

By Grand Design

By Grand Design

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this is the first chapter in my story which is a mixture of fantasy, thriller, horror, intrigue, comedy and action with spiritual overtones. written by me and edited very kindly and professionally by my beautiful wife



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Chapter 1: tora! tora! tora!

"By Grand Design"

I don't believe in fate - a predetermined path through life that is unavoidable no matter what our actions are. Rather, defining moments in our lives where decisions have to be made. Crossroads if you like. Which path you take determines the next chapter in your life and the lives around you. Today one of those defining moments took place and my actions were going to spark a bizarre and grizzly chain of events for me and those around me. Events that may, ultimately, determine the fate of all mankind.

My pupils were hot, bothered and itching to escape for the weekend. They looked about as enthusiastic as road workers on a hot summer's day. Then out of the blue a distant roar that sounded like Niagara Falls, drifted into the classroom. A welcome change from the silence that had blanketed this muggy afternoon. I stopped in my tracks and turned from the whiteboard to witness a look of wonder and intrigue on the faces of the entire class. Now boredom had turned to excitement in an instant. Before I could utter a word the children leaped out of their seats. Falling over each other to get to the window. Eager to quench their thirst for curiosity. I followed calmly and added casually

"O.k. kids once we find out what's making the exciting noise, I want you all back in your seats. O.k.?" One or two of the children reply with a zombie like "yes, sir". All their focus and attention on searching the school grounds and the cloudless blue skies trying to be the first to see what amazing events would unfold before them.

My older, wiser and more logical thinking knew there would be a rational explanation to the thunderous noise that was increasing in intensity by the second. I also knew that the vivid imaginations of the students would be conjuring up all sorts of fantastic and wondrous scenarios. A fleet of alien spaceships entering earth's atmosphere to enslave human kind perhaps? Or a horde of encroaching giant insects on a feeding frenzy, or maybe an army of hideous monsters on horseback sweeping across the country side brandishing long sharp swords. Cutting down every living thing in their path. I was racking my brain for a more plausible reason. Are there any threats of invasion from neighbouring countries? No. It couldn't be an earthquake as the earth beneath our feet wasn't wobbling like a jellyfish and there were no ominous looking clouds as far as the eye could see. I had no rational explanation at all. All I could do was to watch and wait with my wide eyed companions.

Even though the noise was getting louder there was nothing out of ordinary to be seen. I started to have an uneasy feeling about what was taking place or as in this case, the lack of something taking place. Then the window panes started to rattle. Which in turn rattled the children, who started to back away from their view of the outside world. I had to take charge of the situation before panic set in.

"O.k. kids you know the drill" I say sternly. "Under your desks"

Without questioning me, they all rushed to their desks. Some of them colliding along the way. Once they were all neatly under their desks, I gave the second and final command.

"Ok. Nobody gets out from under their desks until I say so. No matter how scary it gets, OK?"

"You're in a safe place, right where you are." I shouted over the constant and ever increasing roar.

This time I received a frightened but alert "Yes Mr Harper" from most of my year 2 students.

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There was no movement from little Lisa Williams, whom I spotted holding onto the desk leg like she had found her long lost teddy bear. Her head was tucked in between her arms and there was a steady stream of tears rolling down her arms and dripping onto the floor. Not wanting to embarrass her by shouting in front of her peers, I quickly ran over to her to console her and to assure her that everything was going to be alright. Even though I was far from convinced of our safety myself. I put my hands on her shoulders and shook lightly.

"Lisa, Lisa" I said, trying not to alert the others. But before I could say Lisa's name a third time, she leapt at me and latched on for dear life.

"I'm scared Mr Harper" she sobbed.

"It's ok Lisa, everything is going to be ok. This will all be over before you know it." I say with conviction, even convincing myself that everything is going to be ok.

She said nothing and just hung on even tighter.

I didn't have time to console her so I just took her with me to the window. Her head tucked tightly into my chest. I couldn't hear her sobs over the roar but I could feel the dampness of her tears on my skin. I scanned the school grounds. Not a thing out of place. Taking my gaze skyward, I spotted what looked like a swarm of jet planes approaching at incredible speed. There were too many to count and they were in no set formation. They were just massed together like a swarm of bees. Simultaneously, as if on cue, they dropped their missiles from their underbellies. With a puff of smoke, the missiles arced towards the school. My world stopped as I stood fixated on the encroaching rockets of death. The selfish side to my human nature momentarily took over. In my mind was screaming "RUN! SAVE YOURSELF, EVERYONES GOING TO DIE ANYWAY!" I dismissed the thought as quickly as it had snuck up on me. I couldn't and wouldn't leave these children here to die while I cowardly saved my own yellow hide. Only I knew that in seconds the whole classroom would be transformed into small particles that would dance in the air until they found their resting place on the scorched earth. I turned to my class for the last time.

"Let's sing a happy song" I shout, while trying hard to to choke up with tears.

They respond well with a relieved look on their faces and wait eagerly for me to start.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round..." The kids continue, taking their minds of the terrifying situation. I close my eyes and hope like hell that my kids will end up in a better place and don't suffer any pain. Before I can finish my thought the missiles burst through the classroom from above. I wrap my arms around Lisa squeezing her firmly as I kiss the top of her head and, what seems like eternity, but in reality is only a few seconds I wait for the explosion and certain death.

Nothing?

The sound of children coughing ignites my attention. I open my eyes to see the air filled with dust but I can still make out four dark objects embedded in the back wall. Four menacing missiles that could potentially blow at any moment. Lisa and I start to cough as the dust enters our lungs without invitation.

"OK kids. I want you to get up, and as quickly and carefully as possible we are going to head to the bus."

Waving the dust from in front of themselves and coughing along the way, the kids head towards the bus. I want to check the entire classroom before I vacate myself.

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"Eden!" I cough across the room to one of the stragglers who has been helping his fellow classmates.

"Could you please take Lisa to the bus for me?"

"No problem Mr Harper"

"Thanks Eden, you're a good boy." I say smiling.

I feel Lisa's grip tighten again.

"Its ok honey, Eden will get you to the bus. And I'll be there as soon as I check the classroom for any others."
I plead with her.

"You promise?" Lisa says as she looks deep into my eyes as if she could read a lie.

"I promise" returning her stern gaze.

"Ok" she says releasing herself. Eden takes her hand and they both cover their mouths as they exit the classroom.

I frantically race around the classroom checking under desks and in cupboards for any children that may have been hiding or scared stiff by the traumatic events.

All the while, I keep glancing at the missile, as if they may give me some kind of warning before they explode.

Ok. No-one is left. Time to run like the wind and leave this doomed classroom in my dust. As I make my way down the still and eerie hallway, I hear a second wave of jets approaching. The dust is thicker in the hallway and I move my arms rapidly to disperse it before it gets the better of me. Coughing and spluttering I exit the building into the madness. I spit the dry grittiness from my mouth as I survey the chaotic scene unfolding before me.

Chapter 2: Sarah!!

Chapter 2

Sarah!!!

Panic reigns as I stare out the ravaged hallway. Teachers and students running wildly to their getaway cars. Not wanting to be amongst the chaos I just watch from a safe distance for anyone in need of help. I notice the school bus moving off with children running after it. I can plainly see that the bus isn't full. The students on the bus are totally oblivious to the poor souls sprinting from behind. They are crying and waving their arms to try and catch the driver's attention. I can see a few of the boys on the bus pointing towards the heavens. I turn to witness another wave of jets speeding their way towards the school.

The bus driver either can't see the children pleading for him to stop or he doesn't care. It doesn't matter either way. Without thinking it through I start running after them. They just slump on the black top as the bus accelerates out the school's gate. "Get off the road" I yell as I gesture them off the road. The battle cry of the jets and the panicked scream around me drown out my commands. The children must be afraid and exhausted as they just lie there motionless. I can hear the missiles screeching as they approach. I quickly pick up two of them, one under each arm and take refuge behind a parked car. The sound of the jets screaming over head is deafening.

The missiles must have made a direct hit as the car moves violently sideways and knocks the three of us over. The two boys start to cry hysterically and run off again in no particular direction. They obviously just want to get away from the confusion and noise. I take off after them as the jets disappear into the distance. "Boys! Boys!" I yell trying in vain to win their attention. They keep on running and screaming as if their pants were on fire. I'm starting to think that I will have to knock them out to save their lives. I guess desperate times do call for desperate measures.

I keep chasing them into the rugby field. O.k. this is my chance. Acting quickly I ankle tap one of the boys and then tackle the other to the ground.

"Calm down boys!" I say gruffly trying to gain their attention.

They both look tired out and are breathing heavily. At least now they are still and I have their attention. One of their mothers appears out of the blue. Picks her son up and starts back towards the car park without saying a word. I gather that she must be in shock too. The other boy gets up and starts walking unsteadily towards the school. It seems that he is still in a state of shock. His body in auto pilot mode.

I pick him up and throw him over my shoulder in a fireman's carry and head back to the car park myself. I scan the area for someone who can take the boy home. I focus on Roger the woodwork teacher who is calmly fastening his seat belt and he appears to have no passengers. The fact that he is acting very calmly and has no passengers does come across a little odd but Roger has always come across as a little odd. He's thirty something, has no kids and always keeps to himself. But this is no time to be analysing someone's psyche and besides, Roger has lived in this town all his life and has never lifted a finger or raised his voice to anyone, that I am aware of. Besides I need someone to remove him from this hotspot immediately. All the other people fleeing the scene have full cars and are leaving without a chance of being stopped. There are people still spewing from the classrooms and I want to be able to help get every living soul to safety.

I pick up my speed trying to catch Roger before he takes off. Luckily he moves off slowly so I'm able to give his boot a whack with my hand to alert him. The car stops gently. There's a moment's pause and then the

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window winds down. With a sigh of relief I move up to the window with the boy in my arms. He's curled into the foetal position and sucking his thumb. Roger peers at me through his over-sized glasses with a blank stare. His eyes give me the impression that perhaps he too is in shock. Trying to catch my breath, Roger pre-empts me before I can speak. I guess the desperate look on my face and the boy cradled in my arms communicates loud and clear to him of my intentions.

"Don't worry Mr Harper. Put him in the back. I'll make sure he gets home safely."

I don't question him, I just nod and muster up a shaky

"thanks Roger."

I take a deep breath realising that I can't hear the roar of the jets anymore. I ask the boy his name before I place him in the back of Roger's car. He doesn't answer. Putting him on the back seat I reassure him that he will be ok and the nice man will take him home to his Mum. I pat him compassionately on the back and close the door slowly but firmly. Before I can thank Roger the car moves off. I just stand there and watch as the car casually strolls off like it's on a Sunday drive. Other cars weave around it as they race for the front gates and freedom.

Did Roger even know the boy? He said that he would get him home safely, so I assume that he knew him. I get a sick feeling in my gut that I have made a dire mistake sending the boy off with him. I can't dwell on that right now, you have to have faith in the human spirit, and so I carry on my crusade to see everyone I possibly can to safety.

I then survey the surrounding area for my next rescue mission. Most of the cars have now exited the carpark and there are only a few teachers leading out, what looks like, the last of the students from the smouldering building. With all the excitement now dying down, I have a chance to reflect on what has taken place. It seems very unusual to me that the buildings are smouldering when the missiles have not exploded. It appears that the buildings are smouldering from the dust and debris still lingering in the air from the barrage of, what seems like, inactive missiles. What jet plane fires duds? I can't really make sense of the scene at all. It's bizarre. I pivot 360 degrees searching the skies for some evidence of the attack. It's as if nothing out of the ordinary took place except for the panicked look on the peoples' faces exiting the building.

I catch a glimpse of one of the missiles a short distance away and I approach it warily. There's no smoke coming from it. That must be a good sign. I kneel down beside the black oblong object. I touch it sheepishly with the tips of my fingers. It feels warm, but not unusually so. It is black and has been sitting in the sun for a short while. I glide my hand along its glossy black surface and rap it with my knuckles. It feels and looks like plastic?! Why the hell would a jet plane be using plastic missiles? I pick it up and find that it is quite heavy. Solid plastic? Now I'm really confused.

If this is someone's idea of a joke it's pretty stupid and elaborate. I throw the hunk of plastic down in disgust. I'm going to call the police and find out what they know before someone gets hurt. HURT! Oh my God! I forgot about Sarah! If she's hearing about this on the radio, she'll be worried about me! I need to call her, maybe she's heard something on the news. I feel my pockets for my cellphone. Damn! I must have left it on my desk. I feel a little more relaxed now that the jets are gone and the missiles they were using are plastic. Some sick prank. Someone's going to be in a whole lot of trouble over this one.

I head towards my classroom with confidence realising that this whole thing may have been a scam. The school hallways seem to be evacuated now, even the headmaster seems to have left the sinking ship. I enter my empty classroom happy in the thought that no-one has been injured. I pick up my cellphone off the desk eager to make sure Sarah is ok and whether she has any insight into the events that have transpired. I start

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dialling Sarah's number, but am sharply alerted by another unusual sound. It reminds me of the noise bombs make on those World War 2 movies as they plummet to earth on their unholy crusade. The sound is faint but easily recognisable as out of the ordinary once again. As I wait for Sarah to answer I stare out the window, 'What this time?' I look out onto the freshly cut playing fields, now potted with an array of black missiles from the pointless attack.

"Damn!" I say out loud as Sarah's answerphone bleats out its message.

"Sorry, I'm either away from..."

