

# The Black Angel

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Extract

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# I

No one can know the origin of evil  
who has not grasped the truth about  
the so-called Devil and his angels.

Origen (186–255 A.D.)

## Prologue

**T**he rebel angels fell, garlanded with fire.  
And as they descended, tumbling through the void, they were cursed as the newly blind are cursed, for just as the darkness is more terrible for those who have known the light, so the absence of grace is felt more acutely by those who once dwelt in its warmth. The angels screamed in their torment, and their burning brought brightness to the shadows for the first time. The lowest of them cowered in the depths, and there they created their own world in which to dwell.

As the last angel fell, he looked to heaven and saw all that was to be denied him for eternity, and the vision was so terrible to him that it burned itself upon his eyes. And so, as the heavens closed above him, it was given to him to witness the face of God disappear among gray clouds, and the beauty and sorrow of the image was imprinted forever in his memory, and upon his sight. He was cursed to walk forever as an outcast, shunned even by his own kind, for what could be more agonizing for them than to see, each time they looked in his eyes, the ghost of God flickering in the blackness of his pupils?

And so alone was he that he tore himself in two, that he might have company in his long exile, and together these twin parts of the same being wandered

*the still-forming earth. In time, they were joined by a handful of others who were weary of cowering in that bleak kingdom of their own creation. After all, what is hell but the eternal absence of God? To exist in a hellish state is to be denied forever the promise of hope, of redemption, of love. To those who have been forsaken, hell has no geography.*

*But these angels at last grew weary of roaming throughout the desolate world without an outlet for their rage and their despair. They found a deep, dark place in which to sleep, and there they secreted themselves away and waited. And after many years, mines were dug, and tunnels lit, and the deepest and greatest of these excavations was among the Bohemian silver mines at Kutná Hora, and it was called Kank.*

*And it was said that when the mine reached its final depth, the lights carried by the miners flickered as though troubled by a breeze where no breeze could exist, and a great sighing was heard, as of souls released from their bondage. A stench of burning came, and tunnels collapsed. A storm of filth and dirt arose, sweeping through the mine, choking and blinding all in its path. Those who survived spoke of voices in the abyss, and the beating of wings in the midst of the dust clouds. The storm ascended toward the main shaft, bursting forth into the night sky, and the men who saw it glimpsed a redness at its heart, as though it were all aflame.*

*And the rebel angels took upon themselves the appearance of men, and set about creating an invisible kingdom that they might rule through stealth and the corrupted will of others. They were led by the twin demons, the greatest of their number, the Black Angels. The first, called Ashmael, immersed himself in the heat*

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*of battle, and whispered empty promises of glory into the ears of ambitious rulers. The other, called Immael, waged his own war upon the church and its leaders, the representatives upon the earth of the One who had banished his brother. He gloried in fire and rape, and his shadow fell upon the sacking of monasteries and the burning of chapels. Each half of this twin being bore the mark of God as a white mote in his eye, Ashmael in his right eye and Immael in his left.*

*But in his arrogance and wrath, Immael allowed himself to be glimpsed for a moment in his true, blighted form. He was confronted by a Cistercian monk named Erdric from the monastery at Sedlec, and they fought above vats of molten silver in a great foundry. At last, Immael was cast down, caught in the moment of transformation from human to Other, and he fell into the hot ore. Erdric called for the metal to be slowly cooled, and Immael was trapped in silver, powerless to free himself from this purest of prisons.*

*And Ashmael felt his pain, and sought to free him, but the monks hid him well, and kept him from those who would release him from his bonds. Yet Ashmael never stopped seeking his brother, and in time he was joined in his search by those who shared his nature, and by men corrupted by his promises. They marked themselves so that they might be known to one another, and their mark was a grapnel, a forked hook, for in the old lore this was the first weapon of the fallen angels.*

