

# HOLY

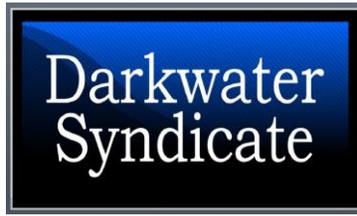
A NOVEL



ABBIE  
KRUPNICK

# HOLY

ABBIE KRUPNICK



Holy

Published by Darkwater Syndicate, Inc.

8004 NW 154 Street #623

Miami Lakes, FL 33016

Copyright © 2017 Abbie Krupnick. All rights reserved. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission.

Darkwater Syndicate, the Darkwater Syndicate device, and associated marks are trademarks of Darkwater Syndicate, Inc.

The names, characters, places, and incidents contained in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, and people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

[www.DarkwaterSyndicate.com](http://www.DarkwaterSyndicate.com)

## CHAPTER 1: FLOWERS

The volcano in the east was snowing violets. Gus squared off against the Magician on the fragrant, blossom-covered plain at its foothills. The Magician cut a sleek figure in his red suit. Tiny, iridescent green feathers dribbled from hair-thin spiral tunnels in his earlobes. When they met his shoulders they turned to puddles of gold whose stringy metallic fingers trailed over and under his lapel. Every few seconds they recoiled up the shoulders and regrew, recoiled, regrew.

Gus rolled his eyes, flicked a couple violets out of the bowls of his ears. To those unfamiliar with the Dream World, everything the Magician did would seem miraculous. Not a few of his tricks required species of magic outlandish in their own right, never mind results. Sometimes his shoes allowed him to fly while another spell held him upright so he wouldn't hang upside down. On a clear day his broad, colorful hat allowed him to see through his scalp to the heavens. Now he plucked a few flowers off the brim, cupped them in his palm before sifting them through his fingers. More took their place.

Puppet master of the Dream World indeed. Everyone else could only watch and wonder as he sewed invisible thread into tangible fabric, lay the completed cloth on barren soil where it turned to water and pushed out a dozen roses. Sometimes the Dream People forgot he was one of their own because he could do more than they could. Special things that confirmed what they all thought: unlike them, he was one with the Valley they lived in. He shared something with it that made him Extra. The Valley was the Dream People's lifeblood made manifest, home and power source rolled into one. If the Magician were part of the Valley, that meant he flowed through them, too. Him and his Extra.

Gus giggled. His most powerful guardian didn't know what to do now that he'd caught him at last. The stalling and parlor tricks were juvenile, *but don't tell him that EVER, wouldn't you like to stay alive a while longer.* It was funny in a sad way.

*But he won't kill me.*

*But he could, he could.*

The Magician frowned, scraped fresh blossoms off his arms. A few dark patches stained the sleeves, were buried again. His suit looked like it was spotted with crumpled black toilet paper. Too many flowers spewing out of the mountain, rolling in purple waves down midnight blue walls which appeared to undulate into the plain. He pointed to it, ready to say something, then made a frustrated noise and threw up his hands. *Mr. Magician can't hold himself still. Never learned patience and never will.* Gus sniggered, and this got him a sharp look. He sobered and stared at his feet.

Oh, the CONSEQUENCES if he pissed him off during this most sacred of reunions. But after all these years, Gus wasn't sure the Magician's abilities counted for anything. In the long run, at least. During his time away he had succumbed to the suspicion that perhaps he wasn't so Extra *kidding yourself this is real, deal with it before it kills you*. Gus inspected the nails on his right hand, scraped out the blue underneath with the nails of his left *too much time off you've forgotten what you're dealing with because you haven't had to look it in the face for too long. You've gone soft, man. You're the mouse who rigs the trap for himself when there's no cheese*.

There was no proof, but he was certain that a long, long, long time ago, the Dream People hadn't been Extra at all. No powers, no magic, no special anything. Then there had been an accident of some sort. Shifting tectonic plates. Bad hurricane. Heaven opened wide and hacked up toothpicks of lightning it had choked on for a few millennia. However it happened, the Valley shifted some Extra into the Dream People. The Magician had been lucky enough to receive more than the others.

Blossoms plowed through Gus's line of sight as he attempted another look at the volcano. Years ago, he would have mashed his fists into his eyes in disbelief. That was before he had seen how easy it was to walk on water or command bread to clone itself exponentially—for the capable few. The spastic surrealism no longer shook him, couldn't make him fear the ground would abruptly drop from under his feet.

He frowned. His clothes would forever smell like cheap perfume. His shirt looked like several pens had exploded on it. He would throw it away later. Patricia wouldn't care enough to ask questions, but he couldn't risk her seeing it. These violets were nothing like those in the Waking World. Runny blue dye leaked from their stamens. The juicier ones clung to any exposed skin. He plucked one off his elbow, set it on his tongue. It tasted like flowers and had the texture of honey. He chewed. More flower taste. He spat out the clump. It collided midair with a gaggle of fresh ones that carried it a few feet to his left.

The Magician's sigh was audible over the storm's gentle pattering. Hands in pockets, his left shoe scraped flowers from the black dirt. It was obvious he wanted Gus to believe he was responsible for the violets. See this mess I made to bring you back, you couldn't resist a show like this, and I put it together. Just. For. You.

*As if*. The Magician could groan and rock on his heels all he wanted, but this storm required a magnitude of energy he lacked. Knowing he wasn't responsible didn't leave many options as to who was. The Dream People wouldn't consider such a display practical enough for investing collective effort. The volcano couldn't do things like this *and wouldn't give a damn enough to try*. It was a mountain, not a Person. Things were done to land. Not the other way around. The ocean in the south could evaporate into thick fog for hours at a time, but

there was no brain down there to make it happen. Magic, sure. Consciousness, no.

The storm was slowing down. Millions of flowers drifted quietly into a carpet a few inches thick. Then the earth shook for a few seconds and stilled. The flowers fell faster, bursting out of the mountain like confetti. Some were forced through the clouds where they remained.

Gus sensed the Magician relaxing, knew this did not bode well for himself. The storm's end was shifting the balance of power.

Fine. If he was supposed to think it was all another trick, then he would pretend so *because here's a clever bastard who could sever your head by snapping his fingers, did that to a squirrel once and a salamander and a bunny rabbit and a chipmunk and a litter of wild puppies, and that doe who licked his hand 'cause she thought he was a nice guy, nice Magician, all magical beings are nice to one another, like this is some bullshit hippie utopia.*

"Bad weather," the Magician said, doffing his hat.

