

Chapter 2

With a final tick the alarm clock clicked over to seven a.m. Its pre-programmed timer kicked in and the sounds of Billy Joel filled the small bedroom where Alex Pendleton slept. He lay there under the single thin sheet, his mind slowly climbing out of the dream he'd been having and into the early morning warmth of another August day. The tune on the radio seemed to mingle with the dream, and for a few seconds, before his mind cleared, the singer took center stage in his dream. The combination was humorous yet strangely unsettling; he had been having a rather frightening dream in which he was being chased through a dense, fog-shrouded forest by an unseen evil presence.

As Alex fled from his pursuer, he could hear its labored breathing, heavy and suffocating like the fog that engulfed him. When he looked back to catch a glimpse, all he could see through the mist was its ghostly eyes; eyes filled with a glowing hate born in the depths of hell.

Materializing out of the fog directly in his path, he saw the singer Billy Joel, belting out "Only the Good Die Young." Alex stopped running and stared at the singer who seemed right at home in the dream, as though he was on stage at Madison Square Garden instead of in the middle of some medieval forest.

A hand clamped down on Alex's left shoulder and he whirled around to face his pursuer. But instead of coming face to face with some hideous creature, he was again greeted with the face of Billy Joel. The singer leaned in close to him and sang, *"Boy, don't you know, sinners are much more fun . . . and only the good die young."*

Wide-awake, the dream quickly faded, like smoke carried away on a windswept day. He threw back the covers, swung his legs out of bed and sat up. A yawn escaped his lips as he raised his arms to stretch away the night's sleep from his body. He reached over and shut off the alarm clock, throwing his bedroom into an eerie silence. As his ears adjusted to the sudden silence, he became aware of the sound of voices coming from the kitchen downstairs. His mom and dad were already awake and having breakfast.

Alex rarely awoke before either of his parents. Most days his dad was up and gone to his refinery job in Freeport long before his

mom climbed the stairs to make sure he was awake and getting ready for school. But this was summer, and school was still weeks away. His mother usually let him sleep in for as long as he wished during the summer breaks, much to his dad's disdain. His father never slept late a day in his life, or so he'd have Alex think. "There's time for sleeping and there's time for working. I didn't raise you to be lazy," his dad had lectured not long ago.

Alex thought his dad to be a rather harsh and unpleasant man, always locked in a defiant struggle between happiness and gloom . . . one part born from the effects the Vietnam War had on him as a Field Medic-1st Class in the United States Army and the other as the son of a preacher. When his tour of duty was completed, he was unable to get a job in the one field that he felt most connected: none of the hospitals in and around Seaside would hire him based solely on his experiences as a medic in the Army. He'd been told that there were too many well-educated, more qualified individuals available and if he wanted to pursue a career in medicine, they suggested he attend college—but that wasn't likely since he'd never completed high school. He had enlisted in the Army at seventeen, a full year before he was supposed to graduate.

Putting considerable distance between himself and his domineering old man was only one reason he'd opted for the military; the other was that he had knocked up Alex's mother in the summer of '66, forcing them into an early marriage. Needing to provide for his new family, he'd taken the only job he knew he could get.

Alex thought the reason his dad was so unhappy was because he'd never been able to overcome his lack of an education. His father had finally gotten his GED, but it was far too late in life to pursue his true passion of becoming a doctor. He made the best of the situation, working hard at the refinery and bringing home just enough money so Alex's mom would never have to work. But Alex could tell his dad always regretted not being able to follow his dream.

He wasn't about to let the same thing happen to his son, and that's when life became a living hell for Alex. Alex learned at a very early age where babies came from; he was taught to keep his privates zipped and stowed, and, above all else, his father taught him "laziness was not a way of life, it was just plain lazy." So, if he

didn't get up at a reasonable time, his dad would be marching up the stairs and banging on his door in short order.

Alex stood up, walked to the door, opened it and headed down the hall to the bathroom, making sure his parents knew he was up and about by clearing his throat loud enough so they would hear.

"It's 'bout time you got up," his dad called from the kitchen.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Alex replied.

"I didn't hear you!"

"I said I'm up!" Alex called down. Under his breath, he added, "Jeez."

He closed the bathroom door behind him, but not before he heard his dad telling his mother, "That boy talks back too much." He didn't wait to hear his mother's reply. The sound of their voices faded away as the door to the bathroom clicked shut behind him.

He flipped up the toilet lid and, as he stood there, he started thinking about the dream he'd been having shortly before the alarm clock had brought him back to the land of the conscious.

For three nights in a row he'd had the same dream. Well, almost the same dream. He wasn't sure what was scarier, having ugly green creatures chasing him through the woods or Billy Joel's face pressing up to his own.

He finished his business and flushed the commode, then reached past the shower curtain and turned on the shower. While the shower got hot, he grabbed his toothbrush and the tube of toothpaste and smeared some of the white paste onto the bristles. He absently brushed his teeth while staring into the mirror at his reflection.

