

The background of the cover is a vibrant red color with a marbled, fibrous texture, resembling recycled paper or a similar organic material. The fibers are thin and irregular, creating a complex, web-like pattern across the entire surface.

CRISS CROSS

Evie Rhodes

CRISS CROSS

EVIE RHODES

RHODES PUBLISHING COMPANY

www.jrhodesenterprises.com

EVIE RHODES BOOKS are published by

RHODES ENTERPRISES
2842 Main Street, Suite #159
Glastonbury, CT. 06033-1036
www.rhodespublishing.com

CRISS CROSS Copyright © 2006 by Eva M.Rhodes

Write the AUTHOR at: evierhodes@evierhodes.com or visit her site at www.evierhodes.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced to any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination to are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

First E-Book Printing October 2014

Cover Design by Evie Rhodes, www.evierhodes.com

First PDF E-Book Printing October 2014
E-book ISBN-13: 978-0-9905594-7-4

E-Book Printing in the United States

CHAPTER 1

NOW AND FOREVER, EVELYN,” QUENTIN’S words were spoken hauntingly, softly into her ear. “Do you know what those two words mean?”

Hungrily and with total authority he pulled her closer to him.

“Umm.” Evelyn moaned as she molded her body closer, tighter against his firm masculinity. She loved the absolute feel of him.

“They mean exactly what they say, now and forever. For you specifically they mean you will never escape.”

Never escape? The words hung in the air menacingly. Something was very wrong.

The rain splashed over them. The wind blew her hair. It was the most sensual moment of her life, until the whispered words of a madman sounded in her ear. Their vibe and meaning slowly seeped through to her brain.

The night was soft, black and velvety. A torrential downpour soaked the streets of Newark, New Jersey cleansing the gutters of the city’s very soul. Ridding it of some of the trash but not all.

The street was deserted. Quentin and Evelyn stood in the park, in romantic isolation, a block away from Evelyn's house.

They had taken a walk after a great dinner. Suddenly the sky had let loose with a fury and so had Quentin. Evelyn was totally confused.

She had been enjoying his company. He had elegant manners as well as sophistication. She thought she might come to care deeply for him. She had spent some quality, deeply moving time with him. Then he flipped on her. Like a light switch that someone had flicked off, just like that.

She stood on tiptoe in her bare feet. She had removed her sandals in the heat of the smoldering rainy sexuality that had her body awash. As she pressed her body against Quentin's, a subtle change took place without a hint of warning.

Quentin was crazy. He was threatening her. What did he mean she was never going to escape? Warning signals ignited in her head. A cold fear seized her body clashing with the hot, sexy heat rising from her womanhood.

Her thoughts rippled, like pebbles skipping across the water. Her brain was suddenly in total chaos. She tried to simulate her thoughts into something that made sense. It was no use. Her thoughts were running rampant.

One thing she did know. She couldn't have anything more to do with him. Something was wrong with him. He was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide.

Evelyn pulled back. She stared at Quentin Curry as though he'd lost his mind. "Let go of me." A clammy foreboding crawled up and down her skin. She shivered. Goose bumps sprout on her arms.

Quentin gripped her tighter. The force of his fingers left imprints in her skin. "Can't do that, Evelyn. Didn't you hear me? I said now and forever." He laughed at the utter lack of comprehension and bewilderment that flashed across her face.

A sense of unreality dug its clutches into Evelyn. Quentin's once expressive eyes were now only twin holes of black, black nothingness.

Gone were any traces of the warmth and compassion that had embraced her earlier.

“You’re crazy,” she stuttered. “I want you out of my life. Let go of me.”

Quentin shook his head. “What you want and what you get are two different things, Evelyn. You’re never going to leave me. And, I’m never going to leave you. Don’t you get it? I said there will never be an escape for you. I always say what I mean. And, I always, *always*, mean what I say.”

“No. You’re a maniac. Let go of me!” she screamed. Her words blew away on the fury of the winds of the rain, as though a great sea was carrying them away.

