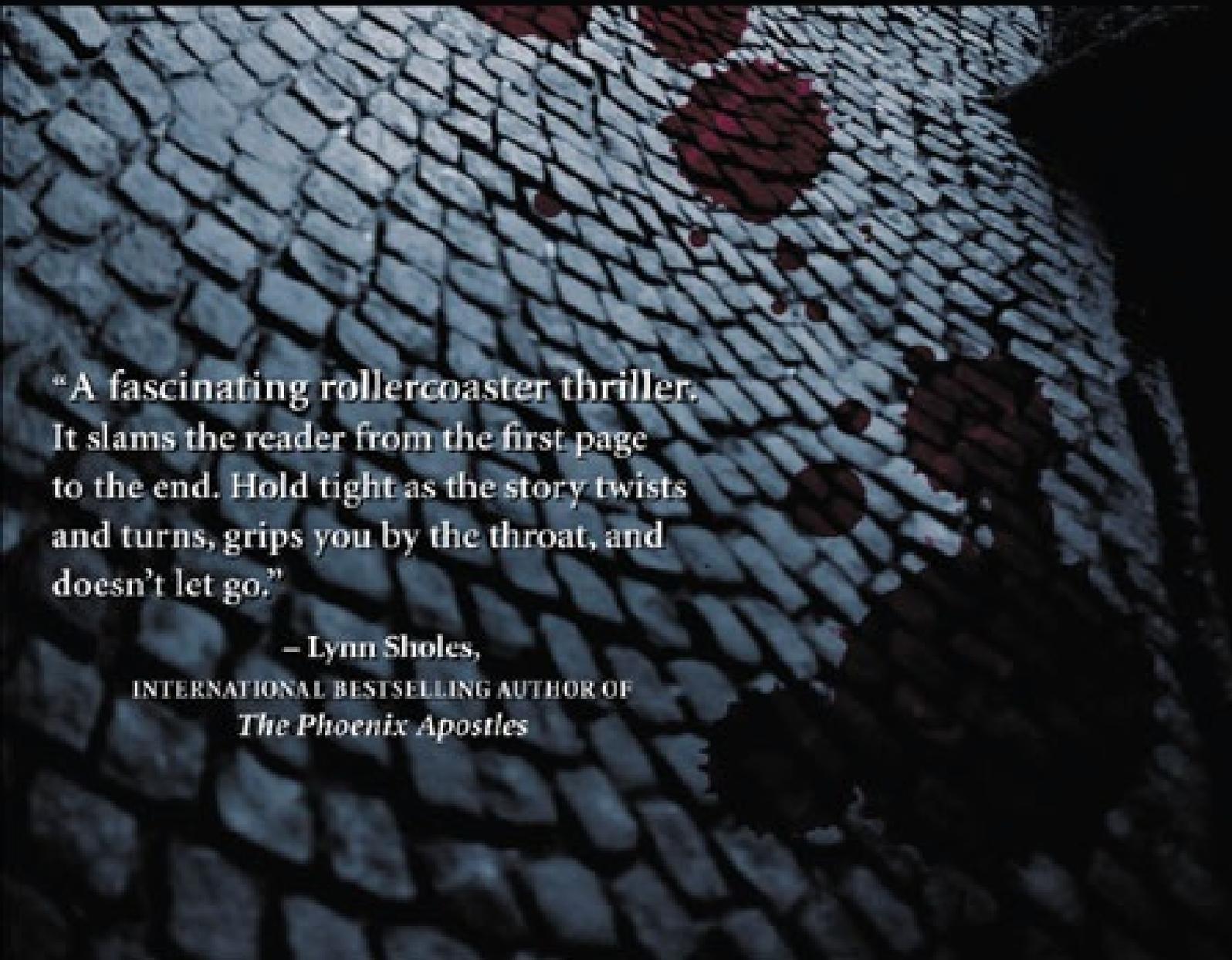


THOMAS MORRISSEY



FAUSTUS  
RESURRECTUS

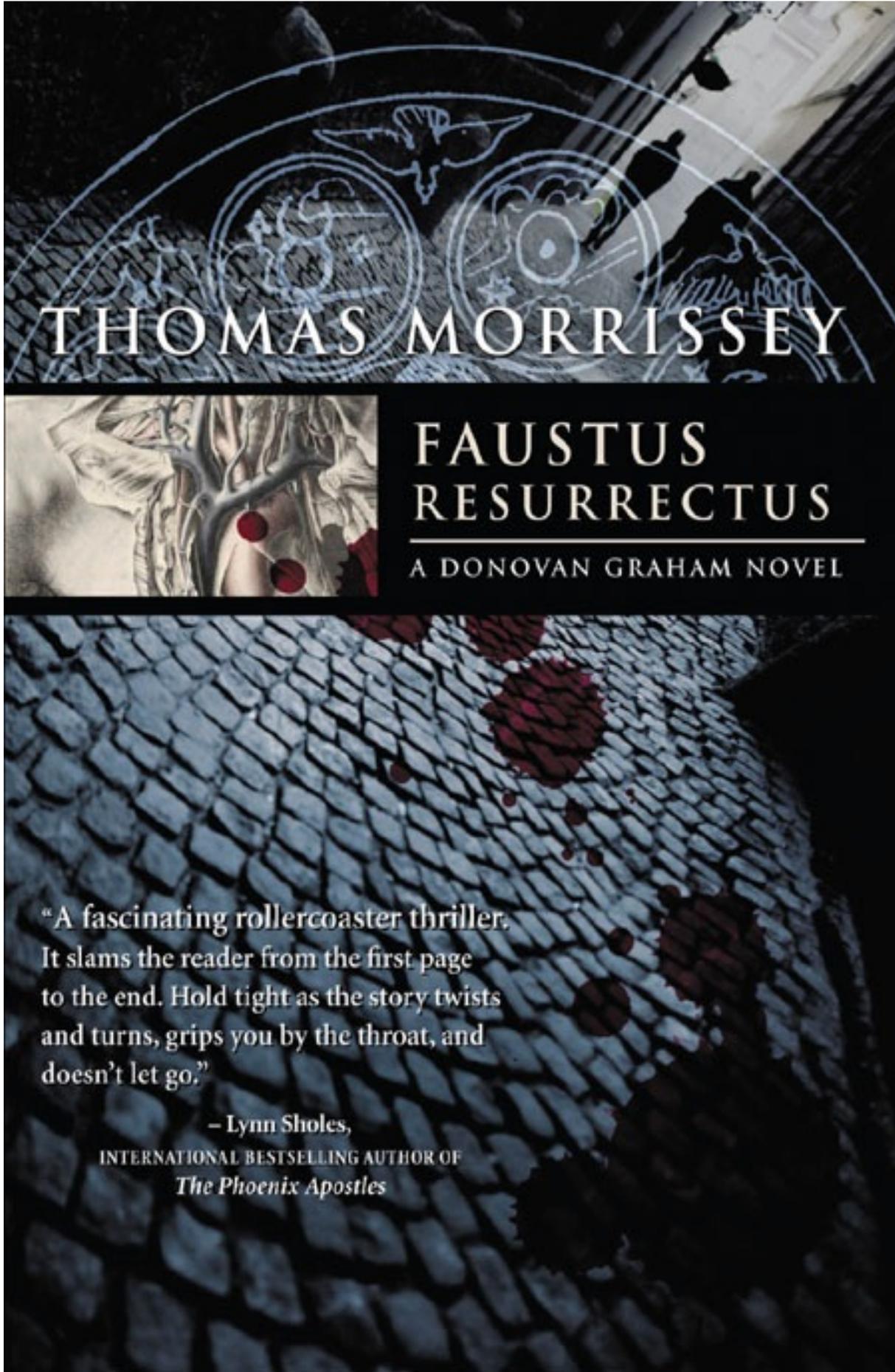
A DONOVAN GRAHAM NOVEL



"A fascinating rollercoaster thriller. It slams the reader from the first page to the end. Hold tight as the story twists and turns, grips you by the throat, and doesn't let go."

