

Sin Eater

Prologue

He clung tightly to his mother's hand as they walked down the dimly lit hallway toward the bedroom. He could hear the soft sobbing of his aunts in the living room, punctuated once in a while by a sharp wail, frightening him even more. He reached up with his other hand and held on to his mother with both of his as they approached the door, his heart thumping so hard in his chest he thought it would burst. They stopped at the closed door and his mother knelt down facing him. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she looked into his eyes, seeing his fear.

"Not to worry, Nico." She said, stroking his cheek gently. "It is natural that people pass on. Your granddad has been sick for a while now, and it is his time to leave. God is coming to take him to heaven soon, so we must go in and say our goodbyes." She smoothed his hair as she talked, her voice comforting. Though still afraid, her words took some of the fear from him. He nodded to her without speaking, afraid his voice would betray him. He wanted her to think he was brave, a big boy whom she could be proud of, not a frightened little six year old.

"Now, when we go in, Honey, don't be surprised at how Granddad looks. This disease has changed him, but know this, my son, it is still your granddad lying in that bed. Do not be afraid. He is still the same person who took you fishing. The same granddad that would play games with you, take you to the movies, help you with your homework, OK?"

He nodded again, a lump starting to form in his throat. He loved his granddad, and the time they spent together was some of his favorite time. He knew no father, as his dad left when he was just a baby. He understood what death was and knew that when his granddad died he would be gone forever, just like their cat that had died last year. He was trying his best not to cry, but he couldn't keep the tears from clouding his vision. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands, wiping away the tears that threatened to spill down his cheeks.

"I know, Honey," his mother said, gently squeezing his shoulder. "This is hard on you, but I know you want to say goodbye to him, to let him know you love him and will never forget him." Her voice caught in her throat and she took a slow, deep breath, willing herself to not cry in front of her son. Under control once more, she asked, "Are you ready, son?"

"Yes," he said so softly she had to lean in to hear him. She kissed him on the cheek and stood up. Taking his hand once more, she faced the door, took a deep breath, and opened it.

The room was dark, the only light coming from some candles on the nightstand next to the bed and on the dresser. It smelled musty and

mediciney, almost unclean. He could see his grandmother sitting in a rocking chair next to the bed, holding the family bible on her lap. She had a shawl around her shoulders and her gray hair was pulled tightly back into a bun. Her head was resting against the back of the chair and her eyes were closed. She appeared to be asleep.

He couldn't see his granddad on the bed, only an un-recognizable form under the covers. He could hear him breathing, could hear the breath rattling in his throat as his body fought for air. His mother led him to the side of the bed opposite his grandmother. "I'm glad you're here, Caroline. You too, Nico," his grandmother said without opening her eyes or lifting her head. A fleeting thought skipped through his mind. *How did she know it was us?* Just as quickly it was gone, unanswered.

"He was asking for you both just a few hours ago. I'm glad you got here in time."

"We drove on down just as soon as we could, Ma," his mother said in hushed tones, as if she was afraid of disturbing her father, lying so thin and pale on the bed. Nico hardly recognized his grandfather, he had lost so much weight.

"Shall we pray together, Ma?" his mother asked, kneeling at the bedside. She tugged on his coat and he, too, kneeled next to the bed. He was so small, he couldn't see over the mattress. As his mother and grandmother began to pray, he folded his hands together and bowed his head, not knowing the words but knowing they were important. When they were done, his mother got to her feet. Nico stood up and looked up at her, seeing the tears in her eyes. He saw her take his granddad's hand, pressing it to her cheek. She kissed it and said, "Goodbye, Pop. I love you." The tears were running freely down her cheeks now. He looked at his grandfather lying there so still and pale. He reached up and took his grandfather's hand from his mother, kissed it, too, and said, "Goodbye, granddad."

A soft knock on the doorjamb interrupted them. It was his great aunt Helen. "He's just arrived, Josie," she said to his grandmother. "Shall I have him come in?"

"Yes, Helen. I fear there is not much time left." His grandmother got up from the chair, placing the bible on the seat. She pulled the covers down to his grandfather's waist and folded them over. Nico could see his granddad was dressed in his best suit. His grandmother took a small plate from on top of the dresser and placed it on his chest. A small piece of bread was on the plate. He watched as she opened the top drawer of the dresser and took out a small cloth bag. Opening the bag, she took out two small gold coins and placed them on his granddads closed eyelids. Turning to her sister, she said, softly, "Bring him in, Helen."

His mother turned to her and said, "You really didn't call one, did you Ma?"

"Yes, Caroline, I did." She sighed and continued, "I know you don't believe in it, but I do, and so does your father. It is important to us. He asked for him, and I will honor his wishes."

"It's just an old superstition, Ma. It does no good, and I don't want some stranger coming in here and desecrating my father with this archaic ritual."

"You don't have any say in the matter, Caroline. It's what your father wanted. If you don't like it, don't want to see it, then wait in the parlor, but he is coming in."

"But Ma, a Sin Eater?"

"This conversation is over, Caroline," his grandmother said, folding her arms over her chest.

His mother sighed and shook her head. Taking his hand she said, "Come on, sweetheart. Let's go back to the living room."

As they turned to go, Nico saw a large figure blocking the doorway. his shoulders. He was wearing a black suit with a white dress shirt. a black tie and was wearing a black top hat. He carried a small, worn leather satchel in one hand and a cane in the other.

He had the most piercing eyes Nico had ever seen. They appeared to burn with a reddish color and seemed to look through him into his soul. Nico's gaze locked on the man's, and when the man smiled, a mirthless, humorless smile, Nico could see his teeth were coated and yellowish. There were gaps where missing teeth had rotted out.

Nico suddenly felt dizzy. Shadows began to creep in from the edges of his vision, and he staggered slightly. He felt as if someone was pulling him into a dark place, a place of death and disease, a place that terrified him. He could feel a connection with the dark man, almost read his thoughts, and he shivered from the feeling of pure evil and degradation that came from him. His vision narrowed even more, and he felt the strength flowing from his body. It was getting harder and harder to move his arms or legs. It became difficult to breath and he felt as if he was drowning.

He felt someone shaking him, saying something, but it sounded like they were talking to him from far away. He was shaken harder, and recognized his mother's voice asking if he was all right. He broke eye contact with the man in black. The room came back into focus and his hearing cleared. He looked at his mother and blinked rapidly, then shook his head yes. His heart had begun to beat rapidly again, and he felt a fear so strong it was almost overwhelming. He felt sweat trickling down the back of his neck, and his body shook involuntarily. His mother, alarmed by his behavior, bent over and picked him up, carrying him rapidly past the man in black and out of the bedroom. He had his face buried in her shoulder so he couldn't see the man as they passed him. As his mother hurried down the hallway, he looked up and saw the man in black slowly closing the door. Just before the door closed, the man looked directly at him and winked.

