the officer to the bedroom door. Once there, he took a deep breath and pushed the door open, then he backed quickly into the hall again. The officer just sighed as he walked by Harold into the bedroom. A minute later his raspy voice called out to him, "Harold, is it? Can you come in here please?" The sinister tone in the officer's voice made Harold quiver.

The big black man looked at Harold as he entered the room, “You mean to tell me that you have no idea what happened here?”

“Yyess, sir, that’s what I’m saying.” Harold thought he could almost hear the cop’s eyeballs rolling around in their sockets behind those mirrors on his face.

“So, let me get this straight. You’re saying that someone else came in here while you were sleeping, killed these two women, placed them in bed next to you, wrote that filth all over their bodies, and you didn’t see a damn thing?”

Harold peered around the officer in confusion and was startled by what he saw. The girls were still there, of course, as cold and dead as before. He thought he saw a slight change in their faces though. It could have just been his imagination playing tricks on him, but he could swear that the corners of their mouths were turned up just a little in some kind of a morbid grin.

That wasn’t what shocked him, though. It was the fact that there was now writing all over the girls’ bodies. The words ‘bitch’, and ‘slut’, and ‘whore’ were repeated over and over again in what looked like black marker.

“Those weren’t there before!” Harold blurted out defensively.

The cop raised an eyebrow as he looked at Harold. “What do you mean, those weren’t there before? You already said that you woke up this morning with these dead girls in your bed.”

“No. Not that! What I’m talking about is the writing. The writing wasn’t there before!”

A frown spread across the cop’s face and his eyes became very somber. His voice lowered even more than normal, “I’m afraid I’m going to need you to come with me.”

Although Harold had expected as much, the words still stung his ears as he heard them. “Are you arresting me?” he asked in a panicked voice.

The officer thought about it for a second, “No, not just yet. First, I have some questions to ask, and then we’ll go from there.”

A moment later he turned to leave. Harold knew he better follow. Any attempt to escape, he feared, would prove futile, and he would end up joining the dead girls in the bed.

He followed the officer out to the car pleading the whole way, “This is all just a big mistake! I didn’t do anything wrong! I could never kill anyone!”

But the officer opened the rear passenger door and shoved Harold in. “Never is an awfully long time.” The black man then started whistling as he walked around the front of the car. It was an upbeat tune, almost triumphant in its melody.

### Chapter 3

The images flew through Michael's brain in rapid succession. He watched the whole scene unfold before him in the elusive and surreal way dreams do. In a flash the girls' dead eyes were staring up at him. Then, in unison, both of them winked at him. He wanted to scream, run, close his eyes, turn off the projector in his mind, but even in the most basic of nightmares these are all impossible.

Then the man left the room, running frantically in search of a sanctuary that didn't exist. Michael wanted desperately to help him; warn him; save him. But he couldn't. Instead he watched spellbound as the two 'dead' girls suddenly sprang to life and oddly began to move their fingers over each other's bodies. They giggled like pubescent schoolgirls during an all-night slumber party, while their gestures and undulations magically became black ink on their skin.

Now Michael stood outside in the bright California air. He watched as the police officer emerged from his vehicle, a black swirling mass of muscle and evil. Initially he was the silent observer in this horror story. But as the officer approached the front door to the house he turned and looked right at Michael. His eyes were fire and he looked at Michael like he was looking into his soul.

A feeling of panic began to overwhelm Michael as he beheld the monster before him. The officer responded with a wide toothy grin that revealed razor sharp teeth lining his mouth and told Michael that this was no man at all.

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After settling himself in, the officer reached for his radio and called the station. Harold couldn't understand any of the static on the other end, and could barely make out what the cop was saying. What he did hear made the fear inside him grow enormous.

*Some static.*

“No need for back-up—”

*Static.*

“Situation's under control—”

*Static again.*

“No, just someone playing around—”

*More static.*

“No dead bodies—”

*Still more static.*

“Going to lunch now—”

*Silence.*

The officer reached up and adjusted the rear-view mirror so that he could see Harold's face. A broad smile erupted on the black man's face, his white teeth gleaming back at his prisoner in the mirror. His voice changed a little as he spoke, his excitement clearly visible in his words, “You okay back there, Harold?”

Harold could feel his teeth chattering as he spoke, “About as well as can be expected, Officer, given the situation.” He actually dared to hope that his politeness would help somehow.

“Don't worry, Harold. We'll fix you up real good,” then, as an afterthought, “And please, call me Reverend. Everybody else does.”