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NIGHT SHADE BOOKS  
SAN FRANCISCO

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*For everyone who has a pipe dream*

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# PROLOGUE

## AFTER THE CEREMONY

*The sharpest tool we had was a bottle opener.*

The big man blinked, uncomprehending.

*How did this happen?*

The full moon added to the light of the bonfire, illuminating bodies scattered where they tried to escape. None was in one piece.

The big man took one aimless step then another, refusing to absorb the meaning of his surroundings.

*We were supposed to be giving thanks...*

Business at the commune had been killer these past few months: personal care items were up, the microbrew had gained some popularity and, best of all, the summer's crop of White Widow had topped out at twenty-three and a half percent THC. It was while he and Greta were smoking some of the fruits of that first harvest, lying naked in bed on a beautiful summer morning, that she'd come up with the idea.

*Mother Gaia has shown us such bounty. We should offer our energy to Her, to give thanks and praise to Her glory.*

*Best energy I know, he'd replied, is sex.*

When they'd set up that morning for the orgy, the sweet summer grass had tickled their ankles. Oak trees spread green-leafed shade over them, and even the moss coating the stone hollow where they'd set up the bonfire had been bright chartreuse. Greta had said the vitality was a good sign.

Someone expressed reservations about messing with weird religions.

*This isn't "weird," Greta had said. We're all about positive energy.*

Now the green was gone, withered, freezer burned to death on the first of August. The foliage had shrunk to husks, trees twisted and gnarled. He tried to understand how this could be.

*Coletun.*

*What happened to him?*

He couldn't stop shaking.

*"I'm gonna come back for you. Mister Fizz made me bigger and stronger than you."* Beneath the bloody horror he saw Greta's face. "Baby..." he whispered, extending a

trembling hand.

Her head rolled to the side, exposing the jagged edge that nearly severed it from her body...

The next thing he knew he was fumbling through the pockets of the jeans he'd stripped off hours—years—ago. Drying blood made his grip sticky, but he managed to untangle his cell phone.

*“9-1-1 Operator. What is the emergency?”*

*“You have to come! They’re all dead!”*

*“Calm down, sir. Who is dead? Where are you?”*

*“Blue Moon Bay. In a field, about a half mile northwest from the commune. The Churner’s Commune. You have to come now!”*

*The thing had burst from the heart of the black bonfire, an icy white lance that blinded him when it struck. His stomach had gone numb; he didn’t remember; didn’t want to remember, anything beyond that.*

*“The Churner’s Commune?”*

*“Hurry! I think...I think I killed them all.”*

# ONE

## THE FIRST DAY OF THE BEGINNING...

“...all those receiving your Bachelor’s Degree in the arts, please rise.”

There was dutiful applause. Donovan Graham rubbed his eyes and let his sunglasses drop back on his nose. The tassels hanging from his mortarboard brushed his face like strands of purple spider web. He waved half-heartedly at them, then stopped as the back of his head started to pound. He took a swig from a bottle of water but it only partially alleviated his cotton mouth.

“All those receiving a Master’s Degree in the arts, please rise.”

More dutiful applause. He heaved himself upright and looked around. At twenty-seven, he was younger than many of the other grad school students; at two inches over six feet, he was bigger than most.

*And I drank more French martinis than any of them last night.*

“All those receiving doctorates, please rise.”

A final round of clapping.

*Give me another couple of years.*

Overhead, clouds still threatened rain. He would have welcomed it; it might have cooled him off. Right now a hot, damp beach towel wrapped his entire body, or at least that’s what it felt like.

They announced a new speaker and everyone sat. Donovan scanned the dais and saw the Philosophy Department standard, a cobalt blue banner decorated by white, silver and gold letters and insignias. Next to it sat Father Maurice Carroll, distinct among the crowd of professors—sitting couldn’t completely hide his 6’ 9” frame. He’d been a basketball player in his college days at Georgetown and would have gone pro if he hadn’t blown out both knees in a pickup game with some local kids. In his late sixties, with a full head of gray-white hair and matching beard and moustache, he looked content and mildly amused.

