

“If it was dark, it was the darkness of the womb.”

-Lynn White

Chapter One

Aiden Haunt turned over in his cradle.

He dug his cheek into his pillow and pulled up his blanket to shelter himself from the whistling breeze and hide from the birds circling below him around the Tree of Life.

From the tree grew a million limbs, and on each rocked cradles. Enormous birds circled the tree and picked up the babies when their mothers were ready to give birth to them.

It was on the highest limb that gently rocked Aiden’s cradle that the gargantuan bird with the gangling legs, spindly neck, and a bill just as long came to perch. Aiden couldn’t see the bird because his eyes were closed, but he felt its presence weigh down on the branch. The bird was early; several months so, actually, but Aiden had known this day would come. He had envisioned it in a dream upon his first night on the tree, sprouting up like a Pupa until his body separated from the shell that he was encased in. That shell became his cradle, as it did for all babies on the Tree of Life.

Wake up, my Lord. It is time, the bird said.

I’m already up, but go away, Aiden said. He caught a whiff of the massive creature’s dry feathers. They smelled of mulch. *You have no business being here. I’m nobody’s lord and I never will be. Now get out of here. It’s bad enough that—*

“Squawk, squawk, squawk!” The bird opened its beak for the first time. It flapped its wings and shook the thick branch beneath them, rustling the leaves. Aiden covered his ears.

I said go away! You can't force me to be something I don't want to be! Nobody can.

As I'm sure your dreams have clearly shown, the bird began.

Did Imagination send you? Aiden balled up his fists beneath the covers and scrunched his tiny nose, his eyes still closed.

Does it matter? The bird's voice was deep and rich in Aiden's head. It sat between his eyes like a migraine.

Did he? Aiden repeated. He leaned to the right of his cradle. The abrupt motion made the branch moan. If he wanted to, he could send himself hurtling to the earth below. All he had to do was push.

Fate sent me, the creature said.

Fate. Aiden flashed his gums at the unwanted guest. *There's no such thing as fate! You can't make me do anything I don't want to do, and neither can Imagination. Now go back to him and tell him I said that.*

As I'm sure your dreams have clearly shown, the bird continued, *you have no choice in the matter. You are destined to be the Messiah. It has already been decided.*

The truth was he *had* seen the dreams. They were horrible, every last one of them. From the moment he had sprouted upon this top branch of the Tree of Life, he had glimpsed into his future. And what he saw was war; endless, meaningless war. All of it would be fought over his

name for centuries after he died. Sects would battle over his philosophy. Christianity and Islam would lose steam after a global economic collapse. A world war over resources would force people to find a new, more practical, “god.” And Aiden, with his vision, would be the one who leads the world out of its depression. It would make him a legend, godlike in his foresight and deliberation. But in time, people would distort his image and pervert it to their own beliefs. The last image Aiden always saw in his dreams was that of a statue of himself crumbling in a seismic bomb blast. A half of his statue’s face always slid off in the dream, smashing on the earth below. And that’s when he would awaken in a panic.

He couldn’t let that future happen. He *wouldn’t*.

Besides, when you’re born, you’ll forget we even had this conversation, the bird continued. By the time you’re an adult, your future will seem as if you had chosen it for yourself. You’ll see. Now, please, stay still. I’m just going to—

NO! Aiden screamed.

He rammed his shoulder against the left side of his cradle. It leaned left, and when Aiden opened his eyes for the first time in his existence, he saw the bird. It was bathed in grungy white feathers on its underbelly. It had a long white meat cleaver of a bill, and dark, beady eyes wide with shock. The bird stood about seven feet tall. It lunged to grab Aiden with its bill. Aiden saw scabs covering its bald head. The bird was too slow. The cradle rolled to the other side of the branch and hit the creature on the side of its pink face. Aiden tumbled out like a log.

You selfish fool!

