

The GoneGod World  
Episode One

# Paradise Lot



R.E. VANCE

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Hallelujah!

## Prologue

The gods are gone. All of them.

I've had the same dream every night since they left. I'm running from a devouring darkness that rushes over the world like a tidal wave of emptiness. I run on charred earth, unsure if the darkness or fear will get me first. In the distance, I can just see a pinprick of light ahead. If I can get to it, I will be safe. My legs burn and my lungs heave. I run and run toward the light, but before I reach it, the world stops. Not like a ledge or a shore; the world just stops. Null and void. And I know, in that way you do in dreams, that I'm standing at the end of everything.

I turn around. If I'm going to die, I want to see it coming. The darkness slows down as the rushing wave breaks into a creeping black fog. It knows I'm trapped. It's savoring my terror.

Just before the darkness envelops me, a burning light grows from the Void.

Like the darkness, it blinds.

I am surrounded by light and dark until a hand reaches from the burning halo and pulls me somewhere else.

That's when the dreams differ, because every night she takes me somewhere new.



Tonight, we walk on a sandy beach that reminds me of where I proposed to her. This is more secluded though—there's no other sign of life. An imperfect memory of a place made perfect by time and imagination.

I'm in linen shorts and little else. Bella is in the same sleeveless sundress that she wears on all our nightly rendezvous. It's the dress she wore the night we got engaged; the one she wore when we drove up to PopPop's cabin for what would pass as our honeymoon.

The dress she was wearing the day the Others killed her.

The hem is dry despite her being ankle-deep in the ocean. She's standing next to me, so close that we could hold hands. But we never do. Even though I want it more than anything, we never touch. I don't know why.

"Hi, Bella," I say. She doesn't look at me, her eyes fixed on the blue, cloudless sky. "I thought you hated salt water. What was it you used to say? 'Salt's a preservative and I don't like the thought of anything preserving me.'"

"Dust to dust," she says, still staring at the same spot in the sky. A single cumulus cloud has crept in from beyond the horizon.

"Yeah, yeah—'dust to dust.' Mummify me, I say. I want to be this beautiful forever."

"I stand by my words," she chuckles, looking at me for the first time that night. "I wanted life to use me up, and when it was done with me, I wanted to fade away into whatever came next."

"And did you?"

"Nothing comes next. You know that."

Yeah, I do. Everyone knows that Heaven is closed and Hell doesn't exist.

“So what are you? A ghost, haunting my dreams?” I ask. The words come out bitter and angry.

Her mood darkens and in a distant voice she says, “Ghosts aren’t real. Not anymore.”

“Well, they kind of are,” I say. “Have you spoken to your mother recently?”

A smile creeps across her face as she shoots me her “You better behave” look.

“Be nice. You promised.” Her smile fades and she is looking at the horizon again. The lone cloud has been replaced with a gray, ominous skyline. She points. “There’s somewhere you need to be.”

I hear the distant roll of thunder as the wind picks up.

“There is nowhere I want to be,” I say, raising my voice so she can hear me over the wind.

A fork of lightning strikes the sand beside us as a gale force wind blows in from the sea, far too fast to be natural. The once blue sky is now blanketed in grays.

“I didn’t say it was somewhere you wanted to be. There is somewhere you need to be,” she says, flattening the wrinkles of her impossibly dry dress.

“I don’t want this to end. Not yet.”

“Oh Jean-Luc, I don’t want you to go either.” She captures me with her intense cerulean blue eyes and, in a serious tone I’ve seldom heard her use, says, “Jean, there’s a storm coming. The thing about storms is that they always end. Remember that, and remember your promise.”

I nod. My promise. A promise I made to the dream of my dead wife one lonely night in the middle of nowhere. A promise that I would go to Paradise Lot and help Others. A promise I plan to keep.

The storm is getting stronger. I need to wake up. “Will you be back?” I ask her this every time I have to leave.

“Whenever you sleep,” she always replies, smiling. “Someone has to save you from your dreams.”

I know she will. She always does.

“In this life and the next,” I say, just before my body jolts as the real world comes into focus.

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My mobile phone was ringing. I glanced at the clock. Three in the morning. Only one person would call me at this time: Penemue.

## Chapter 1 Of Angels & Men

I parked in front of the Paradise Lot Police Station, to where I had been summoned—if such a lofty term could be used for being roused from a perfect dream at such a GoneGodless hour—to bail out a certain guest of mine. My head throbbed from lack of sleep. I hated being woken up; I hated being taken away from Bella.

From outside, the station looked like any other: red brick building; a boring backlit sign with the name in big blue letters; a flex-face shield above the door. Typical—until you went inside.

The first indication that the Paradise Lot Police Station, and by extension the world, was different was that the entrance had been unceremoniously enlarged. Whereas the doors were previously wide enough to accommodate three humans standing shoulder to shoulder, now they were big enough for an elephant.

The next indication that it wasn't your typical cops' HQ was who manned the front desk: Medusa. As in turn-you-to-stone lady-of-legend and friggin' Queen-of-the-Gorgons Medusa. As I walked in, at least seven of her thirty or so snake dreadlocks looked up. "Jean," she said, not taking her own eyes off the computer screen, "what brings you here at ..." One of the snakes looked at the clock on the wall. "Three in the morning?"

"Same old, same old," I said. She giggled and pulled out a form for me. I avoided eye contact as I took it from her. I wasn't afraid she'd turn me to stone—she could, if she was willing to burn through a couple years of her life—it was just that some habits die harder than others. It didn't matter that in this Brave New GoneGod World she no longer guarded the Golden Fleece, or that she, like all cops, had taken a vow to serve and protect. Nor did it matter that she was mortal, with all the insecurities, doubts and fears that entailed ...

She was still friggin' Medusa.

Her giggles faded, and a shy hand took the signed form back. A few taps on a keyboard later a hurt voice said, "Officer Steve will be with you in a moment." I got the feeling one of her snakes was eyeing me, which was confirmed by a disdainful hiss.

I reminded myself that humans didn't look at her out of the same superstitious habit as me. Hell, most Others probably avoided looking at her for the same damn reason. Medusa, like all Others, was newly mortal—thirteen years to be exact—and I guess she went through all the existential angst any teenager did. After all, wasn't not being seen the basis of countless teenage vampire novels?

Oh, hell ...

I forced myself to look up. Medusa worked with her head down, but a large green snake that stemmed from the top of her skull edged forward. Its forked tongue flicked a couple of inches from my face. Partly because I was still half asleep and partly because the snake genuinely looked like it was smiling, I petted it on the head.

Medusa looked up immediately, and my heart fluttered in fear as our eyes connected.

I did not turn to stone.

And really looking at her for the first time, I noted that the Medusa of legend had a

bad rep. She wasn't hideous—hell, she wasn't even plain. High cheekbones housed perfect little dimples on a kind face.

Unused to eye contact, she turned away with a bashful flutter—and that's when I noticed she possessed a more than ample, perfectly formed bosom that heaved quite seductively with every breath.

Medusa was hot!

Hot enough that any serious suitor would consider a bath of snakes just to get used to scaly skin crawling all over them. Plus, Astarte, the succubus who lived in my hotel, had informed me that between the sheets, the snakes were quite the erotic apparatus—for both parties.

"Oooh," Medusa said, shivering at my touch, "Marty likes you."

"Marty?" I asked, retracting my hand. "You named him?"

"Only the mains," she said. "This is Johnny, Alfie, Rocky, Jimmy, Cory, Georgie, and you've already met Marty. What, don't you name yours?" she asked.

"What? My hair?"

"No, silly," she said, her eyes sliding down my torso.

"Oh! Oh ... Ahh, I suppose I did, once. Well, not me, but, my wife. I mean ..." I stuttered, feeling my face burn red.

Medusa broke my awkward stammering by touching my sleeve.

"I like your jacket," she said.

There was something about my jacket. It existed in that sweet spot of representing different things for different people. It was black and collarless. To some, I looked like a hipster priest, my white T-shirt acting as the clerical collar. Others saw me as a sort of fashionable monk, back from years in the mountains. Astarte said the jacket reminded her of an ancient demon called the Judge who separated the righteous from the wicked—and then burned the righteous. Sounded like a great guy.

Medusa looked at me expectantly. Oh, hell ... I suddenly felt like I was back in junior high. What should I do? Maybe I should compliment something about her? Perhaps one of her snakes? If so, which one? And if I picked one, would the others be offended? And would they be venomous?

The switchboard beeped—and I was literally saved by the bell. Her snakes hissed at the computer as she buzzed me through to the back.

"Officer Steve will meet you through there," she said, disappointed.

Just before entering, I turned to say goodbye. I was met by a head full of snakes, all of which simultaneously winked at me.

Hallelujah!



Officer Steve met me at the door, shifting from four legs to two and standing erect before me with an ease that implied every creature could do so. Being one of the Billy Goat Gruff brothers, Officer Steve had a cubicle shaped more like a stable than an office space.

Serious, efficient, smart and diligent, the Gruff brothers made perfect cops, despite looking like your typical—albeit very large—goat. Officer Steve was the youngest and thus

smallest Gruff, which meant he was the size of a lion.

“Hi, Steve,” I started, but he lifted a hoof, indicating that he needed a minute. Then his hoof fanned out into finger-like appendages, which he put into his overcoat to search for a pen in pockets not designed for hooves.

As he fumbled in his pockets, I surveyed the room and was greeted by the hustle and bustle of Paradise Lot Police Station. Just like any human station, this one was filled with angry cops and even angrier cops. Except here, the average beat cop had fangs. An annoyed valkyrie led a cuffed dark elf to an interrogation room, a despondent three-headed cerberus booked several stoned fairies. A minotaur detective with a pinstriped tie sat in his nipple-high fuzzy cubicle, filling out paperwork. Several broken pencils littered his desk, all destroyed by powerful hands more used to war hammers than No. 2 lead pencils.

When the gods left with only a “Thank you for believing in us, but it’s not enough. We’re leaving. Good luck,” Others were forced from their homes to live on the mortal plane. Some fought this change, but most Others accepted their new lot in life, trying to make the best out of a bad situation. Paradise Lot Police Station was an example of them trying. The station was filled with legends trying to fix the problem created by our mutual gods. But even legends have limitations and these guys had been utterly defeated, not by mortal combat but by a far more formidable foe—human bureaucracy.

Officer Steve finally managed to pull out his pen. Clicking it awake, he asked, “Jean-Luc Matthias?”

“Oh, come on, Steve, we spoke less than an hour ago on the phone. What’s more, we’ve met over a dozen times before.”

The Gruff gave me a blank look, his pen hovering over his clipboard as he waited for my answer.

“Yes, yes—I’m Jean-Luc Matthias,” I said, annoyed, doing my best to iron out my frustration as I reminded myself that the Gruffs were just doing their best in the GoneGod world.

The Gruffs, more diligent than most, studied human customs, determined to fit in as best they could. But since they were creatures of story, they preferred tales to dry explanation, finding particular comfort in the legends of Sherlock Holmes. Hence the London Fog overcoats, heavy wool hats and smokeless pipes. At least they were trying.

Officer Steve ticked a box and handed me a form to fill out.

“What happened this time?” I asked as I filled in my information.

“Fighting, I’m afraid,” the Gruff brayed in a British accent. Damn Sherlock.

“Again?” I said, surprised—Penemue was an arrogant pain in the ass, but a fighter he was not.

“Indeed, but this time it is a bit more serious. You see, your feathered friend was engaging in fisticuffs outside the Palisade.”

“What?” I said. “What the hell was he doing there?”

“Not a clue. But he’s been roughed up pretty bad. When we arrived on the scene, three HuMans were pinning him to the ground like a butterfly on display. They’re all locked up now.”

Damn—this was far more serious than his usual drunk antics. The HuMans were a gang of Other-hating wannabe bad-asses. If you imagined the illegitimate children of Nazis

and nutbar survivalists, you'd just be scratching the surface of what kind of scum these guys were. And the Palisade served as their headquarters. No sane Other would come within five blocks of the place. But then again—Penemue was suffering from something he called “Mortal Madness.” I guess in that way he wasn't really that different from the rest of us.

I shook my head. “Damn,” I said aloud. “Where is he?”

“This way, sir,” the Gruff brayed, reverting to four legs.

We took four steps before an ominous voice bellowed, “Hold—I wish to speak with the human.” Only one creature possessed a voice made from thunder—the archangel Michael.

Hallelujah ... it had to be him!



## Chapter 2

### Even Angels Have Their Wicked Schemes

After the GrandExodus and the initial years of fighting subsided, Michael retired from his role as archangel, Advocate of Man, Slayer of the Great Dragon and Leader of the Host of God, to begin his career as a police officer in Paradise Lot. We'd had our run-ins in the past, and he didn't like how I ran the One Spire Hotel. He didn't like the kind of Others I let in and how willing I was to ignore some of their more questionable ways. There was a time, early on, when he visited the hotel daily, citing some violation or other that I was ignoring. It wasn't until I countered with "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone" that I finally got the archangel to leave me alone. Since then, he only came around when there was a complaint.

Still, despite him being such a hardass, I had to hand it to the archangel. He could have been a demigod here—what with all the denominations of Christianity vying for him to be the head of their various churches—but instead he chose to enter the police force in one of the slummiest, dirtiest parts of the world, insisting on starting as a beat cop before quickly working his way up the ranks. For that, if nothing else, I could respect him.

The archangel strode into the main area, each movement exuding strength, each gesture demanding respect. By the GoneGods, he was power incarnate. "Human Jean-Luc," he didn't so much as say, but rather boomed. He was addressing me with my species, which meant that whatever he had to show me mattered. Using one's species as a prefix put a formal twist to any conversation. It was like using "Mister" or "Missus," and was a habit employed by many Others. I, for one, welcomed the habit, finding it useful in avoiding embarrassing situations like confusing gnomes for dwarves, harpies for valkyrie, or elves for vulcans—not that I'd ever met a vulcan ... yet.

"Look, if it has to do with Penemue, I—"

"No, Human Jean-Luc. My business with you this evening has nothing to do with the fallen angel or his debauched ways," the archangel bellowed, each word coming down like a hammer. "Come. Follow me and all shall be made clear."

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Michael led me to his office, its door widened to accommodate his massive size. Head to toe, the chief of police was eleven feet high and built as if Mr. Olympia were carved out of granite. He walked in, sat on the steel frame that acted as his chair, and gestured for me to take the seat opposite him. He started fumbling with his desk drawers, his massive fingers struggling to flip through files.

As I waited for Police Chief Michael to find whatever it was he wanted to show me, I noted that on his office wall hung various awards and one framed newspaper clipping from the local rag that showed an unimpressed Michael accepting a plaque—the headline reading, "Archangel Climbs Police Ranks at Record Speed." Well, with such a colorful resume, there wasn't ever really a doubt, was there, that he'd rise quickly in the ranks of the local PD.

Still, to display so many awards was quite prideful and very unangelic. I pointed to the awards and said, "Pride cometh before a fall."

Michael stopped fiddling and looked behind him. "Indeed," he sighed with recognition. He raised the tips of one of his multiple pairs of wings so that I could no longer see the display from where I sat. "But I have been told that they make me more ... more ... human."

"A worthy quality?" I asked, knowing how he felt.

"A useful one," he said, finally getting out the folder and slamming shut his drawers. He settled on the steel-frame chair, then looking past me and out of the window he said, "Your car registration will soon expire. Be sure to renew it lest I am forced to impound it."

I looked behind me and through the window at my 1969 Plymouth Road Runner. He could read the registration sticker from where it sat a hundred feet away in a dimly lit parking lot at night? Hallelujah.