The speeches finally ended and Doctor Keel, the president of the university, stepped to the microphone. “Today really is the first day of the beginning of your lives. I know it’s cliché, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. From here on out, you are college graduates, a status that confers privilege and demands responsibility. Enjoy the moment, but use it.”

The graduates were herded like cattle into the chutes of individual department

commencements. Donovan saw Joann next to the fence separating graduates from guests. One corner of her mouth curled into the wry grin he'd fallen in love with three years earlier on the other side of the world, in Hawaii. He waved and smiled as she snapped a few digital pictures. Students surged around him in a tide of black robes and colored sashes. He pushed his way across the current to her.

"Hey graduate." She leaned across the fence to kiss him. "Congratulations."

"I owe it all to clean living and the love of a good woman."

"Clean living? How's your hangover?"

"Better now." Above the heads of the masses, he saw the cobalt banner moving towards its building. He looked for a gap in the fence but saw none. "I'll see you over at the Philosophy Department."

"Okay."

She kissed him again and he got a whiff of her hair as she turned back into the crowd. Somewhere he'd read that the most sensual position from which to watch a woman was three-quarters behind. His view of Joann confirmed it. Her dark gray business skirt stretched tight over her well-toned thighs and behind, while her shoulder-length blonde hair was up loosely, allowing a few strands to curl down to her neck just above the collar of her suit coat.

*Lucky man*, he thought.



When the Philosophy Department ceremony was over, Donovan made his way over to Joann. "Phi Beta Kappa?" She slid her arms around his neck. "I had no idea I was sleeping with such a brilliant scholar."

He grinned. "Took me by surprise, too. I remember getting things in the mail, but I kind of just blew them off. It was Father Carroll who made all this happen."

"No." She looked into his eyes with total seriousness. "*You* did. You put in the time, you did the work. You earned it."

"He certainly did," Father Carroll said, joining them. "I know what you're capable of, Donovan, even if you sometimes forget." He glanced around. "Your parents aren't here?"

"The Colonel was unable to attend. My mother sends regrets. They've promised to be here for the PhD ceremony, whenever that is." Donovan hid his emotions with a shrug and looked past Joann. "On the other hand, babe, I see *your* father."

Short and wiry, Conrad Clery cut through the sea of people towards them. Light off his glasses gave him the white eyes of a shark when it rolls in for a bite. "Darling! I'm glad I found you. There's someone I'd like you to meet." Golf-strengthened hands gripped Joann's shoulders as he bussed her cheeks. "Father." Almost as an afterthought, he said, "Oh, congratulations, Donovan. The first Master's is always the hardest."

"What are you doing here?" Joann asked.

"I was one of the speakers over at the Law School commencement. Didn't I tell you?"

Her wry smile returned, with slightly less warmth than she'd shown Donovan. "It must have slipped your mind." Her cell phone rang. She checked the number and frowned. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. Work." She took a few steps away.

Father Carroll turned to Donovan. "I have to get some things from my office for my trip to England. Could you give me a hand?"

"Sure."

Conrad put a hand on Donovan's arm. "If I could have a word with him first?"

Father Carroll raised a bemused eyebrow. "Of course. It was nice to see you again, Conrad. Good luck and God bless."

"To you, as well." Conrad started to steer Donovan away. "Oh, Father—if you get to London while you're over there, there's a terrific restaurant in Knightsbridge, Marcus Wareing at The Berkeley. Ask for Simon; tell him I sent you. He'll take care of you."

"I appreciate that, Conrad. I'll keep it in mind."

Donovan casually moved out of Conrad's grasp. "What's up?"

"Phi Beta Kappa *and* honors; impressive. I'm also Phi Beta Kappa." Joann's father took out a cigar, snipped off the end and carefully placed it in his mouth. Holding a gold lighter—*solid gold, I'm sure*, Donovan thought—he puffed until the tip glowed branding-iron orange. "Your Master's is 'Philosophical Hermeneutics'; what is that, exactly?"