Gus eyed him carefully as the hat shrank to the size of a penny and winked away in the open palm *one smart move and it all goes BOOM. Play nice.* Then the long hands hung loose. The storm was over. The Magician looked back as though he hoped it would start again. He shook his head, smiled like he knew something *should have started running earlier when he would have lost me should have hidden shoulda shoulda shoulda, gonna be sick with all this "shoulda."*

A few blue specks floated between them. Shivers zipped down the back of Gus's neck. His fingers were sticky with blue honey. Flowers were mashed to the soles of his feet.

"Come home," the Magician said. "We miss you."

Where was the welcome party? You miss me. Come home. Sure. As if he had a choice now.

"Things are violent and unpredictable outside the Valley," the Magician added. "You should know better."

It riled him to be treated like a kid again. He hadn't spent the last three months holed up in a cave. Except when it was necessary. But he got impatient lying on his back when the wind occasionally whistled in to remind him of the outside. It was a matter of pride for him that when he finally heeded the reminder, it was only to find food. *Efficient, ain't I?* By the second month he had learned how to hide in the open. There was plenty to explore, especially in any source of deep water. He savored each day he could work the blood into his legs running through the desert. It was satisfying to know that he had better instincts than the superior, magic-infused People *better evolved animals* on his tail. *But if you're the one being hunted, who's really at the top of the food chain?*

Unpredictable. Violent. Didn't he know it. Sometimes the sky grew tentacles of real silver lightning that scourged the ground like electrified whips. The intricate river system in the south spontaneously combusted during snowstorms when the wind wasn't blowing. Once it had happened when he forded them at

night. He was fifteen then and didn't know about the fire. Halfway across, he heard the sharp crackle of flames upstream. Curious, he swam toward them until the heat was near his chest. Too late, he discovered that yes, this was fire, and he couldn't outswim it. He took a deep breath, submerged himself in the freezing water. Above the murky green, orange plasma licked the dim pinpricks of stars. When he crawled up the bank, he still couldn't believe what had happened. Then he watched his skin fall off in charred scraps, exposing muscle and organ. He bit his tongue until it bled so that he wouldn't scream from the shock and pain. But he had to flee before the bank caught fire, so he kicked the remains of his skin into the water and fled. The raw muscles of his feet left dark tracks in the grass.

The Magician couldn't make fire like that. Gus smirked. *Don't we lucky ones go way back?* His toes were grimy. With the dirt it felt like wiggling them at the beach.

"Bad weather, Gus."

*Way, way back.* When he waddled on stubby kid legs and the exquisite suit had been red wings. *It IS a nice suit, I give him credit for that.* A golden serpent's tongue darted out from the long, green sickle of a beak to catch the sunlight. The clouds shifted, cheated the tongue of its gleam. It occurred to Gus that this bird was dangerous. He tossed *one rock two rock three rock four.* Seven. Several more rebounding off its unruffled feathers until it screeched. Panicked by the sound, Gus lifted his arms too late to shield himself from the rush of wings and talons sunk deep in his back through his stomach wall, flooding him with his own digestive acid.

Wouldn't it have been nice to arrive at a different spot than the plain. In the Waking World, he always started in and returned to wherever he laid himself down. No matter how badly things went here, he could count on that much over there. Never the same spot twice at this end. In a row, at least.

The Magician sneezed loudly, wiped his nose on the back of his hand. *A true gentleman.* The sound was too realistic to be real. The ears were empty. Brittle gold chipped off the jacket onto his shoes, exploded into metallic dust.

Good. The spell was wearing off. Or the Magician had grown bored with his own display. His eyes quivered in their sockets. It was unpleasant to watch. Then they stilled, locked on Gus's. He squirmed, nervous sweat loosening some of the stickiness. The Magician's normally brown irises were translucent with pupils constricted to pinpricks. Gus could see through the jelly to the shadows between the folds of the brain.

He regretted taking so close a look as thick silver chains burst out of the field, wound themselves around his wrists. He knew better than to struggle or magic them away. The Magician waved a hand at the ground. The flowers between them cleared. The chains tugged hard on his wrists. He fell on his knees in the dirt *how lucky am I, yes, sir.* He could have started running earlier, *but when he hunts me he can't give up, there's more at stake for him. I just have to stay hidden,*

*whereas he has his pride and reputation. Every minute I was gone was a minute the others respected him less.*

Gold-dusted leather shimmered against the soil.

"I wish it could be different," the Magician sighed, eyes brown again. A short gust of wind tossed dirt into Gus's face. He blinked on reflex, pushed the grains in deeper. His eyes burned. He should have arrived someplace where the ground was one solid piece of rock.

"We could have been a family." That one hurt. His throat tightened. The Magician's face was pitying *disgusting*.

"I thought that was what you wanted," Gus said. His voice came out higher than he would have liked. "That's what we were. You ruined everything –"

"That was your fault." The Magician's smile was all *ugly* teeth. His eyes grew kinder. Gus pursed his lips, refused to be dragged into the argument. "We want you to come home. Your Mothers miss you. Mathis is bored and won't leave me alone. He says I'm 'not a well-intentioned idiot with a stick up his ass' like you."

Gus ground his teeth. Before he could blink, the ground beneath his legs was green softness. He glanced up weakly, too glum to be startled by the change.

Morning dew clung to everything in the almond grove. The violets hadn't made it this far west. Flowering pink almond trees loomed out of the knee-high, teal-colored grass. Thin shafts of sunlight pierced the canopy. Several larger specimens formed a wide ring within the grove's center. He inhaled petrichor and almond blossom, swallowed his grief. The chains were gone. Reflexively he rubbed his arms, stood. The rapid teleportation had left him woozy. At least he wasn't eating dirt anymore.

The grove was home. A Good place. Everything all right? All fine, yes, sir. Here, he was healed and protected. Even if it didn't always seem that way *green talons lifting me from the earth toward the florid heat of the sun*. He shuddered. That had never happened. It could.

Not here, though. The Dream People kept the grove in perpetual spring for him. Before he first came to their World, the Valley was a barren patch of dirt. They had drastically altered forty-two hundred square miles (according to Gus's rough measurements) for his sake. Whether or not land was fertile and had hiking trails didn't matter to them. It was all their home. They weren't human and didn't have to accommodate him, yet they did, and they never let him forget it for a second. Before all the green, the sun bleached the ground so finely they could bathe in the dust.

Gus's stomach churned with something on its way out. It bubbled sour ooze through his teeth. The ground smudged to a single shade of bluish green that made his head spin. He crouched, arms around his middle as though this would prevent his stomach wall from exploding. The grass rustled in the chill breeze, poked into his ears.