Looking into his face a wave of senselessness rushed over her. She spat a rush of words in his face. “I changed my mind about being with you. You’re not who I thought you were.”

“You changed your mind?”

Quentin looked up at the stormy skies. “Did you say you changed your mind? You don’t change your mind Evelyn, unless I change it for you understood?” Quentin words were cold and precise. His voice never raised an octave.

Now, Evelyn knew two things: real fear and the fact that she needed to get away from him.

A surge of strength rose up in her. It was a strength born out of desperation. She wrenched her body free from Quentin’s hold and ran wildly down the street. Her legs and feet were bare. Her sandals were long forgotten. Long wet strands of hair clung to her head and face.

The echo of her bare feet striking the wet pavement provided her with the rhythmic chaos that spurred her on. Evelyn blew the hair out of her eyes. She willed her legs to pump harder, faster as a numbness clawed at her body.

There was no way could she stop.

She looked briefly behind her. She panted as she picked up her pace, sprinting toward safety, which loomed not far in the distance.

Quentin Curry was a powerful, arrogant, and magnetic man. He was at the height of his physicality. His limbs were long and lithe. His carriage was tall and erect. He possessed a demeanor that indicated fierce pride.

He watched Evelyn run down the street. He was not at all concerned about her temporary escape. In fact he wasn't the least bit perturbed.

Quentin was a man of many layers with a sadistic streak a mile long. His extreme confidence bordered on a God-like level. He was a man who knew his own power and one who had come into power, by refusing to obey any boundaries but his own. Accustomed to getting his own way, he knew he had time.

Lazily, a sardonic smile crept across his face. His was a face that could have been sculpted by one of the masters. His face was masterful in the pure architecture of it, in the chiseled lines that outlined his features. It was a face with many textures and layers that he used at will.

Quentin wondered why people didn't realize they couldn't run from their fate?

He studied the picture that was Evelyn. He knew he had chosen carefully, oh, ever so carefully. Evelyn was the only child of deceased parents who left her with enough money that she would never have to worry about it in her lifetime.

She was a loner. Very isolated for one so young, always preferring her own company to that of others. She spent most of her time rummaging in bookstores and in the dusty corners of various libraries. The single link that connected her to the world was her writing.

Ah yes her writing, perhaps a most useful tool.

She didn't have any real friends. All of her friends, imaginary to be sure and relationships resided between the pages of books. Her

friends were in the notes of the music she loved so much. That was the extent of it.

While Quentin reviewed her profile, Evelyn stumbled in the wet street. She threw her hands out in front of her body to help regain her balance. Her legs ached, throbbed actually with pain.

Or was it with fear?

She didn't know. "Legs, please don't fail me now," she whispered desperately. She had never been so scared in her life.

A stray cat ran out from its shelter into the rain. He caused Evelyn to practically jump out of her skin. She turned to look behind her, finding no sign of Quentin. She took a deep breath to quell her quivering body and kept running. She looked around the deserted street. There was no sign of life on the street, just her. "Somebody help," she whispered. "Somebody. Please help." There was no one to hear her.

Quentin lounged in the park contemplating his plan. He knew Evelyn thought he was behind her, chasing her. That was enough to keep her where he wanted her. He was a chaser, though not in the way she would expect. He could chase her without moving a muscle, just as effectively, more in fact, as if he had ran after her.

Anyway he knew there would be no prying into the changes she was about to undergo. He thought about the Reverend Erwin Jackson, but quickly dismissed the thought as being of little consequence.

Reverend Erwin Jackson was Evelyn's minister. His was the one relationship she seemed to foster. The reverend's presence might lend a bit of an edge to the game.

Breeding was important and Evelyn's lineage showed good breeding. He'd done his checklist centuries in advance. He'd been waiting for her, for her arrival, for her birth. Now it was time. He'd been watching. Watching was what he did. Watching and observing were part of his highly honed and sharpened skills.

He knew her womb was young and untouched. She was pure. This was very necessary to his plan. He could not funnel through tainted goods.