"The study of interpretation technically, but really it's the search for truth." Donovan knew Conrad already knew the answer, but he played along. "Traditional hermeneutics studies interpretations of written works; religion, law, literature. Modern hermeneutics studies everything. That would be me, specializing in mythology and religion."

"Why those particular fields, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I like them. They interest me."

"Driving a truck used to interest me, when I was in school. I even did, as a way of paying for my books. Then I grew up." Conrad remained casual. Fragrant smoke hung in the air between them. "What sort of career does one pursue with a degree in Philosophical Hermeneutics?"

"One pursues a doctorate and teaches. That process begins this fall." Donovan showed him a bland smile. "Something on your mind, Conrad?"

"What would you interpret my manner to mean?"

Donovan let that one go.

Conrad examined the crowd as it thinned before turning his gaze to Joann. She hung up and came back towards them. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

She wiggled one hand. "Cautious optimism."

"New lead on Dinkins?" Donovan asked.

"Dinkins" was the Dinkins Shelter case, an investigation that was becoming a hairball for the Brooklyn District Attorney's office. Back in March, Joann had been the Assistant DA riding when the David N. Dinkins Memorial Shelter exploded into a riot that had gutted the shelter and left three guards and nine homeless men dead. So far, her attempt to build the case against the riot's instigator wasn't coming together, because there was some question who started it. Against the counsel of some colleagues, Joann was insisting they had yet to find the ringleader, a man she referred

to as “Charming Man” because witnesses referred to him as “smooth” and “speaking well.”

She nodded. “I was going over the list of the shelter wreckage and saw they had fourteen broken cameras. The shelter’s inventory listed fifteen supposed to be installed. I sent DeFelice to search the site. He found it.” She took a breath. “Now we have to see if anything on it survived.”

“Not bad, Counselor.”

Pride glowed in Conrad’s eyes. “Honey, do you have a moment? There’s someone I’d like you to meet over at the Law School.”

She looked at Donovan. He nodded. “Father Carroll wanted me to give him a hand in his office. Do you know where it is?”

“I do.” She pulled away from her father and ran her hands over Donovan’s chest, giving him a solid hug. “I’m so proud of you. Congratulations again, baby. I’ll see you there in a few minutes.”



“Still among the living, I see,” the priest observed, deliberating before a shelf.

Donovan paused in the doorway. Books and objects covered every inch of Father Carroll’s office and were stacked on every flat surface. Papyrus scrolls, ceremonial daggers, swords, candles, books, crosses, and talismans; each had a story attached to it. Every time he went there, Donovan got a little thrill. The stuff was so...cool.

“The Wrath of Khan-rad is old news. He was reassuring himself that despite my degree, I’m still not good enough for his daughter.”

“Pity he only recognizes quality in cigars.”

Donovan inspected some open books on the desk. “Scorpions?”

“Some light reading for the trip.” The priest busied himself finding more volumes. “What are you and Joann up to this holiday weekend?”

“Tomorrow we’re taking my motorcycle upstate to a bed and breakfast.” Donovan moved a coffee table book and saw something underneath it. “What’s this?”

The priest picked it up and brushed the frame off with his palm. He smiled. “This is actually why I wanted you to meet me here. It’s for you.” He handed it Donovan. Under the glass was a copy of his master’s thesis. “It’s one of the best I’ve ever read.”

“Where did you—?”

“I made copies to submit to the university for your degree. This is the original.”

The title page faced him. Donovan remembered the night he’d printed it on his computer, the culmination of countless hours of reading, research and writing:

### **DESIRE OR DESTINY?**

#### *Free Will Versus Predestination In The Faustus Legend*

“Yeah, it came out pretty well, I guess.” He was so touched he was embarrassed. “Thank you. For everything.”

“This is quite an achievement.” The priest embraced him in a bear hug. “Enjoy

yourself this weekend, and this summer. This fall you're in for a whole new experience. A doctorate requires a tremendous amount of energy."

"I'll be ready." Donovan didn't want to think about going for his PhD. Instead, he gestured at the books. "Scorpion mythology is pretty heavy reading for a plane ride."

"It's for something pretty heavy."

"Really?"

"I would presume so." Father Carroll returned to the bookcase and selected another book. "I was asked to research this by the police."

