

A Portion of Malice

Ages of Malice, Book I

Lloyd Jeffries

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First Edition

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Praise for Lloyd Jeffries

Coming soon

For Dana

Thoughts from the Verge

By: Emery Merrick

Consider this backstory, the first volume in a multi-volume epic spanning time, history, Heaven, Hell, and the apocalypse.

This is the story of a simple man mixed up in things about which he should never know.

And I never dreamed I'd be writing this, shouldn't be alive to write this.

Alas, though, fate is a tortured mistress.

I've tried to capture everything as it truly happened and although religion plays a central role, this isn't a story about religion.

No one will try to save your soul. There are no heart-warming points about a loving God who shepherds humanity to a waiting paradise.

In fact, I could write volumes that debunk that myth once and for all.

Ah, but what's the point?

Believe what you want, live how you want, open your mind to the universe, and consider this volume the first steps down a road both twisted and complex.

In the end, you'll find we've just begun.

But we'll get to that.

To all, be well and happy, blessed by whichever God you choose and in whatever way He or She doles those boons. May my story be a warning—a subtle nudge, a singular wink—about all we take for granted, and the very small pond in which we swim.

Regards,
Emery

Prologue

Jerusalem, time of Christ

Bribes paid, Cain kneels before the bleeding Messiah.
Blood drips from His nose, trickles down His face. Skin, bruised; cheeks, bloated; lips cracked and dry. His eyes are swollen shut.

Cain prostrates himself, lies flat on the sand, squeezes the cool earth.

Tears start as memories invade.

Castaway.

Heretic.

Murderer.

“I beg Thee, Lord, forgive my sins and make me whole. I’ve labored through all these lives paying penance, seeking only Your embrace. Heal me. Take me in. I beg Thee.”

Jesus raises his head, those ghastly eyes glued closed with dried blood. He tries to stand, but rough twine holds him to a thick plank. He strains at His bonds. “Have I not been once tested by you?” His voice is parched, cracks like dry leaves ripe with flame. “Hast thou come to mock me in my time?”

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“Nay Lord. I seek redemption. I seek forgiveness.”

“You are dark to me.”

Cain presses his head to the sand, stretches his arms in penance.

A hushed breeze rustles the trees; flowers brighten the courtyard—
lively blue, bitter orange, buttered yellow.

“A vagabond and wanderer are you,” Jesus rasps, strains for breath.
“Condemned. A fugitive and vagabond, so sayeth the Father.”

Cain lifts his head, spreads sand with each syllable. “Nay, Lord,
Nay! I wish only to walk with You once more. To flee this miserable
existence and be again welcome in Your arms.”

The breeze shifts, stifles, comes from the arid south instead of
the sea.

Sunlight burns his skin, bakes the bushes.

Sweat appears, mixes with sand to clump on Cain’s forehead. “My
Lord, I beg thee. My works are pure. My intent, honest. Please release
me so I might serve.”

The Savior’s head droops like a parched flower. A gash beneath his
eye reopens, blood trickles to drip in a pool at his feet.

He whispers, voice crackling, blood oozing through His beard, over
His lips, drop by drop. “*You* shall endure.”

Cain’s head drops to the sand, salty tears drip. “Please, Lord.
Please. I beg only mercy. Only release.”

Jesus’ voice rises. A whistling wind through mountain caverns, a
raging tempest like millions of insects, swarming, devouring. The
Messiah’s breath is ragged and wet. He inhales, then heaves His rage.

“**YOU!** Endure!”

Cain shudders, stretched hands curl to fists.

It can’t be, not after all these centuries.

His mind fills with fields plowed; with enemies thrown down. With
all the lives he’s lived; all the lives *yet* to live.

Redemption flows away, disappears into the barren desert so
precious to God.

He trembles, rises on shaky legs, stares at the Messiah.

Beyond, the sky turns ominous, looms like a spiteful God shaking
His fist. Tree and flower become a dizzy array of color and leaf.

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Visions enter.

Fiery pillars rend, consume, melting earth, boiling oceans.

Azure skies turn fetid, drip mucous from black clouds and scorched wind.

Humanity screams, pleads, begs God's mercy.

Then an angry God, chuckling in thunder, defiant, even joyous.

God prefers blood.

Cain turns as both tree and flower wither and wilt.

Rain starts, wind rushes.

He blinks into the gale, glances at his hand to find a whip with nine tails, iron shards sewn into its braids.

His voice is calm, even. "What price for salvation?"

The Messiah lolls, says nothing.

"What price?" he asks again.

The whip cracks, leaps for the Messiah's back.

Jesus wails as the nine make purchase, shred flesh like silk.

Rage fills, consumes.

This is freedom.

This is redemption.

Bloody plumes rise, become a hovering, ghostly cloud as nine tails streak forward.