He smiled. He was satisfied with the wisdom of his choice. One had to create their own opportunities. And, he had certainly created his. In his supreme arrogance, he settled on a single thought: The girl is in for the treat of her life and she's running from me. Quentin shook his head in amazement.

He dropped his cigarette lighter. He reached to pick it up. Imbedded in the back of his right hand was an "X." He lit a cigarette as the mist of the rainy night shrouded him.

The predator in him inched its way to the forefront. The pull of it tingled through his body. The sleek black panther of spirit he possessed was now on the prowl. It was lurking just beneath the surface.

Evelyn heaved air in great gulps as she raced up the steps of the Victorian house she had inherited from her parents. It was one of the last few of its kind left in the Newark neighborhood.

The house carried a certain presence. It had an ominous, yet old elegant air about it. It was wrapped in an air of quiet dignity. In the dark of this night, it was possessed with a spirit of stillness.

Evelyn fumbled with her keys looking wildly behind her. She jammed the key in the lock. She fumbled again and the wet keys slipped from her shaking fingers. They dropped to the porch floor. She picked them up. She worked at steadying herself. She tried again. The lock clicked. She bolted through the front door. She slammed it shut and locked it behind her.

Evelyn raced into the bathroom. She locked that door too. She stood trembling as little pools of water formed on the floor from her bare wet feet.

She was completely unaware of the youth, sensual beauty and vitality that radiated from her. Evelyn was a petite young woman with yards of dark, thick black locks of hair. She had beautiful translucent

brown eyes. And, flawless coffee colored skin with dimpled cheeks. She ran her hands up and down her arms, grappling with a terror the likes of which she had never known.

Quentin lay splayed on the glass roof of the bathroom. His gaze was hypnotic as it devoured the sensual Evelyn Jordan-Wells. He reveled in her image enjoying the feel of the hunt.

His loins ached with the thought of having her, possessing her. A groan of pleasure escaped his lips. Evelyn's fear was a tangible thing to him. He breathed it in.

Quentin's eyes were liquid pools of midnight black as he stared through the glass at Evelyn.

Evelyn, sensing his presence, looked up. Her gaze was riveted on Quentin. She shook like a leaf on a tree.

Abruptly, torrential rain, wind and shattering glass engulfed her as Quentin crashed through the glass-enclosed roof.

Evelyn hyperventilated in her fear. But, Quentin's hypnotic stare changed the very rhythm of her breathing. Slowly her labored breathing broke into an even pattern.

Seductively sweet and with a hint of red-hot passion, Quentin touched Evelyn, ever so lightly. "Evelyn Jordan-Wells," he said. Her name rolled off his tongue like sweet licorice candy.

"Hide and seek. You think you can hide from me? Umm, a game. I like games, Evelyn. I created them you know." Evelyn shrank back from him. Quentin allowed it for the time being.

He continued speaking as though there had been no physical interruption. "I especially like games that change the course of history. Games that upset the balance of power. Sensual, sexual and exquisite games, Evelyn. You and I will play. You do want to play with me. Don't you?" His voice had a languid purr to it. It held the promise of a lullaby.

He grabbed her, pulling her to him. He put his lips close to her ear. A deep rage settled over him. He turned his head. It twisted

around like rubber. His eyes produced a glow of radar that destroyed everything in its path.

“Come on, dance with me, Evelyn,” Quentin purred.

The sink, toilet and antique claw bathtub ripped right out of the tiled floor at the force of Quentin’s gaze.

His gaze swept around the bathroom. The walls exploded. The windows blew out. Evelyn broke loose. She backed away from Quentin. A scream erupted from her throat as if a volcano had burst forth.

She crouched and cowered in the face of an evil that was so tangible she could reach out and touch it. Nothing in her sheltered life had prepared her for the darkness that had breached her world. In its face she was completely helpless.

Evelyn briefly looked up. She stared at Quentin as though she had never seen him before. In truth she hadn’t. Shock controlled every limb in her body.