"Did you really call me in here to talk about my car?" I asked. In my mind I debated the possibility of that being the case. After all, he was an Other cop and registrations were exactly the kind of bureaucratic plight that they took very seriously. It was right up there with sorting the recycling and paying overdue library book fines.

"No, human, there is this ... ahh ... poster I wish to show you," he said, the word poster stumbling out of his lips. He fumbled with a folder before his angelic dexterity won the day and he managed to pull out a flyer. On it I read:

In today's confusing mortal world,  
Others of all species are welcome to attend

#### COPING WITH MORTALITY

We'll answer pestering questions like:

"Why is Sleep Important?"

and

"Headaches—Biological Inconvenience, or Wrath of an Angry Demon?"

and many, many more!

"So?" I asked, rubbing my eyes. I looked over at the clock ticking on the wall. Three-thirty a.m. If I could get home in an hour, I could hang out with Bella for another three hours before my day started. "What does that have to do with me?"

"The address," Michael answered.

I looked down at the address—One Spire Hotel, followed by a date and time. I took a double look, rubbing my eyes again. Damn, Jean-Luc, wake up. "Holy crap," I said, my brain finally confirming what I read. "This is for tomorrow. I mean, tonight. This is supposed to start in like fifteen hours." I failed to hide my surprise.

"Indeed," Michael muttered. "And crap is anything but holy," he added, folding his arms over his chest as he waited for my explanation.

“Well, hell—it’s a seminar to help Others cope with mortality. It’s a good thing. The kind of service that Paradise Lot needs. And if you’re going to stop it from happening because of some ridiculous minor infraction, you’re being ... being ... really anal,” I said. What I failed to add was that I had no idea this kind of thing happened in Paradise Lot, let alone in my hotel. That was exactly the kind of thing the archangel would latch onto.

Michael waved his hands in a dismissive gesture. “Where would one get a flyer such as this?”

“I don’t know.” I really didn’t. “Various help centers, the hospital, anywhere public service announcements are made. Hell, a police station should be handing out stacks of them.” My voice dripped with sarcasm, which I hoped sufficiently hid the fact that I really didn’t know.

My gambit seemed to work. Michael announced to no one in particular, “I am satisfied with your answer.” He opened a second folder and removed a single photograph.

He threw the rest of the folder’s remains in front of me, scattering photographs that displayed a scene of carnage in a glossy finish. I hadn’t seen this kind of gore since I left the Army. The photos were of three humanoid creatures that were impaled into the side of a building, pressed so forcefully against the wall that they hung to the wall like macabre graffiti. Bits of bone stuck out where the flesh could not stretch enough to accommodate their new form. If it wasn’t so horrific, I might have thought this some comical rendition of a three dimensional creature being flattened by a rolling pin. Their bodies were mangled so badly that it was impossible for me to tell what kind of creatures they were, but given that their blood was bright yellow, I ruled out human.

I leafed through the photos, one after another. Something about them bugged me. Sure, there were the mangled bodies, but whatever had killed them did so by slamming them against a wall with such force that it literally flattened them, though the red brick wall on which they hung was completely unaffected. You’d think that there would be some cracks in the wall, crumbled stone, anything. “What could have done this?” I asked.

Michael shook his head. “We are not sure. All we do know is that time was burned to do this, which means that either this was some ancient grudge settled or we have a—”

“Fanatic on our hands,” I finished.

The archangel nodded.

“How much time?” I asked.

“Again, it is hard to tell. If I were to use such force, I would burn through a month, perhaps six weeks.”

“A month!” I said in surprise. When the gods left, ejecting their Oncelmmortal subjects to the mortal plane, they effectively cut them off from their source of magic. Every Other only had a certain amount of time to live. Others could trade in some of that time to tap into their once-upon-a-time limitless magic. The more powerful you were, the more time you had, but still ... rational Others didn’t use magic, choosing to preserve the precious little time they had left. Can you blame them? Eighty years, for a creature that has known thousands of years of life, is precious little time indeed.

But then there were the Fanatics, Others so unhinged by mortality that they burned through time in a self-destructive, suicidal rampage without consideration or care. The result was catastrophic. During the Nine Year War, a Fanatic valkyrie took on an entire platoon on

her own, aging with every swing of her golden axe. The result? Seventy human soldiers slain before she was too old to lift her weapon.

“A month is not a ‘grudge,’ ancient or not,” I said. “Why give your enemy the satisfaction of knowing they took so much time from you? No, this has Fanatic written all over it.”

Michael nodded. “Still, of all the tortures I have witnessed, not even the Devil killed with such brutality.”

“The Devil doesn’t exist. Not anymore,” I said, handing him back the photographs.

Michael boomed, “So you keep telling me. But I’ve met the demon, and I can assure you that he’s real. Anyway, the victims were cynocephaly. In your travels, have you ever met any?”

“Humanoid bodies, dogs’ heads,” I confirmed. Michael nodded. “Yeah, I knew a few just after the war. They served as guards when Bella and I ... you know. But I haven’t seen a cynocephalus in years. Why?” I asked.

“Because we also found this at the crime scene,” he said, his voice uncharacteristically soft. He handed me the photo he had removed.

This one wasn’t of a crime scene. It was an old black and white photo of Bella, standing with the Ambassador. They were both smiling and so filled with hope that their mission of peace would work. Although I had never seen this photograph before, I knew when and where it had been taken. They were standing in front of old machinery that would have made a 1950s Frankenstein set director drool with envy. Ancient lab equipment that was more alchemy than scientific, clunky mechanical gears meshed together and sparks of electrical current jumping from antenna to antenna—not that you could see the electricity move in the photo. I just knew because I’d been there once, helplessly watching Bella’s death from behind a steel door.

Hallelujah—I wanted to be reminded of that place as much as I wanted to be drawn and quartered. Actually, I would have preferred the drawn-and-quartered option. At least that one included a foreseeable end to the pain.

Instinctively I reached up and grabbed the fake-silver chain with a twisty-tie wrapped around it. I rubbed the plastic between my fingers as I held the image for a long time, staring at the unwavering smile she wore no matter how bad it got. I guess that’s why the Ambassador chose her—he needed a human counterpart to help his mission to broker peace between humans and Others, and Bella was, well ... Let’s just say that few humans were as kind and as good as she was.

“Have you seen this photograph before?”

“No ...” I said, having to clear my throat. It stung to see her so happy when in just a few short months she would be dead. “How did you get this?”

Michael studied my face, as if looking for some hint of a lie in it. He must have found none, because he said, “It probably means nothing. After all, Bella and the—”

“One of these guys had it?” I asked, rising from my seat.

Michael nodded. “We have no way of knowing who originally possessed the photograph. We suspect it belonged to one of the victims, who most likely knew her during her time as a diplomat.”

I nodded. “Like I said—some were guards, but no one I ever got close to.”

“Very well, Human Jean-Luc. I thank you for your time,” he said, standing.

“What? So that’s it? You found a photo of my wife ... my Bella ... and a flyer with my hotel address on it, and you just, ‘Thank you for your time,’ boom, boom. Thunder, thunder. Come on. You’ve got to give me more than this.”

“We’ll keep you posted if anything comes up. In the meantime, should you remember anything, please do give us a call.” He handed me one of his cards.

“I have your number,” I said, leaving the card on his desk. “Just tell me if the hotel is in danger. I have guests and—”

“We do not believe so,” Michael interrupted. “We believe that this is retribution for the cynocephaly failing to protect the Ambassador. But like I said, this is an ongoing investigation. We will keep you posted.”

I gave Michael my best Oh, really? look, to which he answered, “I promise.” A promise from an Other was as good as gold, and a promise from an archangel was even better.

I nodded and made to leave, pausing at the door.

“Yes,” Michael bellowed. “Did you forget something?”

“The photograph. Can I have it?”

“It is evidence,” he said. But when I didn’t move he sighed and said, “After the investigation is closed I will see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”



### Chapter 3

#### Do Caged Angels Sing?

I stepped out of Chief of Police Michael's office, my heart fluttering with anguish. Bella was the last person I expected to see at four a.m. in a police station, and I was struggling not to break down. But it was more than that. Someone had a picture of Bella. It drove me crazy thinking that some nutbar would be looking at her, thinking about her. I supposed that the photo could have belonged to one of the cynocephaly. Hell, it was even likely. The now expired Ambassador was somewhat of a celebrity amongst Others and his picture hung on many walls, like a velvet painting of Elvis. The Ambassador had done much good before some Fanatics set an explosion that ended his life, and there were many Others who still remembered him for trying.

However, if the photo of my Bella belonged to the killer, that meant he could have been part of the plot that ended Bella's and the Ambassador's lives all those years ago. After Bella died, I tried tracking down the group responsible, but all leads went cold. In the end, after spending three years hunting for her killer, all I had was a river of blood and was no closer to finding her killers. A part of me really hoped that the photo belonged to those elusive Fanatics and that our paths would finally cross. I would relish the second chance at avenging my dead wife.

But that probably would not come to pass—I'd spent all my second chances when Bella took me back. Twice. The first time was when I returned from my stint in the Army. And the second, well ... that was when she began haunting my dreams. Hallucination or not, Bella saved me.

I would have to put aside all thoughts of payback. That was the old me. The new me was about helping Others. And right now, an Other was waiting for me to bail him out of jail.

Back in the main area, I approached Officer Steve and said, "OK, you can take me to Penemue now."

The Billy Goat Gruff stood on his hind legs, pulled out his clipboard and asked, "Jean-Luc Matthias?"



Penemue sat in the drunk tank, expounding on the glory days of immortality lost, which was—according to him—another symptom of Mortal Madness. That, I was expecting. What I did not expect were the half dozen HuMan gang members that sat in the tank with him.

Penemue, unlike Michael, was just an angel (it's funny how natural those words were—just an angel, like that wasn't special enough), which meant that he was only eight feet high and had one pair of wings to Michael's three. He was well built, with the physique of a finely tuned bodybuilder, although these days Penemue was looking more like Homer Simpson than Arnold Schwarzenegger—if, that was, Homer had long beautiful blond hair and wore a tweed vest.

When we walked in, the leader of the HuMans perked up. "Come on, Officer. Let us

go ... We weren't fighting. Cross my heart," he said, making a little X over his heart. Their leader was a boy of eighteen affectionately known as EightBall. He had all the tell-tale sign of the HuMans: shaved head covered in tattoos of symbols that once meant something—the cross, the Star of David, the crescent moon, the Wheel of the Dharma, the nine-pointed star and a half dozen other symbols from dead or dying religions. As for his name, my guess was that it had something to do with the vertical infinity symbol tattooed right between his eyes. In the right light, it kind of looked like the number 8. To those with a limited imagination, his dark complexion combined with the tattoo made his head look like an eight ball. "We weren't fighting. We were having a disagreement, that's all," EightBall repeated.

Penemue sighed. "The boy is correct. We were merely having a disagreement as to whether or not I should exist. A debate that has raged on long before the GrandExodus, although for less literal reasons."

Officer Steve ignored this, pulling out keys and unlocking the cell. "I formally discharge Angel Penemue into your care," he said.

Before he could open the cell door, EightBall reached out and grabbed Officer Steve's hoof. "How come the pigeon gets out and we don't?"

"Because," Officer Steve said, withdrawing his hoof and pulling at the door, "the telephone numbers you provided either did not work or the person answering refused to come and collect you."

"Awww, come on, Baa Baa Black Sheep," EightBall said. Several of his fellow gang members chuckled at the insult. "We're just a bunch of poor kids abandoned by our parents, out looking for love in all the wrong places. Show us some love, Mutton, and let us out."

At EightBall's words, Penemue turned to the boy and said, "Not abandoned, young human. Orphaned. I tried to tell you, your mother and father would have never done such a thing ... Do you know why they named you Newton, young human? It is because—"

But before Penemue could finish, EightBall—whose real name was apparently Newton—punched him square in the nose, causing little streams of light to bleed out of his nostrils.

So that was why they were fighting—Penemue was doing his thing. Angels were created with a single purpose in mind—their one true "thing"—and Penemue's thing was knowing all that was written. That included the abstract, metaphorical writing of one's deeds on one's soul. And with Penemue's perfect memory it meant he could tell you everything about you, your parents, your extended family and all your relatives going back to the beginning of time, with an eerie precision. Sadly, Penemue's thing tended to freak the hell out of people.

The youngest Billy Goat Gruff produced a billy club from out of only the GoneGods knew where and in a stern voice bleated, "That's enough out of you hooligans. One more peep and I'll lock you up and throw away the key." Clearly the Sherlock that Steve studied was more Victorian than modern.

The gang burst out into laughter before settling down. "Look here, copper," EightBall said between chuckles, "he started it."

Penemue nodded. "Indeed I did. My apologies, young Human New—ahhh ... EightBall."

Officer Steve huffed and opened the cell. Penemue, still stinking drunk, stumbled

out. “Let’s try and have a week where I don’t see you in there. Think you can manage it?” the Gruff said, temporarily abandoning his Victorian English vernacular. I had to admit, I was impressed at how natural he sounded. Officer Steve got on all fours and walked away—hallelujah, he sounded like a cop; in the right light, he even looked like a cop ... until he got on all fours and trotted away and reminded everyone he was a large goat.

“Come on, you giant lug,” I said, trying to lead Penemue away. The angel used his wings to help balance himself, feathered tips pressing against the police station’s linoleum floor.

“Hey, priest,” EightBall said before we could walk away. I looked over as the young boy gestured for me to come close.

I should have walked away, ignored the kid, but instead I tugged at my collarless jacket and said, “Priest? I’m no priest. But I think you know that already.”

“Yeah, we do,” EightBall said, gesturing for me to lean in close. He looked around to see if Officer Steve was listening. “We know all about what you do, priest. We know where you and the pigeon live. And we know how much you love them freaks. The boys and I used to turn a blind eye to you insulting the human race by helping those rejects out, but no longer. Pigeon got us fired up and now we’re going to fire you up. Soon as we get out of here, we’re coming and we’re going to rain holy, righteous hell on you and your hotel.”

I sighed as if bored. Only two things got through to a kid like him: fear and respect. And since respect took time, I went for fear. “Fine ... but will you do me a favor?” I said in a steady, even tone. EightBall looked at me curiously. “When you come, just make sure you take me down first. I don’t want any of your blood on my hands, and if I see you hurting someone living under my roof, well then ...” My voice trailed off, letting his imagination finish the thought.

EightBall looked at me, confused, a hint of fear touching his eyes. For a moment I thought maybe that was enough, that him seeing how deadly serious I was, how unafraid I was, would deter him from attacking. Like I said, I knew his type. EightBall’s eyes hardened. “OK, old man,” he said, nodding slowly, “I can do that for you. You go down first.” He backed away from the bars, rejoining his gang on the bench. Hallelujah—so much for a peaceful resolution.

## Chapter 4

### Trains, Planes, Automobiles and Wings

Getting Penemue into the backseat of my old Plymouth was damn near impossible. In the end I had to rest him on his stomach. It wasn't far to the hotel and we could have walked it, but have you ever tried to act as a crutch for an eight-foot-tall, four-hundred-pound angel? The last time I tried, I nearly passed out from the effort, even though Penemue used his wings as crutches.

The arches of his wings jutted out the driver's side backseat window, while his taloned feet hung out the passenger's. It wasn't the best I could do, just the best I was willing to do. The angel had, after all, woken me from a very pleasant dream.

"Drambuie," he said as I pulled out of the police station parking lot.

Drambuie was a sickly sweet honey whiskey and it was the only thing the fallen angel drank, claiming it was the closest thing mortals had to Ambrosia. If you've ever had a Drambuie hangover, you'll know that the last thing you'd ever want to drink was Ambrosia. I honked at no one in particular as I hit a speed bump way too fast. The angel groaned, and I smiled at my over-developed sense of passive aggression. Like I said—pleasant dream.