The Messiah shrieks like a crimson ghost, rages against biting bonds, eyes squeezed as blood rains.

"What price for salvation?" Cain asks with each lash. "What price! WHAT PRICE!"

Blood spatters shy flowers, stone walls.

Trees tremble.

The sky belches thunderous applause.

His arm becomes a blur, whip chasing, starved for blood, famished for flesh.

He twists his hips with each blow, soul raging, overflowing.

Hope turns to vapor.

Redemption to rage.

Despair bubbles to blistering animus as he tries to inflict maximum damage, tries to shred the most flesh.

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“WHAT PRICE FOR SALVATION!”

Tears pour down his face, mix with blood and sand to drift away on harsh winds.

Spit dangles in thick ropes, eyes fill with fire.

The endless voice of God mutes to feral agony. He bucks, shrieks, blood flowing from head and torso, the plank clatters, trembles.

Trees bend, then snap.

Flowers cower, quake, hide from bloody mist as petals turn brown and die.

Then, with the harshness of a slap, a sharp sting on his face.

One of the nine has sliced his cheek.

Salty tears sting him to reason.

He stands panting, arm aching, whip dripping.

He trembles in place, stares at the bleeding God, watches a bloody torso rise and fall with each breath.

Thunder runs away.

Wind dies.

Rain ceases.

Silence invades.

Then, barely audible, comes the Savior's rasped voice.

Cain leans in, listens to wheezed words, endlessly repeated:

“You shall endure. You shall endure. You shall endure.”

Tears stop. Centuries of guilt drain from his soul.

The world feels sinister and beyond redemption.

He closes his eyes; hypnotized, breathless as sweat and blood fall.

“You shall endure.”

His portion of malice grows.

He raises the nine-tail whip and starts anew.

Chapter One

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

I hit the record button on my iPhone, then stare at him. I sit in a comfortable, high-back chair of red leather, coffee mug steaming next to me. I write in a small notebook as my mind fills with questions. In the end, I say only, “Well, that’s a bunch of bullshit.”

Coaxed from his thoughts, he focuses on me. Long seconds pass until he speaks. “Yes,” he says, “quite unbelievable, but every word true.”

“So, *you*, personally, whipped Jesus Christ with a cat of nine tails?”

“Yes.”

“Because He wouldn’t forgive you?”

“Yes.”

I lean forward, elbows on my knees. “You do know that Jesus is kind of known for His forgiveness—i.e. *Forgive them Father they know not what they do.*”

“I do. I actually heard Him say those very words.”

“So, you’re the one guy in recorded history whose sins are so vast they can’t be forgiven?”

He shakes his head, strokes his temple with a gloved hand. "Oh no, there are others."

"You mean Hitler and the like?"

"No, I mean a few of us who are completely forsaken by God. I know only of four; the Roman, the Jew, the Apostle, and myself. If there were others, I'm certain I'd know because I can see them."

"You mean like ghosts or vampires?"

"Don't be a fool," he laughs. "I mean living breathing immortals. Forsaken by God. Doomed to endure. They emit a green aura only I can see. They appear quite normal to mortals such as yourself."

I shake my head. "Doesn't make sense, immortals forsaken by God? For what reason?"

Drake, now with pencil in hand, doodles on a yellow legal pad on the right side of his desk. "Some think for our crimes, but I don't see it that way. I believe God plans for us to take control of this realm."

I pull the mug to my lips and consider this. *The Dove's a nut job*, I write. *Great, just what I deserve.*

"God's retiring?" I ask.

A flare of anger crosses his face.

I push on. Many times, if you can get a subject angry you can get them to reveal much more than intended. "So, the heavenly retirement plan is a few thousand years, then God finds a suitable substitute and moves to Tampa?"

Drake drops the pen, stands, adjusts his tie. Then, placing his hands on the desk, leans over it and smiles. I'm surprised by the gleaming crease, for in it I feel comforted, feel as if this man couldn't *possibly* lie to me. I feel—no, I *know*—in my heart of hearts this man has my best interest in mind. Questions vanish, my doubt floats away. My expression must change because I see the realization of something on Drake's face.

"You've put me under a spell," I say. Then I peer inside my mug for signs of chemical additives. "I feel subdued and content, a little euphoric." It's been a long time since I've felt any one of those sensations, and they strike me as glaring now, a definite departure from the norm.

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“One of my gifts,” Drake says. “You see, I received the gifts of charisma and diplomacy from a source I shall not mention at this point. These gifts have served me well and afforded me certain advantages throughout my long existence. For now, though, suffice it to say all I tell you is true and that, yes, one can say I lost my cool a little when the Messiah rebuffed me—”

“About two-thousand years ago?”

He’s unperturbed at the interruption. “Yes.”

“To control Earth?”

“In a way, yes.”

“What way?”