*And they called themselves "Believers."*

# 1

The woman stepped carefully from the Greyhound bus, her right hand holding firmly on to the bar as she eased herself down. A relieved sigh escaped from her lips once both feet were on level ground, the relief that she always felt when a simple task was negotiated without incident. She was not old — she was barely into her fifties — but she looked, and felt, much older. She had endured a great deal, and accumulated sorrows had intensified the predations of the years. Her hair was silver gray, and she had long since ceased making the monthly trek to the salon to have its color altered. There were horizontal lines stretching from the corner of each eye, like healed wounds, mirrored by similar lines on her forehead. She knew how she had come by them, for occasionally she caught herself wincing as if in pain while she looked in the mirror or saw herself reflected in the window of a store, and the depth of those lines increased with the transformation in her expression. It was always the same thoughts, the same memories, that caused the change, and always the same faces that she recalled: the boy, now a man; her daughter, as she once was and as she now might be; and the one who had made her little girl upon her, his face sometimes contorted, as it was at the moment of her daughter's conception, and at other times tattered and destroyed, as it was before they closed

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the coffin lid upon him, erasing at last his physical presence from the world.

Nothing, she had come to realize, will age a woman faster than a troubled child. In recent years, she had become prone to the kind of accidents that bedeviled the lives of women two or three decades older than she, and took longer to recover from them than once she had. It was the little things that she had to look out for: unanticipated curbs, neglected cracks in the sidewalk, the unexpected jolting of a bus as she rose from her seat, the forgotten water spilled upon the kitchen floor. She feared these things more than she feared the young men who congregated in the parking lot of the strip mall near her home, watching for the vulnerable, for those whom they considered easy prey. She knew that she would never be one of their victims, as they were more afraid of her than they were of the police, or of their more vicious peers, for they knew of the man who waited in the shadows of her life. A small part of her hated the fact that they feared her, even as she enjoyed the protection that it brought. Her protection was hard bought, purchased, she believed, with the loss of a soul.

She prayed for him, sometimes. While the others wailed "Hallelujah" to the preacher, beating their breasts and shaking their heads, she remained silent, her chin to her chest, and pleaded softly. In the past, a long time ago, she would ask the Lord that her nephew might turn again to His radiant light, and embrace the salvation that lay only in relinquishing violent ways. Now she no longer wished for miracles. Instead, as she thought about him she begged God that, when this lost sheep at last stood before Him for the final judgment, He

would be merciful and forgive him his trespasses; that He would look closely at the life the man had lived and find within it those little acts of decency that might enable Him to offer succour to this sinner.

But perhaps there were some lives that could never be redeemed, and some sins so terrible that they were beyond forgiveness. The preacher said that the Lord forgives all, but only if the sinner truly acknowledges his faults and seeks another path. If this was true, then she feared that her prayers would count for nothing, and he was damned to eternity.

She showed her ticket to the man unloading the baggage from the bus. He was gruff and unfriendly to her, but he appeared to be that way to everyone. Young men and women hovered watchfully at the periphery of the light from the bus's windows, like wild animals fearful of the fire yet hungry for those who lay within the circle of its warmth. Her handbag gripped to her chest, she took her case by its handle and wheeled it toward the escalator. She watched those around her, heedful of the warnings of her neighbors back home.

*Don't accept no offers of help. Don't be talking to nobody seems like he just offerin' to assist a lady with her bag, don't matter how well he dressed or how sweetly he sings . . .*

But there were no offers of help, and she ascended without incident to the busy streets of this alien city, as foreign to her as Cairo or Rome might have been, dirty and crowded and unforgiving. She had scribbled an address on a piece of paper, along with the directions she had painstakingly transcribed over the phone from the man at the hotel, hearing the impatience in his voice as he was forced to repeat the address, the name of the



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hotel near incomprehensible to her when spoken in his thick immigrant accent.