The pit in the bottom of Harold's stomach now felt like a bottomless abyss, *I certainly don't like the sound of that!*

They drove for at least an hour, the officer whistling his gallant tune over and over again, before Harold realized that they had left the city far behind them and had entered the countryside. The tempo of the man's song increased noticeably as they suddenly turned off the main highway onto a dirt road.

A gasp flew out of Harold's mouth when he saw a spider scurry out of the officer's ear and burrow itself in his hair. Harold blinked his eyes several times; sure that he was just seeing things. But when the officer's hand came up and started scratching in the same spot where the arachnid had disappeared, the man's hair began to writhe like a thousand tiny thin worms on top of his head. The thing in the front seat then lowered his glasses and looked directly at Harold through the mirror. Harold thought he saw flames dancing in his sockets where his eyes should have been. “Don't worry, Son,” It said in a sinister tone. “Everything will be over soon.”

His gaze then turned back toward the road and he asked a peculiar question in a peculiar voice, “Are you a God-fearing man, Harold?”

Harold was speechless for a moment. *What kind of question is that to be asking at a time like this?*

“I guess so,” he answered softly, ashamed though that he hadn’t gone to church in years.

“See! That’s the problem with people today—no conviction! Either you are or you aren’t!”

Harold grew quiet.

After a few minutes they came to a stop. Harold looked out his window and saw a huge, broken down barn looming ominously before them. The bright red paint had almost completely peeled away, while parts of the roof were entirely torn off. One of the sliding doors lay propped up against its frame, evidently not in working condition for quite some time. The other door seemed to be working though, as the ‘officer’ climbed out of the car and sent it screeching along its track. The darkness inside looked like Death’s black shroud waiting for Harold.

The terror that Harold had felt earlier was nothing compared to what he felt now as the tall black man returned to the car and gave another sinister grin, the split tongue of a serpent darting from his mouth. He knew that he was not going to live much longer.

After driving the car inside the barn and closing the door, the officer flipped a switch and a small light rained down on the front of the car. The soft hum of a generator was the only sound that split the night. A solitary chair sat in the middle of the floor only a few feet from them. It seemed to smile at Harold with its high back and raised arms, almost like an executioner’s chair waited for its next victim on death row.

Roughly the officer reached in and yanked Harold out with one hand. He dragged him over and threw him down on the chair. Harold felt that incredible heat again and looked down at his shirt to find scorch marks in the perfect outline of the man’s fingers.

Harold tried to stand in protest, but the Reverend quickly slammed him back down into the chair. His arm came around quickly, and the back of his hand met Harold’s cheek in a resounding blow. Harold could feel his flesh rip open as the huge ring on the guys finger cut him deep.

The Reverend immediately began tying Harold’s hands and feet to the chair. A soft orange glow and tiny puffs of smoke could be seen, even in the dim light, where the rope came in contact with the thing’s flesh.

Once his hands and feet were secure, the man began wrapping the rope around Harold’s chest, securing it to the back of the chair. Then another strand of rope found its way around Harold’s neck, completely immobilizing him.

Harold tried desperately to plead with the lunatic cop, his mouth the only part of his body able to move. "Please, you've got to believe me. I didn't do anything! I swear I don't know what happened. I never saw those girls before in my life! Please, just let me go!"

The Reverend looked at Harold angrily, "How stupid do you think I am? How can you sit there and tell me that you never saw those girls before when I saw a picture of you and your wife with my own two eyes?" His hand came down again, this time on the other side of Harold's face. The pain was equally as great.

The cop took a deep breath for a second, as if to calm himself. "Would you like to know why everyone calls me 'Reverend'?"

He stood silent for a moment, deep in his own pride, "I have a skill of making people see the folly of their ways. I bring illumination to them. And you, my friend, need to see the light very badly."

For a moment the thing in front of Harold stepped back and looked at him in contemplation, almost like he was admiring his handy work. Then he started walking slowly back to Harold, shaking his head back and forth. He took his glasses off and Harold saw his eyes completely for the first time. The fires had been replaced a cold, hard, icy blue, which hardly seemed natural in that body.

He bent down and looked at Harold deeply. Spit flew out of his mouth as he talked, "Why don't you tell me why you did it, boy? Maybe we can save ourselves a whole lot of trouble."

Harold was trembling violently now. His words had a gurgling sound to them as the tears running down his face entered his mouth as he talked, "I'm telling you the truth! I didn't do anything! This is all just a big mistake!"

A flurry of punches rained down hard on Harold. The Reverend then glared at Harold for a moment. "Look! We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way! It's up to you!"

"I'm telling you, I don't know what happened! Why won't you believe me? Do you want me to confess? Is that it? Do you want me to say I did it? Ok, I did it! Are you happy? Will you please let me go now?"