There was a sound like a dying cow. Despite his condition, he stood, wiped his mouth with the hem of his T-shirt. His legs almost gave out, but it was worth

it. The Magician was doubled over, faced flushed, eyes squeezed shut as he puked in the grass *classy*. Pale orange slime dribbled from the corners of his mouth. None of it stained the suit. The grass shimmered with gold. When he looked up, Gus stared through him *not so much fun when it happens to YOU is it?*

Chunks of his mentor's last meal clung to his lips. Then he straightened, examined his nails as the blue stains on the suit disappeared. The bile vanished so fast it seemed the skin had absorbed it like a sponge. He pulled his hat out of thin air, let it float up and settle on his skull. Gold dripped down his suit in longer threads that inched past his navel. He was smiling. No more flower storms and prodigal children to ruin his day.

"I clean up well, don't I?" he said pleasantly.

Gus wasn't smiling. Things had hardly worked in his favor on the plain, but at least they had been in the open, where he could have *didn't* run. Too few escape routes out of the trees.

*Next time I'm outside the Valley, I'll change things. Set up camp in some hollow they don't know about. Breed my own Dream tribe. Stage a coup. Rape the men, kill the women, eat the children... if only.*

The Magician's eyes were fixed on him too intently for comfort. Gus walked away, grass tickling his open palms. As he heard the Magician match his pace he wanted to sprint, still felt too sick for it, then slowed as a new obstacle presented itself.

The border of the Valley was supposed to be visible from where he stood. Instead he was surrounded by trees and bluish green grass rippling for miles under the grey sky. Behind him were the Magician and the grove.

It had to be another trick. The Magician had dipped those chains in something that got in his skin. He had been drugged *I've been drugged!* into a specific hallucination. Fine. The Magician was living up to his name. This was all supposed to make him feel helpless. But Gus knew the Valley. All he had to do was keep jogging. He could sweat out the magic through his pores.

Several minutes of steady jogging later, the grass wouldn't end. Every so often he stopped, drooling for breath, forced his legs to obey him and keep going. The Magician still followed at a leisurely pace, hands in his pockets.

When he was certain he would reach the border in a moment, he fell to his knees, relieved and ready to take off in a moment. There was a footprint several feet away. He frowned, waded through the grass. He was so exhausted it felt like treading water. He found the print, glanced around to make sure he could afford the detour. The Magician was a wavering red tab on the horizon.

There was no path cut through the grass to the print. It must have been stamped artificially. Gus scanned the area for more, saw only his own parting the grass behind him. Taking care not to disturb the impression, he lowered his foot into it. The motion felt *familiar*, like he had done it a second ago. He squinted at the trees behind him. They looked familiar but he was too far away to be sure.

He jogged to the nearest one, looked around, was seized with déjà vu so potent he lost his balance.

All the same, every one of them. In twenty minutes he had covered no more than four feet. *Twelve years, plus five in my own World, and I still don't know if I'm running in circles.* His mistake had been to assume the trick was a simple distortion of perspective. It would serve him well to remember what the Magician was capable of *and then some.* Might as well be in a hamster wheel. He was depressed. Now he could wait like the obedient tyke he was supposed to be.

The breeze fell away, silenced the rustling grass. The Magician's steps thumped in the new quiet. Whatever he had planned was gonna hurt like hell. The Dream People were passionate about Gus's mistakes. At least his human physiology, alien to their own, protected him with its mysteries. He had first understood the difference between the Waking and Dream Worlds when he cracked open a quail egg in each to reveal two unique fetuses. Nevertheless, the Dream People could make him wish he were dead, *and they'd like to cut me open, wouldn't they?*

It wasn't right to think it, not in the grove that made all things better, but they were greedy. They hadn't always been that way. Over the years, the changes crept in bit by bit. Their smiles sagged, lips revealing crocodile teeth *not here, not here, they can hear you in the grove* showing all their teeth *they can hear the words in your head, see it on your face.*

*Ridiculous, they can't do that,* but those eyes emptied of humor *nothing to laugh at, not funny NOT FUNNY* no assumption of reptilian pupils, just an awful, AWFUL emptiness, teeth ready *not here, don't do this now* thinking, scrying the World with their teeth burnished white and filed down much sharper than last time, ready to skewer him. *They won't like this, not at all.*

The Dream World was no paradise. Its People could suffer. They had to look after their own. That was the point: their home would decay if they didn't correct him. The easier he took it, faster it was over. Then they could be friends again. Therefore, he got what he deserved. They did their job, he did his. Everything went back to normal.

Still, he should have planned better. Could be on the beach in the south by now. Nothing to bother him but a warm, lazy ocean, *but I'm not the type to keep a good thing going, am I?*

## CHAPTER 2: "M" IS FOR FAMILY

More footfalls headed his way. He dove into the grass for cover. Cornered and beaten by the worst of them, the rest on their way to *skin me alive*.

In three months he had reduced his *almost-family* to nondescript thought forms. It was a matter of safety. Daydreaming about them lit him up like a beacon, so he learned to forget. Their specters glimmered briefly in his mind before melting away. Then days, weeks, an entire month when he didn't think of them. Then he'd gotten lazy and started to reminisce. He was paying for it now.

Maybe he'd wanted to get caught. It was understandable if he missed them, *but you took your one chance and blew it*. He wanted to cry again as his Mothers filed into view. He closed his eyes, squeezed the pressure away. They must have been elsewhere in the World, or else they would have headed to the plain *and you're so special they drove out five miles and slept in the same motel room to save money, but it's fine because it's all for you, and who wouldn't bend over backwards to meet him*. They looked like they worked on an oil rig. He squinted at the blue smudges as they approached.

First in line was Silent Mother, arms a deep shade of bruise all the way up to her elbows. She was the Valley's self-appointed gardener, which usually meant she spent all her time picking its wildflowers. If the stems were sturdy, she inserted them between her teeth so that her mouth revealed two rows of flowers when she smiled. Gus would pluck them out and put them on his tongue where they dissolved into sugar. She had discontinued the custom on his eleventh birthday.

Next was Spear Mother. Her clothing concealed a menagerie of weapons besides the spear always at her side. She never took off her helmet. When it was her turn to watch him during his childhood, he would angle himself in her lap so as to see underneath and she'd push him away. On one of his walks with the Magician the latter had stopped suddenly and murmured, "Your Spear Mother is very beautiful."