I shut the cellphone without leaving a message and place it in my pocket, all the time keeping my eye on any movement outside. The sound is all encompassing and getting louder by the second. I raise my head and lift my eyelids, staring into space. "Oh no!" I say with a hint of panic. Tens, maybe hundreds of small black dots drop from the sky with trails of smoke behind them. I fumble around in my pocket and grab my cellphone again. This time when I call Sarah's number there is an overloaded message coming through. My calmness turns to horror. If the cellular network is overloaded it means that this thing is wide-spread. Maybe the whole town is in danger. Hell, maybe the whole country's in danger! "Sarah's a clever woman, she'll be ok" I lie to myself.

I feel completely powerless standing alone in this room with the sky falling down around me. The one I love is most definitely in trouble and I can't do a damn thing about it! I block out my frustrations and focus on the present situation. I can't help Sarah at all if I lose my head. "Ok, let's think about this" I say out loud, pacing back and forward. How much time do I have, is the first question. I edge to the window and take another peak at the plummeting rocks. They're twice the size now and twice as loud. I have to make a decision quickly - just not the wrong one.

Option 1: Drive like hell all the way to Sarah's work, dodging the fiery balls as they hit the road. Problem: I won't be able to see the rocks unless I turn my car into a convertible. No time for that, and besides I'm likely to lose control as I try to manoeuvre around the rocks as they smash into the road, either crashing into a tree or the next rock to fall. No! A car is too clumsy.

Option 2: Stay in the building and take cover under a door frame. Once again I won't be able to see when and where they are coming from. I'd be a sitting duck.

Option 3: I go outside into the middle of the field and take my chances ducking and diving out of the way as they drop. At least this way I'll be able to see what's coming.

I'd rather take what's going to kill me head on rather than hiding from it and crossing my fingers. Decision made. Time for some dodge ball! Winner gets to keep his life and save his damsel in distress. I quickly take one more look at the uninvited guests from above before I take to the playing fields. They're looking angrier and closer than ever. Adrenaline starts to kick in, no time to warm up. I hope all that football practice in my younger days is going to pay off.

Without anymore delay I run confidently towards the classroom door. Clenching my fists and gritting my teeth, I try to release some of the nervous tension I've built up. Suddenly a familiar face appears at the door. Long wavy jet black hair, big brown eyes, skin as white as snow and full red lips most woman would kill for. Jasmine Penny, art teacher and local carnival psychic. She's a sight for sore eyes in what's possibly my final moments on earth in one piece. As I sail through the doorway I gently grasp her elbow. "Jasmine, we've got to get out of here. There's a meteor shower about to hit this place and tear it apart!" I say urgently, looking her straight in the eyes.

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"No Steve! You have to listen to me if you want to survive this!" She replies, her eyes sincere and truthful.

Chapter 3: Jasmine Penny...

Chapter 3

Jasmin Penny... "a penny for your thoughts"

"Why, do you have a better idea than dodging these rocks out in the open?!! I shout back with urgency.

"I had a vision Steve. You and me standing here on this spot after the dust settles." She says almost in tears.

"I'm telling you the truth!"

"What the same truth you tell the teenage girls that come crying from your Carnie tent?" I say sarcastically.

"Sometimes the truth hurts, please Steve I'm begging you. I couldn't bear seeing you dead knowing i could have saved you."

The hot rocks are getting closer every second i waste here. In fact, i probably won't even make it outside now I've been interrupted. I give in to Jasmine's request out of sheer urgency and for no other reason. "If your truth hurts me i want my money back.o.k." I shout trying to look grumpy. She replies with a smile that makes me feel warm inside. She then pushes me gently on the chest and into the doorway.

We end up front to front.

"Take a deep breath and try and relax Steve!" jasmine shouts.

She starts to say something else but the noise is unbearable and i can't lip read. So i just take a deep breath, close my eyes and place my hands firmly over my ears, heightening my sense of taste and smell. Jasmine's perfume drifts into my nose and then my mind. It's the same that Sarah uses. My thoughts take me by the hand and lead me to somewhere safe. Back to the night i proposed to Sarah.

The smell of Italian food in the air. My hands cupped around her waist as i look deep into her eyes. Swaying to the music provided by the violinist i hired especially for the occasion.i remember how beautiful she looked on that night and every other night. I thought how i was at peace in her arms. I could have died right there and then. A single tear wells up in the corner of my eye. Makes its way down my face, findings its home between my lips.*Thats salty*, i think. At that precise moment the meteors rip through the roof and walls of the building like a bullet cutting its way through skin and muscle.

Fast, precise and with no mercy.

They touch down simultaneously. The impact shakes the earth beneath our feet. I'm already holding onto Jasmine's waist. She grabs my shoulders to steady herself. The blast waves from the imbedded rocks converge where we stand at the exact same time, keeping us upright. A single blast from one direction would have sent us both flying into all sorts of trouble. I can't help but think that Jasmine was right. I really had no hope accept for her divine intervention.

The dust and debris swirl all around us as the rocks smoulder and burn. I quickly cover my mouth before the hot dusty air chokes my lungs. Jasmine does the same as we both make our way to the entrance, coughing as we go. We navigate our way round the stationary rocks that are the size of Swiss balls before finally making our way out into the fresh air. Well fresher than inside anyway. We hunch over and spit out disintegrated

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pieces of wall from our mouths. My ears are ringing. I mustn't have had them over my ears the whole time, i think to myself.

"You had them round my waist part of the time" jasmine interrupts taking a drink of water to clear out her mouth.

I must of been holding Jasmine when i was day dreaming about Sarah, oh how embarrassing.

"loving someone isn't embarrassing Steve" Jasmine says wiping the excess water running down her chin then lifting her head to make eye contact with me

. A cheeky smile on her face.

"O.k. Miss Penny, that's enough reading my mind, my private thoughts are exactly that, private" i say firmly.

" Oh, and sorry about touching you i say sheepishly.

"That's alright were even then, you stop touching me and i'll stop reading your thoughts" she says still smirking.

"Sounds good to me" i say smiling to myself.

I head to the fountain after Jasmine is finished and wash out my dusty and dry mouth. I can feel the cool water making its way down my parched throat.

All sorts of questions invade my mind. The main one being. Who did this and why? Maybe Jasmine has the answers i am looking for. I feel a lot better now i've cleaned up and my hearing has come back. I walk over to Jasmine who is surveying the destruction.

"Any idea who did this, better still why they would do this?" i ask looking at the once proud school buildings and grounds.

"I don't know his name or his reasons for doing all this but i do feel him present in the very air. I feel his rage. It's twisted to the point of insanity" jasmine says looking a little sick. Her face contorting as if she is trying to hold back what he is feeling.

"You say him? so it's a single man where dealing with here then?" i ask probingly.

"No, not man Steve, child."

"How do you work that out " i say puzzled."

" I'm picking up all the emotions of an abused child. Resentment, anger, sadness, loneliness, aloneness, revenge. All wrapped up in one densely packed ball of tangled knots. A dense ball ready to explode. That is what we have seen here today. Pure rage."

" o.k. thats just down right absurd, how can a child be possibly causing all this, i mean jets that fire plastic missiles and meteors raining from the sky. Don't they have a space programme thats supposed too warn us of impending dangers from outer space and a defence system that warns us when we are being invaded by enemy planes?" i say getting louder the more this confuses me.

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"Steve" Jasmine interrupts.

" the jets didn't come from land or sea and the meteors didn't fall from outer space. The jets had no pilots and the meteors hit the earth at the same time. Meteors don't do that. Now i can't explain how this child is doing this but he is. So don't try and rationalise this because it can't be rationalised" Jasmine explains calmly like this sort of thing is an very day occurrence.

My mind is going round in circles like on a merry go round. Round and round without stopping. This whole thing is giving me one big headache.

" o.k. you win" unable to get my head around what i have just been told.

"you have amazed me once today already miss penny. i've decided to go along with what you are saying and save myself anymore confusion" i say giving in to the unexplainable.

"wise decision, Mr Harper" jasmine says giving me some space to think.

Although i've allowed jasmine's ideas first place at present i'm still sceptical. I still intend on explaining this with a plausible explanation. For instance, the planes may of been under remote control. The rocks may of been bathed in oil and dropped from several bombers at the same time. Whoever or whatever it is, means business. My attentions turn to Sarah now. I was able to survive the latest attack so it's time to play hero now. I try phoning Sarah one more time. If i didn't try i might regret it later. Now there is a "no" signal response. There is no way to contact her now. Wait a minute.

"Jasmine!" i shout excitedly.

"Steve" she replies heading towards me after surveying the area once again.

"You can contact my wife through teleporting right? " i say hope eternal.

"It's called telepathy, and yes i can certainly try. I'll need a photo and a full name" jasmine replies holding out a hand.

I pull a photo of Sarah from my wallet and hand it over.

"Her full name is Sarah Louise Harper." Isay proudly.

Jasmine carefully takes the photo and looks at it with a smile on her face.

"a beautiful name for a beautiful lady" Jasmine says closing her eyes.

" thanks" i say eager to get on with the telepathy

I start to get nervous, what is Jasmine going to find? Sarah alive and kicking, Sarah alive and not kicking or Sarah deceased. I pray not the later. I squeeze my hands together tightly, rubbing them together back and forth. My attention zeroed in on Jasmynes facial expressions waiting for a smile and dreading her face dropping. It seems like an age has past. Then without warning Jasmynes eye lids flash open at an unearthly speed. It startles me out of my fixated trance. Her pupils widen, it looks like there's nobody home, eyes staring blankly. Her eyes change from brown to complete black.

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Another face materializes superimposing itself over Jasmines. A ghostly image. Muddy grey skin, top lip curled up showing gritting teeth, bridge of the nose wrinkled, penetrating black eyes that could stop the bravest man in his tracks. A face of pure rage. Can't move due to sheer terror invoked by this dark thing presenting itself before me. The insanely angry voice of a young boy comes bellowing out at me. "Leave her alone you witch, she's all mine now!!" The image and message chill me to the bone.

Chapter 4: Vengeanceâ

Chapter 4

"Vengeance"

As quickly as it appeared the haunting apparition vanishes. Leaving a stunned Jasmine standing as still as a statue. Her eyes wide open and empty, her jaw dropped. I cautiously make a move towards her. As I do her eyes blink once. When they reopen they're filled with horror and astonishment. She draws in a deep breath. I stop, unsure of what is going to happen next. As Jasmine exhales she lets out a blood curdling scream that sends shivers down my spine and raises Goosebumps on my arms. She resembles someone who has seen the unmentionable. Her facial features unrecognisable. With her breath completely exhausted, Jasmine attempts to keep screaming. Automatically refilling her lungs with oxygen, she carries on with her insane cry. *'Jasmine's lost her mind'* I think, mortified. I have to act fast before she goes beyond the point of no return.

With no other choice I take a step forward and supply a quick, sharp slap to her twisted face. That should do the trick, I think. She blinks again, this time a little slower. Eyes still blank. I position myself to give her another slap. No need too. Her whole body sways. Anticipating her next movement I catch her in my waiting arms as her legs give way to exhaustion. I lay her down gently on the hard black surface of the car park. Her body completely relaxed like a rag doll. I promptly check her vital signs. Pulse a little fast but heart beating strongly. Her breathing steady. I look into the windows to her soul. Nobody home. I lean down and kiss her tenderly on her forehead. Place her in the recovery position and close the blinds.

"rest my fair lady" I say compassionately.

I slump down on my back, exhausted. The words hissed out by the dark entity reverberate through my weary head. *She's mine now.* I reflect. What did it mean by that? Has it taken her prisoner? Taken her life, or worst of all her soul? With these thoughts running round my head I drift off to sleep, unable to keep my eyes open.....

Conscious now, I stare at the pitch black blanket sprinkled with glittering diamonds that surrounds me. An eerie silence covers the area. I feel alone and very uneasy. Dam, I must have dropped off. Have to get my arse into gear and find out what this "maniac brat" has done with the love of my life. I really don't have a clue where to start. My minds still a little weary from my deep sleep. Finding it hard to concentrate. What's the time? I check my watch. Its ten o'clock!! That was enough to shock me into action. We need to head into town and find out what the hell is going on here! I seem to have found a new lease on life. I feel energised and ready for the task ahead.

"Jasmine" I say out loud with a sense of urgency.

I turn to check on her current status. As far as I can tell by looking at her, she hasn't moved an inch. She looks peaceful now too. I feel like the blood just drained from me. Is she even alive? I quickly kneel down beside her and check to see, hear and feel if she is breathing. I let out a sigh of relief. Her breathing is shallow but normal. I hope she was able to untangle the tortured images she had seen to make her react the way she did.

The next thought to enter my mind is my car. I head to the staff car park to check on the status of my car. My jaw drops as I spot what used to be my prized material possession lying crippled before me. A lone meteor lays comfortably nestled deep within the once immaculate bonnet - like a bird's egg, snug in its nest. I swear it's smirking at me, happy that it's ruined a perfectly good day and car. That's our only immediate form of transport gone.

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Jasmine is still sleeping off her ordeal and is in no shape to face reality, let alone walk out of here on her own two feet. Even though I feel energized, I couldn't imagine carrying her any long distance either. Even walking at a brisk pace it would take us till dawn to reach town. I could go for help on my own but from what I've seen today there may be no help to get.

I head back over to Jasmine and check to see if the blinds are still pulled. I bend down to shake her shoulders but before I can touch her, her eyelids swing open. "Steve!" Jasmine says, wide-eyed and bushy-tailed. "Miss Penny" I reply, "nice to see you back in the land of living."

"I had a dream!" Jasmine says, oblivious to my last comment.

"Last time I saw you it looked more like a nightmare" I say, puzzled.

"He melted my fear away with his angelic presence, and took me on a journey to the evil child's location," she says with excitement in her voice.