She walked the streets, pulling her bag behind her. She carefully noted the numbers at the intersections, trying to take as few turns as possible, until she came to the big police building. There she waited for another hour, until a policeman came to talk to her. He had a thin file in front of him, but she could add nothing to what she had told him over the phone, and he could tell her only that they were doing what they could. Still, she filled out more papers, in the hope that some small detail she provided might lead them to her daughter, then left and hailed a cab on the street. She passed the piece of paper with the address of her hotel through a small hole in the Plexiglas screen. She asked the driver how much it would cost to go there and he shrugged. He was an Asian man and he did not look pleased to see the scribbled destination.

“Traffic. Who knows?”

He waved a hand at the slow-moving streams of cars and trucks and buses. Horns honked loudly, and drivers shouted angrily at one another. All was impatience and frustration, overshadowed by buildings that were too high, out of scale with those who were expected to live and work inside and outside them. She could not understand how anyone would choose to remain in such a place.

“Twenty, maybe,” said the cabdriver.

She hoped it would be less than twenty. Twenty dollars was a lot, and she did not know how long she would have to stay here. She had booked the hotel room for three days, and had sufficient funds to cover another three days after that, as long as she ate cheaply and could

master the intricacies of the subway. She had read about it, but had never seen it in reality and had no concept of its operations. She knew only that she did not like the thought of descending beneath the earth, into the darkness, but she could not afford to take cabs all the time. Buses might be better. At least they stayed above ground, slowly though they seemed to move in this city.

He might offer her money, of course, once she found him, but she would refuse any such offer, just as she had always refused it, carefully returning the checks that he sent to the only contact address that she had for him. His money was tainted, just as he was tainted, but she needed his help now: not his money, but his knowledge. Something terrible had happened to her daughter, of that she was certain, even if she could not explain how she knew.

Alice, oh Alice, why did you have to come to this place?

Her own mother had been blessed, or cursed, with the gift. She knew when someone was suffering, and could sense when harm had come to anyone who was dear to her. The dead talked to her. They told her things. Her life was filled with whispers. The gift had not been passed on, and for that the woman was grateful, but she wondered sometimes if a faint trace of it had not found its way into her, a mere spark of the great power that had dwelt in her mother. Or perhaps all mothers were cursed with the ability to sense their children's deepest sufferings, even when they were far, far from them. All that she could say for sure was that she had not known a moment's peace in recent days, and that she heard her daughter's voice calling to her when sleep fleetingly came.

She would tell that to him when she met him, in the

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hope that he would understand. Even if he did not, she knew that he would help, for the girl was blood to him.

And if there is one thing that he understood, it was blood.

I parked in an alleyway about fifty feet from the house, then covered the rest of the distance on foot. I could see Jackie Garner hunched behind the wall bordering the property. He wore a black wool hat, a black jacket, and black jeans. His hands were uncovered, and his breath formed phantoms in the air. Beneath his jacket I made out the word “Sylvia” written on his T-shirt.

“New girlfriend?” I said.

Jackie pulled open his jacket so I could see the T-shirt more clearly. It read, “Tim ‘The Maine-iac’ Sylvia,” a reference to one of our local-boys-made-good, and featured a poor caricature of the great man himself. In September 2002, Tim Sylvia, all six-eight and 260 pounds of him, became the first Mainer to compete in the Ultimate Fighting Championship, eventually going on to take the Heavyweight Championship title in Las Vegas in 2003, knocking down the undefeated champion, Ricco Rodriguez, with a right cross in the first round. “I hit him *hahd*,” Sylvia told a post-match interviewer, making every Down-Easter with flattened vowel sounds feel instantly proud. Unfortunately, Sylvia tested positive for anabolic steroids after his first defense, against the six-eleven Gan “the Giant” McGee, and voluntarily surrendered his belt and title. I remembered Jackie telling me once that he’d attended the fight. Some of McGee’s blood had landed on his jeans, and he now saved them for special wear.

“Nice,” I said.

“I got a friend who makes them. I can let you have some cheap.”

“I wouldn’t take them any other way. In fact, I wouldn’t take them at all.”