A fury rose in the face of the thing standing before Harold. "I don't believe you!" He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife. The blade had to be at least six inches long when he flipped it open. An evil smile spread across his face once more, "Since you won't talk to me, how about if I make sure you can't talk to anyone else, ever again."

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Michael reeled from the blows that struck Harold's face. Each attack that found its target also delivered its impact to Michael. Each cut and bruise inflicted, his pain and fear, was now Michael's. He felt the sting of the 'Reverends' fist and the fury of his words as they cut deeply into Harold's soul.

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With his free hand the 'Reverend' brutally reached into Harold's mouth and pulled out his tongue. The gleam in his eye matched the gleam coming off the switchblade as it swung down and sliced Harold's tongue off cleanly.

Harold howled a muffled cry as the pain coursed through him. His body started shaking inside the ropes that bound him as the initial stages of shock set in. He vaguely felt a few more punches crashing down on him as the world disappeared into total darkness.

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Blood oozed from Michael's mouth as he watched the Devil in his dreams torture the helpless soul that was Harold. He fell to his knees weakened from the blows that resounded across the victims face.

Michael watched feebly as the man, bound like a captured animal, teetered on the brink of death. Then, when Harold had lost consciousness, the sinister being who called himself the 'Reverend' turned and walked directly toward Michael. Roughly he grabbed Michael by the hair and pulled his face toward him.

"You know who I am, don't you?"

Michael attempted to mutter something weakly and then realized that his own tongue was missing. The sinister being laughed wickedly before releasing Michael's hair. He then bent down and looked Michael right in the eyes. "It doesn't really matter, though, whether you do or not. My plan will succeed in the end. Then all of Heaven will bow down before me."

## Chapter 4

A cheery, triumphant whistle started Harold stirring back to life. He dared to hope, for a brief second, that his world had turned back to normal. But when Harold opened his eyes, the scene before him wasn't what he had hoped for. He was in the same terrible place, with the same foul stench surrounding him, and the same evil creature standing before him.

"Ah, Mr. Wagner, you decided to come back to us, after all. You had me kind of worried for a second there."

Harold tried to blink the blood out of his eyes to no avail. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a muffled sound trickled from his throat. Then he remembered in horror that his tongue was gone!

"Awe, what's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" The thing then laughed cruelly in Harold's face.

The Reverend leaned close, his breath smelling like death. Harold's eyes grew wide as he watched the creature's face change before him. The nose thinned, the eyes grew softer, the lips became fuller, and the hair grew longer. In a second he was staring at Sharon's face smiling at him wickedly.

But then it changed again. The wicked smile remained, but was now surrounded by the hard lips of a man. The nose was now long and pointed, with a goatee covering his chin. His eyes changed from blue to midnight black.

Harold then saw something darker than he could ever imagine—small horns jutting out from both sides of the creature's forehead! Harold knew instantly that he now stared into the face of the Devil himself!

The Devil made a little bow of showmanship. His voice was sharp and hissed as he talked, "At your service. But I prefer to be called Satan. It sounds much more...personal."

*What do you want from me?*

"Why, my dear Harold! What is it that I always want? Your soul, of course!"

*No! This can't be happening! It isn't real! It's all just a bad dream!*

"But I'm afraid it is real, Harold. It's all very real." He brought his hand up to touch the side of Harold's face. Harold winced as the heat from Satan's hand made his flesh smolder and the wounds ooze once more.

“But I can make it all better, Harold! I can make all the pain go away. I can make you better than before; give you the life you’ve always dreamed of!”

Satan extended his hand, palm open, so that Harold could see his dismembered tongue lying there, looking more like a giant slug instead of a human organ. “Harold, I’m willing to make a deal with you. I’ll put this thing back into your mouth; make you brand new. All you have to do is promise me your soul.”

At that moment a thunderous voice boomed in the air around them, “Enough! I will not allow this to happen!”

An irritated look came over Satan in much the same way that a teenager looks at a disciplining parent. “Stay out of this! This man is mine!”

Now Harold could see a white light hovering in the air next to the Devil. They had all but forgotten about Harold for the moment, it seemed, as they continued their heated discussion.

Finally, the white light spoke again in a very strict tone, “You know the rules! This man did not ask for this! Now let him go at once!”

Satan looked slightly dejected for a moment, then he bent down and whispered warningly in Harold’s ear, “You will be mine!”

Harold felt a bone-jarring blow hit the side of his face once more. And then the lights went out once more.

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Harold bolted upright in bed. His t-shirt was soaked with sweat, bringing a chill to his already trembling body. He took a deep breath, trying desperately to calm himself and slow down his rapidly beating heart which was threatening to jump out of his chest.