The face staring back at him wasn't half bad. Was that a five o'clock shadow he saw on his chin? He peered closer to the mirror, turning his chin this way and that, looking to see if he could see the tiny hairs that would confirm his rising hopes.

"That would be so cool!" he said to his reflection. With a beard the girls would be all over him when school started up again. He spit out the toothpaste and wiped his mouth on the towel, staring a few seconds longer at the small patch of fuzz that was most definitely the telltale beginnings of a goatee.

"Yes!" he cried and faked a fade-away jumper at the mirror.

He checked the water temperature in the shower, and, satisfied it was ready, stripped off his shorts, stepped into the tub and under the hot pulsating water.

“Your Cheatin’ Heart” slowly faded from KDLO—the radio station Morty Stegmeyer’s ’57 Chevy picked up with considerable strength—and was immediately replaced with “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” by Willie Nelson. Tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, Morty was still peering down the tracks that led off to the east as a low green gaseous cloud made its way across the road. He glanced down at the meticulously restored dash, its shiny chrome reflecting the morning sun, and smiled at his own handiwork. He had spent the past three years turning the rusted heap into a work of art. He had scoured the countryside—traveling to every mom-and-pop junkyard from Seaside to Abilene, Texas and as far east as Nacogdoches—in search of just the right grill, seat cushion, and even the little knobs on the radio, that was, at present, playing a song by one of his favorite country singers.

Just as he was trying to decide for the fourth time in as many minutes whether to go ahead and drive around the blasted crossing arms or sit and wait yet another minute, the vaporous cloud reached the side of the car, slowly rose up along the car’s painted surface and disappeared through the gap between the door’s edge and the frame of the car. As the gas cloud slid over the metal, gently caressing its surface—painted a perfect turquoise and white—the paint began to blister and melt as though under intense heat, turning it a mottled black.

The green cloud pooled at Morty’s feet upon entering the car, hesitated, and then slowly slid up the front of the seat past his crotch and up his chest. Morty did not notice the cloud until it had risen up in front of his face. The cloud transformed into a ghostly face that stared at Morty with such intensity he instinctively leapt back in the seat, a scream escaping his lips.

“Aaaaaaaa! What the fu—!” he managed to say, but was cut off when the ghastly green face spoke.

“Hi Morty!”

“Wha . . . wha . . . what the hell are you?” Morty stammered, as he frantically tried to extricate himself from the lap belt that stubbornly refused to relinquish its grip.

“Why, Morty, I’m your worst nightmare,” the eerie voice replied. The face disappeared, transforming back into its cloud form and shot into Morty’s mouth.

Morty instantly began to gag. He thrashed wildly from side to side, banging his body first against the driver's side door and then forward into the steering wheel. Each time his body was thrown forward the Chevy's horn would bleat as if in protest.

Morty clawed at his throat with both hands, desperately trying to wrench the thing from his body, but even as he continued to cough and spit, he knew it was too late. He could already feel its cold loathsome touch fingering his guts. His body convulsed against each caress as the strange green cloud began to invade Morty's organs, reaching into his veins and attaching itself to his red blood cells, choking them and filling them with its hellish disease.

Then, as sudden as the strange cloud had appeared, the attack ended. At first Morty continued to struggle, trying to dislodge whatever had assaulted his body. Realizing it was gone, Morty managed to release his grip upon his own throat. His hands fell to his lap and he sat there behind the wheel, winded from the ordeal, trying to make sense of what had just happened. He reached up and ran the back of his shirtsleeve across his nose, wiping away a string of snot that hung dangerously close to his upper lip.

What the hell was that? He peered into the rearview mirror. He stared at his reflection but it didn't appear to be his own—the face that he'd looked at for all of his forty-seven years never looked this bad. Then he understood what had changed. His once dark mop of hair—the ladies had always commented on his hair and loved to run their fingers through it—had gone white, ghost white. *Whatever happened, it nearly scared me to death.*

The railroad crossing fell silent, the flashing lights and the dingy noise cut out as though someone had thrown a big switch somewhere, leaving the morning and Morty in an eerie quiet. He looked up at the tracks, empty and cold upon the ground, and thought how ironic that his life should so closely mirror this deserted crossing. He wondered if maybe there had never been a train; that something else made those crossing arms drop, and it wanted him to stop on this desolate road, alone, because *it* needed to feed. And it wanted not to feed on just anyone, but to feed on Morty, a depressed, alcoholic widower, as empty and cold as those tracks. Because that's what it liked to feed on, that's what it needed.

Just then he felt a sharp pain, low in his gut—down where his intestines snaked toward the wastelands—and he felt like throwing

up. He popped open the car door, leaned out over the edge of the door seal and heaved. He wasn't too surprised to see green goo spill from his lips onto the black asphalt road below.

But what made him cry in fear, like a spooked baby, was the mass of squirming maggots at the center of the green mess that had just left his insides.