The monster in Quentin had unleashed before her eyes. It had replaced the man that she thought she might love. Standing in front of her was a total stranger. It was a stranger who was in possession of a dark and lethal power. He was not of this world. Evelyn recoiled in shock.

Searing white-hot, glittering flashes of light exploded in her brain. She searched the crevices of her mind desperately for a place to hide. There was no refuge. There was nothing for her to cling to.

A chord of deep fear struck within her. She babbled out loud, “Jesus Lord, Jesus Lord, Jesus Lord.”

The sound of her babbling added fuel to Quentin’s fire. He burned a flaming “X” into the wall. “I AM THE LORD! I am your Lord, Evelyn!”

Softly switching gears he said, “Though my name is not Jesus.”

His eyes burned a hole through her shirt. It sizzled but didn’t burn her skin.

Returning to his former state he said, “Don’t you ever forget that I AM THE LORD!” I am Lord over both life and death. I will not be forgotten. Do you hear me? No one will ever forget me. Everyone will know I was here.” Quentin fixed his twin holes of blackness on Evelyn. Writhing behind their depths were legions of slimy reptile tails.

Evelyn sobbed. She gulped air. Raw fear held her in its grip. Astonishment was her new companion. She could feel Quentin crawling around in her mind, poking, feeling. He found it all. Every secret. Her mind lay spread-eagles naked before him.

His presence was a live wire as he insinuated himself into her thoughts. “My Lord.” The words rushed from her lips as if they belonged to someone else. She was barely aware of speaking them.

Quentin laughed. “You’re coming along, Evelyn. You’re coming along nicely. It pleases me when people use my title.”

Evelyn went mute. She was struck dumb by the supreme arrogance emanating from this creature.

“I am a Prince, Evelyn. The Prince. You’ve heard of me. You’ve read about me. Yet, you don’t believe in me. Few people do. It’s what makes me powerful. You’re a perfect specimen of the stupidest species to inhabit earth. I know animals smarter than you.”

Quentin threw his head back and roared, “I am what I am! Can’t you see me?! You don’t believe your own eyes?! Well, here I am! In the flesh! I am my own MAKER!”

He paused. “I am also YOURS!”

He pointed to the masterpiece he had seared into the wall. The flaming “X” glowed with a light of its own.

“This is my legacy, Evelyn. It is my mark. It will travel through the generations of my seed to come. It is a life force. It is what makes me eternal. Didn’t they teach you all about that in Sunday school?”

He stooped down so he could be at eye level with Evelyn. “Take a look around, because you will spend a great deal of time on these very premises, Evelyn. You will never leave this house again. Oh, no. You

will not ever leave. Because if you do. . .” He reached for a handful of her wet hair. He forced her face up to his.

His gaze bore into her. “If you ever try to leave you will die! You will die a death more vicious than the wildest imagination can conjure up. Painfully and slowly, I will release life from your body. Until you beg for death. Until you seek its face. I will kill you and anything you love. Understood? Look at the mark.”

His voice now held the musical tempo of soothing waters. “Look at it I said.”

Evelyn struggled to rip her gaze from him. She looked at the flaming, spirited “X” seared into the wall. My God! He’s insane! The mark swam like a watery illusion before her eyes.

“You’ve been chosen to be the carrier of my legend. In your womb the seed of the “X” will be implanted for generations to come. You, Evelyn, will raise a warrior. Remember the number six. Don’t forget it because it’s a very important part of your future.” His words echoed through the chambers of her being.

Venom rose from the depths of her belly. Hatred swelled inside her. Refusal bubbled from the depths of her soul at the despicable evil. It spewed forth from her lips. She warred with him in a single word. “No!” She pushed him so hard he stumbled backwards.

The tail of the reptile leaped from his eyes. It lashed around her neck chocking her. It left a trail of a red welt on her skin. As quickly as it emerged it withdrew. Evelyn gagged. She wet herself.

Quentin was unperturbed. He got up and in her face just a little bit closer. Calmly he told her, “Yes.”