After a minute, the whirlwind subsided and he looked around the room slowly. Everything seemed normal. Sharon lay next to him, fast asleep and breathing heavily. The alarm clock glowed 3:35 from its normal perch atop the nightstand.

Once he was confident that everything was normal, that it had all been just a bad dream, Harold inched his way over the side of the bed and made his way to the bathroom. He squinted hard as his eyes struggled to adjust to the bright light.

*God, what a nightmare!* He thought as he walked over to the sink. He turned on the

water, just a little, careful not to wake the kids. The cold splash felt good on his face as it brought his senses back to reality.

As he looked at his reflection in the mirror, the terror of what he thought had been a nightmare, flew back into him harder than ever. It wasn't so much the scratches on his face that troubled him, he could have easily scratched himself tossing and turning in a fitful dream. Even the fact that his tongue hurt wasn't out of the ordinary. Everyone has bitten their tongue once or twice in their sleep. But the bruises on his neck and face were different. He realized that the horror he had gone through hadn't been a dream after all. It had all been real.

For a long time Harold sat on the toilet, staring into the mirror and trying to figure out what had happened. Then he realized that the 'what' wasn't as important as the 'why'. He remembered the feeling of desperation he had the day before when he came home from work; the stress that had surrounded the entire house last evening. Then he remembered the thoughts that filled his head as he lay down to sleep.

Suddenly he realized that he had been given something that most people never get: a second chance. He vowed at that moment that he would make the most of it.

As he walked back into the bedroom in deep contemplation, finally at peace with himself and the world, Sharon sat up in bed. The grogginess in her voice was very apparent, "Are you ok, Hon?"

He leaned over as he sat on the edge of the bed and kissed her lightly on the forehead, "Everything's fine, Dear."

Her shock was apparent at Harold's gesture. It was even more so when his lips then kissed her gently on the tip of her nose before sliding down to embrace her lips. Instantly the passion rose between them, as they felt a burning desire between them that had disappeared a long time ago.

The next day found Harold practically bounding up the steps, as he hurried in the house to embrace his family. Of course the boys were fighting as usual, but he barely heard them. The only thing on his mind was finding his wife and giving her a big hug. His search ended when he found her in the laundry room. Casey was on the floor next to her helping fold clothes.

Harold snuck up behind Sharon and squeezed her tight. He kissed her gently on the back of the neck, sending chills through her entire body. That one spot had always been her weakness.

“Good afternoon, Gorgeous.”

A smiling Sharon turned to face Harold, “Good afternoon yourself, handsome.”

Both of the boys stopped their fighting and looked at each other in surprise. “What’s gotten into you two all of a sudden?”

Harold and Sharon just smiled at their sons in response, leaving the boys rolling their eyes and making funny gagging gestures. Then they decided to head outside and find something a little more exciting to do than watching their parents ‘making out’. Casey, on the other hand, didn’t mind a bit, and wanted in on the affection, holding her arms up to be held.

Everything was just like it used to be, just like it should be. Harold swore to himself that it would stay that way.

A little while later, after dinner was finished, Sharon told Harold that she needed to do a little shopping. Once the boys found out that she was going to the mall they both piped up that they wanted to go too. Harold looked a little guilty when Sharon glanced over his way.

“It’s not that I don’t want to go with you dear. But there’s a big basketball game on tonight. I’ve been looking forward to this game all week.”

Sharon looked at Harold’s pouting face and almost broke out laughing. “Don’t worry, Hon. It’s no big deal.” She then leaned forward to give him a little kiss before heading out the door. “I hope your team scores lots of touchdowns. Just don’t fall asleep on the couch. I’ve got plans for you.”

The boys just looked at each other and rolled their eyes again. “Oh, brother! Let’s get out of here quick!”

Then little Casey saw everyone else getting their coats on and ran to the closet to get hers. Of course she couldn’t reach it, so she desperately held out her arms for mommy to pick her up. Sharon looked at her and smiled, “Ok, little girl, you can come too.”

Harold looked at his wife apologetically. But inside he knew how inseparable she was to the kids, especially her little girl, Casey.

He stepped out onto the porch and waved goodbye as they got into the car and backed out of the driveway. Harold could still see Casey waving as they started down the street.

The loud knock on the front door brought Harold sharply awake just in time to see the final score: Notre Dame 62 UConn 60. A little smile spread across his face, even though he was

disappointed that he had fallen asleep.

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost 10:00. Sharon and the kids should have been home a long time ago. It was well past Casey's bedtime and the boys had school in the morning.