Jackie was offended. For a guy who might have passed for Tim Sylvia’s out-of-condition older brother, he was pretty sensitive.

“How many are there in the house?” I said, but his attention had already wandered onto another subject.

“Hey, we’re dressed the same,” he said.

“What?”

“We’re dressed the same. Look: you got the hat, the same jacket, the jeans. Except you got gloves and I got this T-shirt, we could be twins.”

Jackie Garner was a good guy, but I thought that he might be a little crazy. Someone once told me that a shell accidentally went off close to him when he was serving with the U.S. Army in Berlin just before the Wall came down. He was unconscious for a week, and for six months after he awoke he couldn’t remember anything that happened later than 1983. Even though he was mostly recovered, there were still gaps in his memory, and he occasionally confused the guys at Bull Moose Music by asking for “new” CDs that were actually fifteen years old. The army pensioned him off, and since then he had become a body for hire. He knew about guns and surveillance, and he was strong. I’d seen him put down three guys in a bar fight, but that shell had definitely rattled something loose inside Jackie Garner’s head. Sometimes he was almost childlike.

Like now.

“Jackie, this isn’t a dance. It doesn’t matter that we’re dressed the same.”

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He shrugged and looked away. I could tell he was hurt again.

“I just thought it was funny, that’s all,” he said, all feigned indifference.

“Yeah, next time I’ll call you first, ask you to help me pick out my wardrobe. Come on, Jackie, it’s freezing. Let’s get this over with.”

“It’s your call,” he said, and it was.

I didn’t usually take on bail skips. The smarter ones tended to head out of state, making for Canada or points south. Like most PIs, I had contacts at the banks and the phone companies, but I still didn’t much care for the idea of tracking some lowlife over half the country in return for five percent of his bond, waiting for him to give himself away by accessing an automated teller or using his credit card to check into a motel.

This one was different. His name was David Torrans, and he had tried to steal my car to make his getaway from an attempted robbery at a gas station on Congress. My Mustang was parked in the lot beside the station, and Torrans had wrecked the ignition in a doomed effort to get it started after someone boxed in his own Chevy. The cops caught him two blocks away as he made his getaway on foot. Torrans had a string of minor convictions, but with the help of a quick-mouthed lawyer and a drowsy judge he made bail, although the judge, to his small credit, did set bail at \$40,000 to ensure Torrans made it to trial, and ordered him to report daily to police headquarters in Portland. A bondsman named Lester Peets provided the coverage for the bond, and then Torrans skipped out on him. The reason for the skip was that a woman who had taken a knock on the head from Torrans during the attempted robbery

subsequently lapsed into a coma in some kind of delayed reaction to the blow she had received, and now Torrants was facing some heavy felony charges, and maybe even life in jail if the woman died. Peets was about to go in the hole for the forty if Torrants didn't show, as well as sully his good name and seriously irritating local law enforcement.

I took on the Torrants skip because I was aware of something about him that nobody else seemed to know: he was seeing a woman named Olivia Morales, who worked as a waitress in a Mexican restaurant in town and had a jealous ex-husband with a fuse so short he made volcanoes look stable. I had spotted her with Torrants after she finished her shift, two or three days before the robbery went down. Torrants was a "face" in the way that such men sometimes were in small cities like Portland. He had a reputation for violence, but until the robbery bust he had never actually been charged with a serious crime, more through good fortune than any great intelligence on his part. He was the kind of guy to whom other lowlifes deferred on the grounds that he had "smarts," but I had never subscribed to the theory of comparative intelligence where petty criminals were concerned, so the fact that Torrants's peers considered him a sharp operator didn't impress me much. Most criminals are kind of dumb, which is why they're criminals. If they weren't criminals they'd be doing something else to screw up people's lives, like running elections in Florida. The fact that Torrants had tried to hold up a gas station armed with only a pool ball in a sock indicated that he wasn't about to step up to the majors just yet. I'd heard rumors that he'd developed a taste for smack and OxyContin in recent months,

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and nothing will scramble a man's intelligence faster than the old "hillbilly heroin."