"Well, while you were on this 5 star cruise to location unknown, I was worried sick about you and Sarah. The important thing for me right now is that you are not permanently in a trance and what this, whatever it is, has done to the one I love," I say wanting answers. The urgency in my voice must have brought Jasmine back down to earth as her face changes from just coming off a fun ride to someone bearing bad news.

"Sarah's alive, Steve, but she's under the control of the evil child," Jasmine says with sadness in her eyes.

"Control? What do you mean - control? Has she suddenly sided with evil? And could we call this thing something else besides the evil child? I don't know, maybe vengeance or wrath? Evil child is so cliché, I feel like I'm in an Austin Powers movie!" I say, getting rather loud and running out of breath.

"Please, Steve, just listen to what I have to say. I'm sure then you'll be able to look at the situation in a different light. We have an ally. I don't know who he is, but he made his presence known to me and his power is equal to that of vengeance. You're happy with vengeance?" Jasmine adds looking for my approval.

I nod, she continues.

"His presence dissolved the fear and pure horror that I experienced during the encounter with vengeance. My guard was down and once he was in my head, I couldn't escape his grip. His presence was the complete opposite to the light beings."

I interrupt. "Light being?" I say sarcastically.

"Okay, let's call him divinity," Jasmine says, eager to get on with her dreamy story.

"Divinity and Vengeance it is then. Sorry, carry on Miss Penny," I say happy to clear that up.

"While Vengeance had a hold on me, I could feel his rage and anger. I could see nothing. All around me was darkness. A heavy suffocating darkness that was closing in on me. I felt the space I was occupying getting smaller and smaller, slowly squeezing the life out of me. I've never experienced such panic before. And the noise - my God, the noise." Jasmine starts breathing heavily and begins to sway as before. Her eyes dancing in circles. I quickly intervene.

"Jasmine! Snap out of it!" I say firmly, snapping my fingers in front of her face. As I do, I notice a red hand print on her left cheek. I hope she doesn't notice that. Explaining that I had slapped her the last time this

By Grand Design

happened might be a little embarrassing for both of us.

"Thanks Steve," she says, dragging her hand across her face and trying to compose herself.

"The noise was like it would be standing in the middle of a swarm of bees. A humming sound that would drive a sane person mad. Even after he'd left my body, the horror went on. A sharp pain in my face brought me out of the darkness and then everything went black again, only this time the darkness was quiet. And that's when divinity's light enveloped me. That's when the noise, terror and suffocation became a distant memory, like when time heals a traumatic event. I left my body and was lifted high above where we are now. I'm usually scared of heights, but I felt completely safe, surrounded by Divinity's peaceful life-force. I watched the landscape pass beneath me, the moon's radiance giving the fields and rolling hills a beautiful glow. As we drew closer to Vengeance, I became more and more unsettled. The same feelings that had me in Vengeance's grip were creeping up on me again. Divinity must have sensed this, as a light, tingling sensation swept through my troubled thoughts, leaving behind a clean slate. Divinity's light cancelling out the dark and dense disease that is Vengeance. Divinity didn't say a word. We just hovered high above a dark forest below. The forest surrounded a large, perfectly round crater with what looked like a black pearl in the centre. The dark forest around the crater caught my attention as it appeared to have a life of its own, bubbling with activity. Suddenly howling and screaming burst up from the forest below, hitting me like a tropical storm. At that point a soft light surrounded me, the hellish noises stopped and the activity that brought the forest to life, died down to a simmer. Obviously they couldn't see me now, but I could still see them. I calmly focused on the deep black sphere in the crater's centre. Our friend the moon once again shedding its light to reveal this insidious scene. It looks small from above, but in reality must have been quite large after comparing it to the surrounding trees. The sphere sat atop of a perfectly ice-cream shaped mound of earth. Narrow at the bottom and extending upwards at a steep angle to a flat surface at the top. Around three times the diameter of the sphere. It sat level with the forest. The crater's depth was hard to judge at this height, but I could tell, if you were to fall into it from ground level, it would mean certain death. The surrounding forest and deep crater, obviously a deterrent for would-be attackers."

I interrupt again, "Why would Vengeance be worried about would-be attackers when he can, supposedly, command a fleet of killer jets and fire balls? Surely a click of his fingers and he could lay this place to waste," I say, unsure if Jasmine has the answers.

"He's vulnerable somehow," Jasmine says, fingers tapping her chin as she thinks.

"Well, when you find out how he's vulnerable I want to know so I can end his devilish crusade. By the way, when are you getting to the part about Sarah's state of mind and where-a bouts," I ask, getting more impatient by the second.

"Very soon. I'm sorry, I just want you to see the whole picture to help you understand what we're up against."

"Right you are Miss Penny. I'm sorry, continue," I say, rubbing my hands and getting rather nervous about what I'm going to hear.

"Okay, where was I? Yes, that's right, the fall would mean certain death. Divinity's calmness made me almost forget where I was. Then without any warning the sphere turned a lighter shade of grey. A black spot appeared in the centre. The spot grew slowly but surely. Well it seemed slow as I was at least one hundred metres above the ground. It blocked out the sphere and then the entire crater as it sailed towards me. The closer it came, the more detail I could make out. With the help of the moon's light, I could see what looked like a black skinned fist. Long fingers unfurled from the fist revealing nails sharpened to a point. This hideous sight would have normally scared me stiff, but I just watched as if there were no imminent danger. As if I was safe at home, snuggled up on the sofa, wondering what was going to happen next. With the inhuman claw

By Grand Design

getting closer, blocking out all but a few struggling moon rays and fully opened, all went blank. Next thing I knew I was back here looking at you."

Chapter 5: the Penny drops

Chapter 5

the penny drops

"That's it!" I say with an astonished look on my face

"What about the part in your dream where we become hero's after saving Sarah and restoring the earth to its former peaceful state?"

"The earth has never been peaceful. Nothing is at peace in the physical plane." Jasmine corrects me.

"Sorry wrong choice of words."

"o.k., try its former candy coated over a rotten apple state."

"That's spot on, I'm impressed." Jasmine says, nodding approvingly and raising her eyebrows.

"Well, if it's any consolation I believe with Divinity on our side our chances of coming out of this alive With our loved ones has just gone up to fifty percent. That's from zero to fifty in the space of a Dream. Things are looking up I'd say."

"Yeah, well that's better odds than winning Lotto and I won a hundred dollars just last week. Things are looking up for sure"

I say with a hint of sarcasm.

"O.k. then, since we are on the topic of odds or in this case, an oddity. Let me explain my theory on Sarah's present state of mind. I hope what I am going to tell you will answer all the questions you are conjuring up." Jasmine says taking a pause and a deep breath.

I'm looking forward to this. Still skeptical of Jasmine's weird and wonderful theories.

"Have you noticed a change in behavior lately in Sarah and other people in town?" Jasmine asks.

I place my hand over my mouth as I do when I am thinking. I guess Sarah has been a bit short tempered lately but I had put that down to woman's hormones and the stresses of holding on to her real estate job in these hard economic times. But still, it's unusual for Sarah.

"Now that you mention it, yes. Sarah has been quicker to fly off the handle lately. She seems agitated and more distracted than usual. I had put it down to work related stress."

I say still in thinking mode.

I didn't mention my thoughts about Sarah's womanly hormones playing a part in her short temperedness. Jasmine may have jumped at the chance to put me in my place again. ..

"I guess you could even say that she's away with the fairies sometimes" I conclude,

By Grand Design

Remembering how often I have had to snap her out of a trance like state lately. I had also put that down to stress.

"Not Fairies, Vengeance. I believe he has been imposing his will upon young souls" Jasmine says pausing in deep thought.

I believe she is trying to break down her theory into layman's terms for my understanding. She needs to because what I just heard is a far cry from what I was thinking. Where does Jasmine get these strange ideas from?

"Oh really, that sounds interesting" I say trying not to look too out of touch with the latest ethereal thinking.

"Yeah, I know. It sounds way out there. Just keep an open mind" Jasmine says either picking up on the hesitation in my voice or reading my mind.

"Ummmm, o.k. here we go. Souls have a beginning or a birth just like humans. We are all created from the divine spark and have a series of lives on earth. The outcome of each incarnation, oops sorry, individual life determines the lessons for your next life. All the while working our way back home to the source of the divine spark. Since Lucifer, oops sorry again, the devil."

"I know who Lucifer is" I interrupt smiling.

"Good to know. Since Lucifer turned his back on god all souls must choose of their own free will their path back home. Some souls take longer than others and some don't make it at all." Jasmine says sighing deeply.

I confirm that I understand by nodding as I search for questions to ask.

"So where do the souls go that don't make it?" not really sure if I want to know the answer.

"They choose selfishness over selflessness and wind up in chaos where they feel at home."

"You mean hell?" I question

"Hell to us, home to them" Jasmine says with a worried look on her face.

"Nice... so why is vengeance only attacking young souls?"

"Like I said, the journey home for each soul is like the journey of a human from birth to death. Except for a soul there is no death. Once we are home we start on a new adventure beyond the physical plane, sorry, earth. Young souls like young children have just begun their journey of discovery. Like young humans they are generally trusting and open whereas older people are, as a rule wiser. They challenge anything that appears to be too good to be true. Children on the other hand are very accepting and

Easily fooled by appearances." Jasmine stops to take a breath as my head is spinning from information Over load.

I was brought up as an atheist and none of these spiritual ideas were ever thrown at me. "Live your life To the fullest". "live each day as if it was your last" and "live it up" while you can, were the only motto's I Was taught. Basically when you die that's it. End of story. Trying to cram in all these new ideas is

By Grand Design

Making me tied and I want to switch off. I have to stay alert though because this information could Help me understand the big picture of what's going on here and even though I may be an atheist I am Still open minded. Especially after current events. Just need some time to process all this. Staying focused I widen my eyes and take a deep breath of oxygen to keep the blood flowing.

"You o.k.?" Jasmine asks looking a little worried.

"Just tiedâ. carry on."

"o.k....vengeance has probably entered the dreams of young souls, sensing that they are naive and taking advantage of the situation by imposing his will upon them. He would probably appear to them as a friend or a loved one that has passed on. Maybe even an angel. When they embrace him with open arms he takes a grip of their souls, like he tried with me. The young soul going from master of his own destiny to slave of vengeance's diabolical destiny planed for the human race."

"So why doesn't he try his luck on older souls as well. Just incase they succumb. That way he would double his number of followers?" I query.

"I'm guessing that he wanted to keep this whole thing under wraps so he could catch everyone by surprise. Recruiting only the faithful and taking control of the unsuspecting and naive. If the right people or in his case the wrong people were alerted to his assault on earth there may have been more resistance."

"What do you mean by the faithful? Do you think he already had a cult following?" I ask

"Not all people will be fooled into following him. Some people have hearts as black as his and would accept him as their master willingly. Sharing in his delight for creating chaos and inflicting pain and anguish upon the innocent. Their commands would be accepted on a conscious level and carried out without question." Jasmine finishes waiting for my reply.

All I can think about is Sarah. I know that she wouldn't hurt a soul. So that means she is a slave to Vengeance. I'm worried that if she is forced to do horrific things for him that her heart may turn black like his after time. Losing her true self.

"What about Sarah? How would carrying out heinous tasks affect her?" I ask taking a nervous swallow.

"As he has complete control over her the only hope Sarah has of saving her soul would be to hide"

"What good would hiding do now that he's already caught her!" I snap before letting Jasmine continue.

" Hide her soul Steveâ.her soul"

"How is she going to do that." I ask after calming down and feeling a bit stupid.

"Knowing that she isn't in control of her own actions and by witnessing the torture vengeance is forcing her to do, Sarah may well resort to switching off, so to speak. Finding a happy place in her mind to hide. Away from the traumatic events unfolding before her eyes and by her own hand. Unfortunately he is steering the ship. Sarah and the others are just along for the ride"â lâ lâ lâ !..

Chapter 6: Yin and Yang

Chapter 6

Yin and Yang

My wife has been imprisoned in her own body. Vengeance is the jailer and he holds the key to her soul. Her only means to escape is to hide in the memories of a better time and place. I feel a wave of sadness wash over me as I think back to a better time and place of my own.

I arrive home from a hard day at the office. My thoughts plagued with work related problems. It's late afternoon and the sun's lost its intensity. A cool breeze swirls around the tall trees that are dotted around our front lawn.

Sarah catches my eye as I exit the car. She's a vision to behold. , Slowly swaying back and forth on a swing chair that sits on our front porch. She focuses on a book. I just stand there and admire her from a distance. All my earthly concerns drain away as my love for her takes hold.

Her long blonde hair cascades down her pretty face and comes to rest on her shoulders. She's wearing a long white summer dress that flows down to her ankles. The dress is covered in different coloured flowers that seem to dance in the gentle breeze.

I just stand there in a trance, thinking how lucky I am being loved by such a beautiful woman with a heart of gold. She senses me standing there and looks up with a smile. One reserved only for me and for my eyes only, one that melts my heart.

I walk towards her with a smile of my own that would span the length of the Grand Canyon. Suddenly from out of nowhere a voice calls my name. It's distant and very faint. "Steve". It's soft and sounds like a woman's voice.

I keep walking towards Sarah and her infectious smile. I am close enough to see her green eyes gleam like emeralds in the soft light. I am distracted by the voice again. This time it's a little louder. "STEVE". The heavenly apparition before me starts to fade away and becomes blurred. I instinctively grab at it. Too lateâ. My heart starts to cool and my smile turns to a frown. Fantasy becomes realityâ

I'm unsure of where I am and I feel a little disorientated. Then my mind starts to catch up with my sight. Jasmine is waving her hand in front of my face.