Another loud knock hit the door just as Harold was about to turn the handle. *Who in the world could be knocking at this hour?*

His heart sank immediately when he saw the two police officers standing on the porch under the dim light.

One of the officers spoke up right away. His voice was very professional, "Mr. Harold Wagner?"

"Yes, that's me. Why? What's going on here?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this sir, but there's been a terrible accident."

Harold's knees started to buckle and he had to grab the door frame to keep from collapsing. His words stumbled out of his mouth, "What kind of accident? What happened? Are Sharon and the kids all right?"

The officer looked at Harold for a second. The expression on his face told him everything, even before the words came out of the officer's mouth. "Apparently a semi ran a stoplight just as your wife was leaving the shopping mall. The impact was horrific. There was nothing the emergency crew could do to save them. I'm afraid your wife and kids were killed instantly...I'm terribly sorry."

Harold barely heard the last sentence as he fell to the ground hard, not even trying to catch himself this time. At first he just sat there on the porch for a long time in a state of shock. Then his body started to tremble violently as tears ran down his face like a river.

Both officers reached down and helped Harold to his feet. Slowly they worked their way into the house where Harold fell back onto the couch like his spine had been ripped out.

The second officer spoke up this time, his voice much more compassionate than the first, "Is there anyone we can call for you, a friend or relative maybe?"

The words were slow to register in Harold's brain, his emotions clogging all of his internal circuits. After a while he turned absently toward one of the officers and somehow explained to them in broken words and phrases that all of their families lived in different states; that there wasn't anybody.

After a long time of trying feebly to console Harold, the officers decided that there was nothing more they could do there and turned to leave. The second officer, the one with the compassionate soul, spoke up again before they left, “When you feel up to it, we’ll need you to come down and identify the bodies...but only when you’re up to it.”

A vague grunt that kind of resembled an ‘ok’ answered the officer, and the two of them walked out of the house and back into the night, leaving Harold completely alone.

Wave after wave of sorrow crashed down on him. His heart burned as it felt the full force of loved ones lost. Just when his ocean of sorrows had calmed just a little, so that he might bring his head back above water and not drown in the swirling abyss, another wave slammed down hard, sending him reeling. His family had meant the world to him and instantly they had been violently ripped from his life. *What am I going to do now? How can I go on without them?*

Finally, a long time later, the tears ran dry and couldn’t flow anymore, and his mind was numb from the terrible blow it had endured. Somehow Harold found the strength to stand, and willed himself up the stairs toward his bedroom. The only thought in his head right now was that maybe, if he laid down for a little while, he would wake up and it would all be just a bad dream like before.

Harold didn’t seem to notice that the light was already on in the bedroom as he tried to flip the switch. Then he stumbled toward the edge of the bed and was a little startled to see a small piece of paper lying right in the middle of his pillow. Curiously he picked it up and unfolded it. He almost collapsed when he read the message: “I told you so!” Below it was the picture of a smiley face with a pair of small horns sticking out of the top.

Harold sat down on the edge of the bed and didn’t move for a minute. His hand absently began to rub the side of his face and the front of his neck, feeling the emotional and physical scars there. His tongue started to roll lazily around in his mouth, and he felt the soreness that was still there. Then he realized that there was only one thing left for him to do.

He dropped to his knees beside the bed and reached under it for the locked box hidden there. He fumbled with his keys for second before he found the right one that opened it. Slowly he withdrew the revolver that had been secured inside. After that, another smaller box was retrieved and opened. For some reason his hands were eerily steady as he loaded the bullets into the gun. He spun the chamber almost in defiance, before putting the gun to the side of his head.

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Tears fell down Michael's face as he felt the emptiness inside Harold's soul. With every fiber of his being he felt the hurt that radiated from this man's broken heart and the sorrow that now engulfed his spirit.

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At that moment the words that his mother had spoken to him so many times before echoed in his head: "Careful what you wish for...it just might come true!"

Harold thought he could hear a sinister laughter filling the air around him. Quietly, he said a final goodbye to his wife and children. Then he pulled the trigger.

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The blast from the gun jolted Michael from his terrible nightmare. For a long time he sat on his bed, wrapped in his blankets and trembling violently. His hair was drenched in sweat and his mouth was dry and parched. A coldness and emptiness filled his bones.

After a while he calmed down a little and was finally able to get out of bed. He stumbled on weak legs to the bathroom, where he found the familiar bottle of aspirin that had become his best friend the last few weeks. As he stood in front of the mirror, searching for answers, the words of the dream creature resounded in his brain: "You know who I am, don't you?"

That's what scared Michael the most; that he had stood face to face with Satan and felt the fires of hell waiting to devour his soul.