He turned his attention to the “X.” It burned brighter under the heat of his satanic gaze. Radar-like light streamed from his eyes.

He looked at her. Hot sensuality replaced the radar streaming from his eyes, an animal scent of musk rose from the heat of his body.

Quentin slowly licked the outer parameters of Evelyn’s lips. He was all lithe sensuality as he gently stroked her wet hair. He kissed the tears from her cheeks.

Evelyn rebuffed his very touch. Her skin crawled from the touch of the beast. Her insides heaved. Then something inside her cracked. It broke down. It disconnected. She lost the last of the tentative hold. She couldn't handle it.

Once again she reached out seeking solace in a corner of her mind she never knew was there. This time the corner embraced her with warm and welcoming arms. It was a place of peace, quietness and refuge.

She floated away as the beast mauled and devoured her body.

CHAPTER 2

SOME WEEKS LATER, EVELYN SAT in the warmth of her parlor staring across at Reverend Erwin Jackson. It was a lavishly appointed room, spacious and encompassed by high ceilings.

Vines and birds decorated the wallpaper with astonishing hand-stenciled details.

The fireplace created warmth in the room as the flames crackled, although heavy brocade drapes were pulled against the windows, keeping out the day's sunlight.

The room was scattered with sofas, chairs, footstools and tables. Collections of Frederic Francois Chopin, Ludwig Van Beethoven and Franz Listz sat with a book of poems by Emily Jane Bronte.

Evelyn inherited the wonderful collection from her parents. On a normal day she would sit in this room, listening to Chopin, Beethoven, or Listz while writing longhand on her yellow legal pad.

However, this was not a normal day. Her collections were silent. The silence was loud, almost unbearable. She thought of the collections as her friends. They had been there in her times of need. It seemed as if somewhere along the way in their instrumentation, they

had drawn for her a musical pattern that would shape her life, with their peaks and valleys.

Today there were no symphonic poems and melodies being released. Today there were no crashing crescendos playing to match the rhythm of her pen.

The composers had composed, she supposed laying the final groundwork for this stage. Now it was her cue. “Reverend Jackson, thank you for coming on such short notice. . .” Her voice trailed off on an uneven note as though she had suddenly lost her thought.

The reverend observed her closely. “You are free to call me, anytime, day or night. You are aware of that.”

“Yes. I know. Thank you,” Evelyn sighed. She lapsed into her own thoughts. The room had always encompassed her with a special feeling of belonging and passion.

The parlor had in the past inspired her to great heights. The very feel of the room, its atmosphere helped her to discover an existence and connect to her writing at a level, and depth, she hadn’t known was possible. Now it seemed as if it had withdrawn its comforts from her.

Of every room in the house this room was her very favorite. At times she could hear the laughter and joy of the past that was now sealed, solid and frozen, in memory only, within the walls. Within those walls was life, the foundation of her life from a different time.

She shivered in the shawl draped around her shoulders. She tried to bring her vision in focus. The room no longer held that special warmth for her. It was as though a vacuum had sucked it all out.

Fragments of words swirled as though she were on an international call listening to the faraway echo of a voice on the other end, which had suddenly been disconnected.

Groping for something to say she leveled a stare at the reverend. “How are things at the orphanage?”

“Fine. In fact we have a new little boy who has taken quite a liking to me. He’s been helping to clean the Chapel. The child sits at

my feet while I'm preparing scriptures. I've been reading to him." The reverend shook his head. "Amazing little fellow he is. Who knows? Maybe he'll grow up to be a missionary. He comes from a tough background but he's eager to hear about the Lord, so you never know what will happen."

"No. I guess you never do," Evelyn replied.

The muted lighting in the room cast a faint glow and Evelyn found her attention wandering to watch the kaleidoscope of colors dancing from the stained glass figurine sitting on the table between her and Reverend Jackson. She reclined in her favorite serpentine seat, crossing her legs at the ankles.