"Steve" she says softly.

"Oh. Hey Jasmine. Sorry, I must have zoned out for a second" I say rubbing my watery eyes.

"Don't be sorry. It's not nice knowing that your wife's in trouble and there's nothing you can do to help her." Jasmine says smiling compassionately.

"Don't worry?! I'll help her alright! I'll track down that selfish little bastard and tear him limb from limb!" I say abruptly and completely out of the blue , my transition from dream state to harsh reality complete as my hurt turns to hate.

By Grand Design

"You can't fight him on his level. You're an amateur in his domain. You'll have to put your personal feelings aside and focus all your energy on the positive. Your anger will only make you lose control. Then you will be of no use to Sarah at all." Jasmine pleads.

Jasmine's right, I lose control and I lose everything. I am more frustrated than angry. Frustrated that I am powerless to help the one I love. I need to snap out of this feeling of being helpless. If I can keep positive and use Sarah's rescue as my motivation I may just be able to wrangle a happy ending out of all this. So it's only looking on the bright side of things from now on.

"Right, so what's the plan? How do we choke the life from Vengeance?" I say ready for action and a lot more composed.

"That's the spirit!" Jasmine says smiling.

"I believe the dream I had holds the key. The heavily guarded forest and the protective sphere surrounding vengeance tells me that he's vulnerable! THATS IT!!"

"That's what?" I reply.

"Even though divinity didn't talk to me I could feel what he was feeling. He felt sad and partly responsible for what was happening. Divinity is the light and vengeance is the darkness, There opposites, yin and yang!" Jasmine says gesturing me with her hands palm up like I should know what she is talking about.

I guess you have to think like Jasmine to come up with a conclusion like that, especially with the little information that she just gave me.

"Did the penny just drop?" I say smirking. Not letting on that I think that she is a few sandwiches short of a picnic. "Yeah, yin and yang, black and white, I use to have the emblem on my surf board. But how does that make Vengeance vulnerable?" I ask looking completely confused.

"Don't you see?" Jasmine says throwing her arms up in the air.

"Obviously not" I say glumly.

"They used to be one and somehow they have split into two. Divinity is the soul and vengeance is the vessel. Sorry, Vengeance is the flesh and blood. That's why he's hiding behind a shield."

"So he can bleed, that means we can kill him" I say eagerly.

"He won't just die either, he will cease to exist. He has no soul, no conscience, and no remorse for his actions. He is pure evil. There is no chance of him ever finding his way home"

"Wasn't Lucifer a fallen angel? I mean, he's supposed to be at the root of all evil and he has a soul, right?" I question, hoping that Jasmine will answer with a "no" because if it's a "yes" we're in it deep.

"Yes, of course, he has a soul, he's an angel" Jasmine replies.

I feel the blood drain from my body. I promised myself to keep positive so it's onwards and upwards.

"Anyway back to the dream." Jasmine says quickly.

By Grand Design

I think she picked up on my dread. I'll have to get my poker face on next time.

"The dream is symbolic. Vengeance or Yin, yeah I think we should call him Yin from now on. It's simpler and Divinity is Yang. Yin can't physically out stretch his arm to pluck threats out of the sky. I believe that was to show me that his powers are far reaching and that his terror attack has gone global. The light that surrounded me when the things in the forest became agitated was showing me that Yang will protect us and for us to have faith in him. We can't let anyone know of his existence either. He knows that we are old souls and he is putting his trust in us to do what has to be done. If Yin finds out we are in league with Yang he will no doubt force a battle to wipe out mankind just in spite of Yang. We can't even trust Sarah, Steve. She could be under Yin's control and not even be aware of it." Jasmine says with a serious look.

"So now he is a Hypnotist as well as a ventriloquist." I say sarcastically and happy that I have finally made sense of something that Jasmine has said.

"Precisely my dear Watson, your power of deduction is improving by the minute." Jasmine says light heartedly with an English accent.

"Well thank you Sherlock, you're too kind." I reply sounding more like Sean Connery's double "0" seven than Peter Cushing's Sherlock Holmes.

"I thought Dr Watson was British." Jasmine says trying not to laugh.

"One more question?" I say looking embarrassed.

"Hit me with it" Jasmine Chuckles.

"Why doesn't Yang take care of Yin himself?" I say as I start to laugh out loud. That just sounded so stupid. Both Jasmine and I burst into laughter that we can't control. After a few minutes of recurring laughter we both take a deep breath and pull ourselves together.

"Thanks Steve, I think we both needed a good laugh"

"Why thank you Miss Penny" I say while taking a bow.

"Now to answer your question, Yin and Yang are opposites but they are also one. They know each other inside and out. A one on one battle between them would be fruitless. Neither of them would win. It would go on forever and the only casualties would be all life on earth and that is exactly what yang is trying to avoid."

"Well that pretty much seals the deal then. We are earths only hope. So I say that we head into town or what's left of it and scavenge what supplies we can. Then head to this cave I know that I found when I was a kid. After a rest we can head off at the crack of dawn on our holly crusade and victory." I say passionately.

"You really missed your true calling Steve. You should give up your day job of physical education teacher and become a motivational speaker for the round table." Jasmine says while shaking her head like you would if you were answering "No" and trying to hold back a giggle.

I really don't think she's taking me seriously.

"Lead the way King Arthur" Jasmine says gesturing me to lead the way and still smirking

By Grand Design

"Yes, well that's the problem. My trusty stead caught a fiery ball in the bread box and his days of crusading have unfortunately come to a stale end." I say disheartened and putting an anti climax to my fist pumping speech.

"Oh, don't worry; my trusty stead will see us right." Jasmine says winking at the same time.

She heads off in the general direction of where my car is parked. Or what's left of it anyway. She fades into the dark night as I follow behind. The moon and stars providing our only means of light as the entire school has lost power after the attack. I wonder what sort of car she has. What would a psychic hippie drive? I hope it's not a "VW" Kombi van. Dam! I could run faster than one of them. She did refer to it as her Trusty stead too. I might be pleasantly surprised and find that she has the latest "V8" Mustang.

Suddenly a vision of us entering town in Jasmine's bright red Mustang pops into my head. With me at the wheel we drift round the corner into Main Street with the precision of a professional driver, coming to a screeching halt in the middle of the road. I rev the engine as Yin's henchmen look on with stunned looks on their faces like animal's caught in our head lights. While they are still in a state of shock we leap out of the car like the Dynamic Duo, armed to the teeth with a look of true grit and determination plastered all over our faces. We open fire without mercy and take no prisoners. I think I've seen too many action movies. I have a bad feeling that my expectations are about to be shattered.

"Ah, here she is, right behind this wreck" Jasmine says excitedly.

"Wreck, that's no Wreck Miss Penny. That's a fully restored 1969 Pontiac GTO or "the Judge", as it was known." I say proudly.

"Well, it looks like "the Judge" has been handed out his own death sentence." Jasmine says mockingly with a false sense of pity on her face.

I reply with a grunt of displeasure.

I am starting to dislike this woman. Then I spot her ride.

"That's your trusty stead? A moped, you're having me on right?" I say as my face drops. My thoughts of a grand entrance laid to rest.

"Yes a moped and I only have one helmet"

"Could things get any worse?" I complain with my mouth still open in shock.

"They will with that attitude" Jasmine retaliates.

Now I get an image of us chugging into town on a pink moped after travelling all night. , Armed with a matching pink helmet and a nervous grin, Yin's evil army dying by an over dose of uncontrollable laughter.

I really don't think things could get any worse...

Chapter 7: psychic or psycho?

Chapter 7

Psychic or psycho?

My expectations have just been shot to pieces. Jasmine's trusty steed is no more than a stubborn donkey. At this rate Sarah will have no choice but to seek refuge within her mind to escape the clutches of Yin. I'm afraid that she may go too deep and never find her way back to the land of the living. At this point in time I have no other option. I have to put my faith in Jasmine and her donkey. Hey, maybe it's reliable like the turtle in the old story, "slow and steady wins the race". Currently I'm acting like the hare with my eagerness to win the race and rescue my damsel in distress.

The hare in the story was full of himself and underestimated his opponent. With what I have witnessed so far I don't want to make the same mistake. If I do I may not even make it to the finish line. Yin may appear to be a child but he is acting like a criminal genius. His actions so far have put everyone at the school and possibly the world, into a state of panic. I can't rush into facing Yin without knowing more about him. But on the other hand the only confirmation that he is behind all this has come from Jasmine. The hideous face and insidious voice that supposedly came through her while communicating telepathically with Sarah may have been an alter ego of Jasmine's schizophrenic mind for all I know.

Now that I think back to the incident, it did seem like Jasmine was having a schizophrenic episode. The change in facial expressions and voice could have been an angry character that she has created after a traumatic event to protect herself. I was so desperate to contact Sarah that I would have believed anything at the time. Now that I have had a chance to rationalise what I saw I'm starting to think maybe she's just plain old psycho, not psychic.

Maybe I've been putting too much faith in her. I have to admit that the plastic missiles and flaming meteors are certainly out of the ordinary but they can be explained. I believe Jasmine had the answer but she overlooked the obvious and went with the over the top scenario which doesn't surprise me. She admitted that Yin can hypnotise people so why didn't she click that the pilots of the jets may have been under his control? Now that's a theory I can believe. What I need is concrete proof of what and who we are dealing with. Not some airy fairy explanations or the ravings of a lunatic. A good start for me would be to make contact with the outside world. Outside of the one that Jasmine and I are presently in, one that makes sense.

I need a radio or a ...cell phone! I dig into my pocket and rip it out but the screen is completely blank. I press and hold the power button but there is no response. I was wrong after all, things could get worse and they just have. I have no immediate way of tuning in to a radio station and my only help to save Sarah could well be a fruitcake. In Jasmine's favour, she did save my life after a supposed prediction of our impending deaths and she did read my mind after the incident. So at this stage I will give her the benefit of the doubt but I will be keeping a close eye on her behaviour. If she does end up being a psycho I will have to let her go.

I hope she hasn't just read my mind. If she is for real my reservations about her sanity won't faze her. If she isn't they may just tip her over the edge. All I can do is wait and see. Hey maybe Jasmine has a cell phone?

"Hey Jasmine, do you have a cell?" I ask acting like I believe she's completely sane.

She is checking that her motorised bicycle is in good working order.

"No, sorry I don't believe in them." She replies coldly.

By Grand Design

"O.k. thanks anyway."

She either knows what I was thinking or she's still upset over my comments about her bike. Either way she isn't letting on. In case she isn't reading my mind I can't let on that I am having doubts about her sanity. I need to tone down my comments so she doesn't get suspicious of my motives and probe my thoughts again, so it's time to make her feel at ease. Dam! I will have to wait till we explore town to find a radio. Hopefully there will be a car radio in working order there, assuming that the town has no power.

Jasmine's sitting on her moped with her pink helmet in hand. She's looking out into the darkness and fixated on one point. I can't make out what it is. I don't think that she is looking at anything in particular. Just in the opposite direction to me. I walk over to her and put my hand on her shoulder in an attempt to break the ice between us.

"Hey, I'm sorry about insulting your mode of transport. I hear that they are very economical." I say apologetically.

"Yes, they are also easy to park and hide. There also great at avoiding being destroyed by meteors, unlike larger targets." Jasmine retorts as she looks at my mangled muscle car and then at her moped which is still in one piece.

"TouchÃ©" I say in defeat.

To add insult to injury she hands me the helmet.

"Should I be worried? Does this mean I'll need it?" I question with a puzzled look.

"No, I just thought it would put you at ease since I'm only a learner." She says holding back a smile.

"Ha, ha, very funny miss Penny." I say nodding and smiling.

"I realise that you're an independent woman but my mother brought me up to be a gentlemen, god rest her soul. So the helmet is yours." I say waving the helmet away.

"Why thank you sir." Jasmine replies in a southern American accent.

"Besides, I haven't ridden a moped before. I prefer a steering wheel over handle bars, more control." I say nodding with a cocky expression on my face.

"Maybe, but there's something liberating about riding a motorcycle, you feel so free and alive." Jasmine says as she ties her hair back to fit her helmet on.

"Talking about liberating, how about we liberate this town miss free and easy?" I say in high spirits.

"Free, yes, easy, no" Jasmine replies quickly.

"Sorry I didn't mean easy as in easy, I meant easy as in easy going" I say trying to redeem myself.

"Don't worry I know exactly what you meant mister I like to be in control." Jasmine replies while fitting her helmet into place.

By Grand Design

I assume from that comment that she is reading my mind but I won't mention anything just in case. I hop on behind her, the seat only fit for a small passenger. The rear end of the moped labours under my ninety five kilo's. I was right; we are going to be chugging our way into town. I let out a deep sigh and place my arms round Jasmine's waist.

"O.k. cowboy, hold on tight because this ride isn't for the faint hearted." Jasmine says while trying to steady her moped under both of our weight.

"Well I certainly aren't faint hearted but I'm not overly excited about the whole experience. So what does that make me?" I say tightening my grip.

"Dull!" comes her cheeky reply.

Without further warning Jasmine smacks her donkey on the ass and without so much as a "Hi Ho silver" we chug off into the strangely still night.

Even though I was apprehensive at first I am quietly surprised by Jasmine's driving skills as we cruise smoothly down the road of uncertainty. Her sled only coughs and wheezes on the odd occasion. I would like to see what's coming before it smacks me in the face though. The cool breeze rushing past my face causes my eyes to water. I sit about six inches above Jasmine's pink helmet. Being six foot two doesn't always have its benefits. I am forced to turn my head to the side and watch as the moonlit trees and vacant paddocks pass me by.