He resumes his seat. “We’ll get to that. It’s a long story and I’ll tell you all of it. But for now, let’s say that we immortals will rule Earth and all who live here.”

“Nonsense. How could anyone possibly do that?”

“You’ll see. It’s the reason I hired you.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, but maybe you can tell me why you and your immortals are the chosen ones?”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “I murdered my brother.”

I consider this for a moment, can’t hide my skepticism. I picture the next words in my mind as if writing them and take an extra beat of pause for each comma and period: “With over four hundred thousand murders per year, with many killing a family member, you’ve been singled out, by God, for murdering your brother. More than two thousand years ago.” I look him right in the eye, shake my head. “Sounds like bullshit.”

Drake crosses the room. Past pedestals with marble busts of Beethoven and Caesar set beneath well-aged paintings, certainly priceless, both busts and tableaux. Around exquisite couch and chairs pilfered from a Louis XIV living room, maybe *the* Louis XIV. To finally a view from enormous windows that overlook the expanse of Dubai. He stares for a long time as I sip my coffee. Silence hangs between us and I consider stopping my phone recording to save the battery.

I empty the mug and stand to leave.

“My name is Cain,” he says. “I’m cast out for killing my brother Abel.”

I freeze, almost drop my phone. Drake turns from the view and looks surprised at my expression. My thoughts go back to the Sunday school lessons forced on me as a child. Cain. Killer of Abel. Cast out by God. The world’s first murderer. Then it hits me.

Wearer of the mark.

I speak a little too loud when I say, “Where’s your mark, Cain?”

He takes a step toward me and stops. Maybe it’s the light or the contrast between Dubai’s bright sun and the darkness of the room, but, in that haze, he looks like a kicked puppy. He raises his right hand, trademark gloves in place as they always are with this man. Then, in a single motion, removes the glove.

I’m engulfed with red light.

My skin tingles, then pins and needles erupt—even my eyebrows stand on end. I feel depressed, repressed, feel like dropping to my knees from the effort of standing. Sight deserts me, enveloped and encased by this all-consuming crimson. I feel like I’m having a panic attack. My breath runs from me and is hard to catch. My limbs crackle with small currents of electricity. I can’t tell my position in space: standing, sitting, spinning? Time itself dematerializes and I float, terrified and breathless, awash in this malicious light.

Then it vanishes.

He stands by the window, glove now back on his right hand, small tendrils of white smoke rising to the ceiling.

Startled, I check my surroundings. The same chair now holds me, the mug sits on its side at the table next to me. My phone is untouched. The busts, all in place. No art hangs askew on the wall. Dubai’s bright sun streams through the window.

I stifle nausea and lean forward, try to collect my senses.

“Wha...What in...the hell...was that?” I’m reeling. My chest feels heavy. My limbs, wired to an electrical grid, charged and tingling. I stop, will myself to breathe. After a few seconds, I manage to raise my head, see Drake by the window standing impassive like a Greek statue.

“You wanted to see my mark,” he says. “More coffee?”

Chapter Two

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

I've never been in the Burj Khalifa. Never even set foot in Dubai, or the Middle East for that matter. My journey to this place is pretty run of the mill. An American dream gone bad.

I won my first Pulitzer at the age of thirty and then another at thirty-five-ish. I say *-ish* because I'm not sure what year it was when I won that. I'd been on a bender of drugs and alcohol and didn't care much about anything, least of all time or prizes. My life should've been easy after that second Pulitzer, coasting on reputation. But my darker side had other plans. In short, I bought off on my own legend—that I was gifted and everything I wrote, a masterpiece.

I found the bottle, and it became medicine. The drugs followed and became medicine, too. The wife left, and I was eventually invited to leave my post at the *Times*. Money dried up. Friends faded, and in short order I was the guy at the bar with all the stories and none of the money. Then came the shabby apartment at two-fifty a month in a crappy little town in upstate New York, Ramen noodles most nights, I'm sure you know the rest. It's not that uncommon of a tale.

On to the night I press a pistol to my temple. I remember chuckling, high as Heaven, as I push its bluntness against my skin. Relief. My time was over and nothing that lay ahead could be worse. Rock bottom, they call it. I squeezed the trigger by increments, savored the release, not afraid at all. Then a knock at the door, ill-timed to say the least, and I remember thinking: Might be *Publisher's Clearing House*.

Flash forward a couple days and here I am, across from one of the most revered and influential men in history. *The Dove*, the press calls him, a reference to his astonishing skill at making peace in war-torn regions.

My research before choosing to come—as if *that* had been a choice—had yielded almost one hundred percent positive results. Thaddeus Drake, international peacemaker. A well-heeled gentleman by all accounts who lives a life of casual luxury. Since the 1990s, Drake has been a central figure on the world stage, appearing in areas wracked by war and somehow creating peace from chaos. In fact, he's so talented in this aspect, his name has become synonymous with the word *peace*.