I figured that Torrans would get in touch with his girlfriend when he found himself in trouble. Men on the run tend to turn to the women who love them, whether mothers, wives, or girlfriends. If they have money, they'll then try to put some ground between themselves and those who are looking for them. Unfortunately, the kind of people who went to Lester Peets for their bond tended to be pretty desperate, and Torrans had probably used all of his available funds just rustling up his share of the money. For the moment, Torrans would be forced to stick close to home, keeping a low profile until another option presented itself. Olivia Morales seemed like the best bet.

Jackie Garner had good local knowledge, and I brought him in to stay close to Olivia Morales while I was taking care of other business. He watched her buying her food for the week, and noticed her including a carton of Luckys in her buy, even though she didn't appear to smoke. He followed her home to her rented house in Deering, and saw two men arrive a little later in a red Dodge van. When he described them to me over the phone, I recognized one as Torrans's half brother Garry, which was how, less than forty-eight hours after David Torrans had first gone off the radar, we found ourselves hunched behind a garden wall, about to make a decision on how to deal with him.

"We could call the cops," said Jackie, more for form's sake than anything else.

I thought of Lester Peets. He was the kind of guy who got beaten up by his imaginary friends as a child for cheating on games. If he could wheedle his way out

of paying me my share of the bond, he would, which meant that I'd end up paying Jackie out of my own pocket. Calling the cops would give Lester just the excuse that he needed. Anyway, I wanted Torrans. Frankly, I didn't like him, and he'd screwed around with my car, but I was also forced to admit that I was anticipating the surge of adrenaline that taking him down would bring. I had been leading a quiet life these past few weeks. It was time for a little excitement.

"No, we need to do this ourselves," I said.

"You figure they have guns?"

"I don't know. Torrans has never used one in the past. He's small-time. His brother has no jacket, so he's an unknown quantity. As for the other guy, he could be Machine Gun Kelly and we wouldn't find out until we hit the door."

Jackie considered our situation for a time.

"Wait here," he said, then scuttled away. I heard the trunk of his car opening somewhere in the gloom. When he returned, he was clutching four cylinders, each about a foot in length and with the curved hook of a coat hanger attached to one end.

"What are they?" I asked.

He held up the two cylinders in his right hand—"Smoke grenades"—then the two in his left—"and tear gas. Ten parts glycerine to two parts sodium bisulfate. The smokes have ammonia added. They stink bad. All homemade."

I looked at the coat hanger, the mismatched tape, the scuffed pipes. "Wow, and they seem so well put together. Who'd have thought?"

Jackie's brow furrowed, and he considered the cylinders. He lifted his right hand. "Or maybe these are gas,



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and these are smoke. The trunk's a mess, so they've been rolling around some."

I looked at him. "Your mom must be so proud of you."

"Hey, she's never wanted for anything."

"Least of all munitions."

"So which should we use?"

Calling on Jackie Garner was looking less and less like a good idea, but the prospect of not having to hang around in the dark waiting for Torrans to show his face, or trying to gain access to the house and facing down three men and one woman, possibly armed, was certainly attractive.

"Smoke," I said at last. "I think gassing them may be illegal."

"I think smoking them is illegal too," Jackie pointed out.

"Okay, but it's probably less illegal than gas. Just give me one of those things."

He handed a cylinder over.

"You sure this is smoke?" I asked.

"Yeah, they weigh different. I was just kidding you. Pull the pin, then toss it as fast as you can. Oh, and don't jiggle it around too much. It's kind of volatile."