I feel tired as the scenery that passes me by starts to become a blur. It puts me in a hypnotic state. I start to day dream about how sweet life was when I woke up this morning. A drop dead gorgeous wife, a car most men would only dream of and a job that I feel passionately about. You wouldn't dare ask for anything more. That was this morning and now almost twenty four hours later I've lost my wife, car and possibly my job. I've been almost squashed by a meteor, had my arms around another woman and found out that my wife is not only lost but under the control of a pint sized dictator. I am presently on the back of a moped being driven by a carnie psychic I can't trust. Yet I trust her with all our lives. Ain't life grand?

I don't get a chance to answer my own rhetorical question as Jasmine turns abruptly to the side of the road. She quickly but carefully comes to a stop on the grass verge.

"Why the sudden pit stop?" I ask as I remove my numb bottom from the meagre passenger seat. I survey the surrounding area for any unusual movement as Jasmine removes her helmet and places it on the grass. She then stabilises the moped and replies.

"We have company." She points in the direction of where we are headed.

I focus my attention on the road ahead.

"What sort of company?" I ask unable to see a thing. Everything beyond a few meters is a blur at best.

"Wait" Jasmine instructs.

I keep staring in the same direction and try to keep an open mind as to what may appear from the blanket of darkness ahead. Before my mind can play tricks on me a vehicle's head lights pop up from over a hill. Above the head lights another high beam light concentrates to the side. It's a search light.

"That's probably the Calvary searching for survivors" I say excitedly.

By Grand Design

"I'm afraid not Steve, if that's the Calvary we are on the right side." Jasmine replies with a hint of distress in her voice.

"I take it that's a psychic prediction" I ask although I believe I already know the answer.

"No, not a prediction but a strong feeling of uneasiness." She says staring at the approaching headlights.

"In that case we need somewhere to hide and fast." I say scanning the immediate area.

"We'll have to hide the moped too. We don't want to alert them to our presence." She says while kicking back the bike stand.

There's a barbed wire fence with heavy wooden posts between us and a large paddock. I can make out the outlines of some big trees about one hundred metres beyond the fence. They seem to be our only visible sanctuary.

"O.k. lets hide in that belt of trees. We should stay out of sight and mind there." I say as the slow rumble of a "V" eight engine drifts into audible range. I turn to witness a line of head lights cruising slowly towards us. They seem to be coming out of nowhere and increasing in numbers by the second. There's no chance of getting by them with their search lights scanning the area in all directions. I have this horrible feeling that they are on the prowl to find us.

"Sounds good" Jasmine replies wheeling the moped over to the fence.

I watch the lights trying to calculate how long we have to run and hide before they are on top of us. Even though they appear to be travelling slowly the menacing glare of the head lights has doubled since I have been watching. So I would say that time is of the essence. I ignore the panic that starts to upset my stomach and smartly head over to help Jasmine lift her moped over the fence. She's standing still like a statue right next to it and facing away from me. It sits parallel to the fence that stands over a metre high.

"O.k. how are we going to do this." I think out loud hoping to break the spell she appears to be under. She doesn't react at all. I carry on with my appraisal of the task at hand.

"It probably weighs a hundred to a hundred and fifty kilos." I continue as I eye up the moped.

Still no bite from her, maybe she's preparing to levitate it over the fence? Now that would be impressive. If she could accomplish that the joke would be on me. Any doubts about her psychic ability would be put to rest. Thinking about her using mind over matter to lift the moped over the fence is beyond my comprehension and completely impossible as far as I am concerned. It'll take good old fashioned brute strength to lift that dead weight up and over the fence.

"Right Jasmine, are you feeling strong?" I say getting into position at the heavy end.

"Find somewhere secure to hold on too, and then on the count of three we will lift it above the fence line and then heave it over. It may have a rough landing but I'm sure a few scratches are better than the alternative. Just remember to bend your knees" I instruct.

I check Jasmine to see if she is moving into position. She hasn't moved an inch!

"Jasmine!" I shout firmly.

By Grand Design

The "V" eight rumble intensifies causing my heart beat to increase.

"JASMINE!!" I shout even louder this time.

"SNAP OUT OF IT!!" I add getting up from my lifting position and reaching out to touch her shoulder. Before I can make contact her eye lids flick open. This startles me a little as I didn't realise that they were closed. She drops down and grabs the moped with both hands. With arms slightly wider than her shoulders she lifts it above the fence with no visible strain at all. Holding it like a cardboard cut out she takes a step forward, stretches out her arms and drops it onto the opposite side of the fence. It hits the grass, bounces once and comes to rest on its side unscathed.

I open my mouth to say something but nothing comes out, I'm speechless. Witnessing Jasmine lift her moped without straining a muscle defies logic. It's not quite levitation but my faith in jasmine has been restored.

"Come on Steve, let's get moving. There crawling closer by the second." Jasmine shouts without even mentioning what she just did.

"You, you just lifted it over the fence without even breaking a sweat." I say in astonishment now that I can get the words out.

"No time to explain now, pull yourself together and high tail it to the tree line before it's too late!" Jasmine demands, trying to break me out of my bewildered state.

"Yeah the tree, let's go!" I shout back looking a little star struck.

"After you, wonder woman!" I shout, offering Jasmine the lead.

"I may be wonder woman but I aren't dressed for action so if you don't mind!" She shouts while twirling her finger around to indicate that she wants her privacy.

"Why of course Miss Penny!" I shout while turning away.

Seconds later she is calling out for me to follow. When I turn she is already pushing the moped towards our hide out at a brisk pace. I leap the fence in a single bound and run to catch up. The noise from the "v" eight engines has turned from a deep rumble to an all encompassing roar. I glance to our right to see the search lights less than five hundred metres away. I catch up to Jasmine and grab the moped from her.

"Allow me!" I shout pushing it at a faster pace. After all I am the man around here.

"Be my guest!" Jasmine laughs.

We make it to the tree line without incident. I lay the moped down flat on the ground and slump down against a thick tree trunk. Jasmine sits down beside me as we both catch our breath.

"Oh, shit!" Jasmine blurts out in shock and totally out of character.

"What!" I retort thinking the worse.

"We left the helmet on the other side of the fence!"

"Oh, shits right!" I say taking a deep breath.

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We stare into each other's eyes concentrating on finding a quick solution to our big problem. There's only one thing to do and I'm sure that I'm faster than Jasmine even though she has the strength of ten men. There's no time to argue so without any further thought I break our stare and peek around the tree trunk. The lights are still a good hundred metres from the helmet, a pink helmet that may cost us our lives. Without saying a single word I get up and make a dash for it...

Chapter 8: Steel Dogs

black... Chapter 8

Steel Dogs

Jasmine calls out my name in vain as I make a mad dash for her moped helmet. It won't be long before it comes into view of the sinister vehicles. They're lighting up the road and surrounding area with their blinding head and search lights as they move slowly but surely in our direction. I knew that dam helmet was trouble the first time I laid eyes on it. I put jasmine's cry behind me as I run like the devil's nipping at my heels. It doesn't even feel like my feet are touching the ground.

I try to ignore the ever encroaching steel dogs as they attempt to sniff us out. Their glary stare blinds my peripheral vision and their howls drone constantly in my head like a pack of hungry wolves. The belief that I could make it to the helmet and still find a place to hide is fading rapidly. With that thought I take a quick glance to my left. My heart sinks as I realise that I don't have a shit show in hell of making it.

I'm twenty or thirty metres away from the fence and the search lights are waving from side to side only inches away from the helmet. Once they spot it alarm bells will be ringing or in this case probably a chorus of deafening air horns. Then the search lights will sweep the entire area with a fine tooth comb. It would be suicide to carry on or head back to the tree line so I skid to the ground where I am. Luckily the grass is quite tall and covers my sides, leaving only my back exposed.

I should have taken more time to properly assess my chances of beating the "v" eights to the helmet instead of relying on a split second decision. But it's too late for hindsight so I need to assess the current situation and make a better decision. I slowly raise my head above the grass line and check on the position of the cold and calculating "v" eights. Before I can focus on what's going on all hell breaks loose. The search lights are furiously flashing around the paddock and the thumping of my heart against the hard ground is replaced with the vibrations from highly revved up engines. I drop my head back down and lay motionless like a deer caught in a hunter's paralysing spot light. I close my eyes and pray that they don't spot me. If there is a god I ask that he spare me so I can fight another day and save the one I love. To die here now would surely be a waste.

I realise that there isn't a merciful god as a single air horn sounds above the revving, now comes the hunter's bullet. I don't intend to suffer the same fate as the deer. I take another look over the grass just to be sure I've definitely been seen and that the air horn wasn't a scare tactic to spook me out of my hiding place. No, it wasn't. A blinding set of spot lights are heading straight for me wiping out the fence like they were tooth picks. Like the deer I spring to my feet and make another mad dash, this time for the tree line and away from where Jasmine is hiding. I can hear the vehicle ripping and churning up the ground as it loses traction behind me. It's desperation to run me down and its shear power has it slipping and sliding on the grass which gives me the time advantage I may need to reach safety.

My leg muscles start to fail and I feel like I am going to fall over so I adjust my speed slightly and run in a zigzag pattern to make myself a harder target. I eye up a tree close by that has a thick, long trunk with plenty of branches. With the Vehicle still having problems finding traction but only seconds away I leap at the tree's trunk without thinking and clamber up the branches. The tree's rough bark rips at the flesh on my hands as I frantically climb upwards and away from my relentless pursuer. I hear it accelerate below me, signalling its intention to charge at the tree. At this point I am caught between two branches and completely stretched out.

Panicking, I scramble to pull myself up. Too late! The lightning strikes "CRACK!" and the thunder rolls, reverberating through the unsuspecting tree. The impact unleashes a violent wave of vibrations that sweep

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through the trunk and out into the branch I'm holding onto, rocking it and loosening my weak grip. I start to drop like a lead weight. Crashing through the smaller branches as I search wildly with my arms and legs to gain control of my fall and hopefully stop short of the raving lunatic below. My gallant but ultimately feeble attempt to stay in the safety of the tree comes to a stale end. I smash straight through the stationary vehicles windscreen with it still revving full on and still trying to move forward. The driver must be completely insane.

My adrenaline must have kicked in because I can't feel a thing and I'm completely wired for action. I urgently lash out at the driver with my foot. It finds its home at the top of an empty seat. Boy, now I feel even more stupid about doubting Jasmine. No time to get precious though, I need to swallow my pride and focus on escaping. I slide through the empty windscreen frame and into the passenger's seat.

I look around the single cab of what looks like the inside of a pickup truck but there is only a simple gear stick and steering wheel fitted. Everything appears to be upholstered in soft black leather that almost feels like human skin. There's no Speedo or rev counter, no clock, CD player, or ash tray, only tightly pulled black leather stretched over the basic shape of a pickups interior. I feel down where the accelerator and brake pedals should be to but there's nothing there either. I don't scare easily but this cab is really freaking me out.

Now that I've slowed down momentarily and I'm not reacting on instinct alone my sense of smell comes back. I almost reach as I take in a whiff of the putrid stench. It smells like I'm in someone's bowl, like raw sewage! Without wanting to spend a second longer in this abomination I reach for the door handle. As I do the revving pickup starts reversing at high speeds as I start gagging. I grab at the gear stick and try to wrench it from the floor with the other hand over my nose. It won't budge at all, so in desperation I take a hold of the steering wheel. Dam! I can't budge that either and the smell is making it hard to concentrate. All my body wants to do is throw up.

I get a grip of myself and grab onto the steering wheel with both hands. Then I kick my feet onto the dashboard on both sides of the steering wheel and pull as hard as I can. To my surprise the steering wheel pops out and ends up in my lap. I throw it out the windscreen frame in absolute disgust. The hole where the steering wheel use to be starts oozing a dark substance. The smell in the cab instantly intensifies and the truck spins one hundred and eighty degrees and comes to a sliding halt.

Before I can react and launch myself out the windscreen frame the truck rams into first gear and wheel spins before it takes off towards the fence. It picks up speed rapidly as I once again grab at the gear stick. The smell isn't as bad as the fresh air is blowing in and I'm somehow getting use to it. Even though my stomach is still turning and I still feel a little queasy. I latch onto the gear stick with both hands and hunch over so I can fit under the cab's roof. I yank on it as hard as I can and eventually it gives way to.

The dark ooze seeps from this wound as well and the smell is just as bad. I try to smash the rear window of the cab with the gear stick but after the first hit it turns into the same dark ooze that came from the wounds. I try to flick it off as it runs down my arm but it sticks to my arm like napalm but luckily it's cold and doesn't burn. I give up and look round for anything else that I can wrench off that might cause the truck to stop or even slow down but there's nothing. I can't even find a seat belt, so I curl up in front of the passenger's seat, block my nose and wait.

I feel the truck crash through the fence and then do a wheelie on the road. It shudders to a halt and then roars off again into the paddock. I can feel it skidding on the soft ground through the floor. After about thirty seconds of thrashing about the truck puts on its anchors. It just stays in the one spot and idles. I wait and I wait feeling very uneasy. I give up waiting after what seems like forever but in real time was probably less than five minutes. I decide to check out what's going on and rise up from my protective huddle.

By Grand Design

I slowly crane my head and look out the passenger's window and at the same time push against the door that has no handle. It doesn't even feel like budging. Everything is pitch black outside until my eyes adjust to the moon light but before they can a bright light shines into the cab. Now's my chance to make an escape, I rush across the other side of the cab and put all my weight and strength into busting out the driver's door. All I do is give myself another bruise to add to my collection. Now another bright light shines in through the driver's side. Come on Jasmine Create a diversion or beam them out of here, do something! The trucks on both sides of us rev up their engines. I need to think fast before I become the filling in a metal sandwich.