Last was Mother of Sparks clutching her painted staff which emitted the titular fire when it struck the ground. The sparks never hurt her sisters or Mathis. They made Gus drowsy. She was the only Person who, if she felt like it, could make the Magician go away *couldn't do it now, could you?* Her fire corroded his skin. He showed her true respect, to the extent that he was capable of respecting anyone.

The knot he had swallowed a moment ago drifted back up. His sobs broke the chokehold on his throat. Then the sadness left, taking the nausea with it. He felt empty. All his memories clouded over, impatient to blitz his spirit raw.

*Lonely.*

*Sure. And you let them get to you. Ruined everything.*

After he'd done so well! Real freedom for the first time in his life. No one to teach him what he already knew and hurt him for knowing. Just him and the World *together at last, baby*. Stressful or not, it was still freedom. He wandered through places he knew they had never seen before, where he learned secrets Spear Mother wasn't privy to *and Mathis says she knows everything*. The World existed in ways no one would believe unless they saw them in person *Person*.

For the first month, they sought him on foot. It was nerve-wracking to tremble in the shadows while they called his name, begged him to come home *servoed them more than right, so why am I a mess now?* Amplified by their growing rage, their magic resonated through the ground when they walked. They had only to identify where the aftershocks bumped into something with a soul. His knees were marked with yellowing bruises where he had bit hard to keep still. Those were the days he could burrow in the grove. More hide and seek than escape. Then they began to take his flight seriously, so he fled Valley and found places where the land was flatter and shelter infrequent. Aided by his limited knowledge of magic, he turned to disguises. With practice he became a dolphin, tree, a holly bush. As long as the costume was sentient, and he was economical with his magic, it worked.

The best one was the rabid hyena. It was so good that when Flower Mother happened upon him convulsing in the scrub grass, she couldn't feel his soul fluttering weakly within his emaciated exterior. Even her pity didn't threaten his hold on the disguise, though it was probably what had led to him missing them all and getting caught.

These were his parents. They sheltered him from dangers a visitor would be stupid enough to walk into. The Magician had spearheaded this education, treated Gus like the son he had always wanted to give his knowledge *and just a few bad nights to reinforce the status quo*.

The grass was a flattened, shadowy mess around him. The wind lifted their robes from their ankles. They knelt close around him in a circle. Like girls taking turns with a doll they passed him around, coddled and kissed him.

"Hello... hello," murmured those who spoke. Silent Mother was probably mouthing the words. He stifled a hysterical giggle. "Hello... hello... hello... hello..."

Their soothing voices wormed into his ears. Flower Mother wiped the dirt out of his eyes with the flat of her thumbnail, drew the pain out of his joints with magic. Mother of Sparks sprinkled some of her fire over his head, relieving him of a headache he hadn't noticed. When the Magician tried to enter the circle, Spear Mother took a short sword from inside her cloak and held it to his neck. He blew her a kiss and vanished. Of her sisters, she had the smallest reserve of personal magic. Both she and the Magician knew that if Mother of Sparks weren't there, he wouldn't have backed down.

Sheltered by the other two, Gus remained oblivious to their exchange. As far as he knew, everything was better now. Everything as it ought to be. He was forgiven. They still loved him. Whatever happened *whatever they do to me*, he would be okay. They would always be there. They missed him. It was all okay.

A crash and heavy thud came from the trees. Like synchronized machine gun turrets his Mothers turned their heads toward the sound. He sat up, peeked over Flower Mother's shoulder.

Mathis had fallen out of a tree. A few blossoms followed him to the ground. He lay still on the dead branch which had failed him. For a moment, Gus thought he was dead. Then he rolled off the branch and disappeared in the grass. A second later he resurfaced like a groundhog poking its head up. His naturally bright red eyes settled on Gus. He grinned, started running toward the circle of Mothers. Gus yelped with joy and burst out of their embraces. They made no attempt to hold him back. As he ran he thought he should feel guilty for leaving so soon. *But I'm no longer running* from their trickery and malice. Sure, they loved you, but here was Mathis. The only Person upon whom Gus bestowed the title of friend. Every so often, Mathis responded in kind. As long as the forced reunion had to happen, he was welcome. He was an inch shorter than Gus, with matted hair like a chunk of insulation foam. When he grinned, his teeth were exceptionally bright, like each one had been bleached and dipped in enamel. He glowed against the backdrop of the clouded sky.

Mathis lifted him up and spun him around. Then they broke apart, stared shyly at their feet. Mathis looked up first and giggled. Gus copied the sound, rolled it around his mouth. He liked Mathis's laugh.

"I found something," Mathis said. "Wanna guess what it is?"

Several yards off the Magician approached with his hands in his pockets. Gus squinted but he was too far away to discern his facial expression. There was a rustling noise behind them. The Mothers marched toward the boys, parted around them like water around a rock. They regrouped behind Mathis and continued toward the Magician via the path of flattened grass they had created before.

"Come on, Gus. Guess."

*Why didn't the volcano reach this far?*

"GUESS. Guess Gus Guess. Guessssssss."

It could be a prank. Mathis liked those. There might not be any harm in playing along. But Mathis's tricks removed Gus's organs, turned his legs upside down to fuse his feet with his ass. Though it had taken several such accidents for Gus to become reasonably suspicious when something especially strange happened to himself.

"Come on," Mathis whined. "Guess!"

Why NOT have his *only* friend stick the lesson's point in with a poisonous shove. An eye for eye restored balance. That had to be it.

"No," he said, wiggled freshly clean feet in the soft earth.

"Aw, why not?"

"You'll get me in trouble."

"Why would I do that? I don't want to get you in trouble. I would never ever get you in trouble. All I want is for you to be happy. Your well-being is my rock. Gotta keep the rock nice and shiny, right?"

Gus looked up. Mathis made no effort to keep a straight face. Behind him, his Mothers were conferencing with the Magician leaning against the trunk of the grove's oldest tree. His hat was gone. Every so often, a Mother gestured to where Gus stood with Mathis, and the Magician shook his head.

"Mathis, it's always the same thing. I'm not falling for another one."

"Not my fault if you do."

"Always your fault."

"Don't be a sissy. All you have to do is guess. Guess Gus Guess. Guess Gus Guess."

"No."

"I'll pinch you."

"Go to hell."

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"Hell."

Gus sighed. Mathis had never heard of that particular Waking concept, which meant annoying questions later. The only reason there weren't any now was his preoccupation with whatever interesting discovery he'd made.

"Please, just tell me what you found."

"You have to GUESS first."

"Why?"

"I said so."

Hardly a fair point, but Mathis wouldn't budge. "Fine," he said. Dream People were stubborn. "Is it a fish?"