The reverend studied Evelyn. He wondered at the turmoil and conflict that were trading places across her frozen features. He had been her minister since she was a child. Never before had he sensed such despair in her. Nevertheless he was a trusted confidant, a servant of God. So, he sipped from his cup of coffee and waited patiently.

"Reverend Jackson, there are some changes taking place and I, umm, well, I wanted to talk to you about them."

"Of course. What sort of changes are you speaking about?"

Evelyn's attention strayed. She didn't answer right away. Finally, she struggled to pull her gaze from the dancing colors of the glass figurine. She took a sip from her cup.

She looked at the reverend. Her throat constricted and went mute. Her vocal chords froze in place and not a word came out. She cleared her throat. The reverend didn't rush her.

She knew there was no way to cushion what was on her mind. Her need went beyond the very grain of all she believed. She needed the endorsement of Reverend Jackson, although in her wildest fantasies she didn't imagine she would receive it.

However, she was determined to press forward. She drew her shoulders straighter. Then they slumped and she faltered. Indecision rose up in her. How could she go on? How could she tell the reverend? She must. Pin pricks of rage stabbed at her brain. She was obsessed

by the knowledge of the monster that was growing in her womb. Her hands trembled.

This thought spurred her on. The very idea of ridding herself of the monster had temporarily stayed her fear. She imagined what it would feel like if she could beat Quentin, even at the risk of losing her own life.

In this one act she could take the very thing away from him that he wanted. She looked at the reverend. At last she said, "I'm pregnant. I can't have this baby. I need an abortion." The words tumbled out of her mouth after being pent up for so long.

When she uttered the words a high-pitched screech sailed through the air that only she could hear. A low growl emitted from the fireplace.

Reverend Jackson blinked. He reigned in his astonishment. Evelyn had always been so upright. It was all he could do to imagine her in an unwed relationship.

He considered the early loss of her parents, the accidental death of her maiden aunt, her last living relative. He supposed it was not surprising that she had sought companionship. However, her announcement of pregnancy was vividly shocking.

Nevertheless, he assumed a calm air of solidarity. This was a steadiness that had served him for many years. Any trace of the surprise he felt was expunged from his voice before he spoke. "Evelyn, you know I can't advise the termination of a pregnancy," he said.

Evelyn shifted to the end of her cushioned chair. She fought hard to ignore the screeching, the growling. "You don't understand Reverend. The relationship it isn't. . .it just isn't. . . I just don't want it. I have to get rid of this baby."

The glass figurine beckoned to get Evelyn's attention. There were no longer muted colors of beauty streaming from it. The figurine had been turned upside down on its head. The tail of a reptile was choking its neck. The only color streaming from it was red. Red blood.

Evelyn bit her lip to keep from screaming. She bit it so hard she broke the skin and could feel the blood seeping into her mouth.

The reverend was taken aback by the venom-tinged words, "I have to get rid of this baby." Evelyn sounded like a stranger.

He didn't condone this pregnancy. But considering the girl was alone he would have expected a different reaction. Her vehement rejection of the child growing in her womb was quite disturbing.

He placed a soothing hand over Evelyn's. Her hands were ice cold and rock hard. They were trembling with the force of an earthquake.

He said, "I can't give this my blessing. I can't advise the termination of a pregnancy. It just can't be done under any circumstances. God has a way of working things out, my child. Let him do it. In his time and in his way."

Risking a glance at the figurine Evelyn found it had righted itself. Once again it was glowing with a rainbow beauty of colors. There was no tail of a reptile choking its neck. The neck of the figurine was flawless in its slender elegance. The screeching and growling had stopped.

Evelyn pulled her hand away. She was unable to control the trembling that robbed her of her agility. She wanted to pick up her coffee cup but found that her thought processes had disconnected from her limbs. She lacked the ability to complete such an innocent task.

Willing her mental processes back into control over the physical, she smoothed her skirt and felt relieved at the simple movement.

She wished she could believe the reverend's words. She wished she could remember all she had been taught. But lately it seemed as though whatever knowledge she once possessed had deserted her. It was as if thieves had broken in and stolen it.