It's also well-known Drake holds the ear of numerous world leaders, and I find considerable documentation and photos of him with some of the most famous people of our generation. It's odd, but Drake never goes in for political dogma, offering his services to dictators and presidents, communists and religious icons alike. He seems to put little thought into who he's helping, but his results are always extraordinary.

One thing though, my research reveals no reason for the gloves or why he always wears them. There are, of course, many theories: a childhood accident, a skin condition, even an article about how his hands are actually alien and not human. Drake's silence and refusal to answer the question eventually wins the day, and mentions of the gloves gradually fade until all the world just accepts the fact that the Dove will always appear with his gloves securely in place.

When this gloved man showed me his mark, his hand appeared normal. And by that, I mean, not disfigured or alien. The mark itself is certainly abnormal, but perhaps that's the answer, Drake hides his

mark, the mark of Cain, so unbelievable and distinctive that if a journalist ever sees it, it would become an instant sensation. And if that's fact, then what Drake says must also be true. Thaddeus Drake, formerly Cain, killer of Abel, now a peacemaker among mortals.

So here I sit, staring at the gloved hero beloved of all, stricken with a feeling of dread and fear. He's lit a cigarette and smoke rings his head in lazy coils like a demon's halo. I press the mug to my lips and remember it's empty. I wonder if I've been drugged. This hasn't been a typical morning.

I check my phone. RECORDING. I wait for Drake to speak.

The smoke-plumed king adjusts some papers on the desk he's returned to. Slides some pencils to his left and arranges them in a neat line of three. He looks at me under his eyebrows, adjusts his cufflinks.

"Now, shall we begin?" he says. "Where to start?" Exhaled smoke punctuates his speech. "Have you a pad?"

"Yes, and I also record," I say, nodding at my iPhone.

"Very well, then let's begin. Or I guess we have begun." He straightens as if rising, though he hasn't yet sat, and moves toward the bar, a dark mahogany slab with a few bottles of liquor. Ice clinks into a glass and I hear the liquid mix with it.

"I'm not a very good storyteller, I'm afraid," he says, turning toward me. "But now you know where the tale starts. Amended, of course. There are centuries of tales prior to that, but the day I whipped Christ was a singular turning point. Caesar's Rubicon, yes? I suppose in my rage I knew that even then."

"Then why did you do it?" I ask. "Why not walk away?"

"Have you ever had truly nothing to lose and only a single speck of light on the horizon?"

"I have nothing to lose now." The words pierce like the crimson light. I feel the stab of my ultimate loss. With considerable will, I force the pain inward and out of my mind.

"Indeed, dear Emery. So you can relate. Longinus tells me he found you with a pistol pressed to your head. Was that your solution?"

I stifle my reaction. When the giant man knocked on my door, I'd

stuffed the Sig under a couch cushion before answering. There's no way he could've known I was a finger twitch from oblivion. My mind tries to grasp it, how could they know? Unless...

"You guys were watching me?"

Drake leans back and chuckles. "Of course, dear Emery. Your task is far too important to leave to just anyone. Did you not think it odd Longinus appeared at exactly the right moment?"

"Now that you mention it." God, I've been naïve. The Dove is a little more sordid than I imagined. "I was making a tape when he interrupted. Where is it?"

Drake drags on his cigarette. "It's safe," he says, "and available if you should like to have it."

The thought hits me again, my heart swells, bleeds in my chest. "Not right now," I say quickly. The idea of listening to my suicide note holds no temptation. "Too fresh. I need some time."

Drake holds my eyes for a few seconds, and I hope they don't betray my emotions.

"Of course, dear Emery. As expected." His glance is a mixture of joy and pity. Striking because it's so misplaced.

"Shall we go on," he asks. I nod.

He snuffs the cigarette in a silver, ancient-looking ashtray.

"I was in the same place as you when Christ refused my redemption. Lost. Adrift." He stares into the air. "Angry. Hopeless. When I was denied, I...well...snapped, as the kids say." He's smiling now, beaming even. "It was then I became free. *Everything* changed. I was born again, you might say. After centuries of solitude, centuries of wanting only to be with God once again, centuries of trying to make amends, seeking redemption, doing everything I could to gain His approval, it became crystal clear I was chasing the wrong thing. Know this, my dear Emery, God is not a redeemer. He's a butcher."

Standing now—when did he stand?—he places his hands on his hips. "My freedom came with that realization. God prefers blood. Never, ever forget that."

I digest the words, scribble them as reinforcement, as Drake

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thumbs a button on the small black phone on his desk. The line rings once then a female answers.

“My usual table, please,” he says.

“Of course, Mr. Drake.”

He pokes another button and the line dies. He looks at me.
“Hungry?”