He shook his head furiously. "Not at all."

"A pig."

"No."

"A queen bee."

"Nope."

"A queen ant."

"What about something that isn't alive?"

Behind him, the Magician shifted to a standing position.

"I don't want to."

"Too bad."

"All right. It's a stick."

"No."

"Steam."

"...eh. No."

"A big pile of sand."

Mathis raised an eyebrow. "Why would I—no."

"A bigger pile of sand."

"I'm gonna saw your legs off."

"The biggest pile of sand."

"You're not funny, and no."

"Water? Air? Wind? Seashell?"

"No."

"Is it nothing?"

Mathis looked skyward as if the answer were tucked behind the clouds. Gus backed up to the nearest tree.

"Not really," Mathis said slowly. "No."

"Pure magic?"

"That doesn't exist."

The Magician smiled at the grass, shook his head.

"Then I give up."

"Then you don't get to find out."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you what it is if you don't guess."

The Magician's smile disappeared. Gus didn't want to know what that meant.

"So it's something."

"Yep," Mathis said.

"It exists?"

"Sure does."

"In how many forms?"

Mathis hopped on his toes with delight. "Someone's been paying attention!"

"Come on, man."

"I'm not a man. Not even close."

"Is it a rock?"

"Try harder."

"I give up for real."

"Not fair!" Mathis exhaled furiously. He dove into his pockets and emerged with closed fists. He brought them together, quickly cupped his hands to contain a wispy grey substance threatening to escape. Gus tensed. The Magician blinked and disappeared. The Mothers were gone, had cut a new path leading north in the blue-green.

"Guess, Gus."

The game wasn't fun anymore. Gus turned to run out of the Valley again. Nothing bad was allowed to happen in the grove. A spot of physical discomfort here and there, but not the big stuff, not what was out of Mathis's pockets. It wasn't fair that he couldn't run as fast as the Dream People. They should have taken care of that years ago. Extra strength, Extra speed, Extra intelligence, Extra

agility—anything to make him Extra in a World to which he didn't metaphysically belong.

High-pitched winds screamed behind him. His hands covered his ears, couldn't shield them from the noise. He charged through the cool grass itching his legs. The almond scent turned sour. The screaming was on his tail, at the small of his back, slithering up his neck. Then it was all around him. The World spun as he raised his arms around his head but the grey wisps licked through them. All he could do now was shut his eyes and wait.

He had seen this thing before. In fact, he had discovered it first and promptly told the Magician, who was angry but surprisingly magnanimous. Everyone makes mistakes, he said. The important thing was to never again associate with this one. Unless Gus wanted bad things to happen to the Dream People. It had never occurred to Gus until then that he was capable of hurting them. Confused, he had vowed to forget his discovery.

"It's safe to look now."

*Don't, you don't owe him anything, don't trust him.* He lowered his arms. Panic lodged his voice in his throat. He was powerless to do anything but watch as Mathis came forward whistling, the awful grey thing floating along behind him. It was bigger now, a swirling, ragged cloud. *I gotta hurricane in my pocket and it's happy to see you.* As it hovered toward Gus, it seemed to repeatedly condense and expand, growing each time.

"You may have bumped into it first," Mathis said, "but I mastered it. It does whatever I want."

Gus patted the cloud affectionately. It erupted in flames. *Bad magic, my magic. MY MAGIC. That's mine!* His indignation was cut short by the fire that sizzled and threw sparks for several seconds before settling into a languid glove of heat. He turned his head, didn't want to see the first few bites it would take. In a desperate attempt at humor, he pleaded, *Take my Dream family. Not me. I don't care about them.*

He could have imagined it, but he was pretty sure the awful grey thing responded, *Are you sure?*

*Absolutely,* humoring the pretend exchange.

The awful grey thing seemed to reply, *No matter what happens?*

Thanks to his Mothers, he wasn't in pain anymore. *Sure. Yeah.* Dream People were hard to kill. The awful grey thing wouldn't be able to hurt them.

A roar sounded all around them. Gus winced at the noise, looked back to the ancient trees rustling as the grey thing was sucked back into Mathis's palm. Mathis kissed it, whispered something. The cloud whirled out again and zoomed high in the air, hovered for a few seconds before speeding east. Fresh tears of relief leaked from Gus's eyes. Mathis wasn't laughing at all. He looked mournful as he murmured, "So you knew what that was."

Gus shook his head.

"Don't be cute, Gus. You knew what it was."

"I didn't. I swear."

Mathis's eyes widened. His hand came to his mouth as he looked in the direction the awful grey thing had gone.

"But the Magician explained it to you."

"All he said was that it could kill everyone."

"You're joking, right? Gus, tell me you're joking."

"I'm not."

Mathis looked dejected as he lowered his hand. It was a long time before he whispered, "Oh well."

Then he straightened and brushed himself off.

"You really mean it when you..." Mathis said as he looked over his shoulder. "I guess you'll figure it out later."

Gus had never seen him this uneasy, but that grey thing was deadly. Mathis wasn't getting any sympathy from him.

"Just get the Magician to fix it," Gus suggested. "If it's a problem with magic, he'll take care of it."

"If we had enough time, there wouldn't be a problem, but now we don't, and it's my fault, and I can't—"

"Stop it."

Mathis inclined his head. "Stop what?"

"No more pranks."

"This isn't—"

"Cut the shit, Mathis."

"You swear too much."

He never had a chance to retort. Overcome by sudden exhaustion, his legs collapsed, brought him down on an exposed tree root. The shock swam upwards from his left knee to his groin to his wrists to his chest to his head—

—heavy on the pillow. A stale taste coated his mouth. His left leg was sore from hip to ankle. He glanced around his bedroom, at the red plastic curtain over the window just above his head. Then he lay back and groaned.

### CHAPTER 3: RISE AND SHINE

He peeled off the sweat-soaked blanket, shoved it off the bed with his heel. Still too muggy to breathe. He pulled off his flower-stained T-shirt and sweatpants, rolled them into a bundle that hit the floor with a soft smack. His face was thick with exhaustion from the return to the Waking World. As he lay back in the damp sheets, his head jostled a faint petroleum smell from the curtain. He arched his neck, nudged the hem with the tip of his nose, closed his eyes. The odor made him queasy. He turned on his side. The heater whinnied along the adjacent wall. Patricia kept the thermostat at seventy-five the entire year. When he wasn't home, she turned it up to eighty. He would come home from school to her noisy sighing on the way to the basement. Most of the time he didn't care enough to make the trip downstairs. She must have anticipated that he would constantly adjust the temperature in her absence if the dial were easy to get to.