"I think you've had quite enough of that stuff for one night," I said, taking a fast turn. Another groan from him. Another smile from me.

Penemue lifted one of his wings, pulled at a little canteen of Drambuie and began downing it. Seeing that turned my passive aggression to aggressive aggression. I reached in the back, yanked the canteen from his grimy claws and threw it out the window. "Hey," he protested. "I was drinking that."

"Yes, you were," I growled. "And what good did that do you? I'm bailing your ass out of jail at four in the morning, we got a gang of testosterone-jacked teenagers who want to turn you into a pincushion of light—and you want to drink some more. What's wrong with you?"

"The same thing that is wrong with all of us. Mortal Madness! For which death is the only known cure."

"Shut it," I said.

"Indeed," he said. A hand popped out from the back with another canteen in it.

"Drink?"

"Drink? What? Where did you get that from?" I said, grabbing the second canteen and throwing it out the window.

"I have more than one wing, Human Jean-Luc," Penemue said matter-of-factly. "And layer after layer of feathers. I could stay dry in a tsunami. Did it once in a river of blood ..."

"Penemue!" I barked. "Are you even listening to me?"

From my rear view mirror I could see the angel's face turn toward me. Our eyes met in the glass. "Jean, please. I hear you. All of Paradise Lot hears you."

"Why!"

"I wanted to play pool," Penemue said. "Figured I'd be good at the angles."

That was too much. I pulled the car to the side and threw the gear into Park. I turned to face the fallen angel and said, "I supported you when you were homeless. I covered for

you when the cops came 'round looking for all the library books you stole. I lied for you when your makeshift distillery blew up and I took care of you when you sprained your wing playing Santa Claus and got stuck in a chimney."

"St. Nick, and it was an industrial shoot and I was trying to escape a pack of guard dogs with a taste for the divine."

"Whatever!" I shouted. "The point is, you were laid up for three months while I fed, watered and Drambuie. I think I've earned enough credit to know why! Why would you mess with them? Why would you go to the HuMans' headquarters? Why? Why? Why!"

"Because ..." Penemue hesitated. "Because I wanted to apologize."

"To who?" I asked.

"To Newton. EightBall, I mean."

I had expected a lot of clever answers from the angel, but the thought that he'd apologize to anyone for anything left me flabbergasted. Eventually I asked, "For what?"

"For what?" Penemue echoed. "Let's see ... Perhaps I wanted to apologize for burning down his house. Or perhaps it was because I felt guilty for stealing his future and turning him into an orphan. Or perhaps I wanted to say sorry for killing his parents."

That last comment shut me up. The two of us drove in silence until the angel eventually broke it. "Killing his parents, Jean-Luc. Even for a human, you are daft. During the GrandExodus, I fell on his home and killed his parents. For that, I felt I at least owed him an apology, even if it is thirteen years too late."

So that was what this was all about. Others were just as shocked by the gods leaving, so much so that most didn't show up in the best of moods. In Australia, scores of bunyips came out of the sea. In Japan, yūrei descended Mt. Fuji. Giants wandered out of Stonehenge, and in Oxford angry dwarves walked out of some poor guy's chimney. And those were the nicer arrivals. Sadly, in most places Others showed up in a more Biblical fashion.

Volcanoes spewed dragons and tornadoes were filled with shrieking banshees. Oceans boiled and skies turned blood red. In Paris, the earth opened up, swallowing the Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile as ghouls and orcs streamed out in droves, attacking everything and anything that was unlucky enough to have been nearby. In Greece, minotaurs leveled the Parthenon. In China, the Jade Emperor's army wiped out entire villages before their rage finally subsided.

And as for Paradise Lot? Well, the sky opened up and legions of angels fell onto my city like comets. One of those comets killed PopPop, making me an orphan. Another comet did the same to EightBall.

More fluorescent tears streamed down Penemue's face as he spoke. "When I was ejected from Heaven, I fell—and not for the first time, mind you—onto this cursed city ... and right onto the apartment building where young Human Newton's parents resided. I didn't mean to, but as anyone who has fallen can tell you, one does not always have control over one's trajectory." He spoke the last sentence with a pompous air, trying to hide his shame.

"For days, I stood out on the Palisade," Penemue continued, "trying to work up the courage to speak to the young boy. When I saw him this evening, laughing with his friends, I thought to myself that today would be the day I apologized—but before I could say

anything, the gang of boys just attacked, and ... well, you know the rest.”

I didn't know what to say. Penemue's guilt for accidentally killing EightBall's parents was consuming him. This was not the kind of guilt that went away with a confession or even self-destruction. Believe me, I know. This kind of guilt stalked you, nipping away at your heels little by little until you were driven mad. And there was nothing I could say or do to console my friend.

Penemue looked up and said, “Did you know that young Human Newton was considered a child prodigy? At the age of eight he could play the entire Fifth Symphony with nary an error. His parents were so proud that they saved every penny they could to encourage his talent. Who knows what he could have accomplished had I not stolen his future from him?”

“It's not your fault,” I said. “It's theirs.” I jerked my head at the car roof, indicating the gods. “For leaving. For the way they left.”

“Perhaps ...” he said, his voice drifting off. “But I do have wings, and had I been just a little bit faster or more aware, I might have fallen elsewhere.” And with that fell more fluorescent tears, until the twice-fallen angel fell once more into sleep.



## Chapter 5

### Lust or Love

We drove home, a soft snore emanating from the backseat. After hearing Penemue's confession, I knew that the EightBall problem wasn't going away. Beyond the little annoyance that the HuMans were a violent group of Otherphobes who would start targeting the One Spire Hotel, this was an issue of penance for the twice-fallen angel. How could he blame himself for their death? It wasn't his fault that he was evicted from Hell without warning. And it wasn't his fault that his entry to the mortal realm happened to be over Paradise Lot. But those were rational arguments for a much larger problem, and as one who has more blood on his hands than a thousand good deeds could wash off, when it came to seeking redemption, rationality was not the nail on which you hung your coat.

Redemption is reliant on being forgiven, and I seriously doubted that EightBall would ever forgive Penemue. Even if he did, Penemue would never forgive himself. Although I felt for my friend's plight, I had a more practical issue to deal with—EightBall would come for him, and soon. Penemue was a fallen angel with a massive amount of power, both physical and magical; I knew that he would suffer a thousand strikes and still not be tempted to lift a finger against a human. So was his way. So was the way of so many Others hated by my fear-mongering species. He might even welcome the attack, seeing it as a blood-for-blood kind of deal—like I said, redemption wasn't rational. But Penemue was only one of the Others who lived at One Spire Hotel, and what he did put them in danger as well. His confession, although noble, was also selfish.

I nervously thumbed the industrial heavy-plastic twist-tie I'd coiled around a plain silver chain I always wore. Other than being designed to hold together electric wires in all temperatures, there was nothing special about it except that once-upon-a-time I used it as an engagement ring when I proposed to Bella. At seventeen, I was in a hurry and didn't have any money to buy a real ring. That night I knew it was now or never, so I raided the house until I found the twisty tie. Then I got down on one knee on a beach near Paradise Lot and proposed. Lucky for me, Bella thought the twisty-tie was the most romantic thing ever. I don't know why and don't care. All I know is I was damn lucky to have found Bella. I had to hand it to the twisty-tie makers, they knew how to build something to last. I touched the last tangible symbol I had for Bella as I thought about Penemue's current dilemma. I had always found cruising a great way to clear my head. But even after taking the really long way home, I had nothing. After circling the block three times, I parked in front of my hotel and left the slumbering angel in the car—no point in trying to carry his celestial ass. Besides, the thought of trying to get him inside made my already sore head throb.

As I walked inside, the bell above the front door faithfully jingled. With a whoop, I sat behind the secondhand IKEA desk that served as my reception. Whatever would happen next, I would deal with it—if not only to protect my friend, but also the other Others living in my hotel. After all, I once made a promise to this girl whom I love very much.

I surveyed my desk. Bills, bills, bills and more bills. Electricity, water, gas, unpaid taxes—hell, one of them was a garbage-collection bill for unnatural biowaste left in a dumpster by the demigod CaCa who lived in my basement. There was a particularly vile letter from the

landlord stating, in no uncertain terms, that he'd "rain holy hell on my ass" if I missed another rent payment. Well, screw him ... He was a racist, or rather an Otherist, and I was the only human stubborn or stupid enough to take on this place. Given his limited options, I knew he would always choose to rent to a late-paying human than a prompt, responsible Other. Before Hell was shut down, there was a special kind of place for assholes like him.

Speaking of Hell and assholes, what happened to all the human souls that didn't return after the GrandExodus? Not a single human returned. Ghosts and ghouls came in legions, but the actual Heaven and Hell occupants—not one came back. Why? No one knows. There are two theories as to what happened to them: either they were taken with the gods, or they were extinguished. But whenever you start to think about why the gods did what they did, questions only lead to more questions. Screw it—I didn't have time to engage in a solo philosophical debate. With my growing debt, there was a real chance I couldn't keep this place open for another month, let alone the rest of the year. Unless I found a way to pay some of these bills off and a steady flow of income, I was sunk. Bella—damn it—how did you manage to keep this place above water?

"Ahem," a voice said behind me. I didn't need to turn around to know it was Judith, my once human, but now poltergeist, mother-in-law. I had once joked with Bella that if anyone hated me enough to come back from the dead to haunt me, it would have been her mom. Seems the joke was on me, because that's exactly what she did. After the GrandExodus happened and the magic ceased, Judith rematerialized. Suddenly all those moments when I'd go cold for no reason or socks went missing from the wash made sense.

"Judith, I'm sorry if I woke you," I said, "but it's five in the morning, so if this can wait ..."

The ghost gave me a disapproving look. "It's doing it again," she interrupted, her voice dripping with disdain.

I didn't need clarification—she was referring to Astarte, the succubus who lived in room 5. For the uninitiated, a succubus is a creature that feeds off of sex, literally sucking your life's energy out of you. Like a vampire, but with orgasms. Lots of orgasms. Of course, these days she no longer fed directly from sexual energy—but that didn't mean she still didn't get what she needed from sex. She used her talents to earn money, which she used in turn to purchase what she needed to survive—food, water, shelter. Lingerie. As far as Astarte was concerned, very little had changed in this new GoneGod world.

Judith sucked air through her ectoplasmic teeth. "All that groaning, it is simply unnatural." Bold words from a woman who floated.

"Fine, fine," I said, "I'll talk to her."

"Please see that you do," Judith said, turning to drift upstairs.



Judith watched from her door as I knocked on room 5. From inside I could hear continuous sounds of moaning and groaning as several voices continued their nightly pleasure, undisturbed by my knock. I banged on the door again, louder this time. The voices stopped for a moment; there was a rustling pause, then the moaning quickly reached its previous crescendo.

“Astarte,” I yelled.

Before I could knock again, the Other opened the door. When she saw me, she leaned against its frame as if presenting herself to me. She was wearing a nightgown that accentuated lean, small hips that subtly suggested that if you were horizontal and near them, all would be right with the world. Lush, brunette tresses rested perfectly on her shoulders. She wore an elegant, lacy tank top just transparent enough that a hint of her dark nipples peeked through from atop her small, perfect, perky breasts.

I looked past her and saw several writhing bodies, all intertwined in the ecstasy embrace she hosted. She closed the door just enough so that I could no longer see the bodies, but wide enough that I could hear all the bliss going on inside. From within, a distant voice said, “Astarte, where are ...?” The voice drew in a breath before slowly exhaling with a flesh-filled “Oh ...”

Astarte gave me a knowing smile as I tried to focus on her. She pulled out a cigarette from only the GoneGods knew where and placed it between ruby lips—lips that could do a lot more than hold a cigarette. Lips that most men would sell their left foot to have on theirs. Fire from her lighter illuminated rosy cheeks that bracketed her sensual nature with a false sense of innocence.

There was nothing innocent about Astarte.

“No smoking inside, Astarte. You know that,” I said, doing my best to not look at the A-cup angel’s breasts. I reminded myself that there was no evidence that she was actually a she. And without the tell-tale signs of gender, this Other skirted the edges of male-female perfectly. Breasts that may or may not exist underneath a loosely fitting nightshirt. A long sensual neck with enough bulge to it that it might be an Adam’s apple—but, then again, might not. Arms that were muscular but tender, hair that was lush but somehow masculine. Not that being androgynous did anything to diminish this Other, who was wildly tantalizing. I had no doubt that there were many who saw Astarte as male, female and Other, and reminded myself that I only saw Astarte as a she because, well ... I like boobs. There, I said it.

“Yes?” Astarte said, taking a long drag on her cigarette.

“Come on,” I said, “you know the rules. Put it out.”

“Oh my, Jean—always with the rules.” She let out a sensuous puff of white smoke that just made you wish you were in her cloud of heaven. I shot her a look that said it wasn’t working. I was lying. She opened the door just wide enough for me to see four other bodies all writhing and reeling, and dropped her cigarette into a lipstick-stained wineglass. “Happy?” she asked as she blocked my view again.

I nodded and said, “There’s been a complaint about the ...” But before I could say “noise,” a loud groan bellowed out of the room, making my point for me.

Astarte chuckled. “I told her she could join,” she said, looking at Judith behind me. “One without legs could be an interesting ... asset.”

Judith snorted with disgust and floated through the door.

Astarte chuckled and then, looking me up and down, she gave me a disapproving look. “You look like hell.”

“Headache and Penemue,” I said. I didn’t need to say more.

“What has that devil done now?” Astarte chuckled, her posture too perfect. When

she stood, her back arched just enough to push out her breasts, accentuating them so that any sane human wondered exactly what they must look like underneath that delicate sheath of lace. But it was more than that. The way she held herself made every article of scanty clothing hang on her in such a way that pronounced every curve, every dimple, every bump, driving her admirers to a maddening frenzy of lust. She did not light a cigarette, she ignited it. She did not brush back her hair, she sculpted it. She did not smile at you, she inflamed you.

Everything about her screamed desire, and by the GoneGods I was not immune. I looked at her and wanted nothing more than to embrace her for a few perfect moments of unbridled ecstasy. But that was just it. It was not love, it was lust. It was not passion she inspired, but desire. And if you could see her in that light, you could see that the way she held herself—the way she gestured, walked, spoke—was an unnatural lie designed to capture her quarry. She was a predator, and your desire was her prey.

Still—she was beautiful.

“Picked a fight with the HuMans,” I said in answer to Astarte’s question, figuring it was best to warn my guests of what might come.

“Oh, darling,” she sighed. “Is it serious?” The words slipped off her tongue with a hint of a Parisian accent coloring her voice. I doubted she ever spent any time in France and I was pretty sure that her accent was the side effect of me once confessing a particular love for the way French women spoke. The introduction of the accent had been subtle, and if it weren’t for my experience with Others, I might have never noticed. Still, despite noticing, the accent was a nice touch to her seductive dance. Hearing her speak aroused me in ways that made me doubt why I remained loyal to the dream of my wife.

I nodded.

“What are you going to do about it?” she said, her tone demanding. Once-upon-a-time, Astarte was a demigoddess, worshiped by thousands, lusted after by more. She was used to getting her way, commanding people to do her will. Some habits die hard.

I thought about telling her to shove it and deal with her own battles. That I was done fighting their battles for them. But I could see that her forcefulness came from fear. After living thousands of years unable to be hurt, the fear that some kids with a baseball bat would come knocking on your door took on a completely different nuance. It wasn’t her fault that Penemue got drunk and did what he did. And it wasn’t her fault that she was a lover, not a fighter. “You could offer them a freebie?” I joked.