"I remember something about scorpions in the news about a week ago. The guy killed in the hotel. Is this connected to that?"

"It seems logical, but I couldn't say for sure. All I was asked for was some background on scorpions and their meaning in mythology."

"Need any help?"

The priest glanced up at his tone. He read Donovan's face and said, "Donovan, you are the best student I've ever had, and I welcome your input, as always. I believe, however, God has for you a destiny in life greater than 'research assistant.'"

"It'll lighten your carry-on bag."

"This field is rarely about personal comfort." He continued to gaze at the bookshelf, but Donovan recognized him weighing options. He'd seen Father Carroll do this in class, but this time he seemed more...intense? "I suppose I could make a few calls before my flight leaves, to make certain it's acceptable. If you really want to...?"

"Research scorpions? No problem."

"You're certain this won't interfere with your plans?"

"Not in the slightest," Donovan assured him. "I'll take care of it."

"All right, then." Father Carroll began to gather some of the books into a stack. He glanced up. "Why are you smiling?"

"Are you kidding? I tend bar for a living. Helping a police investigation beats the hell out of pouring mojitos in midtown."



Later that night, with Joann stretched out across her king-sized bed fast asleep, Donovan went out to the living room of her Brooklyn Heights loft. All the excitement of finishing his Master's, the overwhelming relief, left him both euphoric and drained.

*And now...what?*

He stood naked and inspected his body in the mirror of a night-black window. He'd never achieved the chiseled, zero-percent body fat look of a gym rat, but he never worried when he rode the subway either. He knew he could take care of himself. That, however, wasn't the issue, at least not in a physical sense.

*"What would you interpret my manner to mean?" Your meaning has been clear to me for a long time, Conrad.*

He considered Joann's father's words in a more charitable light.

*Of course he's skeptical. He and The Colonel were practically separated at birth. Talking to one is like talking to the other. They're men of action. An academic job*

*doesn't impress either of them.*

The final words of the commencement came to him:

*"Enjoy this moment, but use it."* His lips curled up. *Okay, I will; professionally, I'm helping a police investigation. Personally...*

When he considered what he really wanted, the answer was actually a question:

*I wonder if she'll marry me?*

The thought made him smile all the way back to bed. Quietly he lifted the thousand count sheet and spooned behind Joann, but before sleep came, one final question occurred to him:

*Why would the police need to know about scorpions?*

## TWO

### WHERE DEATH DELIGHTS TO HELP THE LIVING

When Joann went work the next morning, Donovan returned to his apartment on West 48<sup>th</sup> Street to do Father Carroll's research. It was difficult to maintain his focus; the idea of proposing marriage was so big he found himself daydreaming about their life together. He liked what he saw. The books remained untouched until, with some reluctance, he put the idyllic images away and got to work.

The priest had offered no guidelines regarding pantheon or creed, asking only for information on the religious and mythological significance of scorpions. Donovan worked through the morning into mid-afternoon, and around three he paused to run out to a local cheesesteak place. He was satisfied with the amount of information he'd accumulated—scorpions and their images exist in nearly every major culture in history—but troubled he had no idea how to present his data to the police.

As he ate, he debated how to approach the problem. Should he focus on Egypt, on Isis and Selket? The Scorpion Man of the Gilgamesh epic? Maybe he ought to explore the alchemical process of evolution, lowest to highest, scorpion to eagle via the *serpens mercurialis*? Or examine Sadrafa, the half-scorpion, half-serpent god who predated Mithras in ancient Iran? Dorje Drollo of Tibetan Buddhism? The way scorpions represented the treachery of Jews to medieval Christians? All of it? Unlike any paper he'd written for school, this "assignment" had no context that might help draw conclusions. He wanted to do Father Carroll proud, which meant figuring out what the police wanted and giving it to them.