*Would it be better to stop using blankets?* They didn't accompany him to the Dream World. Clothes were the only objects that could go over with him. Every so often he wore shoes to bed; they never made it. Socks, fine. Shirts, pants, boxers—fine. Never ties, hats, anything in his pockets. He didn't mind until the visit when he fell off a cliff and shattered his right femur. Mother of Sparks located him six hours later. In all that time he could have doped himself up on painkillers. Or lit a couple flares. He had given up wearing pre-wrapped Ace bandages, which made it but disintegrated after a few minutes.

Then there was the time he was confronted by a bear whose waist cleared the trees when it stood on its hind legs. A gun would have been very helpful. There were no rules in the Dream World against killing. It wasn't associated with immorality.

"What if you die?" Gus had once asked Mathis, who had shrugged and said, "Hasn't happened yet."

"But you need rules to keep people in line, right?"

"Only five of us, and we know our limits."

Gus sat up, pressed his forehead to the freezing window. His forehead became clammy. When his eyes started to ache he pulled away. He exhaled, wiped away the steam spot. His eyes widened as he threw himself back on the bed. Seconds before the window shattered he knew he should have rolled onto his stomach to muffle his breathing. Glass burst out of the frame and rained over him. The heavier shards nicked his stomach and groin. He didn't dare pick them off. Cold, unwelcome air rushed in. So much for blankets.

Winter had been waiting for him to come back. It struggled to squeeze Its head through the splintered frame, cutting off most of the draft. The curtain scraped the ceiling. A pop, a ring lasting a few seconds, then a short plastic tap as something hit the floor. More cold air, then a loud crack. Splinters fell on his forehead, into the ravine between his closed lips. They began to itch. Too dangerous to move and get Its attention. If he turned his head to let the debris fall on the pillow, his ear would skim the underside of Its jaw.

This year It had become more aggressive in Its attempts to *come get me, you pathetic lizard*. It had cornered him twice at school and once in a gas station bathroom with a tiny barred window facing the parking lot. Couldn't It leave him alone on Christmas break? How about a World War I-style armistice? *Except It's right here, right now, and It isn't going away.*

Wood cracked as It breached the widest part of Its head. Jagged chunks of lathe and plaster bounced off his stomach. Winter's hearing and manners weren't the best. Mostly It relied on strength and teeth. If he survived the next few minutes, Patricia would make him answer for the wall.

Its heat deserted him. He wanted to draw his elbows and knees to his sides. There was another loud crash as It rammed Its head through the frame. A screeching growl, then a heavy knock as Its closed Its jaws, shook Its head. More debris landed on his middle, pushed the glass in deeper. He clenched his teeth. Its warmth covered him again as Its head slid easily through the window.

Something clicked against the exterior wall. The noise cycled like fingers tapping on a desk. If it would just stop making so much *NOISE* for a just minute. Its tiny arms breached the hole an inch above his head. The tips of Its claws flicked his hair, were painted dark with his sweat.

It didn't open Its jaws at first. Had to sniff him out. He could be anywhere in the bedroom muggy with his scent. In the past few years, every return trip came with a stench like he hadn't showered for a year. Winter didn't need to see him to know when he moved. It only had to find the thing that smelled like him the most. Therefore, he had to be still and hope his fog of stink was enough shelter.

He should have run when It stepped back to get Its head through. Its heart boomed over him. If It were smaller, he'd be munchies already. Outside, all It could do was freeze him out. His dinky bedroom was too small for It. Two years ago Its head hardly cleared the kitchen lights. Now Its shoulders loomed over the roof by at least a foot. It would have to turn Its head to get a clear view of him through the window. Scaly bugger wasn't smart enough to think of that.

Why did It have to come after him? The Bronx Zoo wasn't that far. Couldn't It go there and chase buffalo? *Every fucking year*. Its distant screams haunted him as November grew bitterly cold. By January his nerves were shot. As soon as high school had given him the chance to pick his schedule, he had chosen classes according to how little glass made up the walls they were held in. Wood shop was in the basement. He hadn't planned to be a carpenter but circumstance was pushing him in that direction.

*Why does Stevens spend all his time downstairs?*

*Not sure. Maybe he likes it down there.*

Hiding was easier when he was younger. Now there wasn't enough space under the bed. The closet was a no-go. It could bust through the window, then the door.

A snort and shuffling papers. It was searching his desk *for what, toenail clippings?*

Could It hear him blink? Paranoia made him impatient to find out. He batted his lashes at Its pale underbelly. It stopped breathing. *Well I'll be damned* more so than he already was. Somehow, It had sensed something.

The Magician would save him if he were here. He wasn't neglectful. Just violent. *And unpredictable.* Spear Mother would skewer It through the chest, let It bleed out on the sidewalk. Flower Mother wouldn't have the heart for poison but she could perfume the air with an opiate to slow It down.

Its chest deflated in one hot rush. Too dumb to breathe quietly. A growl simmered under Its tongue. Heavy dregs of saliva dangled from Its parted lips, coated his face. It angled Its head slightly, tipping more spit over the edge. Steaming drops splashed on his legs and groin, slid down his sides, dragged splinters of wood and glass off the bed.

The underbelly rose and fell. Not the morning he needed after that *grey screaming* thing. At least it had left him high-strung enough to be alert. He might have fallen asleep against the window. Sitting duck for teeth tucked primly over the lower lip when Its mouth was closed.

A loose pile of plaster dust and wood was the wrong place to die. Especially without clothes on. Shivering stark naked under a pile of rubble coated in slime and old sweat. If Mathis were here, he would be bent over laughing, weakly pointing out all the embarrassing details.

He raised his head slightly to inspect the damage. There was no debris. He was slick from shins to scalp. Maybe Its spit healed minor cuts. That explained why It salivated like a broken fire hydrant. Who wouldn't need a self-produced healing balm for a diet of aluminum siding and asbestos?

The panic wasn't eating him up so badly now. Its drool had proved a soothing distraction from his other problems. No more tension in his neck. That damn draft was gone. For the first time today, he could think clearly. Maybe even survive the morning. All thanks to a bath of spit *are you my mother are you my mother are YOU my mother?*

Then he had to shit. Slowly, carefully, he slid toward the foot of the bed, calves dangling at stiff angles. His new skin of spittle made it a silent operation. The backs of his knees cleared the edge. His heels met cold plastic, shifted the curtain rod across the floorboards. He paused. Winter growled *don't look down don't look down I'll trade you a pound of inconsequential flesh from my right calf if you don't look down.* He searched the floor with his toes for a spot where the curtain wasn't. There was space to the left of the bed behind his desk chair. He debated

the merits of a faster escape. If he moved slowly now, he wouldn't have enough momentum to stand and get to the door in time. For every few actions he needed, It used one. No need to snap him up. Just pin him to the wall like a mosquito. Break his spine, crack ribs, burst his lungs like balloons. Have a grand old time beating him lifeless.