Right, I have a plan but I need to time it perfectly. If I propel myself out the windscreen frame too soon they will abort and run me down like a dog. If I leave it too late it will be exactly that, too late. But if I time it just right I'll be laughing all the way back to Jasmine while they are untangling themselves from a mangled mess. I quickly get into position with my shoes hard up against the upright of the seat with legs bent. Much like a sprinter at the starting blocks but instead my hands are gripped around opposite sides of the windscreen frame. Now I'm spring loaded and ready to catapult to freedom.

I wait nervously as my heart pumps like there's no tomorrow and my adrenaline kicks into gear again. I feel a trickle of blood run down my hand as my grip on the window frame gets tighter. There must have been some glass left in the frame. It doesn't matter though, because I can't feel a thing. That's it! I'm sick of waiting!

"Come on! What are you waiting for?" I scream as I eyeball both trucks. They taunt me like bulls with their angry grunts and their defiant stomps. My eyes show no fear as the two powerful beasts kick off their destructive journey. They charge towards me with their heads down and horns at the ready. With no red cape to confuse them or sword to slow them down I use cunning to gain victory. Closer, closer, now! I catapult out the window as the bulls collide.

The sickening sound of metal colliding with metal follows me out the windscreen frame as I fly out over the bonnet. I hit the ground rolling and come up into a ready position to start my sprint to the finish line. To my horror three more trucks are parked in a row about fifty metres in front of me. Where the hell did they come from? Their head lights are dimmed and for the first time I can see the front of my antagonizers. They look like they are grinning at me with their piercing eyes and radiator grill that looks like an evil smile.

"Not today boys!" I shout in defiance

I spin around and head back towards the horrendous crash behind me. I leap onto the crumpled bonnet of the crushed truck in a single bound. The other two trucks venting steam on either side, the Matador victorious once again. With an extra spring in my step and sporting a grin of my own I purposely push down extra hard on the wrecks roof on my next step as I bound to safety.

Without any warning I unceremoniously end up flat on my back with the wind knocked out of me. To make matters worse I am lying in a puddle of black ooze. It's like I'm in a Jello wrestling pool that smells really bad. I feel shattered, my back aches and the ooze is making me sick once again. The engines on the other three trucks spark into life. No rest for the wicked I guess. I urgently crawl out of the muck and push through a mound of metal dust particles until I reach clean grass. This is what the wrecked trucks must have reduced to. Not having any time to ponder what just happened I get to my feet and start running away from the other trucks behind me.

To my amazement they are now right in front of me. How'd they get in front of me so quickly? I turn round on the spot and check behind me. The three trucks are still there with their lights dimmed, engines rumbling and grins even wider. O.k. fellas you want to play? Let's play! The two trucks on either side reverse and fan out to create a circle around me with the others. I now stand in the middle of six blood thirsty steel dogs that seem invincible and can replenish their numbers at will. They roar as they stare me down with crazed, hungry eyes.

By Grand Design

At this point my body is telling me to drop to my knees and surrender like a broken man and let the dogs savage me. But my "will" is screaming at me to make a stand and to go out fighting and that is exactly what I intend to do.

Without another thought and using the element of surprise I sprint towards one of the trucks giving me a few precious seconds head start. They react without hesitation to my defiant charge and put pedal to metal for the Final act, tearing up the dirt in their thirst to pull the curtain down on me which gives me another few second's grace. Please keep those wheels spinning just a little longer, almost there, yes! I take off with my shoe landing on the truck's bonnet at the same time it finds its grip on the ground. It shoots forward causing me to lose balance, topple over its roof and crash into the tray behind the cab. I try to break my fall but end up hurtling into the back of the tray at full force. I roll around in the tray trying to find my breath when I hear an almighty explosion as the trucks collide where I stood only seconds before.

I brace myself knowing what comes next. Once again I wind up in the middle of a pool of ooze. I lay there vulnerable like a new born baby covered in blood and slime. Cut, broken and bruised I just stare up at the night sky as it spins round in a whirlpool of stars. The adrenaline is wearing off and the pains of my battle are becoming unbearable. All I can do is succumb to it as the whirlpool fades to black...

Chapter 9: the souls of the departed

Chapter 9

"The souls of the departed"

It's the dead of the night and, if I could spare my hand, I swear that I could reach out and touch the moon. It almost covers the entire sky, blocking out all other heavenly bodies from my view. I concentrate on it and my breathing and water treading technique because if I don't, I'll drown.

I'm struggling to stay afloat in a seemingly endless ocean of thick black oil. I call it "the ooze." It smells like poo's.

Ha, ha, ha!

No! I can't laugh. It makes me weak and disrupts my focus.

I regain my composure but my arms and legs are starting to feel like dead weights. A thought enters my mind that I'm not going to make it. It triggers a sense of hopelessness and I start to panic. My steady rhythmic movements turn to desperate flailing. The amount of air I'm sucking in isn't enough to feed my oxygen starved muscles. My heart pumps faster and faster as it fights for my body's survival.

The blood rushing to my head has it pounding like it's going to explode. My muscles have nothing left to give. I sink into the black abyss...

My bodies in complete survival mode now as it sucks in the black ooze hoping that it's oxygen. I'm sucking it in with so much force that my body jerks back and forth. All I can see are little blue and white lights that dance before me in the darkness as the jerking becomes weaker and weaker. My body starts to give up its fight.

A bright light appears from above. It struggles to penetrate the ooze in its gallant attempt to reach out to me.

It illuminates the lifeless scene that consumes my body as a single hand seems to materialize from nowhere.

My mind is hazy but I'm still aware, so I reach up and take hold of the hand, as I do the ooze turns to water and the light bursts into life. The hand starts pulling me towards the surface. My lungs are fully tanked and I have a new lease on life. I can make out a smiling face through the water's slight ripple.

Glistening green eyes and locks of golden blonde hair, it's Sarah! I break through the water's surface and the sky turns to black. Before me is a familiar face staring down from above. My mind is momentarily blank. As I start to process information again I search my memory banks for her name.

"Welcome back stunt man Steve." The lady says standing over me and smiling.

"Hey..." I reply still searching for her name. Jane, Julieâ ;

"Jasmine!" We both blurt out at the same time.

She smiles sympathetically as I look around to try and get my bearings back. Where's the moon gone? I pat the grass around me wondering why I aren't still in water and where's the ooze gone that was covering my

By Grand Design

body like a symbiotic skin.

"Sarah, where's Sarah!!" I shout out in desperation.

My emotions engulf me again and I feel lost and alone like I'm still trapped in the ooze. I close my eyes and shake my head to rattle myself back into reality. I reopen my eyes to find Jasmine Still standing above me with the night sky and all its heavenly bodies in proportion, but no Sarah.

"She's not here Steve." Jasmine says softly.

"But I saw her, I touched her hand, I could feel herâ It was Sarah, I know it was." I say as my voice tappers and I question what I just witnessed and experienced.

"I'm Sorry Steve, but it was just a vivid dream." She replies while touching me lightly on the shoulder.

"Well the black ooze that stuck to my body like puke to a blanket wasn't a dream, what happened to that?" I say sounding increasingly annoyed.

Jasmine bends down gently beside me and scoops up a palm full of what looks like black snowflakes. She holds the palm of her hand to her mouth and softly blows them into the cool night air. Her breath propels the light substance skyward. I just stare at the moon lit flakes as they tumble and dance like autumn leaves. Watching the show they are putting on has me in a trance. The flakes start to fall too earth along with my mind. That was a nice distraction but what I really want is to revisit my dream; I want to be back with Sarah so bad that it hurts.

"Why did you wake me up anyway?" I say coldly while I eyeball her.

"I didn't intentionally wake you up; I was trying to help you." She replies getting a little touchy herself.

"Help me, HELP ME! Why didn't you help me when I was getting my arse kicked by the monster trucks from hell?" I explode, my anger getting the better of me.

"Because if I'd done that Yin would have realized that I was a formidable foe and either snuffed my life out instantly or made the rest of my life a living hell. If he decided to spare me I would be in the spotlight twenty, four, seven and useless to you, and â everyone else. Besides I did help you, but only after the trucks had vanished." Jasmine says matter-of-factly.

Her logic can't be denied and snaps me out of my angry mode; once again I have to swallow my pride. Isn't it funny how we make so much sense when we are cool, calm and collected and how we spew out non-sense when we let anger get the better of us?

Now that I have calmed myself down a bit I realise that I feel great! The pain that had me fainting is completely vanished. I take a sneaky look at the cuts and bruises on my arm so Jasmine doesn't notice. I don't want to make my astonishment to noticeable and give her a big head. They have completely disappeared too!

I feel brand new and supple like I've been born again! The last time I felt this alive was when I was ten years old and I had just emerged from a deep, clear pool of water that a river ran through. The water flowed down from the mountain top and was so cold that it could freeze the balls off a brass monkey. Whatever Jasmine did puts medical science to shame. Well that settles it, time to give her a big head and swallow my pride, "gulp".

By Grand Design

"Yeah, good point, we don't want any undue attentionâ so how was it that you helped me?" I slip in without sounding too amazed.

"Because I didn't think that all the kings' men, and all the kings' horses could've put me together again but now I feel like I could leap a tall building in a single bound." I question hoping that I won't be forced to give an open apology. I believe my change in mood should be thanks enough considering my prides at stake.

"Here, let me help you up Humpty and I'll explain." She retorts mockingly as she gives me a helping hand to my feet.

I knew my reversal of moods wouldn't appease her. She had to get in a cheap shot to put, and keep me in my place. Well, no more mister nice guy!

"Yeah, and while you at it you can explain how you lifted the moped like it was a plastic movie prop?" I add firmly.

"That information is on a *need to know basis* andâ (Jasmine says alone) ***you don't need to know.***" We both say at the same time.

"I should've known." I say shaking my head.

"Why are you psychic too?" Jasmine says sarcastically

"No, you are, amongst other things." I say under my breath.

"Pardon." She replies curtly.

"Onto other things." I say trying to disguise my last comment and quickly move on.

"So how did you patch me up and make me feel like superman, wonder woman?"

"Well, you see I entered your brain through your mind and flicked a switch that turns on a super-natural healing process, mending your bones and tissue within minutes." Jasmine says smugly.

"Need to know basis, right?" I say with an unimpressed look all over my face.

Jasmine winks.

"So is there anything you can tell me that isn't a secret?"

"Ah..., that you snort like a pig when you're sleeping." Jasmine says trying to hold back her laughter.

"Anything else?" I say still unimpressed.

"Actually now that you mention it, yes there is. While you were climbing trees and playing with Yin's toys I did something useful and probed the minds of the trucks hoping to find out something of value about our arch enemy and believe it or not they weren't trying to kill you. They actually want you to live; well Yin wants you to live." Jasmine says with a hint of sarcasm.

"Well, that's refreshing." I interrupt.

By Grand Design

"Not really, they wanted to torture and torment you, give you hope and then take it away and finally exhaust you and leave you helpless to within an inch of your life, with the expectation that you would recover and fight another day."

"I'm sorry I asked." I say, really sorry that I asked.

"o.k., maybe I should re-phrase my question, anything else of a positive nature?" I say wishing this conversation would end.

"Yeah, they were so excited about your fighting spirit that I believe they will keep you alive till Yins bored with you."

I feel like a court jester who has to impress his king or have his head chopped off.

"So how long do I have?"

"How long a piece of string? Look, it's to our advantage. You put up a great fight and I'll put you back together again or I could leave you to die if you prefer?" Jasmine says, knowing damn well that I won't give up while Sarah is still alive and kicking.

"No, that's alright I'll play Yin's silly game and take one or more for the team." I say with conviction. I would lay down my life a thousand times over if it meant a chance to save Sarah and other innocent people for that matter.

"I knew that you were a team player, besides I have a tasty titbit to add to our game plan. Yin didn't notice me at all when I read his thoughts and feelings through the trucks. It seems that he is completely preoccupied when in control of his dark creations and in a tormenting frenzy. I still had my protection up though; I won't make that mistake again. He was so engrossed with you that I could've stood in front of him and made stupid faces and he wouldn't have even flinched. So potentially when you're taking another one for the team I could be a fly on the wall in his head gathering Intel that might show up other weaknesses that could spell his demise or at least give us an edge." Jasmine says looking very pleased with her-self.

"I'm quite happy to put my life on the line but are you happy to put your sanity on the line? Taking into consideration the last time you had a close encounter of the first kind with Yin. I mean he almost drove you stark raving mad to the point of no return and this time you will be on his turf, not Sarah's." I say looking concerned.

"Like I already explained, he caught me by surprise when I tried to make contact with your wife. I won't let that happen again and yang came to my rescue anyway." She says looking confident.

"Well that's where you're going to come unstuck because if Yin detects you and your protection fails, he won't be able to do a thing because he doesn't want Yin to know that he's helping us."

"Don't worry, I'm well aware of the risks but sometimes you need to take a gamble when the stakes are high and the chips are down. I'm certainly not going to go in unprepared, and I certainly don't want to let you or the rest of humanity down but being self centred and holding back to save my own skin isn't in my make-up. If an opportunity arises that can put us ahead of Yin's game I will put my life on the line without hesitation. That's my grand design. That's who I am." Jasmine replies and then kicks the stand on her moped and starts pushing it towards the eerily quiet road. All I can hear is the sound of her shoes swishing through the tall grass. There's no breeze, no crickets chirping, no owls hooting, just complete and utter silence. It's as if all the creatures of the night have vanished or are too scared to let their voices be heard, in fear being found, even in their own

By Grand Design

domain and under the cloak of darkness.