Astarte laughed at the suggestion. I mean really laughed, clutching her stomach, her cheeks turning rosy red. Her laughter seemed to turn off the sultry sex-goddess and leave a vulnerable, beautiful, real woman in its place. I don’t think she’d ever looked as lovely as she did at that moment. “Oh, Human Jean,” she said, “you are a delight. An evening with me would change them forever, but I fear that I am not what they want.”

“What? Do you think they’d turn you down?”

She gave me a look that a thousand cold showers couldn’t reverse. “No one turns me down,” she said. “But after ... well, that’s another story.”

Astarte was right. She wasn’t what they wanted, and once the blood was rerouted back to their big heads, they would resume their path of carnage. I nodded. “Well, I’ll figure something out. Until then, will you keep it down?”

“Cross my heart,” she said, crossing something far too low to be a heart. “Now if you don’t mind, I really must say goodnight, unless of course you want to join ...” She pushed the door open, revealing bodies which would have required an autopsy to figure out where one body stopped and another began.

“Thanks,” I said, summoning all the willpower I had, “but lust isn’t what I need right now.”

Astarte glared at me before opening the door wide, revealing the full glory of the orgy inside. “Why not?” the succubus said in a harsh tone. “You say it like there is something wrong with Lust. What would you prefer? Love?” She laughed at the word. “I could never be so cruel. Love is not the doe-eyed virgin you believe her to be. Love is always hungry. Love is always wanting. Love is not rational. Love does not compromise. And Love is not happy simply possessing you. She wants to own you. Control you. Be you. The first murder was because of Love. And I promise you that the last of your kind will die for her.

“Love is the single-minded hunter who consumes its prey, sucking it of all its worth, and then seeks another. Love is only happy when you are on your knees, begging her to stay. And Love will walk away, leaving you to your self-pity just to feel your ‘need.’

“Love is addiction, leaving you always wanting more.

“Love is a disease for which there is no cure.

“But Lust ... Lust is the tender paramour that wants nothing more of you than what you are now. Lust does not seek some idealized fictional version of yourself, nor does she try to mold you into that false creation.

“Lust is present, Lust is attentive and Lust is now.

“And when now is over, Lust moves on, harming you no more than a pleasant memory harms a child.

“But most importantly,” Astarte said, pulling out an envelope of money from only the GoneGods knew where, “Lust pays your bills.

“Now tell me, Human Jean, what’s so wrong about Lust?”

“Well,” I said, feeling myself blush, “when you put it that way ...”

## Chapter 6

### The Head of the Pin is Crowded

Given the fun, fun, fun of the last four hours, I decided that a couple hours of sleep would be a good idea. I lay down under my duvet—extra fluffy—and closed my eyes, thinking that being bone-tired was all I needed to fall asleep. Stupid. Like sleep would come to me now. Sure, the woman of my dreams, both literally and figuratively, was waiting for me once I drew back the curtain of night, but come on! After an evening of dealing with Penemue and the imminent threat of the HuMans, appeasing my tyrannical ghost of a mother-in-law and summoning every ounce of self-restraint to not join an orgy with a succubus that I knew would have rocked my world with fifty shades of rainbow. Every fluid, hormone and muscle was revving at maximum, and nothing short of a baseball bat to the head would put me under. And I doubted that would work.

So I did what I did every night I couldn't sleep. I played with myself. No, not like that. Amongst my many quirks, I collect old toys. I have almost the entire collection of the original Transformers, a bunch of He-Mans, some GoBots, an Etch A Sketch, an entire village of Smurfs and a bunch of other toys that went extinct as soon as your phone let you fling about angry birds. Tonight I staged a battle between Voltron and the G.I. Joes, letting my subconscious mull over all my problems while the Red Lion flanked Snake Eyes.

As Red Lion pounced I thought about the HuMans and Penemue, about my bills and complaints about the noise. I thought about everything that was wrong except the one thing that was really bothering me. You see, dealing with the Others that lived in the One Spire Hotel was like being a stage manager for the cast of The Muppet Show, and over the years I'd gotten used to that. As for those pictures that Michael showed me—well, I'd seen worse. Much, much worse.

So why were the Defenders of the Universe and Joes at each other's throats? Because of Bella. I hated seeing her there, with her wide hopeful smile as she stood next to that damned Ambassador.

Questions swam in my head. Where did the photo come from? Why was it in Paradise Lot? Did it have anything to do with her death? What did it have to do with me? And what the hell was up with that flyer? "What is 'Coping with Mortality' anyway?" I cried out loud, the last question spilling out of me.

A flicker came from the right eye of my Castle Grayskull just before its little plastic drawbridge lowered and a three-inch-tall golden fairy walked out, rubbing her eyes.

"Sorry I woke you, TinkerBelle," I said to the golden fairy.

I had no idea if her real name was TinkerBelle, and since she couldn't speak, she had no way of telling me. But in the six years we'd lived together, she'd never once complained. She either was unaware of Peter Pan or saw the name as a compliment. As for why I named her TinkerBelle ... well, how many three-inch-tall golden fairies do you know?

Her dragonfly wings fluttered and she flew until she was close enough to me that I could see her annoyed face—which I suspect was the point.

By way of an apology, I said, "Penemue got arrested again." Tink gave me a knowing look that said she knew that wasn't everything. A look that said, And ...

“OK, OK.” I lifted my hands up in front of me in a defensive stance. “When I was at the police station, the archangel Michael showed me some pictures.”

Tink did two flips in front of me before fluttering up to my face and jutting out her arms in a bodybuilder’s stance, puffing out her cheeks.

“Yeah, him.”

Tink never left the hotel, staying out of sight whenever an Other came around. But it was more than being shy that kept her out of sight. As far as I understood—and I admit I didn’t know much—TinkerBelle was a legend of a legend. A myth of a myth. To Others, Tink was as unbelievable as Medusa, Loch Ness and Big Foot had once been to humans. And I was the only living creature that knew of her existence. I met Tink at the lowest moment of my life, and I don’t think I would be standing here if it wasn’t for her immense capacity to forgive. I owed the fairy a lot—I would see myself die from a hundred thousand paper cuts before I let any harm come to this fable of a fable.

Tink gestured, So what?

“Well ... one of the photos was of Bella.”

Tink’s eyes widened in surprise. She pointed toward her wrist before taking a picture with an imaginary camera.

“When was it taken?” I guessed. Tink nodded. “The day she died.”

Concern painted across her golden face. Her eyes narrowed and she shrugged, pointing at me and then at her own head. “How do I know?” I asked. Again, Tink nodded. Hey, what can I say? After years of playing charades with the fairy, I was pretty good.

I told Tink all about the photo and how I recognized the place from its background—modern equipment surrounded by ancient gears and apparatus, like she was standing in an updated version of Dr. Frankenstein’s lab. Bella died in that place exactly one year after the Ambassador came to this very hotel and convinced her to join him on his crusade of peace. The devil and his promises.

Tink listened, but it wasn’t until I mentioned the Keep Evolving flyer that she put up a hand, gesturing for me to repeat myself. “Yeah—he showed me this advert for a seminar that I am supposedly throwing at the hotel.”

And are you? she gestured. Don’t ask me how she did it or how I guessed it—sometimes I think she cheated and burned a bit of time to telepathically give me the answer.

“No,” I exclaimed.

She shrugged, rolling her eyes. “Yes, I’m sure,” I said.

Her hand hit her forehead in a Duh! gesture, and her wings stopped fluttering and started flapping. Like bird’s wings. Or angel wings.

“How could I be so stupid?” I said. There was only one creature brazen enough to organize an event at my hotel without informing me. Angel Miral. “You’re a genius!” I said.

Tink blew on the backs of her fingernails before wiping them on her chest. She whisked off to the left turret of Castle Grayskull, pulling the drawbridge back up as she entered her home. With a flicker, the castle went dark.

“Goodnight, Tink,” I said, putting on my black collarless jacket and heading for the door.

I was off to confront Miral. I always thought angels were supposed to offer humans comfort and care, but to me they were all just a pain in the ass.





## Chapter 7

### White Wings, White Coat

Miral worked at St. Mercy Hospital, which was a twenty minute walk from the hotel. I would have driven there, but Penemue still snored away in the backseat of my car. Better to walk. Besides, dawn was nearly here, and with the light, Paradise Lot came to life.



Paradise Lot was located on an island roughly half the size of Manhattan. Although once-upon-a-time an affluent human city, given how violently the Others appeared over its skies, the island quickly became an unofficial refugee camp for Others. After the war, humans upgraded Paradise Lot from an unofficial Ellis Island of sorts to an official Ellis Island-cum-refugee camp-cum-Gaza Strip where all the Others got official-looking documents which did not allow them to travel, vote, own land or legally marry. They could, however, use the ID to pay taxes.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Yeah, right. More like, “We welcome all you Oncelmmortal creatures of myth and legend. We give you the least of what we have to offer. Please do not ask for more.”

Any way you cut it, Paradise Lot was a slum. The only difference was that in this slum, winos had angel wings and the homeless slept in discarded lamps.

That said, for those who could afford it, Paradise Lot did have the kind of establishments that appealed to Others and their particular tastes. The Stalker Steakhouse, for example, was a restaurant that catered to werewolves and other Others that liked to actually hunt their meals. Then there was the Red Rooster, an extremely impractical place to go unless you knew how to perch. For culture, you could watch an Eleven play at Adawin’s Playhouse—that is if you had the time to spare. The average play lasted three weeks and made Japanese kabuki feel like you’re watching the latest Fast & Furious movie on fast-forward.

And then there were the Others’ places of worship. Churches, mosques and synagogues, as well as temples, shrines and sanctuaries of the ancient or forgotten, were open day and night, welcoming all practitioners if they were willing to dedicate themselves to the single purpose of praying the gods back.

The gods have yet to answer and in that way, not much is different between the GoneGod world and its silent past.



I got to the hospital and walked into the emergency room where Miral worked. It was, as always, filled with a nice cross-section of Paradise Lot’s inhabitants. Fairies, pixies, gargoyles, and a nymph with both arms badly broken. They were all vying for attention from

the understaffed, overworked nurses and doctors.

The average Other wasn't very good at standing in line, as was evident by them crowding some poor fairy receptionist who kept insisting they fill out a form first. Unfortunately, the average Other wasn't very good at filling out forms either, as most of them only knew how to read or write in an obscure language that no one but their kin could read.

And then there were the Onces.

Onces were the ones that once-upon-a-time were somebody—or something. They were the dukes and duchesses, the princes and princesses of Olympus, Tartarus, Hades and the several dozen other realms that once-upon-a-time meant something. And now that they were lowly commoners, just as mortal as the next guy, well—they didn't take kindly to being asked to sign their name. Some laws of nature were all too true—the higher you are, the harder you fall.

"I am Asal of the Vanir," cried out a half-man, half-donkey creature. The fairy receptionist stared at the onocentaur, evidently unimpressed. The Once snorted, continuing nonetheless. "Yes, the very Asal of the Vanir who stood against the invading Æsir."

The receptionist, still unimpressed, handed his human half a form and said in a detached voice, "And I am Elsvir the Reception-Desk Fairy who once stood against an invading horde of asses who think they're better than everyone else. Next!"

Asal stomped his hooves and brayed, "Well, I never ... If it wasn't for me, you would be speaking orc garble, eating babies for lunch and enjoying the obsessive drumming those deformed Northerners never seem to get enough of." The onocentaur shuddered at the thought. "As a reward for my deeds, the All Father assigned me to be Kvasir's steed. For nearly a century I carried Kvasir, the wisest of all men, on my back before—"

"The form," the receptionist said.

"But I drank from the Mead of Poetry."

"Next."

Normally I'd leave a Once to their rants and inevitable humiliation, but Asal looked so sad, his donkey ears drooping, his human face downtrodden as he stared at the form. Besides, he held the paper upside down. I grabbed it from him and said, "Here, let me do it." Sometimes it really sucks that there's no Heaven, because if there was, I'd get a palace for sure.

He looked down at me—not hard given that he was basically a horse—and said, "Finally, a mortal that understands protocol."

"Indeed," I said, stretching out the word to an unnatural length. Sarcasm.

"Yes, indeed!" the onocentaur responded with much enthusiasm. Sarcasm was wasted on Others. "The name is Asal of—"

"Of the Vanir, yes, I've heard."

"So you know of my deeds." The gleam in his eye was positively palpable, and I'm a sucker for a pathetic smile. I nodded. Why not? It probably made his week.

He hee-hawed and dug his hind hooves into the carpet and bowed, right leg tucked behind his left foot in an elegant bow. "Young master ...?"

"Jean."

"Jean ... I am forever in your debt. Should ever you need the services of Asal, the

great Ass of Kvasir, all you must do is call out my name.”

“Thanks,” I said, pointing at the form, “but right now the only service I need from you is to answer a few standard questions.”



I had just finished Asal’s form when the room went quiet. Ever been to a party when suddenly everything went quiet and someone broke the silence with “An angel passes by”? Well, it’s more literal than you’d think. An angel did pass by. Rather, walked in. Miral walked into the waiting room, her every step holding a dancer’s polish. Her dovelike wings hunched over her shoulders, forming a doctor’s coat, tiny linoleum name tag with the words Resident on Call pinned to them. As soon as she entered, all of the waiting Others ran up to her, hands—and claws, tentacles, etc.—outstretched. Miral ignored them all, looking over the crowd—not hard to do, as she was seven feet tall—and called out, “Sparkles. Miss Rainbow Sparkles, of Coca-Cola?” A sickly-looking pixie fluttered up from her seat, gripping her stomach as she flew over to Miral.

“Miral,” I said, chasing after her, “I need to speak to you.”

She did not turn around as she headed to her office. “Need, Jean, is very much a matter of perspective. Is your need greater than theirs?” she asked, pointing to the overrun waiting room. Her voice came out even and steady, her every word spoken with a refinement that mirrored her grace of movement.

“But—”

“But nothing,” Miral said, extending her hand so that the sickly pixie could rest on it. “My experience is that need is often mistaken for want. What I want is more time. What I need is more help.” And with that Miral turned on her heel and left the waiting room to examine the pixie, and me to reflect on my shame. Damn, the angel was good.



After being shamed by Miral, I decided that I would give her a bit of what she needed by helping. I clicked a pen and, standing in the middle of the waiting room, announced, “OK, I’ll fill out forms.” For the briefest of moments I felt what it must be like to be Mick Jagger. The Others didn’t just come over—they rushed me, each one of them shoving their form in my face, begging that they be first. I literally had to stand on a chair to get out of the crowd. Then, summoning my most commanding voice, I said, “One at a time.”

That had as much effect as telling a group of seagulls not to eat the discarded bread. The rush only got more overwhelming, and it didn’t stop until I yelled, “I will only help those who are quiet! ... And sitting!” For good measure I pushed through the crowd and went over to the only Other that had not rushed me—a satyr with a nasty gash on his head.

The Others obeyed. Literally. Every one of them went quiet, sitting down not on an empty chair but exactly where they had been standing.

“On the chairs.”

A whirlwind of wings, feet and hooves filled the room as the Others played a version of musical chairs.

Hallelujah!

When they were quiet and somewhat patient, I went around filling out forms. Most of them were complaining about stomach cramps and headaches. Some complained of fatigue. Truth was, most of these Others weren't really sick, they were just bad at being mortal. They still tried to live by the same rules that governed them for thousands of years before, and this new world was so cumbersome with all the things they had to remember. Things like eating, hydrating, sleeping. Shitting. You'd be surprised how many Others suffered from self-imposed constipation pains simply because they couldn't live with the daily indignity of a morning poo.