But if he were fast enough, he might have the element of surprise on his side. Only half of It, *the half with the teeth* and shrimpy arms, was inside the room. The rest was stuck beyond the window.

It stopped growling. Whatever he did, he would have to be quick.

He slithered off the bed. As he geared up to sprint for the door, his spit-slick foot skidded over the curtain. His arms extended to break his fall, wrists jarring into the floorboards. He let his elbows and shoulders scream for him; Patricia didn't need to hear. It wasn't her business.

Winter's breath steamed his back. He scrambled for the door, yanked the handle down and got to his feet as he threw himself through the opening. In the dry heat of the hallway, he scrambled and swung the door over the morning light silhouetting Its teeth. The door clicked home. He collapsed panting on the worn rug in the hallway. His arms throbbed.

After a few seconds he heard It bashing in the wall to create a hole big enough for Its legs. Patricia wouldn't be happy about that, either.

Not that Winter was ever careful. But It was hungrier this time around. The drool-soaked rug was evidence enough. Something had happened to Its appetite in the past year. Growth spurts could do that to a person. He couldn't imagine what they did to a Season.

Showering would make him *less fragrant* less tasty. He scooted to the opposite wall to watch. Any moment now. Any moment. The door shuddered in the frame as It bashed into it but the lock held.

He chuckled. Every so often It managed to hook the handle between Its teeth and cock Its head to the side. But the door would swing shut as soon as It let go because It hadn't figured out how to turn the handle and push at the same time.

Some days he was tempted to take a hike into the woods and signal It from the top of a hill with nautical flags. This is YOUR season. Your time to shine. And you can't kill the one thing you've hunted all these years. Didn't even have the decency to spare him the anxiety and kill him outside.

That wasn't fair. It couldn't turn into a beast outside.

The crashing noises stopped. Floorboards groaned. He crawled to the bathroom and locked himself inside. Always more difficult to get Its entire body into warmer places.

There was a muffled bang in the hallway. It had likely busted his door out of the frame. Its three-clawed feet grated the floor as It stood in a space just slightly bigger than his room.

Broken door, walls, windows. Patricia wouldn't understand the destruction and his own unscathed body. At this point he would have to cut down a

neighbor's tree so that it fell on the house to disguise the original damage *because that's something neighbors do, they don't hire people to remove trees, they hack away at 'em until something gives.*

At least he was safe in the bathroom. Winter wouldn't come in unless he left the window wide open. Didn't like the smell of his feces. He remembered his present need to be rid of them. He sat on the toilet and examined his wounds. Most were shallow. A few were swollen. No glass stubbled his skin.

That's understandable, the Magician would have said. *It's a magical beast. It can get away with more than you.*

He glanced at the door. So much noise. Maybe Patricia would hear and do something. She hated It more than him. She didn't even know the worse half of It, and still she was his best defense. Heat scrambled Its senses, made It uncomfortable enough to skedaddle.

The saliva tightened his skin as it dried. He turned on the shower. The hot water always took a couple minutes. He passed the time grinning at himself in the mirror, made what he hoped was a good war face. Too much plaque on teeth still orange from last night's dinner. Ferocious. What a mangy animal! How terrifying! He tucked his arms close to his chest, spread two fingers on each hand like Winter's claws. Perfect. March out and smile at the brute.

The mirror began to fog. He relaxed the monster pose. Out of habit he reached for the hem of his shirt, felt silly when he remembered where it was. Patricia was easing up some of his morning with her need to live in a sauna. Why was she only that way at home? She never turned the heat on in the car. She didn't even own a pair of snow boots.

He winced under the water cooking away the dried spittle shell. Safe in a steamy cubicle of old grout and chipped black tiling. A truly effective barricade. Why, if the beast took a sudden liking to his shit, It was free to parade inside and eat as much as It wanted. He would make things easy and drop one in the tub. *How many stinks does Gus Stevens make? One for every bone Winter can break.*

When he had finished lathering himself with bar soap from head to toe, he reached for the half-empty bottle of shampoo on the ledge of the bathtub. The shampoo was cold on his scalp, took a few seconds to melt under the water. Then he scrubbed until his scalp was on fire, dug his fingers into his hair to force the icky second skin down the drain.

The soapy water swirled slowly around his feet. Something big ballooned in his chest, tightened his throat. He lowered his hands, stared at a crack in the wall as the water thundered around him. His legs were weak. He lay down in the tub, curled into a fetal position with his head just beyond the water tapping his skin. One by one the sobs welled up.

Didn't even have to see all of him. It knew, always knew. A lurid yellow eye swirling with something grey, the pupil dilating to make room for the iris to open its sharp rat mouth. It sang tickling white noise that rose swiftly in pitch. He clasped his hands over his ears, shut his eyes tight and still saw that great

yellow one multiplying, each with teeth filed sharp so their voices screamed in his skull. Wordless needles drilling through his brain.

Best to run and dive right into Its gullet. Or make It angry. Yank Its tail. Throw something at It. *One stone two stone three stone DEAD.* A quick, brutal end. No one would care if Winter disappeared.

If only the Magician could sense his thoughts in this World. Then he could send an S.O.S.

*Stupid.* The Dream People wouldn't help him now. They had turned on him. His Mothers had left him with Mathis, who sicced that awful thing on him. Worse: the Magician had allowed it. He was willing to teach Mathis how to "master it." All Gus got was a warning that the World would end if he tried.

His scalp itched under remnants of drying shampoo. He stood slowly, stepped back under the water. How much had he jacked up the water bill? But it was just one shower. Patricia wouldn't find out if it were just one shower.

A couple minutes later he had sufficiently rid himself of soap scum. The shower handle seared his fingers as he turned off the water.

Maybe that was how they got rid of Samuel all those years ago. Got him scrubbed and clean, then shoved him in a glass room to appease the monster they had let into whatever building where they kept him. Poor Samuel. If only they had told him to board up the windows. But why would they, when they had been too alarmed by what Samuel had done to let him explain himself? No one taught five-year-olds to protect themselves from Winter. Things didn't work that way.