Far away from Portland, as her mother made her way through the streets of an unfamiliar city, Alice emerged from a deep sleep. She felt feverish and nauseous, and her limbs and joints ached. She had begged, again and again, for a little stuff just to keep her steady, but instead they had injected her with something that gave her terrible, frightening hallucinations in which inhuman creatures crowded around her, trying to carry her off into

the darkness. They didn't last long, but their effect was draining, and after the third or fourth dose she found that the hallucinations continued even after the drug should have worn off, so that the line between nightmare and reality became blurred. In the end, she pleaded with them to stop, and in return she told them all that she knew. After that, they changed the drug, and she slept dreamlessly. Since then, the hours had passed in a blur of needles and drugs and periodic sleep. Her hands had been tied to the frame of the bed, and her eyes had remained covered ever since she was brought to this place, wherever it was. She knew that there was more than one person responsible for keeping her here, for different voices had questioned her over the period of her captivity.

A door opened, and footsteps approached the bed.

"How are you feeling?" asked a male voice. It was one that she had heard before. It sounded almost tender. From his accent, she guessed that he was Mexican.

Alice tried to speak, but her throat was so terribly dry. A cup was placed to her lips, and the visitor trickled water into her mouth, supporting the back of her head with his hand so that she did not spill any upon herself. His hand felt very cool against her scalp.

"I'm sick," she said. The drugs had taken away some of the hunger, but her own addictions still gnawed at her.

"Yes, but soon you will not be so sick."

"Why are you doing this to me? Did he pay you to do this?"

Alice sensed puzzlement, maybe even alarm.

"Who do you mean?"

"My cousin. Did he pay you to take me away, to clean me up?"

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A breath was released. “No.”

“But why am I here? What do you want me to do?”

She remembered again being asked questions, but she had trouble recalling their substance, or the answers that she gave in reply. She feared, though, that she had said something bad, something that would get a friend into trouble, but she couldn’t recall her friend’s name, or even her face. She was so confused, so tired, so thirsty, so hungry.

The cool hand passed across her brow, brushing the damp hair from her skin, and she almost wept in gratitude for this brief moment of solicitude. Then the hand touched her cheek, and she felt fingers exploring the ridges of her eye sockets, testing her jaw, pressing into her bones. Alice was reminded of the actions of a surgeon, examining the patient before the cutting began, and she was afraid.

“You have nothing more to do,” he said. “It’s nearly over now.”

As the taxi neared its destination, the woman understood the reasons for the driver’s unhappiness. They had progressed uptown, the area growing less and less hospitable, until at last even the streetlights grew dark, their bulbs shot out and glass scattered on the sidewalk beneath. Some of the buildings looked like they might have been beautiful once, and it pained her to see them reduced to such squalor, almost as much as it hurt her to see young people reduced to living in such conditions, prowling the streets and preying on their own.

The taxi pulled up in front of a narrow doorway marked with the name of a hotel, and she paid the driver \$22. If

he was expecting a tip, he was now a disappointed man. She didn't have money to be giving people tips just for doing what they were supposed to do, but she did thank him. He didn't help her to get her bag from the trunk. He just popped it and let her do it herself, all the time looking uneasily at the young men who watched him from the street corners.

The hotel's sign promised TV, AC, and baths. A black clerk in a D<sup>12</sup> T-shirt sat behind a Plexiglas screen inside, reading a college textbook. He handed her a registration card, took her cash for three nights, then gave her a key attached to half a brick by a length of thick chain.

"Got to leave the key with me when you go out," he told her.

The woman looked at the brick.

"Sure," she said. "I'll try to remember."

"You're on the fourth floor. Elevator's on the left."

The elevator smelled of fried food and human waste. The odor in her room was only marginally better. There were scorch marks on the thin carpet, big circular black burns that could not have come from cigarettes. A single iron bed stood against one wall, with a space between it and the other wall just large enough for a person to squeeze through. A radiator sulked coldly beneath a grimy window, a single battered chair beside it. There was a sink on the wall, and a tiny mirror above it. A TV was bolted to the upper right-hand corner of the room. She opened what appeared to be a closet and discovered instead a small toilet and a hole in the center of the floor to allow water from a shower head to drain away. In total, the bathroom was about nine feet square. As far as she could see, the only way to shower was to sit on the toilet, or to straddle it.