I must have filled out two dozen forms when Miral walked in and announced, "Fellow Fallen—those of you who have swollen stomachs and aching heads, please follow my associate to the mess hall and bathrooms." Half of the Others left. "Those of you with dry tongues, please head over to the water fountain and drink. And those of you with blurry vision, go home and sleep."

The room cleared out, leaving behind the nymph with the broken arms and the satyr with the nasty head wound. Both of whom went off with other doctors, leaving me alone with Miral.

"I do that twice a night," she said with a cunning smile, and led me to her office.

↔

For the second time today, I sat across a desk from an angel. "Thanks, Miral," I started. "I won't take much of your time. I just wanted to ask you—"

"Jean, what would you say if I told you I have a way to solve all your problems?"

I blinked twice. "I'd probably tell you that you're spending way too much time watching infomercials."

"No, silly," she said, pulling out a flyer with the words Keep Evolving on it. It was the same damn flyer they found from the crime scene.

"Aha! I knew you were behind this!" I cried out, proud of my detective skills, then remembered it was really Tink who figured it out. Still, Miral didn't have to know that.

Miral rolled her eyes, pulling out a manila folder and opening it in front of me. I was hesitant to look. The last time an angel gave me a manila anything, I didn't like what I saw. This was no different. In it was a bunch of empty boxes to be filled out for the OIF—the Other Integration Fund.

"Oh, great. More forms," I said, closing the folder.

She opened it up again. "They are accepting another round of applications. And I know that your bills are mounting up. This will save you."

The OIF was a government-run initiative. A human government initiative, which meant a lot of hoops to jump through, a lot of paperwork to fill out with a shit-ton of measurables and deliverables. Not to mention milestones and action plans. I danced with them once before and all I got in the end was sore feet. Miral, like so many Others, didn't get human bureaucracy. It seems that Heaven didn't really have paperwork.

"I told you, I already tried with the OIF. They pulled the funding as soon as Bella ... you know ..."

“Yes, because all you did was offer Others a place to sleep. Bella, she offered seminars, talks, classes. You barely offer clean sheets.”

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes.

“Don’t you see?” Miral continued. “This is a second chance. If the One Spire combines forces with St. Mercy Hospital, throwing weekly seminars on coping with mortality, the OIF will reinstate your funding.”

“I don’t know,” I said. It would be great to get a bit of cash coming in. As it stood I was barely making ends meet. I shook my head. “I’ve been down this path before and—”

“You’re already doing it. I’ve called the OIF. They said that all you need to do is throw one seminar a week. That will be enough to gain access to the funding.” She pointed at the flyer. “We got a full house.”

“Resistance is futile,” I said in my best Borg voice.

“Resistance is pointless,” she said, evidently not a Star Trek fan. “I’ve taken care of everything. All you have to do is set up and—”

“Don’t say it,” I said.

“Bake cookies.”

“I hate baking,” I protested.

“Think of it as penance. Now, tell me—what did you want to see me about?”

## Chapter 8

### Blessed Be He

I told Miral about Michael and finding the flyer. I also found myself telling her about Penemue and the HuMans, about Judith and Astarte and the damn headache I'd had since waking up that morning. Hell, there must be something about women with wings; they can always get me talking. Once I started, I opened up to the angel, telling her about every pain, problem and pathetic thought that rattled around in that empty canister I called my skull. It felt good to get it all off my chest, and with every word I spoke, I felt my burdens lifting.

I told her everything except about my dreams of Bella. Some things were private, damn it, and angel of mercy or not, she did not have full reign over all that occupied my mind.

After I finished unburdening myself, I went silent, expecting, hoping, praying for some kind of ancient divine wisdom that would cure all. But she didn't say a word. She just stared at me for a long, long time before finally standing up and walking over to her cupboard and offering me a Tylenol.

"This is for your headache," she said.

I took the pill and said, "The murders? Any thoughts on that?"

"Either it is a Fanatic, or her killer returns. Only time will reveal which it is."

"Time. You're the once-captain of God's army and a being older than solid objects, and all you can tell me is 'Be patient'?"

"Indeed. And it gets better than that. For the rest of your problems I recommend faith," Miral said as she ushered me out her door.

"Faith in what?" I said. "They're gone, remember."

"Even when they were here, faith was never about them. It was always about having faith in yourself," Miral said, giving me a knowing smile.

"So that's it? Faith and patience."

"Yes." Then, as if as an afterthought, she added, "Oh, and let the cookie dough sit for at least half an hour. That way the cookies will come out all the more fluffy."



I left Miral's office, annoyed at having no more answers to any of my problems, and headed into the reception where I was greeted by a low, reverent murmuring.

"It is he—the Form Filler."

"Do you think he will come to our aid?"

"Approach with caution."

"Do not make eye contact."

"Beware his mighty pen."

"Be humble. And remember to SIT!"

Several Others approached, heads hanging low, eyes averted, clipboards outstretched. Hallelujah!

A blue-tinged jinni at the head of the line rushed over. He knelt before me and said

in a reverent voice, “O wise and wondrous Form Filler, if you should bless us this early summer morning, we would ever be in your debt. I shall whisper your name in seashells and cast them in the ocean so that all the creatures of the beneath will know your name.”

A garden gnome no taller than six inches scurried up the wall, his tiny climbing spikes dotting the wall. When he was eye level he said, “And I shall enter the beehive in the central park and slay the pollen lovers’ queen in thy name.”

And with that, all the Others offered me various honors. It wasn’t until an ahuzotl barked “And I shall offer a human sacrifice!” that I intervened.

“No, no, no! There’ll be no seashell throwing, no bee slaying, and certainly no human sacrifices.” I pointed at the Aztec demon dog to emphasize how serious I was about not killing people. The dog lowered his head in embarrassment and frustration, partly because I refused his gift, but mostly because he didn’t have an excuse to rip apart a human.

I looked at my watch—seven a.m. I was exhausted, overworked and in desperate need to bake four dozen chocolate chip and macadamia nut cookies. I simply didn’t have time for this. “Hallelujah,” I muttered, grabbing the jinni’s clipboard.



I must have gotten through eight more clipboards when the lights flickered. Just outside the sliding glass doors of the reception, I saw an Other standing there, staring at me with an uncomfortable intensity. His arms were longer than normal, as were his neck, fingers and teeth. Hell, everything was just a bit too big, too long, too prominent for what could have passed as an otherwise normal human frame.

Our eyes met. He smiled, the edges of his lips almost literally touching his eyes. Massive, blocky teeth reflected the hospital’s fluorescent lights, and I got an eerie The-better-to-eat-you-with sense from this Other.

A popobawa hung upside down from the ceiling and I noticed it was writing its own name in the correct place. “You,” I said, looking into the horizontal slits it called eyes. The thing focused on me and the horizontal slits rotated until they were vertical. I shuddered. “Can you write?” I asked.

“Yes,” it clicked.

“English, I mean.”

“Yes.” It blinked. Well, not blinked so much as rotated the slits that were its eyes another three hundred and sixty degrees.

“Good, you are the new ... Master Form Filler.” I handed over the clipboard in an exaggerated, ceremonial passing-of-the-mantle that resembled a half-hearted signing of the cross followed by what probably looked like me chasing away an invisible bee. The creature beamed. I don’t mean “smiled,” “danced with joy,” or “clicked in glorious triumph.” I mean it actually emanated light like a firefly.

“I shall not fail thee, O Great Master of Master Form Filler.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, handing him my pen. “May the ink flow ever freely.”



I approached the sliding doors. Up-close I noticed that it wasn't just this new Other's physical features that made him odd—it was his smell, too. Over the years, I've learned that humans as a species have a distinct smell. The same is true of Others. Each species has its unique scent; to describe a human smell over an Other without experiencing it is like explaining color to the blind. Humans, with our pheromones and sweat glands, our stomach acids and diets, smell human. Which is to say, mortal. Others, although thirteen years mortal, had yet to have those biological processes permeate them on a cellular level. There was no mistaking an angel's smell. Or any other Other for that matter.

But this Other—this "Grinner"—he didn't just smell human. He smelled very human. As if he over-sweat, over-ate, over-shat. His pheromones were double-timing to get maximum effect. More didn't mean better or worse. He just smelled wrong.

The automatic doors didn't slide open, which could only mean one thing. This grinning Other was burning time. The thing about magic is that it doesn't play nicely with modern technology. Burn time in front of a computer and it will shut down. Lights will flicker and TVs will go on the fritz. And automatic doors won't open. You know how the old pacemakers couldn't be near microwaves? Same concept here. And the stronger the magic, the more time burned, the bigger the problem for the electronics. I've seen airplane navigation systems fail, hospital main and backup generators cease and radios shut off.

I gripped at the sliding doors and tried to force them apart. They wouldn't budge.

"Human," this Grinner guy hissed, his voice holding a serpentlike quality.

"Yeah, that's me," I said, pulling at the door.

He sniffed through the glass and grinned so wide that his eyes actually moved inwards to make room for the edges of his smile. "Yes ... Indeed," he said, backing away from the door. When he got about three meters away the automatic doors finally budged, opening at a maddeningly slow pace.

I pulled at them, squeezing through, and said, "Hey, you ... I want to ask you something." But in the moment I took my eyes off him to squeeze through the door, he vanished. As in, into thin air. And in the early morning light I could have sworn I saw the half-moon crescent of a Cheshire Cat smile fade away.

## Chapter 9

### Being Human Is Easy ... If You Have the Cash

I didn't like what happened in the parking lot with that strange Other so willing to burn time, but what was I going to do? Using magic wasn't a crime. Yet. I guess I could call Michael and tell him I saw someone suspicious, but even then, what would I say? "That Cheshire Cat gave me the heebie-jeebies"? I had no idea if this guy was related to the homicides or not, but something in my guts said he was. As I walked home, I imagined what that conversation with Michael would go like:

"Human Jean-Luc, what did you see?"

"An Other."

"An Other?"

"Yes, an Other ..."

Awkward silence.

"And?"

"And, ahhh, he looked menacing."

"How so?"

"Well, he smiled."

"Smiled?"

"Yeah, but it was a really, really creepy smile."

"Oh, a creepy smile you say. Well then, that does it! Guilty! Thank you, Human Jean-Luc. Once again you have saved the day. Oh, by the way, here is the Key to the City."

No way was I going through that. And what's more, it was racial profiling—rather, Other profiling—assuming that this guy was guilty of some crime simply because of the way he looked. It was like arresting a guy because he had a beard. There was enough of that going around with everyone assuming vampires were evil, ogres stupid and angels good, and I wasn't going to be a part of it.

Luckily, I had two Others older than most mountains living in my hotel. If one of them told me an Other like that was not to be trusted, well then ...

My thoughts were stopped dead in their tracks by the sight of an old man who was standing right next to my 1969 Plymouth RoadRunner. He was eying Penemue's taloned feet with unnatural concern. He looked at the feet, as if trying to glean something about the essence of the being to whom they belonged, before nodding in approval and then touching their soles, causing the slumbering angel to stir and withdraw his feet into the backseat of the car. Either the old man possessed an unhealthy foot fetish or he was of the gutsiest pranksters in the world to dare tickle the feet of a sleeping fallen angel.

Either way, I couldn't just stand there. "Hey," I said walking up to him. "Leave him alone."

The old man caught my gaze with his hazel eyes, and what hit me next was something that I struggled to understand. Warmth. Comfort. Peace. But even that was an oversimplification of what happened, because warmth implies temperature; it was so much more than that. I read somewhere the best sleep of our entire lives happens when we are in the womb. Growing in the belly of our mothers was where we experienced the deepest,

most all-encompassing sleep that we will ever have. Think about it—we're in a perfectly dark room that is at the ideal temperature for our developing body. We are constantly being fed while we rest, in blissful ignorance of all the troubles of the world. The soft heartbeat of the person who loves us more than life itself is constantly beating in the background, reassuring us that all is well. All is safe.

And that was what I felt standing before the old man. Or rather, I should say—the old Other.

My military training kicked in as I reminded myself that this creature was manipulating my emotions with some serious kind of mojo. Hell, if this Other kept it up—given how old he already was—he'd turn to dust before my very eyes. If, that was, I still stood to witness it. Summoning all my will, I did what I was trained to do in such situations—counter whatever was happening with the opposite. In the once-upon-a-time world of magic, opposites negated one another, and it was a matter of whoever had the stronger will that won. I flooded my mind with images of PopPop's funeral, the horrors I'd seen while being a soldier in the war and of Bella's body being ripped apart.

Popping out of his spell, I growled through gritted teeth, "You stop that right now."

I reached out to throttle him, but a giant clawed hand held back my arm. "He can't help it."

I swung around to see Penemue awake and holding me back. The previous night he had been all banged up—bloody nose, black eye, torn vest. And although his tweed vest was still torn, the rest of him was healed. He looked as good as new. Better than new, because somehow the years of self-abuse were washed away and he looked more like his former self. "He can't help it," Penemue repeated, eying the old man. I noticed that Penemue's blue iris glistened behind an unescaped tear. "It is his nature. His innate ability." The angel let me go and, putting a fist over his heart, bowed. "I thought you left with ... them."

"No," the old man said. "I am no god. I am, however, a traveler seeking shelter." Turning to me, the old man lowered his head slightly and said, "I understand your establishment is friendly to me and my kind."

I nodded and from the corner of my eye I saw Penemue wipe away a milky white tear. Speaking in a language I did not understand, Penemue said something in a low tone. The old man turned to face Penemue, who immediately dropped to his knees, bowing his head in a gesture of contrition. The old man gave him a knowing smile and touched his head.

Penemue stood and, putting a fist over his heart, turned to me and did something that he never even came close to doing in the four years we'd known each other. He apologized. "Human Jean-Luc, for all the trouble I have caused you, I am sorry. It seems that we have a very special guest staying with us tonight. Please afford him all the hospitalities you have shown me." With that, he unfurled his wings and said, "I shall be up in the attic contemplating my sins should either of you require anything from me." Penemue took to the sky, leaving me alone with the old man.

Hallelujah!



“Sorry about that,” I said, not really sure what I was sorry for. The drunk angel? Yelling at him outside? I suspect I was apologizing for a lot more. I took him over to the mess that passed as the hotel’s welcome desk. “We’ve got some issues here in Paradise Lot to work out, and ...” I clicked a ballpoint pen open and handed him a check-in form.

“You’ve been hurt.” There was something about his tone that told me he wasn’t talking about bruises or broken bones. And, equally, there was something soothing about his words. Like he understood my pain and was sure that all would work out in the end.

“Stop it,” I said, looking at him. Deep wise wrinkles crawled out from the corners of his eyes that must have been forged by a lifetime of laughter and tears. He had heavy-set hazel eyes that rested under a silver brow, and he gave off an air of confidence that simultaneously conveyed strength and compassion. He wore a subtle smile that said he’d had more good times than bad ones, and his calloused hands told me that he knew what a hard day’s work felt like. Everything about this man was comforting and strong. Even his smell made me feel safe and secure. He smelled like ... like ... Old Spice and cigars?

Holy crap, this man smelled like my grandfather, PopPop. Hell, everything about him screamed “PopPop,” from the way he waved his hands, to his hunched shoulders that, for PopPop at least, was a result of gravity and arthritis slowly pushing down his spine.

PopPop was always my inspiration, someone who when I was growing up I desperately wanted to be. When he died, I cried for seven days straight, ready to die from misery—probably would have had Bella not been there to feed me. And now, this man—this Other—stood before me, reminding me of PopPop in the most visceral of ways.