*There are more important matters to think about,* Mathis would have said. *Like that thing that wants to eat you for breakfast.* Winter could wait. It wasn't going anywhere. No need to waste his last moments worrying about It.

He hesitated in the bathtub. Mathis would have been right, if he had been there to say all that. He shouldn't get distracted by what he couldn't change.

Maybe that was what the Magician had wanted to show by letting Mathis in on the secrets of the strange grey cloud. Only Dream People were allowed in on the big secrets. Therefore it HAD been a lesson. A very effective one at that. Gus had underestimated his mentor, who had broken his rule of announcing punishment prior to administering it. Gus had required a demonstration to drive the point home once and for all.

*No.* It wasn't the degree of the suffering, but how he endured it. That was why his mentor had resorted to something new.

He pressed his ear to the door. The hall was absolutely silent. The only sounds were his own breathing and the buzz of the lights in the bathroom.

If there were a way to make it back alive, he hoped he would be smart enough to recognize what that was.

He took one deep breath. Let it out.

Emerged in the hallway.

Nothing. No exposed insulation and disintegrated woodwork. The rug was dry. His door was intact.

That didn't mean anything. Winter often fixed what It destroyed to cover Its tracks. Putting everything back made it harder for him to know precisely where It had gone. The surprise element made things more exciting for It. No sport in hunting inferior prey that didn't even have the advantage of an effective hiding place. This whole morning had been a pocket version of the game they had played for years. Big bad monster plays with Its Food. Food figures out Monster and tries to outwit It. Monster figures out that Food doesn't have many tricks up its sleeve. Food figures out that Monster lives up to Its name. Food does its best to burrow as deep as possible. Bit by bit Monster lays siege.

It might be in his room. He didn't dare look inside yet, put an ear to the door to listen. Something screeched behind it. He stepped back. The screech repeated.

Unless Winter was nibbling window glass, that was the radiator.

He opened the door. Nothing waiting for him. He relaxed. The room was cold but smelled better. The wall was repaired, the curtain back up. He closed the door behind him, picked gingerly through glass-free floorboards. Nothing on the bed. He sniffed it, smelled his sweat. No more beast smells and sighs.

He flopped himself down on the sheet, tentatively allowed himself a moment of joy. The beast had given up for the moment. That didn't mean It was gone for the Season, let alone the rest of the day.

But he was going to church later. It wouldn't know to follow him there. He had never been before. It couldn't smell him outside, not when It was busy freezing the entire northeastern United States.

*If It hunts me in the open* but It wouldn't. Even if It could, It wouldn't try.

He went to listen at the door. Something grumbled in the hallway. There was a short pause before another growl followed. The sound was too deep for the radiator.

His spirits sank. He wavered on his feet.

Why hadn't he checked other rooms and closets instead of retreating to his fortress?

"Gus!"

The door muffled Patricia's voice.

"I'm going out!"

The front door slammed and locked.

*Winter isn't a monster, he told himself. Just a lot of cold air and ice and snow. A real monster would have gotten him by now. The ones he should worry about didn't try to eat him. The ones they preached about in school, like disease and poverty and unprotected sex—those won obvious victories without teeth and claws. If It were a real threat, they would have warned him beforehand.*

*Exactly, 'cause Samuel lived to a ripe old age, and I have my life together.*

He smiled. The danger was real, yet no one knew enough to protect him so *nobody taught me nuthin'.*

**END OF SAMPLE**

**DISCOVER OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE  
THROUGH DARKWATER SYNDICATE**

***A Moon Called Sun***

*By: Christopher F. Cobb*

*"This is intriguingly different science fiction/fantasy/horror, wildly ranging, sometimes hard-hitting, not for maiden aunts."*

**– Piers Anthony, New York Times bestselling author**

A botched alien abduction sends modern-day Trace Jackson to north Florida in the year 1818, where he meets a beautiful Seminole woman, and the two strike up a relationship. Unfortunately, Trace's distant ancestor, General Andrew Jackson, is hell-bent on driving out the Seminoles by whatever means necessary. Can Trace survive to fulfill his destiny in another dimension where time no longer has meaning, on a moon called Sun?

***The Gullwing Odyssey***

*By: Antonio Simon, Jr.*

*"The Gullwing Odyssey rests solidly on the shaking shoulders of a good laugh – and that's what sets it apart from ninety percent of fantasies on the market."*

**– Midwest Book Review**

A four-time award winning fantasy/comedy adventure. When an unusual assignment sends Marco overseas, he finds himself dodging pirates and a hummingbird with an appetite for human brains. Little does he know the fate of a civilization may rest upon his shoulders. In spite of himself, Marco becomes the hero he strives not to be.

***Shadows And Teeth***

***Ten Terrifying Tales Of Horror And Suspense***

*By: Various Authors*

Prepare for extreme horror. This award-winning collection of ten stories features a range of international talent, masters of horror and new voices in the genre. Take care as you reach into these dark places, for the things here bite, and you may withdraw a hand short of a few fingers.

*The Man In The Forest*

*By: Michael Warriner*

Vincent, a musical prodigy, is caught up in a concert rivalry with a former student. He travels to Romania to settle the score, but what he discovers is the horrific true story behind the song his protégé wrote, "The Man in the Forest." Supernatural phenomena and horrific sights abound, but the locals are tight-lipped about the mysterious goings-on. Can Vincent and his group upstage their rival, or will they fall prey to the man in the forest?

*Chasing Blood*

*By: R. Perez de Pereda*

A briefcase full of money lies on the floor. Would you take it? What if the money belonged to a crime lord, and taking it set you running for your life? Still sound good? It did to Ryan, who had nothing to lose.

Born a child of the streets, Ryan Cantril learned early on to fight for his keep, and sometimes just to keep what he earned. Now in his thirties, the self-proclaimed king of the sucker punch fights to keep the cash he rightfully stole from a powerful crime syndicate – and if he's lucky, his life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abbie Krupnick lives in Summit, New Jersey. When she's not writing, she trains Brazilian jiu-jitsu and makes explosive quantities of visual art.

## ABOUT DARKWATER SYNDICATE

We are Darkwater Syndicate. We're the publishing company with a defense contractor's name, and that sums up our approach to books. Our mission is to be your source for uncommonly good reading.

We refuse to be mainstream. Our authors are not afraid to push boundaries and buck trends. Pick up one of our books and see why we call them "uncommonly good" reading.

We are headquartered in Miami Lakes, Florida.

Visit us at [www.DarkwaterSyndicate.com](http://www.DarkwaterSyndicate.com).

Follow Darkwater Syndicate on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).