*But how?*

Wadding up his cheesesteak wrapper, he went to the loft kitchen above his living room. A bundle of *NY Posts* sat next to the garbage can, and he went through them until he found:

#### **BUGGED!**

#### *MAN STUNG TO DEATH*

A close-up of a scorpion, alien and threatening, dominated the page. He skimmed the story and saw it was pretty much as he'd remembered: a man had been found dead in a midtown hotel bathroom, victim of scorpion stings. In an incredible sequence of

events, the woman in the room next to him had just flown in from Nevada, and the scorpions had apparently come along in her luggage, gotten free, and caught him unaware.

*Or not.*

*If this was just a bizarre accident, the cops probably wouldn't be asking about religious and magical significance of scorpions.*

In the story was a quote from an NYPD detective sergeant named Fullam. If this was the case that needed the research, he would have been the one who contacted Father Carroll.

*I wonder if his name will open any doors?*



“Mister Denschler was extremely unlucky to have been in such the wrong place at the wrong time,” said Doctor Pommeru. “Of the thirty species of scorpions native to the United States, only the Arizona bark scorpion is capable of causing a lethal reaction in humans. Those are what killed him.”

Fullam’s name had opened the door to an appointment with Doctor Shad Pommeru, the medical examiner who performed the autopsy. He was a thin, frail man with a habit of nodding his head, birdlike, every few seconds. He and Donovan were on a small elevator, descending from the main floor of the medical examiner’s building to the morgue in the basement.

The doors opened, and they stepped out into a small, well-lit area with offices opposite and to their left. A faint odor of spoiled meat permeated everything. Double doors to their left led to the street-access ramp. A water-stained wedge of wood propped one open to let in a spring breeze. It didn’t help. A pair of men in security guard uniforms nodded to them. Silence cocooned the scene.

“The freezer is around this way,” Pommeru said, taking the lead. “I prepared the body after I spoke to Sergeant Fullam. He asked me to give you my complete cooperation, and so I shall.”

“Thank you.” *He did?* “I don’t think this will take too long.”

Pommeru nodded and pulled the stainless steel door open. A fresh gust of spoiled meat wafted out. Donovan stepped to one side, trying not to think about the cheesesteak he’d eaten as the doctor wheeled out a sheet-covered gurney.

“Arizona bark scorpions do not deliver all of their venom in one sting,” Pommeru said, “The envenomation creates pain and swelling, like a bee sting, but would not normally be fatal. An amount of poison this large, however, left him no chance of survival.” He paused before lifting the sheet. “Did Sergeant Fullam explain entirely the condition of the body?” Donovan shook his head. “Ah. Well. Be prepared.”

Donovan hadn’t given much thought to whether he’d be able to deal; in truth, he’d never seen a body that hadn’t been embalmed and lovingly prepared for a funeral. “Okay.”

Pommeru pulled the sheet aside.

The corpse looked lumpy, misshapen, like a human-shaped bag filled with water

balloons. Tiny stab wounds poked Denschler's skin, each a dark entry point atop a bump. The bumps had swollen to different sizes, turning his body into a topographical map on which the scorpions had climbed. Lines in his face suggested an expression of abject terror even two weeks after the event. "Oh." Donovan breathed slowly. "I see." Most startling was a gaping burgundy gash between his legs. His genitals were missing, and the wound had crusted over like dry aged meat. Donovan looked away.

"What happened to his—?"

"The Arizona bark scorpion is carnivorous." The doctor consulted some papers on a clipboard. "Official cause of death is a combination of cardiac arrest and respiratory failure, induced by the introduction of thirty-four separate doses of scorpion venom. Tissue analysis indicates he was still alive while the genitals were, ah, consumed." He offered the clipboard. "Is there anything else in particular you need to know?"

*Jesus.* Donovan stared at the body, trying to store the image even as his natural revulsion resisted. With a sense of relief, he accepted and scanned the clipboard. There was a lot of jargon he didn't quite understand. "I can't think of anything right off. Could I have a copy of this?"

"Take that; I have the original."

"Thank you." He watched Pommeru cover the body, and suddenly felt a coward for his squeamishness. "Let me give you a hand."