Except he wasn’t PopPop. He just looked like him, smelled like him. Felt like him. “Stop making me feel better. It is not real. Innate ability or not, I don’t like feeling manipulated.”

“As you wish,” he said, and his eyes began to glow.

“What are you doing?” I said as my general irritability returned to me.

“Preventing myself from making you feel better.”

“How?” I said. It wasn’t just his eyes that glowed—his whole body became bioluminescent.

“How else? Magic.”

“What?” I said. “Are you burning time?”

He nodded. “A bit. It is the only way to stop making you feel better. As the angel mentioned, I cannot help who I am. My presence has always been a calming effect on those near me. I can no more change that part of me than you could change the color of your eyes.”

“Well, stop that!”

“What?”

“Stop burning time,” I ordered.

“But earlier ...”

“It’s fine,” I sighed, still not happy with being made to feel happy. “I’ll deal with it. Just don’t burn any more time.”

“As you wish,” the old man said, and his skin stopped glowing.

“Thank you.”

Immediately the feeling of my PopPop came back and I felt ... better. Safe. Almost

content. I had heard of Others like this one before—Others who were the equivalent of emotional chameleons, camouflaging themselves in your feelings and desires to help or protect them. This innate ability was something that they had little control over, which meant I had to be careful around him. After all, you never see the knife in your back coming from the ones you love. But still, judging from Penemue’s reaction and taking into account who the angel was, I suspected that this Other’s intentions were less than nefarious, if not outright good. I reminded myself of something Bella used to say: One can survive without trust. But living means having faith in others and Others. Damn you, Bella.

“OK—fine,” I said, fighting back a smile. “Mister ...?” I said, tapping the form.

“Joseph. Just Joseph. ‘Mister’ was my father.” He laughed at his joke. When I did not join him, he frowned and said, “Oh well, I am very funny in Valhalla.”

“I’m sure you are, Joseph,” I said, writing down his name as I suppressed a chuckle. “I’m sure you are.”

I handed over the room key and Joseph eyed me suspiciously. “Aren’t you going to ask me more questions?”

“Like what?” I asked.

“My purpose for staying—”

“None of my business,” I said.

“A deposit?”

“You’ll pay when you check out. Or you won’t. I figure those who can afford to pay, do. Those who can’t—well I’m just happy to offer them a few nights here.”

“Are you really?” he asked.

“No,” I mused, “but I made this promise, and ...” I stopped fighting the mojo again. He nodded like he understood and said, “How about what kind of Other I am?”

“No,” I said.

“Oh,” the Other said, widening his eyes. “Why not? In my short time as a mortal, it seems the question most asked by humans.”

“It’s like asking what your religion is—or was—or how much money you got in your bank account or if you’re straight or gay. Leaves too much room for profiling, and I’d rather judge you on what I see than what I believe.”

Joseph nodded, slowly eying me up and down. A small smile crept over his face and he said in a slow and deliberate tone, “When I heard of your little haven, I didn’t believe it. But now ... like you said—what you see ...”

He stood there for a long moment, not moving, like he was trying to unravel something he didn’t understand. “Well,” I said, breaking the silence, “if that’s it, I’ll be ...”

“Your name?”

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Your name—you never told me your name.”

“Oh, right. Jean,” I said, straightening my collarless jacket. “Jean-Luc Matthias.”

“Ahh,” he said, smiling, “you’re just missing the ‘Mark.’ ” Again, he chuckled at his own joke.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“John, Luke, Matthew and Mark.”

“Oh yeah—right,” I said. “My mom was a devout Catholic and apparently the day I

was born she wanted to spread the good news.” I lifted my hands in a half-hearted gesture of Surprise!

“And did she? Spread the news, that is?”

“No. She died giving birth to me, kind of killing the good news aspect and any faith I might have had, and ...” I said, and as the words came out of my mouth, I put down my pen in frustration. His mojo was loosening my lips, and I hated it. “I’ve only told that story to one other person and she’s dead. Your innate ability, or whatever it is, is throwing me off. I just met you. I don’t even know if I trust you. So what do you say if we call it quits on the questions?”

“I am sorry,” he said, his expression momentarily sad. But as quickly as his smile left his face it returned, and he said, “Would it help if I told you a secret?”

“Not really,” I said, still annoyed at falling under his spell yet again.

“But it would make us even.” He gave me a hopeful look.

I sighed. “OK, fine.” I’d played these kinds of games with Others before. Secrets, riddles, Guess-my-name ... it always ended the same. They’d say something ridiculous and look at you like they just laid out the secrets of the Universe.

He produced a plain wooden box no bigger than a Rubik’s Cube from his pocket. He opened it and showed me its hollowed, empty innards. “I stole this three thousand years ago, always planning on giving it back. But then they left, and now there is no one to give it back to.”

See? Told you. I gave him the same expression one gives a cat when presented with a dead bird.

“Don’t you want to know what it is?”

“It’s a box,” I said.

“Yes ... and no.” He paused, waiting expectantly.

“OK, fine—what is it?” I said.

“A lot of things, and nothing at all,” he said with a deadly serious expression. Oh brother, give me a break! A smile crept on his face, and he started laughing. “It’s a box. Just a box. You should have seen your face. ‘A lot of things, and nothing at all’ ... Really, Mister Matthias, lighten up.”

“Oh?” I said, returning his smile.

“But I will tell you this—the box has belonged to some very interesting mortals over the ages. Pharaohs, prophets, would-be gods. And all of them thought that if they could just fill it up with the right kind of—what did you call it?—mojo, they’d change the world. Not always for the better, mind you.” He handed me the box.

I examined the plain wooden thing that looked like it was constructed by the slow kid in wood shop. The thing hadn’t even been sanded down, and slivers of wood splintered from the edges. Holding it, I felt nothing. I tried to hand it back, but he refused.

“No, you keep it,” he said. “Maybe you will be able to do more good with it than they ever managed to.”

“I can’t accept this,” I said.

“Please, I insist.”

What I didn’t say was But it’s a piece of useless crap, opting for a more cordial, but empty, “Thank you.” I opened my top drawer and put it inside.

He smiled. “Think nothing of it. Should the fates smile upon us, maybe we will find time for me to regale you with tales about those who thought they could change the world with a plain wooden box.”

“I’d like that,” I found myself saying. What was strange was that—mojo or not—I meant it. I really would like to hear this odd creature’s stories.

Damn—it was proving very difficult not to like this Other.

## Chapter 10

### Home Is Where Your Heart Is

The One Spire Hotel was seven rooms, plus an attic and cellar. Currently five guests resided here—six if you included the fairy that lived in Castle Grayskull. In less than twenty-four hours, my world went from crushing debt, a prostitute succubus's constant orgies, a pissed-off ghost of a mother-in-law and drunk fallen angel, to all of the above plus a Fanatical Other in town, homicidal gangbangers hell bent on destroying my hotel, a soothing Other that—despite Penemue's reaction to him—I didn't fully trust and a pissed-off archangel of a cop.

And I would go on a month-long trek to the Himalayas with all of them if it meant I didn't have to bake.

I hated baking.

No matter how hard I mixed, how vigorously I beat or how committed I was to stirring, my batter was still lumpier than the poxes on a Capulet's ass. Despite carefully measuring, no two cookies were the same size, and in spite of my precise timing, every single batch of the chocolate chip and macadamia nut cookies came out rock hard. And what's more—it took me the whole day to whip up the monstrosity of cookie hell I planned on feeding my guests.

Welcome to mortality. Lesson one: not all cookies were created equal.

Hallelujah!



After the cookies were baked, I put on my black collarless coat and set about to make the One Spire Hotel's little dining room suitable for a seminar, which meant covering the three tables with freshly laundered sheets and lining up all the chairs to face the front.

As my *pièce de résistance*, I displayed my burnt cookies on two silver trays and placed an old metal music stand in front of the room to act as a speaker's podium.

Then I took a step back and surveyed what "making the most of what I got" meant. Insufficient lighting, a cramped space and burnt cookies.

Way to make them feel wanted, Jean-Luc.

"What did you expect me to do?" I found myself saying to a Miral yet to arrive. "Lay out fresh flowers, maybe put on a little Kenny G in the background for musical accompaniment? Remember, I didn't want to do this in the first place." I was practicing. If you knew Miral, you would too.

"Actually, this exceeds all expectation," Miral said as she walked in, her flawlessly white wings wrapped around her shoulders like some kind of superhero cape. Little rain droplets ran down her wings like water on a duck's back. "Not a hard feat when you have none."

I swear to the GoneGods that I was a man of extreme military training who was always acutely aware of my surroundings. At any given time, I could size up a room, tell you how many exits there were, the number of possible combatants, where the surveillance

equipment was hidden, and I had abnormally wide peripheral vision. Beyond that—there’s a friggin’ bell above the front door. None of my alarms—internal or otherwise—went off. “How the hell did you do that?”

“Hell,” she said, raising an eyebrow, “is exactly why I learned to do that.”

She surveyed the room while practicing mortal techniques at diplomacy. In other words, compliment the good things, gloss over the bad. She didn’t do a good job. I guess when you had the word of God on your side, tact wasn’t one of the skills you needed to develop. “Not exactly the heavenly halls, but I guess you tried. Given who you are and what you are capable of, I should be happy that you remembered the cookies.” She picked one up, bit into it and spit it out. “Or perhaps not,” she scowled.

I looked at my watch. Five minutes until the time on the flyer. Five minutes and so far it was just me and Miral. Not that it meant anything. The concept of time was one of the many things Others struggled with.

“Have faith,” she said, taking her place behind the podium.

“You already said that.”

“Then,” she said, with a smile, “you should listen,” and nodded to someone standing behind me.

I wouldn’t have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes, but in walked my mother-in-law and current poltergeist Judith, side by side with Penemue. Judith gave me her requisite scowl but didn’t say anything. Once-upon-a-time she was a staunch Catholic—I guess being in the presence of a couple of angels resulted in best behavior. She held the arm of an unusually sober and well-groomed Penemue, who guided her to seats in the front. He nodded at Miral with an unearthly reverence and sat next to Judith. I got to hand it to the big guy, I don’t know if I could be so cordial with the one who stood at the gates of Heaven while I was being cast down to the pits of Hell. Then again, the gods leaving meant that Miral was an outcast too, and I suspected his nod carried with it a silent empathy for her.

The front door bell rang and a familiar hand touched my shoulder. I turned to see a rough-looking woman of about five-foot-nothing, wearing an old Victorian dress with a hat that had lost so much of its vibrant color that it was practically sepia. She looked like an old photo.

She folded her old Victorian umbrella that was so filled with holes it was more a showpiece than anything of use and, pulling out a handkerchief, wiped away some of the rain from her brow.

“Sandy,” I said. “Good of you to join us.”

“Jean, there is not much time and we must dispense with pleasantries,” Sandy barked. But when she saw Miral across the room, her tone became far more affable as she walked over to greet her. “Miral, darling—how are you?”

Once-upon-a-time, when Bella ran the One Spire Hotel with a hell of a lot more success than I did, Miral and Sandy were her first employees. Both had moved onto bigger and brighter things—Miral using her preternatural brain to complete medical school in three years, and Sandy using her cooking skills and former werewolf nature to open the Stalker Steakhouse. As the two conversed, looking over the place, I couldn’t help but feel self-conscious. There was no doubt that I was barely holding Bella’s dream together.

When the pleasantries that she apparently did not have time for ended, Sandy

returned to me and in a curt voice said, “Is my cell ready?” As a once-upon-a-time werewolf, Sandy never got used to the fact that she no longer transformed with the Moon. I guess after years of running on all fours for three days a month, she couldn’t let go. So once a month Sandy came to the One Spire Hotel to be locked away in the basement where she sat there, not changing. I had to admire the little woman—she’d been locking herself up every full moon for over three hundred years because she wanted to make sure she wouldn’t hurt anyone, and she wasn’t going to stop now.

“Everything is ready down there. Even got the combination lock like you asked. But, Sandy, you don’t need to lock yourself up. Not anymore ...” I started.

The teeny-tiny woman snarled, “Not a word, Jean-Luc, I am here to be locked away. It is, after all, that time of the month.”

“Tell me about it, girl,” Astarte chimed as she shuffled past us into the room.

“Sex-slave of Satan!” Sandy barked.

“My, my—we are in a mood,” the succubus said without missing a beat, sending the former werewolf out of the room and down into the cellar. “Give me the Black Death over a Victorian prude any day. At least the dying screw like it’s their last day on Earth,” Astarte said, following Sandy with her eyes.



The little bell in my reception chimed continuously as a flight of fairies, a frustration of dwarves, and hodgepodge of goblins walked in, followed by a kitchen of trolls, a charge of ogres, a quarry of gargoyles and a dust of pixies.

There was barely enough space for the nearly three dozen Others. Hell, if it wasn’t for the fairies and pixies hovering midair and the goblins hanging from the ceiling lamps, the event would have had to turn Others away. The seminar began with the more mundane subjects that covered the importance of eating regularly, drinking and sleeping enough and shitting daily. Many of the Others nodded in agreement, asking questions like “How do you know when you’re full?” and “Which bodily fluids are acceptable to excrete in public and which aren’t?”

This was followed by the slightly more complex concepts of money and time, how to read time, count money and the basics of social etiquette like not cutting in line and why being late was bad. Like I said, pretty straightforward stuff.

This went on for a couple hours—you’d be surprised how many details there were to cover, things I pretty much just did without ever stopping to think about it—and all was drawing to a close when one particularly big-eyed pixie asked Miral what happened to Others when they died.

In the years that I had known Miral, I’d never seen her flustered. Not once. Not even close—until that night. “Well, ummm, I suppose ... the prevalent theory is that nothing happens,” she floundered. Then, as if needing to clarify herself, she repeated the key word: “Nothing.” Angels suck at tact.

“What do you mean, nothing?” The pixie sparkled, a dark azure and crimson purple dust emanating from her being.

“I mean that when you die it all just kind of goes black,” Miral said. “Like sleeping,

except you never wake up.” Miral forced a smile.

“But I only have a thousand years,” mourned the pixie.

“A thousand years—I only have eight hundred and sixty-three,” cried a gargoyle.

“Sleep is death,” lamented a fairy who vowed never to sleep again.

The frustration of dwarves started jumping up and down in place—their version of public protest—while the goblins flung big mounds of green mucus at one another.

“Calm down,” Miral pleaded, “calm down!” but even her angelic countenance wasn’t enough to calm this crowd. Death, whether imminent or a ways away, was terrifying. But suddenly needing to face mortality when thirteen years ago you were once-upon-a-time immortal ... That was several dozen shades of dark scary shit.

Things were getting out of control, and I was considering throwing them out, starting with the dwarves, when a soft voice pierced the clamor. “Death is the door through which we must all walk through, one by one,” it said in barely a whisper. As if feeling the words rather than hearing them, everyone immediately calmed down and listened. “Death is final and forever, and it is the only experience that each and every one of us shall share. The sooner we all accept this, the better we shall respect the time we have,” Joseph said, calm and even.

The crowd not only calmed down, but they also bowed. Even Miral and Penemue lowered their head in reverence. One of the dilemmas that faced Other unification was that one type did not necessarily respect another. With long memories and tens of thousands of years of history, each type of Other had at one point or another gone to war. It seemed that no two types did not have some kind of historical beef. And yet, everyone in this room regarded Joseph with equal reverence. I’d never seen anything like this before. Innate ability or not, magic or not, this Other had some serious cred.

I wished Bella was here—she would have been floored.

“Death,” Joseph continued, “is the bridge that ties the AlwaysMortal humans and the Oncelmmortal Others. Death is what binds us together, our only shared experience. For that reason, if nothing else, death should not be feared, but embraced.”