Reverend Jackson's God, who used to be her God as well, suddenly held no comfort for her. She desperately wanted to believe. She couldn't. She had found she was sorely lacking the ability to see anything except the darkness that had shrouded and invaded her life.

“Reverend Jackson there must be some exception.” She stumbled over the words almost gagging on them.

The reverend gave her his most comforting look. When he spoke his words were tinged with a hint of authority. “I’m sorry. There aren’t any exceptions, Evelyn.”

Evelyn sighed. She was deeply disappointed, abandoned and scared. She didn’t argue or dispute the reverend. She had expected exactly this.

A sense of pure desolation washed over her at the reverend’s words. She knew somewhere in her religion there was a cornerstone, a rock, but she didn’t know how to get to it. Those thoughts seemed to belong to someone she used to know, like a best friend she had lost contact with.

Her face crumbled for a fraction of a second. The reverend watched her war with herself to win back her composure. He sighed deeply.

Finally, drawing on sheer willpower, Evelyn arranged her posture to reflect a strength she didn’t feel. “If I am left with no choice, then there is something I need to share with you. Something that must not ever be revealed outside of this room.”

Evelyn could taste the bitterness, rising like bile in her throat. She was about to subject herself to a scrutiny she wasn’t sure she could handle.

Quentin was the outward visible sign of her worst fear, manifested in the flesh. He was the ultimate culmination of every fear she had ever known. He was a full-blown breathing nightmare.

Reverend Jackson was one of the most solid people she knew. Yet, even he would be hard pressed to believe her story. It didn’t matter. There was no way she could carry the weight of this alone. So she decided to cast her line out onto spiritual waters.

Evelyn looked around the room. She lowered her voice to a whisper. She said, “Never, Reverend, never can my words leave this room.”

An involuntary tremor passed through the reverend as her words were spoken. As though the very finger of God were touching his soul. He was drawn as if by a magnet to stare at the blazing flames in the fireplace.

He blinked. He knew he had never ever experienced such an eternal feeling. The reverend searched his mind for scriptural support, which was always the support he sought. Finding none, he stared at Evelyn while taking a deep breath.

Looking beyond her he suddenly knew he was unprepared for the magnitude of the burden she was about to lay at his doorstep. Just as he'd always known instinctively that one—day his ministry would become pivotal to some event not of his making.

He allowed himself the briefest moment of solace by closing his eyes. When he opened them he looked directly at Evelyn and said, “Speak, child.”

CHAPTER 3

BY 1999 THIRTY-TWO-YEARS LATER, THE seed implanted in Evelyn's womb had grown. It had taken root. The root had become a man. He was the product of her worst fears. He was the epitome of her highest joy. Like a pendulum, Evelyn's fate had swung high and low.

He was sprung from a foundation of pain. He was derived through great deception. He was born in the shadows of darkness, in murky waters. He was Evelyn's son. He was her pride and joy. His name was Micah Jordan-Wells. And, he had yet to know his title.

Evelyn had never told him about the circumstances surrounding his birth. She had not spoken to him of his father. She had shielded him from an awful truth.

She thought what he didn't know couldn't hurt him. Their lives were crafted in the simple act of denial.

She had made a singular choice. She took the uncomplicated path. Then fate intervened and dared to display, its uncontrollable factors.

Micah Jordan-Wells was a by-product, one who was battling his own demons. The sins of the past were visited upon him. The truth of his existence hovered nearby. The truth waited. It waited patiently.

Then it struck. It cast its net in the deep of the night upon Micah Jordan-Wells.

* * *

It was dark. Pitch-black dark. Hot mist rose from the ground around Micah's feet. He struggled to free his hands and feet from the roped wired bounds. The muscles in his biceps tensed. They coiled. Micah was wired tight to a chair. He slithered around like a cobra in a desperate attempt to be free.

It was intensely hot in the room. The temperature soared beyond anything normal. Sweat dripped, poured into his eyes skewing his vision. He tasted the salt of it in his mouth.