Pommeru nodded, hauled open the door and grabbed the gurney's front. He led Donovan to the freezer's left rear wall. The smell of spoilage in here was much stronger. He bumped another gurney as he adjusted his end, and a movement startled him. The body on that gurney was covered by a sheet up to its chin, with a wooden shaft sticking out of one eye socket. When Donovan jostled the gurney, the shaft had wiggled. He continued to not think about the cheesesteak as he stepped back out and suppressed a shudder.

"If you have any other questions," the doctor handed Donovan a business card. "If I am not here, you may call my cell phone." He gestured back towards the way they'd come. "Please excuse me if I don't see you out, but I have some work to do."

"No problem. Thank you again for your time."

Donovan rode the elevator back up to the building lobby and collected his motorcycle helmet from the security guard at the lobby front desk. On the wall behind the desk was the motto of the Office of the Medical Examiner:

Taceant Colloquia Effugiat Risus Hic Locus Est Ubi Mors Gaudet  
Succurrere Vitae

The guard had already provided him with the translation:

"Let conversation cease. Let laughter flee. This is the place where  
death delights to help the living."

Donovan pushed the lobby doors open and went out to First Avenue, eager to clear the smell of the morgue from his nostrils.

*Ate his balls; Jesus!*

His mind churned as he walked slowly towards the Vulcan.

*If this all happened the way the paper said, involving Father Carroll doesn't make*

*sense. So the cops must think the scorpions were used as a weapon to murder this guy Denschler. By whom? And why? And did the scorpions really eat his balls—gah!—or did something else happen? Did someone take them for some reason? Maybe that's what Fullam wants to find out. Maybe a sexual angle is where I should approach from. Scorpions? Gelding the victim? There can't not be a connection.*

He swung his leg over the motorcycle and sat. Donovan's current bike was a Kawasaki 900 Vulcan, midnight-metallic blue with gray and white trim around the gas tank and side panels. Chopper-style without any exaggerated features, it had a curved black leather seat, slightly elevated handlebars and a profile lean enough to allow him to ride between traffic.

The image of the wound, dried out and blood-crusting, made him cringe. *Pommeru said he was alive when it happened. And he could see it, too, unlike that guy with the arrow in his eye—*

He sat upright on the bike.

*Arrow. Scorpion. Genitals...*

A pattern started to appear. He frowned, considering it for a moment, then slipped his helmet on and started the Vulcan. Rather than head back uptown, though, he circled the block and parked at the top of the morgue's street ramp.

He left his helmet on the bike and went back down the ramp and through the swinging doors. The guard office was empty. "Doctor Pommeru? It's Donovan Graham." He jogged down the hall and around to the freezer door. "I wanted to take a look—"

The freezer door slammed open. Donovan saw a flash of white—the doctor's coat—as the little man flew out at him. They collided and bounced into the opposite wall. Donovan's head cracked into the tile. He saw stars. Pommeru looked past Donovan's shoulder, eyes widening. Donovan started to turn. A gurney shot like a cannonball from the freezer, crashing into the wall. The body on it flopped off, landing on top of Donovan. Donovan gasped and thrust it away. Someone big—someone *huge*—stormed out. Dressed in a ragged black suit, he was roaring and violent and Donovan only caught a glimpse of his face before the giant snatched two handfuls of his leather jacket. With no effort he raised Donovan's body off the ground. Donovan kicked his steel-toed boot at the giant's kneecap. The giant grunted and dropped him. Donovan launched himself at the enormous midsection. He plowed his shoulder into the giant's stomach, drawing a "whoosh" of breath fouler than the smell of corpses, and followed it with two hard punches. The giant stumbled, then swung clumsily. Donovan ducked under the blow and charged again, bulling the giant back towards the open freezer. The giant pounded an arm down on his back. It felt like a telephone pole hitting him, and Donovan dropped like he'd been shot. He rolled over and shoved the gurney. The metal table clanged into the giant. Donovan seized Pommeru's coat and dragged him away.

"Come on! Come on!"

The giant loomed behind them, eclipsing the fluorescent light with impossibly broad shoulders. Donovan scrambled to his feet and shoved Pommeru up the corridor. "Run!"

They made it out the swinging doors, and Pommeru kept going. Just outside the