The rest of the evening wrapped up with each and every Other insisting on meeting Joseph before leaving. The dwarves smiled, the goblins climbed, the pixies sprinkled him with their dust. The fairies sang to him and the trolls offered him rancid meat which he humbly accepted. Hell, not a single Other left until they got a chance to show their respect. Even Penemue saluted Joseph before leaving, and Judith—well, let’s just say she didn’t scowl at me as she left. She didn’t smile either, but I’ll take whatever little victory I can get. And it was then that I realized what it was that I wanted. What it was that all of us want. And I knew I had figured out what EightBall wanted, too. In excitement I ran over to the fairies and asked them for a favor. They listened intently and replied that they were happy to help for seven vials of glitter and two bottles of Elmer’s Glue. A steep price, but one I was willing to pay. They agreed and left.

I turned to my now empty breakfast room and saw that Astarte, Miral and Joseph still remained. Astarte approached him and, for the first time that I knew of, she didn’t try to

seduce the Other, but rather spoke to him in a quiet voice. I don't know what they said to each other that night and I suspect I never will, but whatever it was, when Astarte left the room I could sense in her a feeling of hope. Seeing Astarte, I remembered the smiling Other outside the hospital, but tonight was such a wonderful evening that my questions could wait until the morning.

Miral was the last to leave. She bowed deeply to Joseph, thanking him over and over. I tried to catch her attention, but like Astarte, the emotional experience of meeting Joseph had obviously taken its toll.

Alone, I turned to the Other and before I could stop my mouth, I said, "What are you?"

"I thought you deemed it rude to ask."

"I do, but did you see what you did here tonight? Seriously, I have to know ... What are you?"

Joseph laughed. "How easily we break our principles, claiming that necessity deems it acceptable."

"As much as I love your quotable wisdom, I've got to know," I said.

"I'll tell you what. I'll give you three guesses. That way you will not be breaking your own vow to never ask."

"And if I get it?"

"Then you'll know."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you won't."

"Oh, come on!" I protested. "OK, fine, but if I don't get it, then you've got to tell me."

The Other shrugged and said, "Let's cross that bridge when we get there."

"OK, fine. Let's see ... You're unique. But we knew that much already. Perhaps you're a legend?" Joseph's eyes lit up at that, "There are stories of humans that were chosen to perform great deeds for the gods. Hercules, Achilles, Benkei ... and let's not forget the prophets who got to visit all the various heavens and hells ... Human?" I hazarded.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

I considered who he could be. My second guess was that he was a god that had chosen not to leave. I couldn't ask. I didn't know how. How do you ask a being responsible for creation itself what they are? The thought hung at the edge of my lips, begging to get out.

"No," he said. "I'm not that either. But we established that with the angel already."

"But I didn't say anything."

He shook his head. "You didn't have to. Your hesitation said it for you." He put up his index finger, indicating one last guess.

I racked my brain for some commonality that Others shared, whether in their myths or legends, but nothing came to mind. My thoughts went on like this for a long time. So long that I was beginning to feel rude for keeping him awake, even though Joseph still had the same patient look on his face. All I really knew about him was that all Others respected him and that he was always cordial to everyone. I finally settled on, "A dragon using a glamor in order to look human, maybe? Or a shape shifter?"

"Which is it? A dragon or a shape shifter?"

"A shape-shifting dragon," I offered.

"Cheeky," he said, shaking his head.

"Damn it!" I said. "Fine, but that middle guess didn't count. You've got to give me one more. Please."

Joseph chuckled. "This is why I so love human beings. Always demanding what is fair and bargaining for it. Fine. One more guess—but I suggest you sleep on it."

"But—"

"But nothing, Jean-Luc," he said with a soft smile as he headed upstairs.

On the landing below his, I bid him goodnight. He walked to the base of the next set of stairs. The lights flickered and Joseph looked at them with concern.

"It's just the rain," I said. "Messes with the electrics of this old building. I can't afford to get it all fixed up."

He sniffed the air. "There's a storm coming," he said, continuing up the stairs. "Thing about storms is that one way or another, they always end. You would do well to remember that."

"You know," I said, shaking my head, "you're the second person today to say that to me."

"Sounds like you know some very wise people. Have a good night, Jean-Luc Matthias who is just missing the Mark," he said, laughing again at his own joke. "A good night, indeed."

"Goodnight," I returned, although the comment hung empty, shallow after a night of so much good. But I was exhausted and too lazy to think of anything more to say. Had I known that Joseph would be dead in less than three hours, I might have tried harder.



## Chapter 11

### Just When It Was All Going So Well

For the first time in a very, very long time, I went to bed excited—not only to see Bella, but to wake up the next morning. Whatever was happening in Paradise Lot—Fanatic, gangs of HuMan Otherphobes, bills, orgies and pissed off mother-in-laws—I actually felt hope for the morning. Dawn would come, and with it things could get better. Much, much better. I was excited. Happy even, and I didn't think sleep would come easy.

I was wrong. On all counts.

I closed my eyes, sleep taking me before my head even touched the pillow. The darkness came rolling in, a tidal wave of nothing, and—like every night—I ran. But this time there was less terror and more excitement to see Bella. My wife may be dead and the memory of her may haunt my dreams, but a piece of her was that memory, and that memory—like Bella—wanted the world to heal. I needed to tell her that someone had finally arrived with enough respect, kindness and wisdom to be the glue to hold us all together.

I ran to the edge of everything where Bella always saved me moments before the darkness came. That night she took me, not to the beach where I proposed or the cottage where we first made love, but to our first apartment. And not the happy move-in days. Marriage is hard, and we were mac-and-cheese poor, and this was the apartment we moved in to after PopPop died. It was also the apartment I left her alone in when I joined the Army.

Typically, my brain would guide us to happy places, and on an eve when I was particularly happy, I just assumed I'd go somewhere happy. But then again, misery is a habit and my brain was probably compensating. Stupid brain!

"You look well," she started, looking around at the apartment before finally settling her gaze on me. "Chipper, even."

"I feel good," I said, sitting on our two-person sofa, if the two people were toddlers.

"Does it have to do with that new guest? Joseph?" I wasn't surprised that she knew his name or sensed that my peace came from his presence. After all, she was my delusion. Therefore it stood to reason that she knew everything I did.

I nodded. "He has a wisdom to him. The Others listen to him. Humans listen. I really feel he can change things for us. For the better."

She gave me her Poor naive Jean look, and said, "I hope you are right, but please, don't pin your hopes on him. Remember, we've been here before."

"Sheesh," I said, "I thought I was the negative one. Where are we? The Bizarro World?"

She chuckled and said, "Trust the Unicorn, but don't put all your hope in him."

"Unicorn?" Then it hit me. In order to be loved by all, Joseph needed to be a legend of legend—like TinkerBelle—which meant he needed to be an Other that appeared in all traditions. A unicorn was one of them. "A unicorn! Of course ... Why didn't I think of that?"

She stepped toward me, her hand outstretched, but with every step she took the farther away she got. The room began to stretch out, elongating, pulling her away. Still, she strode toward me, but it was like she was on one of those super long moving walkways you

get at airports. Bella was walking against the roll and losing.

I stepped forward to close the gap, but I too was being pulled away from her.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“I’m sorry,” Bella said, putting her hand over her lips. “I had hoped for more time.”

She blew me a kiss—you know, that cute thing you do with your lover—and I did my part by pretending to catch it. Except instead of it being a mime, my entire body was hit by the shockwave of her kiss, knocking me clear out of my bed.



I woke up on the floor, all my toys shaking as a slow-moving waterfall of dust fell from my ceiling. Tink was out of her castle, flying over to me, a look of worry on her face. “What ... what happened?” I said, my mind still waking up.

Tink pointed upstairs and then put her body into a cannonball before exploding out her arms and legs in all directions. She followed this up by whirling around, gesturing for me to leave my room. The look she gave me told me that we were under attack.

Hallelujah!



I made my way to the outer hall. The second floor was completely untouched. For a moment I thought that maybe, just maybe, there was no explosion. But the shockwaves alone told me I was lying to myself. I ran upstairs, where Astarte met me on the landing and pointed to Joseph’s room. I took a moment to prepare myself for what was beyond the threshold and opened the door.

There was something decidedly unbelievable about explosions. Not that I didn’t believe in them. I did. The GoneGods knew that I’d survived more than my fair share of them. But still, through all the explosions that I’d had the misfortune of being near, I just couldn’t get used to them.

First of all, there was the sheer chaos caused by a bomb. The scattering of debris, whole objects broken into smaller pieces along unnatural lines in the most unnatural places. I’d seen a car blown in two, its hood upside down in a trench only a meter off of the strip of road it had been driving along, its trunk hanging in a tree like some sort of deformed metal bird’s nest. And that was a car. A soulless, unfeeling hunk of metal.

I’d also seen what happens to a body, human and Other, when it was caught in a blast. One moment there was a whole being, and the next moment its foot was several meters away, its sole on the ground, stump pointing upwards, while its toes faced away from the blast as if it were trying to run away and had simply forgotten to take the rest of the body with it. A wing in the hands of an angel, her other wing flapping futilely as she tried to get off the ground. The suspended entrails of a yeti hanging from cedar branches like poorly hung Christmas decorations, the yeti looking at it with a look of admiration that seemed to say, “Look at what I made.”

I’d seen all that and worse, and still I wasn’t prepared for what waited behind the door.



The room was empty, its bed, side table, closet and chest of drawers all missing, presumably littering the road out front. From the threshold, I could see the bathroom sink embedded in the building across the street. The outer wall had been blown out in a nearly perfect square that did not encroach on the floors above or below. The explosion should have torn holes into the inner walls, damaging the hallway and adjacent rooms. As far as I could tell, the only damaged area was in the room. It looked like someone took a giant vacuum cleaner and sucked out everything.

What's more, the area where the bathroom once was should have been covered in water, its pipes still spouting. But from the mouths of broken pipes water gushed up only an inch before hitting some invisible shield and spreading out like a garden hose pouring water on glass. It defied physics.

I tried to cross the threshold but instead hit an invisible shield at the door. I pushed, but I didn't have the strength to get through. Then I realized the whole room was being held together by a force field that was in the room, like a balloon inflated in a box. In the middle lay Joseph, his arms over his chest like he was being swaddled by an invisible blanket. "Joseph," I cried out, banging against the force field. "Joseph!"

The old man turned his head slightly. Upon seeing me, he smiled, before a look of pain ran across his face, his lips curling. He took a deep breath and mouthed one word.

"Push."

I didn't need to be told twice. I pushed with all my might. The force field didn't budge. Astarte and four scantily-clad bodies came to my aid and our combined effort caused the wall to move, but it wasn't until Judith joined that we finally caused it to pop.

Water started spouting everywhere. I yelled at Judith to go to the basement and turn it off. She gave me her typical derisive look and headed downstairs. As soon as that was taken care of, I stepped further into the room. Then, turning to Astarte and her guests— noticing for the first time that they were all humans—I said, "You got to get out of here. Out the back door and, please, call for help." As five naked bodies ran out the door, I added, "And for the love of the GoneGods, put on some shoes."

Then I ran over to Joseph. Little droplets of rainbow-colored blood trickled out of his eyes and from his lips, but still the Other smiled. In a voice far too casual for what just happened, he said, "Sorry about that, Jean. Magic is so much easier to turn on than off. But I think I did it. Didn't I? The hotel, the Others, they are all right, yes? Did I manage to contain it?" He coughed. I put my hand against his chest and nodded.

"Yes. No other part of the hotel was touched," I said. "Because of you, no one was hurt, Joseph. You did it." I looked down at Joseph and saw that his arms were pressed so tight against his chest that his ribs were compressed to make space for his forearms. His legs were mangled, broken in several places and pushing up against his torso. His neck was also pushed against his body, like a turtle trying to get back in its shell. The features of his face were flat and tight; blood dripped out of the corners of his eyes and into the tributaries of his wrinkles. He looked like he had just been pulled out of the belly of a snake, after every part of him had been crushed within the serpent's contracting muscles.

“Good,” he said, and even though it caused him great pain, he managed a chuckle. “You still have one last guess.”

I couldn’t believe he still wanted to play our stupid little game at a time like this. “Forget about that,” I said. “Can you heal yourself? Spend a bit of time so that you can have some more here? With us. With me,” I said through the glassy, shimmering lens of trapped tears.

He shook his head. “I’m afraid you’ll have to use your guess now. I doubt I’ll be here to answer you tomorrow.”

“Oh, come on!” I said. “There’s got to be something you can do. Maybe I could do something.” I looked at his injuries but was hesitant to touch him, lest I make them worse.

“Yes, there is ... You can guess. Have you had time to think about it?”

“Yes,” I said, frustration pouring out of me. “A unicorn. You’re a unicorn.”

Joseph smiled. “Good guess. How did you know?”

“It came to me in a dream.”

Joseph nodded and said, “Your dreams are very wise. You should always listen to them.”

A tear finally escaped, its stream running hot down my cheek. I clamped my eyes shut. “Who did this, Joseph?” Struggling to keep my rage caged up inside, I asked again, “Who?”

“It has finally arrived, Jean-Luc,” he rasped. “The storm. It is finally here.”

--END OF EPISODE ONE--

Get Episode Two:



## **[EPISODE TWO - FREE](#)**

I really hope you've enjoyed EPISODE ONE and are as excited as I am for the next episode. Because I really want you to immerse yourself in the world of Paradise Lot, I'd like to offer you EPISODE TWO for FREE (plus a whole bunch of other goodies!) All you have to do is **[CLICK HERE!](#)** Or buy it on **[Amazon HERE.](#)**

Hallelujah!

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### Episode Three...

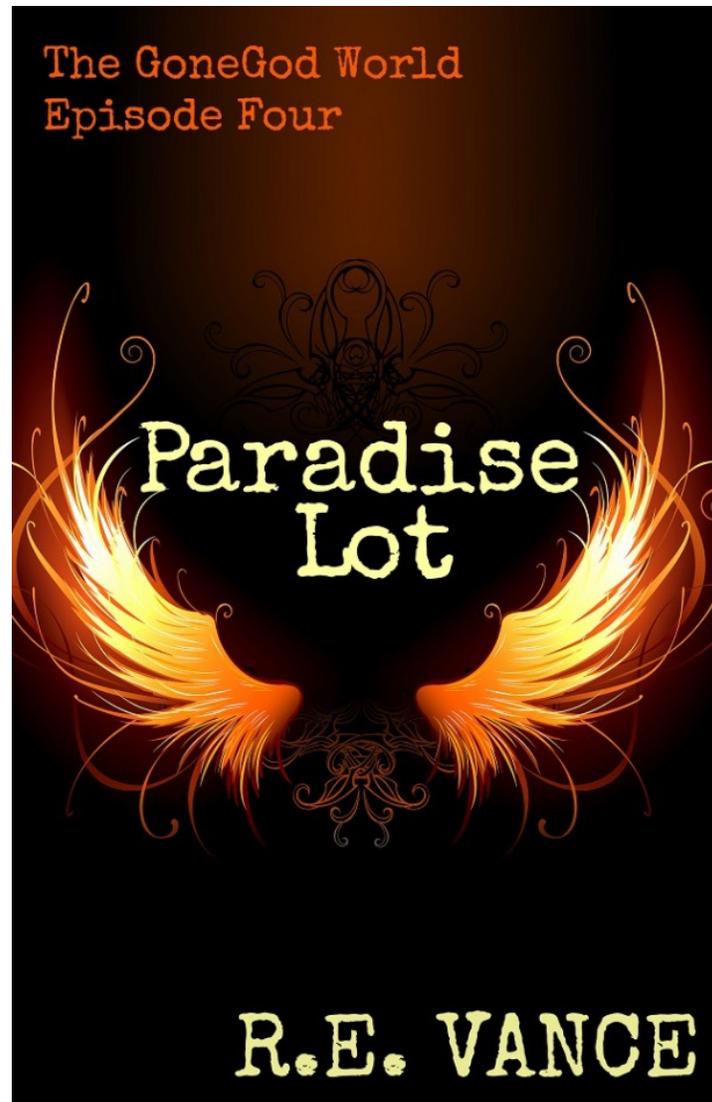


What a day! After some strange 'Other' blew up the One Spire Inn and killed his friend, Jean-Luc spent the last few hours trying to figure out what's going on. Lucky for him, he is friends with the angel Penemue and the succubus Astarte—two creatures older than most mountains. Unlucky for him, the insane creature that's causing havoc in his city is the one and only Avatar of Gravity, a being as old as the universe itself...