"Well I can't argue with that." I reply as I catch up after a chill runs down my spine that gives me the hurry up.

That's my grand design? I dread asking what Jasmine means by that and I know that if my curiosity gets the better of me and I do ask that we will be here for another hour as I try and get my head around what she's trying to explain and we just don't have time for that. Hell I might even get the old "it's on a need to know basis" answer and completely waste my breath. I don't really care who or what Jasmine is, only that she is helping pave the way to saving this town and Sarah.

"You know it's not my own life I'm worried about Steve. I'm at peace with myself and the universe." Jasmine adds as I catch up leaving the darkness behind me.

"It's the souls of the departed that plague me. Souls trapped in limbo after suffering a traumatic end to their world at the hands of Yin or one of his many minions. When a soul departs its earthly confines after a horrific death it becomes bogged down with negative feelings that block it from moving on. Physical and emotional pain, helplessness, hopelessness, and the shock of the event act as a ball and chain that keep the soul from ascending home. Left to their own devices these souls could spend an eternity freeing themselves from this heavy burden. In an attempt to change their cruel fate they relive their lives over and over again, only to find themselves retelling the same sad story. All they needed to do was too accept what had happened and they would've been freed. It's as simple as that. Well it's as simple as that for someone who is at peace with themselves but that's rarely the case when a life's true path has been cut short by another's hands. I can save these poor souls from their own spiritual prison. Sorry Steve I know that I'm rambling on about things that don't make sense to you, so to put it bluntly. We are not only on a quest to save the living; we are also on a quest to save the dead."...

Chapter 10: ashes to ashes, dust to dust...

Chapter 10

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust"

So now we're on a quest to save the dead as well as the living. Hell, I didn't even believe in life after death twelve hours ago. Now I'm expected to aid in freeing hundreds or maybe thousands of lost souls. Does Jasmine think that I'm her apprentice wizard or something? The only help I can give is moral support and even that would be hypocritical because I am an atheist who is yet to see proof of life after death. For me, seeing is believing.

People that have had near death experiences have spun a yarn or two about bright lights at the end of a tunnel and being greeted by relatives who have already died, but no one has come back to tell the tale after being pronounced "stone cold dead." To my knowledge, when your brain dies its lights out for good.

"I take it saving the dead is your department? By the way that's a rhetorical question." I say seriously.

"Yes, That's my department so don't get your jocks in a knot. I'll do the jail breaking and you can keep the getaway car running. Being behind the wheel of a getaway car would be right up your alley, wouldn't it?" Jasmine says smugly.

"Getaway car? What getaway car? And who are we breaking out of jail?" I say as I navigate my way through the maze of fence wire scattered around the churned up ground.

"Gee Steve; keep up with current events would you. While I'm freeing lost souls I'll be oblivious to what's going on in the real world. So I need you to snap me out of my meditative state if there's an emergency. The only way to do that would be to slap me across the face. You'd be o.k. with that aye Steve?" Jasmine asks with a suspicious look on her face.

"I prefer the analogy of the getaway car over the slap on the face to save the day but yeah, I think I can manage that." I reply hoping that I am not going completely red in the face with embarrassment, knowing quite well that she's onto me and my quick thinking action the last time I saved the day.

"That's good, because I'll be counting on you to save the day tough guy." Jasmine says sounding distracted as she concentrates on searching the area where her pink helmet was last seen in one piece.

"Dam it." She says as she props her moped up and bends down to pick up what looks like the remains of it.

"I loved that helmet. It fit like a glove, oh well que sera sera, what ever will be will be, looks like we are both going to have a bad hair day." Jasmine says nonchalantly as she turns and glances at me.

In reaction to her comment I habitually run my hand through my mane of sandy coloured hair that almost extends down to my shoulder, suggesting that I am some what vain about my appearance. I don't like to think or portray that I am that way though. To get around being labeled an egotist I simply say that I am taking pride in my appearance. I look back at Jasmine after I've finished hand combing my hair just as she is turning away from me and giggling to herself. She must have taken more than one glance and caught me preening myself, how embarrassing.

By Grand Design

I guarantee she already thinks that I'm egotistical. Living in the material world with my flash car and trophy wife and now being caught correcting my bad hair day. I should give her an open invitation to read my mind and she'd know that I rebuilt that car from a beaten up rusted shell with my bare hands through many hours of blood, sweat and tears, that I fell in love with Sarah because she is beautiful on the inside and that I was taking pride in my appearance. But I don't need to justify myself to anyone. Like Jasmine said, I am who I am and I'm at peace with myself. Maybe that's another indicator that we are old souls. Being happy in your own skin and not having to prove yourself to anyone. Dam! I think Jasmine is rubbing off on me. Old souls! What was I thinking more like a loving mum and dad and growing up in a positive environment?

Jasmine picks up the last piece of helmet and casually walks over to a patch of grass that hasn't been shredded by spinning tire tread. With her back to me she kneels down carefully onto the disturbed earth that surrounds the lonely patch and places the pieces down like they were once alive and precious to her. During these profound moments Jasmine's movements are fluent and effortless, it's almost like she's floating. She stays still and knelt down for a moment longer and then suddenly springs straight up like a jack in the box, her legs out stretched and toes pointing down as she gracefully lifts off the ground. She pauses in mid air for a split second then spins around like a ballerina on a jewelry box with her arms almost fully extended out to her side, her black floral dress moving in unison with her body. She lands weightlessly in front of me with her eyes closed, her face expressionless. Her display reminded me of the way Wonder Woman would change from mild mannered office clerk to costumed superhero in the old television series. I believe that is exactly what she wanted me to think too, after my comment about her acting like Wonder Woman. Again Jasmine leaves me speechless and looking like a stunned mullet. Her eyes come to life and she proceeds to strut towards me like a catwalk model and unexpectedly extends her arm and scruffs up my hair as she glides past me.

"Let's go Steve, we have people to save, souls to free and a dictator to topple." Jasmine says grinning as she hops onto our real getaway vehicle.

Lost for words, all I can do is smile. I'm quite convinced that Jasmine isn't a psycho anymore but she certainly is a strange one. I'm sure that "Steve" was the hero's name on the Wonder Woman series too. She's screwing with my head again. STOP SCREWWING WITH MY HEAD JASMINE!! She doesn't even blink an eye lid to my mind's loud command. Oh well, I guess she's switched off, her reading my thoughts are the least of my worries at the moment anyway. Without another word I straddle our trusty donkey behind her and we head down the road of uncertainty.

A feeling that this is the calm before the storm hits me as the dark and silent country side passes me by. An eerie shroud veils this once proud farming community and it has my nerves on high alert. I try to break through these thoughts and enjoy the peace that the silence offers. I imagine that the cool breeze flowing past my face is whisking my worries away. Within seconds my mind is completely empty and the information my senses are collating are meaningless. My eyes break my mind's vigil soon after with an image that can't be ignored. It's the shadowy outline of a familiar row of trees that stand proudly on the edge of our property.

"Jasmine!" I shout to gain her attention urgently.

"Steve!" She replies, turning her head slightly to the side.

"Pull into the next driveway on the left!" I instruct.

She takes her right hand off the handle bars and gives me the thumbs up signal of approval. With all the excitement and with my urgency to explore town I didn't even consider stopping at our home but when I saw those trees my heart filled with hope. Hope that maybe, just maybe Sarah's hiding out here after escaping Yin's evil strangle hold or maybe she's here but under his control? Or the worst case scenario, where her body is completely under his control and has no warm feelings towards me at all that could hold her back from

By Grand Design

tearing me apart limb by limb. My hope turns to hopelessness in the blink of an eye.

If Sarah's under his control I'd rather not face her at all. I haven't even given it a thought as to how I'd tackle an evil Sarah that's hell bent on ruining my day. I'm torn between my heart and my head. Do I give into the anticipation and excitement that I feel cursing through my veins and risk an emotionally charged encounter that would probably end in disaster?

Or do I suppress my romantic feelings, sail on by the house and temporarily lay my hearts desires to rest and keep my focus on bringing Yin to his knees. That way I don't even have to encounter Sarah, saving myself heartache and keeping my head in the game. Besides Yin would have the upper hand in such an encounter because if I was forced to defend myself against a wild creature that looks like Sarah I'd almost certainly let my emotions get the better of me. Any hesitation in a confrontation like that could spell my demise. An untimely reunion like of that nature would be useless at best and of no benefit to anyone.

Come on dude, you have to make a decision, and quickly. The entrance to our house is fast approaching. The very thought of seeing Sarah has my heart beating double time. Dam it! Do I give in to logic or love? The words "don't worry, carry on", Are on the tip of my tongue. Where almost on top of the driveway! No! My heart won't let me deny Sarah. I swallow my words and hope for the best but prepare for the worst. I guess you could say that curiosity got the better of me to and we all know what happened to the cat don't we? Well, it's lucky that I'm not a cat.

I take a deep breath as we pull in. All is about to be revealed and it makes me sick to the stomach with that horrible sensation when you know you have stepped into a situation that you may not be able to back out of. I wish I would simply wake up from this nightmare. The letterbox is still intact which gives me a false sense of hope that all is normal. As we make our way down the gravel drive I notice a bright orange glow radiating through the tightly woven braches of the hedge that obscures the view of the house. Then the smell of burning wood hits me and knocks my heart to the canvas.

As we round the corner of the hedge I'm hit with the first glance of what use to be our home. There before me lies a smoldering heap of ash and charred remains. All my earthly possessions either melted, burnt or completely obliterated. A macabrely twisted and tortured sculpture crafted by Yin's sick mind. Jasmine pulls up just short of where our front porch use to be and steadies her moped as I exit the passengers seat with a heavy heart. I stand in front of the ruins and stare blankly, completely lost in a torrent of mixed emotions.

The orange glow I saw through the hedge belongs to a splattering of meteors nestled amongst the carnage. Their original red faced anger is now just a menacing flicker that spits and sparkles with a volatile mixture of red, white and yellow embers. If not for their destructive background I could easily be seduced by their colourful and enticing disguise. But I'm not because they've decimated my car, our house and everything in it. I feel like pissing on them and turning their sparkly smile upside down.

Sarah! My god, Sarah might be under this smoldering heap. My heart sinks to an all time low as I struggle to hold back from throwing up.

"Jasmine!!!" I yell out in desperation.

She turns to look at me and sits up to attention. Before she can speak in continue my desperate plea.

"Sa, Sa, Sarah could be in this mess! I need you to light up the area so I can check." I stutter out loud.

She rushes over with her moped at the ready and it's headlight on full beam. Dam where do I start? Where would I hide in a meteor shower? Got it! Under the solid Rimu dinning table that would sit right about there.

By Grand Design

"Concentrate the light right there!" I command Jasmine while pointing to the exact spot. She directs the light without saying a thing and with a blank expression on her face.

I wade through the charred remains to the lit up area and begin swiping aside the debris in search of Sarah's own charred remains.

"She's not here Steve!" Jasmine shouts out without a doubting tone in her voice.

"I have to be sure!!" I scream back like a man possessed as I upturn the remnants of the table. She's not here!

"You're wasting your time!" Jasmine retorts.

I shut her out of my mind and spitefully continue my rubble rampage. Who the hell does she think she is anyway? This is my life, and possibly the love of my life scattered around me. O.k. there's nothing here, onto the next area.

"Light!!" I command.

Without question Jasmine shifts the light over uncovering another twisted mess. I can't stop until I've examined every last inch. Like I said "seeing is believing". I sift mindlessly as my imagination theorizes Sarah's possible fate. The horrific and traumatizing scene repeats itself over and over in my head and it's sending me insane. I can feel an exponential anger welling up inside me as the images gnaw away at my patience.

Sarah screams like a banshee, her fair coloured skin turns to black as it melts and slides off the muscle tissue below. She desperately slaps at the relentless flames but the blackened skin on her hands start to melt too which sends her into an irreversible state of shock. She twists and turns wildly in a last ditched effort to ease the pain and burning but the flames increase in size as they steal her precious oxygen away causing her lungs to draw in fire instead of air. She falters and keels over having finally succumbed to the fiery beast.

I convert the energy produced by my anger and frustration into strength and stamina to finish the task.

After what seems like an eternity I stand up and take a well earned stretch as I look back on the unruly mess I've made. By my hand the somewhat orderly sculpture has now turned into something abstract. In an automatic response to ease the stress my body sends me into a fit of hysterical laughter.

"Hahahahahahaha."

"Sarah's alive! She's alive!" I shout out the top of my lungs while steering up into the heavens like someone up there is listening.

"Hey, man in the moon! Guess what?... Sarah's alive!!"

"Hahahahahahaha."

Seeing the stars trigger a daunting realization. The meteors might have squashed Sarah to a fleshy pulp!

The man possessed shifts into gear again as my lunacy continues. I line up the nearest meteor and shoulder charge it trying to roll it over to check if she's underneath. It doesn't even budge an inch but my shoulder does. The "pop" I heard as I hit the meteor must have been my shoulder dislocating as now I don't seem to have any control over my arm at all. I twist my body from side to side and my right arm sways as it dangles from my

By Grand Design

shoulder joint like a chicken's broken neck. O.k. well I guess I can't use that shoulder again.

Goal driven and with the determination of a mountain climber I line up the meteor with my left shoulder. As I run full steam ahead the meteor turns to dust right before my eyes. Without having time to stop I follow through with my reckless action and lunge at where the meteor was standing. Unbalanced I lose control of my footing and tumble over onto the brittle wood below that easily gives into the weight of my body. Unable to break the fall with my useless limb I crash into the fire hardened ground, the side of my body and face taking the brunt of the impact. I squirm around in the debris as I try in vain to push myself up with my dead arm.