His jerking around caused the wires to slice through his flesh. Red spots of blood oozed from his wrists and ankles. Then there was a sound like the roar of a rushing wind. An ear-shattering explosion burst forth. His ears popped.

Micah sat very still. He listened. He tried to identify the direction of the sound.

Red, orange light burst forth through the darkness. A flaming ball of fire rushed him. With the speed of light it was on him. He howled. A mix of denial, defiance and terror discharged from his throat.

Someone laughed. Mocked him. He heard a deep baritone voice. It held no life. It held no feeling. It echoed up to him from a deep pit. "Micah! Micah!" It drew him in, sucking him down into its tunnel. A mere instant before he would have been engulfed in flames.

A flaming "X" shone through the darkness. Molten heat seared it into the cement floor. The "X" slowly ascended. Then it branded itself over Micah's body merging with him. Gut wrenching sounds of pure agony gushed from Micah's mouth. Buckets of vomit poured forth through his parched lips.

He scooted his chair backwards to resist the merger. He twisted. He turned trying to gain some distance from the frightening mark. It was all over him. He shuddered. Stark fear drenched his body. The smell of his own musk reached his nostrils.

Micah's dehydrated body jerked spastically. He sat up in bed. Sweat dripping terror of the darkest kind drenched his body. His mind whirled in confusion.

He looked around. The room slowly came into focus. He had emerged. He freed his wet body from the twisted sheets.

He jumped out of bed and strode to the shower. He knew it was time to face the real demons of his world. There were enough of them that he didn't need to conjure them up in his sleep.

Micah Jordan-Wells was a high profile, very celebrated homicide detective in Newark, New Jersey. He was a man who had done battle with a great many of Newark's dragons. He'd affectionately been given the nickname of the Dragon Slayer by Newark's elite corps of the press.

Right now he was the darling of the media for reeling in a man called Silky who had wrecked terror in the streets of Newark. He had created horror in their hearts. He had numbed the minds of Newark's citizens and police force. In short he had scandalized them into electric outrage.

Silky didn't just commit crimes; he gave the impression of creating them; like an artist creates a portrait—murder by design. His murders were like hideous paintings, created by a master who wants you to marvel at the boldness of his strokes and guess at the illusions he has hinted at.

Silky possessed a darkness of spirit that leapt out from the carcass of his victims and screamed for justice. The callousness with which he performed made him unparalleled in the annals of crime.

Micah was still grappling with the tail end of Silky's case, which was taking its place in Newark's crime history as something akin to notorious.

He turned the spray nozzle in the shower to full force. He shivered as the shock of ice-cold needles sprayed his body into rigid alertness. As the water rained over his body the "X" beckoned, once again. It

summoned him. There was no resistance in him because there could be none.

It was happening again. A visionary connection manifested in the flesh that swamped his being, connecting him to a dark and evil path. The inhabitation of the eyes he looked through made him shudder. The things he saw made him weep. They were his eyes and yet they were not. They were his hands and yet they were not. Who was he fooling? He was there.

The immeasurable joy of the act of murder swept through his limbs and merged with his being. It was another woman, another victim, and yet another masterpiece.

She was a prized photograph. Her high-heeled feet kicked wildly. Her legs were bare beneath the gold dress. Moonlight streaked across the shadows of darkness in the room. Tied around her throat was a pair of silk pantyhose. He pulled tighter and tighter. The “X” seared itself into her forehead.

Her wild kicking slowed. Her legs flopped beneath her. The last shred of life drained from her body. One of her gold silk strapped, high-heeled shoes fell off her foot. Her body went limp. It was final.

He stroked the soft silk of the pantyhose. He loved the feel of the silky softness between his fingers. Stark fear sprayed from her eyes. Only now it was frozen in its portrayal.

He smiled. The rapture was upon him.

The mark of the “X” pulsated within his body. His skin gleamed with the shine of it. He took one look around. His final gaze rested on the framed picture of a six-year-old boy.