GoneGod damn—a lot can happen in a day...

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## Episode Four...



The gauntlet has been thrown as Jean-Luc challenges the Avatar of Gravity to a one-on-one fight in the middle of nowhere. Jean-Luc doesn't know if he'll see the light of dawn and he doesn't care. There's only so much one human can endure ...

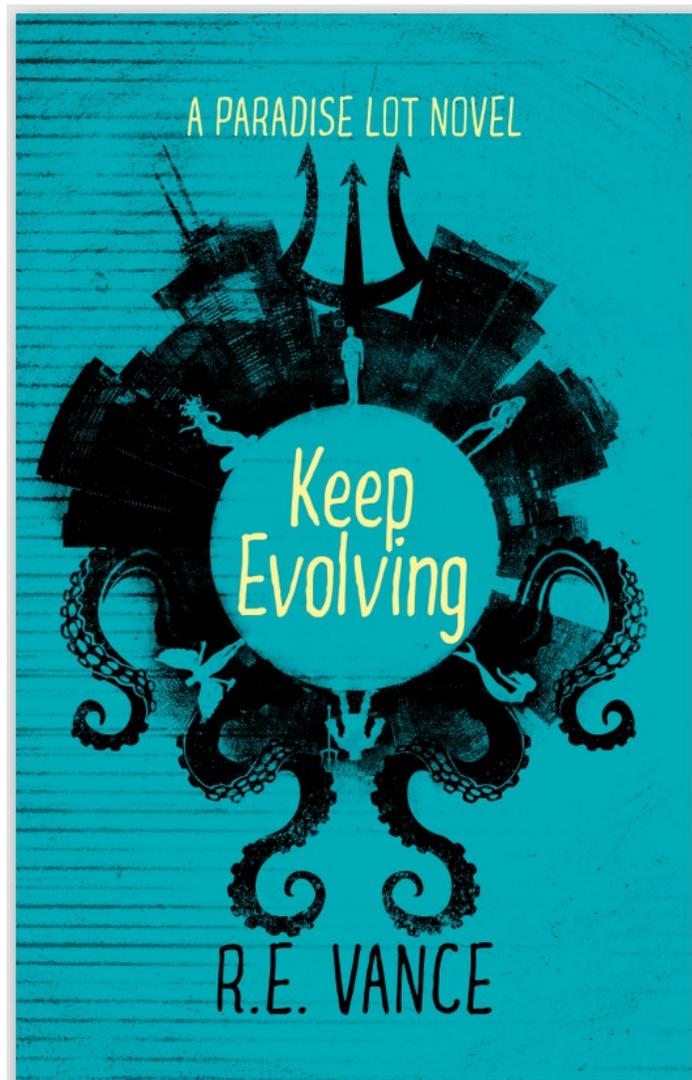
The exciting finale of Paradise Lot: Season One is finally here!

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## Love Paradise Lot? Then why not indulge in the next Paradise Lot novels?

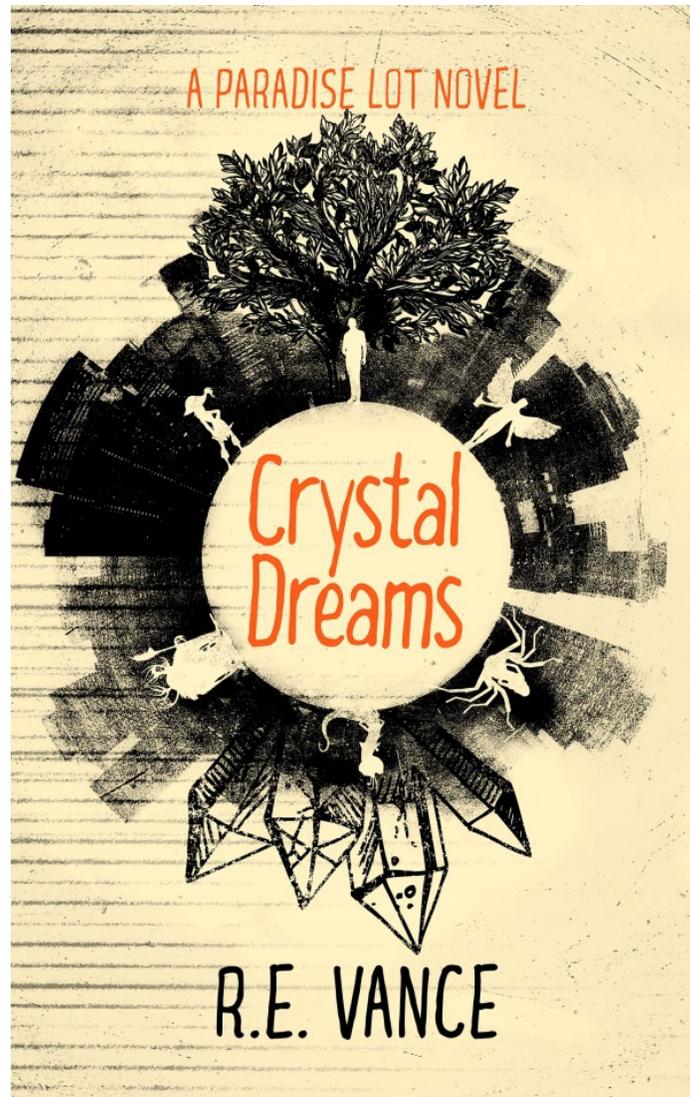
*“When the gods departed, they left behind their WMDs: Weapons of Mass Destruction—or rather, ATDs: Apocalypses of Total Destruction.”*



Check out the next book in the new urban fantasy that readers are saying is as original as *AMERICAN GODS* and as exciting as *THE DRESDEN FILES*.

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*“I used to think the apocalypse was the worst thing that could happen ... boy, was I wrong.”*



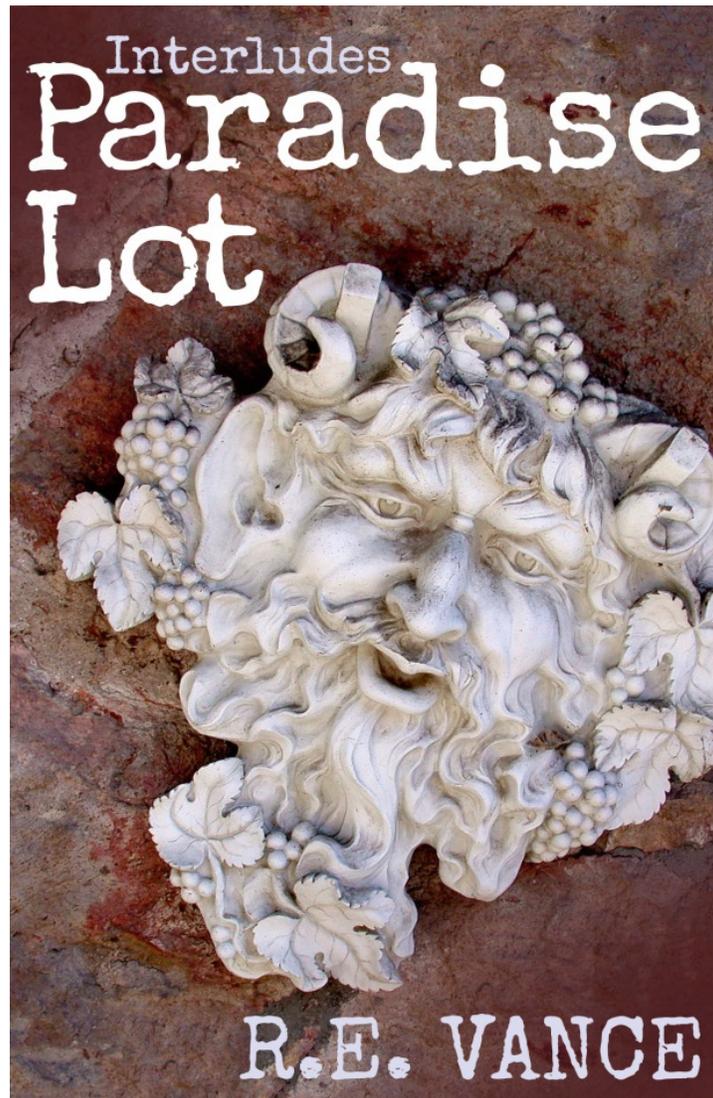
There's no going back from this one. For fans of THE DRESDEN FILES and Stephen King's THE LANGOLIERS, this urban fantasy detective novel is not to be missed!

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## Still want more Paradise Lot?

Then indulge in the Paradise Lot Presents series and check out what some of the other characters are up to – and how their shenanigans play a major role in what is to come!

**Paradise Lot Presents:** Interludes



*"5-stars!"*

*"I just discovered GoneGodWorld and Paradise Lot, and I hated putting it down to take care of annoying distractions like eating and working. Solid characters and plots, set in a well-conceived and well-*

*developed world.”*

*“Another slam dunk for R. E. Vance!”*

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**Paradise Lot Presents:** The Curious Case of the  
Bone Flute Troll



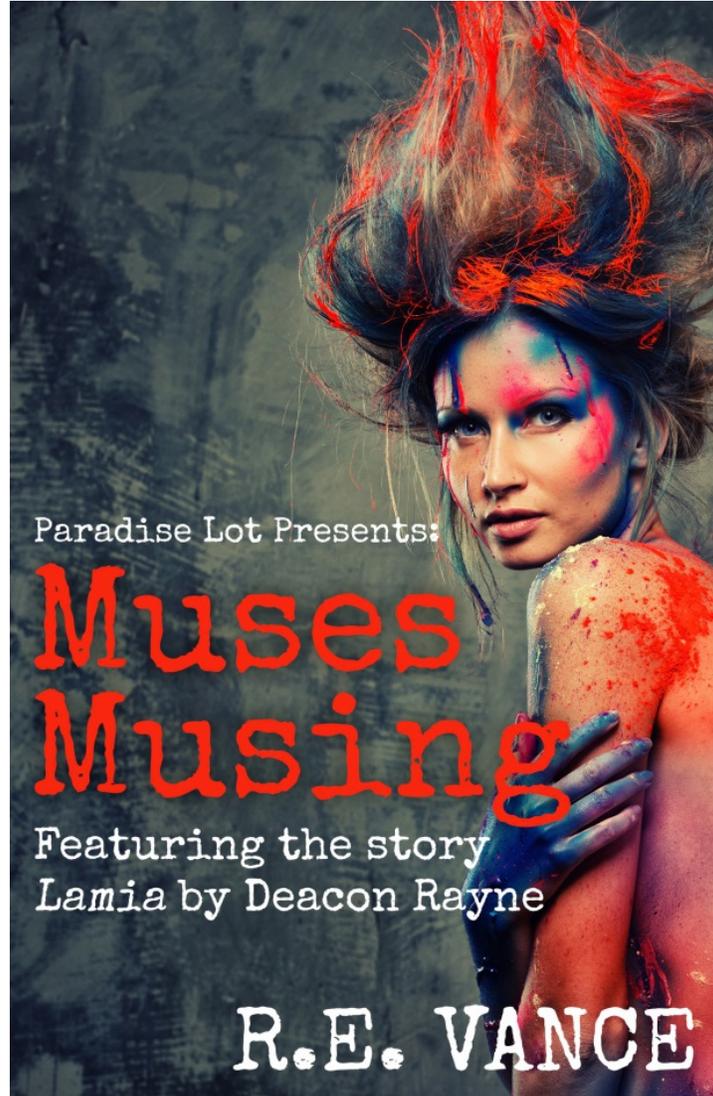
*"Raw-powered imagination together with powerful characters makes this latest instalment in the GoneGod World a brilliant piece in an evolving series ... One book you can't afford to miss."*

*"Another awesome entry into what is quickly becoming my favorite series."*

*"Step in a world where the archangel Michael helps the Gruff Brothers to solve the mystery of who is robbing graves to make bone flutes. Enjoyed every word of this tale."*

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**Paradise Lot Presents:** Muses Musing



*"This is a fascinating world that RE Vance has come up with."*

*"Everything about it is wonderful and I wait eagerly for more!"*

*"A very compelling read."*

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## About the Author:

R.E. Vance lives in Edinburgh with his wife, soon to be born child and imaginary dog where he enjoys a beautiful city, whisky and long walks. All he really wants is to quit his job and write stories based in Paradise Lot. All he really hopes for is that his child-to-be is born healthy (ten fingers, ten toes and at least two eyes will do) and that eventually he can get a real dog so that he can have an excuse to go on even more long walks.

Connect with me –

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Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/re.vance>

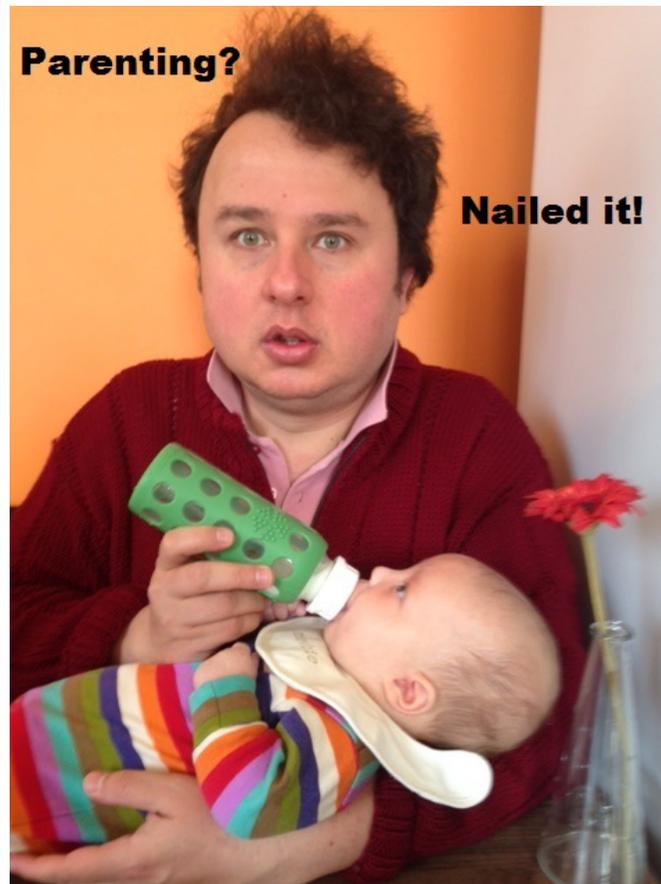
**Dedication:**

As many of you know, June 20th (coincidentally my birthday) saw the birth of my son.

Well, four months on and I can say without question that these last few months have been the best time of my life.

So, as with everything I write, this book is dedicated to my muse and angel, my banshee and yara-ma-yha-who ...  
Wee John.

Parenting, writing, my 'day' job ...  
It's all under control.



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