Once again anger and frustration take hold but this time there is no positive conversion and no escape. I let out an angry cry that could be heard a mile away.

"ARRHHHHHHGGG!!!"

My torrent of emotions turns into a torrent of tears born of anger, frustration and self pity. My pent up emotions have now been purged as I lay in silence and let out a long, deep sigh of relief. The pain and feeling of helplessness set in once again. I really have to quit this bad habit of doing myself a mischief. I want to laugh but I'm in too much pain. I hear someone making their way towards me. They are light footed and very agile.

"Tut, tut, tut, Steve, Steve, Steve, I don't know why you have to be so stubborn. I could have saved you all that pain and anguish. If I didn't know better I'd think that you were under Yin's control with all that anger and bravado. I have a right mind to leave you here all night to suffer and think about your hasty actions so you won't try a stunt like that again, but luckily for you I am a nice person." Jasmine says reassuringly with a hint of smugness.

I just let out a muffled grunt of agreement.

"O.k. well that's settled then. Now, are you convinced that Sarah isn't amongst the rubble?"

"Hmmm." I mumble.

"So be it"

With those words comes a flash of bright light.

I open my eyes to find myself sitting behind Jasmine on her moped as we sail on down the dark and eerie country road to town. I start to think about how I ended up here but instead I put it down to a "need to know basis" and I really don't need to know. ;

Chapter 11: from the ashes the pheonix rises

Chapter 11

From the ashes the phoenix rises

I feel a defining moment coming on as we approach crossroads on our way to liberate town. At the same time I'm at crossroads to liberate myself from the fear, guilt, self pity and an over inflated sense of myself that I've masked, but can't hide, now I've been found wanting. The fear of losing Sarah, the guilt of not being there to save her and the self pity I feel because of it. As for my big head, well! Taking pride in my appearance, who am I trying to kid, full of myself more like it? My pride has been my nemesis for as long as I can remember, fist fights, lost opportunities, and heartache. All those times I thought it was protecting me when really it was stunting my growth mentally, emotionally and socially. I've finally been given the opportunity to shock myself into taking a good look at my actions and their possible consequences because this time around the stakes are the highest they have ever been and I can't just sweep them under the carpet like so many times before. The denial of my human failings has now been exposed like the raw nerve of a decaying tooth and it's time for a root canal.

They manifested again in the childish and self absorbed way I acted when I searched our home (that had been burnt to the ground) for Sarah's body, especially believing that I could shoulder charge a meteor that's as solid as a tank. My "so called" love for Sarah has me swimming against the tide while Yin is laughing all the way to world domination. It's a selfish love and I don't intend to feed it any longer. I should've been happy for Sarah if the meteor had taken her life; at least it would've been quick and painless. Instead, all I could think about was how I wouldn't see her again and the heartache I'd go through losing her, when all the while she could be suffering a fate far worse than death.

The way I snapped at Jasmine was downright rude too. Controlled by Yin? Hell I'm acting like him, acting like a spoilt brat who just threw his toys out of the cot because he wasn't getting his own way. I may be the product of a loving environment but I'm also the product of a narcissistic environment that heralded me king of the land. Accept now I have been over thrown by a merciless tyrant who's raped and pillaged my land and demoted me to court jester. It's time to wake up to myself and the smell the bullshit I've been spinning. At this point in time I've been my own worst enemy and no threat to Yin at all but that's all about to change. My main goal as of now is to end Yin's reign of terror and bring anyone who sympathies with him to their knees.

This change of attitude and the thoughts associated with them have my brain working overtime as we pass something that resembles a flattened car underneath a pair of cold, black and lifeless meteors. The metal body of the car must have drained the heat and life from them. I see this as an omen that will favour us in our war against Yin and I hope that Yin, like the meteor will underestimate his victim because of his own over inflated sense of himself and go into our next battle blindly. I realize he has already tested me with the trucks and was impressed even though I came up short of a victory but he can't get into my head as I am an old soul per se. Giving me the element of surprise.

I spare a thought for the occupants of the car as Jasmine cruises through the crossroads without hesitation and that's exactly the mindset that I need to adopt. I can't hesitate and let my emotions hold us back any longer. Yin will probably know how much I love Sarah as he has already taken control of her and no doubt probed her memory. He will try and break me by torturing her or by making me believe she is not under his control, then have her turn on me. Well that's where he is sorely wrong. I know this is what Sarah would want to. She's always been a free spirit and wouldn't want to be held captive in her own mind whether or not she's in a happy place. Given the option I know she would welcome death knowing that she would be free, even if it means nothingness. I know that if we cross paths I will have to take her life to set her free which means I have to stay

By Grand Design

strong and steady in my resolve. I have to see this as a mercy killing and take my emotions out of the equation and that is exactly what I propose to do.

I feel like I should be battling with my decision but to tell the truth my purpose and direction in life have never been clearer. My mental breakdown has me seeing life with a new clarity. Like a dirty windshield, my path ahead was obscured by all the grime I've collected over the years and like the rain, my tears washed away all that dirt and grime to expose a clear road ahead. With my personal and interpersonal demons exercised and the ties that bind me to society severed I felt like the weight of the world has been lifted off my shoulders. I also have this strange feeling that I've been holding out for this moment in time all my life. It's like I've been waiting in the wings for my call to enter centre stage too put on the performance of my life. Slay the evil villain, woo the audience and have everyone home safely and in time for supper.

The first thing I need to do is apologize to Jasmine for my disturbing behaviour.

Apology accepted.

The reply to my thought startles me. I jump with fright causing the rear end of the moped to wobble and lose control momentarily. Jasmine skilfully steadies the ship and has us on course once again.

Hahahahah! Careful tough guy or you'll do us both a mischief.

Shit that was close!

Where the hell did those thoughts come from? They sure as hell weren't mine!

They came from me, you numb-skull!

Jasmine?

The one and only.

You got that right.

Sorry?

You gave me a fright!

I noticed, didn't you recognize my voice?

Yeah, sorry about that, I'm not used to having a party line in my head. Besides you sound different on the "headphone".

Nice use of words there Steve, so I'm guessing you're in a better mood now?

Yeah, well you've already accepted my apology before I could voice it in the normal way and I guess you heard the rest with your "minds ear"?

"Minds ear", I like that, and here I was thinking you knew nothing about psychic abilities?

Only what I've heard in passing.

By Grand Design

Well, you're either a good listener or secretly interested?

I must admit that the topic can fuel a good debate, dam this is weird!

Try closing your eyes; it makes it easier to concentrate.

I hope your eyes aren't closed!

Of course they are.

What! Closed?

I can open them if you'd prefer?

Yeah, I'd appreciate that... What the hell are you doing!?

I'm opening my eyes.

No! Why are you standing on the seat?!

I'm turning round.

Why!

So you can see my eyes are open, seeing is believing, remember?

I don't need to see your eyes open; I need to know they're on the road!

But you don't trust me.

Where going to crash!!

See.

O.k. I trust you, now turn around and face the road, please. No! Don't sit down!

Didn't you know that women can multi task?

O.k. I'm going to close my eyes now.

About time.

Wake me up when we "hit" town.

As you wish master.

Great now she thinks she's a "Jeanie" too.

I'm still here you know.

Oh yeah, there you are, what's that silly grin for?

By Grand Design

You know you really should be careful what you think.

Sorry but I'm a virgin when it comes to sharing my private thoughts.

Its o.k., I'll be gentle.

What's that on the road?

It looks like skid marks.

How do you know, you can't see?

But you can.

Great! Do you want the shirt off my back too!?

Blame yourself, you invited me in when you thought about me and "yes" you were very rude and still are.

o.k., I get the picture, the skid marks?

Jasmine winks at me and leaps onto her seat in a single bound, turns one hundred and eighty degrees on the spot and drops back onto the seat in one fluid motion. She slows down and veers off the road where the skid marks exist onto the grass verge. Then carefully steers her way through the busted up fencing and barbed wire, lighting up the fateful trail. The deep trenches that scar the ground soon turn into chewed up dirt and grass. There's a short pause in the destruction before the chews turn into bites, with big hunks of earth being ripped from terra firma and spat out at random leaving behind a series of capping cavities. My thoughts of this being a rescue mission are becoming less likely as by the pot hole.

My fears are realized as we stumble upon a horrendous crash scene. A light coloured four wheel drive truck lays at rest on its roof with the passenger's side facing us. The roof is caved in and everything in and around the wreck is still and silent. With my hopes dashed I take my time to hop off the moped and survey it, knowing quite well what I'm about to see won't be pretty.

"There's no life here Steve." Jasmine says knowingly.

"Yeah, I sort of gathered that but if you don't mind I'd like to be sure, for my own peace of mind." I reply kindly.

"O.k. but you'll need to brace yourself."

"I know." I answer compassionately.

It's the old saying "where there's life there's hope" not curiosity that drives me this time as I walk cautiously up to the trucks front passenger window not knowing what to expect. This could be some sort of trap for all I know, although Jasmine would've alerted me by now if it was and as far as I can tell this isn't one of Yin's V8's. So I'm assuming a human was in control and even though there doesn't seem to be any movement inside I can't dismiss the idea of someone being alive but unconscious.

I lie down and peer into the narrow opening where the window used to be. With the small amount of light shining through I can barely see, "SHIT!" Shocked, I move my head back sharply trying to distance myself from the white, pupil-less eye staring back at me.

By Grand Design

"Are you alright?" Jasmine asks calmly

"Yeah, I'm fine, I just need some more light" I lie in reply, my pride not completely dissolved.

Without delay the entire inside of the truck lights up leaving no shadow unturned.

"That's great, how'd you...don't worry." I say knowing I won't comprehend the answer.

"Your welcome." jasmine replies casually.

With the interior of the truck lit up like a sunny day I move forward for another look knowing that any new surprises will have nowhere to hide. Now I can see everything in fine detail but the cab is tightly cramped after being slammed into the ground time after time on its death roll. The back of the person's head is hard up against the crushed roof and at ninety degrees to their back, their spinal cord has broken through the skin at the bend and the aorta has been torn open releasing all their precious blood. The pale skin and contorted skull make the person's face unrecognizable as human and more like a monster. That and the smell of rotten meat denies this individual the dignity they deserve, and has me feeling queasy, so I back out, sit up and take a deep breath of fresh air.

I store my emotions away for a quiet and personal time then make my way to the driver's side of the wreck, almost certain that I am going to find a similar grotesque figure that only hours ago walked, talked, drew breath, thought and loved. Much to my disappointment I was right except the air bag had deployed, fat lot of use that was. Last but not least I'll check the back seat. The rear of the cab hasn't been crushed as bad as the front part which gives me a little slice of hope for anyone that may have been unlucky enough to have taken this ride down a nowhere road.

I let out a big anxious sigh as I crouch down, my heart pumping faster from the anticipation of what the last section of the cab will bring to light. My worst fears are realized as my mind catches up with my sight. The body of a child hangs upside down like a puppet on strings, suspended from his seat belt. The sheer force of the accident has left his fragile little body twisted out of shape. Like the passenger his eyes have rolled back into his head although his expression is somewhat peaceful. I reach out and touch his arm as a comforting gesture only to find that rigor mortis has frozen him in time. A tear escapes from one eye as I avert my attention to the ground, hoping that if I stare at it long enough the image burnt into my mind will somehow magically vanish.

I have to think of something else to simmer the emotions brewing inside me. My thoughts cut to better days with Sarah, but I can't muster any solace there either, I can't push past images of me slaying her and the sadness I see in her eyes as I do. I feel myself spiralling down into a pit of endless despair. I have to get a grip and fast. My will makes a gallant stand as I grab a section of the truck below the window in an attempt to release some tension without making a scene. But my anger and hurt bubble and toil within me as my grip around the fatigued metal tightens. My fingers curl inwards towards my palms taking with them the crumpling truck body like it was made of aluminium cans. All my negative energy is focused into a ball of raw power that originates in my gut and explodes through every muscle in my body as I let out a primal ROAR! lifting the Truck up and over in one swift motion.

It lands on four wheels like a cat as the pure adrenaline cursing through my veins has me on a surreal high making me believe I'm invincible. I breath in copious amounts of oxygen to feed my over worked muscles as I stare blankly at the up turned wreck In front of me. Slowly but surely my breathing starts to regulate at a normal rate as I come down from mount Olympus and back to earth.

By Grand Design

"What the hell just happened!?" I ask myself out loud while staring back and forth between both my arms, expecting them to be huge and green with veins popping out all over the show. But they're still plain old white albeit a little more inflated than usual.

"Jasmine, what the hell just happened!"

I notice the bright light in the truck's cab shut off, pulling the curtain down for the last time on the acts of all its occupants, may they rest in peace... Simultaneously the light on the moped comes to life and points in my direction. I look into the light as it's the only thing I can see in the surrounding darkness, but it's blinding.

"Jasmine, is that you? Talk to me." I blurt out firmly while covering my face from the annoying light. The light from the moped blinks out and there is a slight pause in time while I stand in complete silence with darkness all around. Without warning Jasmine materializes a few feet away from me like she stepped out of a room that has no windows and into the radiance of a full moon, taking on the appearance of a porcelain doll. She's so luminous that I almost have to shield my eyes again. I instinctively search the night sky for the source of light but the moon is nowhere to be found. I turn back to Jasmine who is about a foot away and staring at me with admiration. She looks quite chilling with her inquisitive stare and pale white glow that's radiating from within her. I want to break the silence for some normality but she pre-empts me.

"Like the phoenix he rises from the ashes." ;

By Grand Design

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