The rushing air tore at Aiden's plummeting nude body. He spread his arms and whizzed past thick branches each lined with seven or eight cradles. The network of verdant leaves and branches was stunning as he plummeted toward the black vortex that was the ground.

As he fell, two more birds with the same gray feathers and sharp bills looked up. They dropped the babies they had in their clutches and flew toward him. Aiden tilted as they neared and they shot past him, their white undersides brushing his skin. In the sharp maneuver, he missed a branch that would have split open his head.

Shit, he thought. All he wanted to do was hit *one*. Why was it so hard? The branches flew past him in droves. He couldn't line himself up with any of them. He was going too fast. It was almost like the branches were shifting out of his way.

He continued falling for minutes.

Behind him, there was screeching. He couldn't turn his head but could sense the birds were nearing.

If he was going to end his existence, he had to do it soon.

The light was sparse and lit by lanterns on the ends of branches. It was hard to see. But then, an ideal branch emerged from the darkness. He was close. But so was the screeching.

The branch was fat and wide. He couldn't miss it. He closed his eyes and bared his gums. At this speed, his collision would take out all twelve babies sleeping on the branch, but it couldn't be helped.

Better twelve now than billions later, he thought. He prepared for the collision and—

A sharp, piercing sickle shot through his right shoulder blade. His neck snapped forward and his arms shot out. He let out a tiny scream, using his lungs for the first time. In one searing tug, he was shooting skyward again.

Let me go! Aiden kicked out his legs and clamped his tight eyes against the rushing wind.
I made up my mind! I don't want to be born!

The future demands otherwise, the bird said, flapping its wings aggressively against gravity.

But you're creating fate! This isn't how it's supposed to be! Let me end myself!

The bird didn't respond. They soared skyward. Two more birds were swooping down toward him, their beaks wide with fury.

Chapter Two

Jeff Haunt chewed off his nails and spat them on the tiled floor. The custodians would have to deal with them later. He sat at his computer screen and rubbed his hand through his graying hair. He worried about his wife. She seemed off this morning before he left for work. Her eyes were distant when he kissed her goodbye. Her forehead was hot, too. He hoped everything was okay, especially with the baby. These past few months have been hard on her. They've been hard on the both of them, really, especially after she lost her job. That had really put a dent in their budget. Their savings dwindled every day.

At 47, two years younger than his pregnant wife, neither of them was getting any younger, or richer.

The entirety of his last paycheck was spent the same day on paying off bills and buying groceries. For lunch today, he had a banana, a chocolate pudding, and a thermos to fill up with water at the fountain. His stomach grumbled just *thinking* about it. There was no more turkey in the fridge to make sandwiches, and no more bread, either. Both ran out two days ago with the ketchup. But there was plenty of mayonnaise. Like that did any good.

If he spread out the money a bit more and didn't get a haircut for another week, *maybe* he could afford a slice of pizza in the cafeteria. He did have a five-dollar bill burning a hole in his wallet. The thick cheese and canned tomato sauce would be like filet minion after all these weeks of whatever's left in the fridge. But then, he probably would need the money for a gallon of gas.

It was in times like these that he often thought about asking his best friend, Steve, if he wouldn't mind carpooling a few more days during the week, to give him a chance to save up some gas money. But that wouldn't be fair. Besides, he didn't like letting Steve know how broke

he was. Being more than 20 years his senior, it was embarrassing having less money, even if Steve did still live at home with his dad and didn't have to pay a mortgage.

Who was he kidding? He couldn't buy pizza today. He couldn't buy pizza for *weeks*. He swept the idea out of his mind. His stomach grumbled in protest.

He took off his square glasses and dug his face into his hands. It was all too much. And—oh, shit—lesson plans were due today at noon and he hadn't even started on them. *How could this day get any worse?* If not for Marigold and the baby that was still on the way...

But that's right, he *did* still have Marigold and (*God, please*) the baby still on the way. With those two people in sight, he had hope. Both were at home, but one he wouldn't see for another five months, and he couldn't wait for that day to come. He had always wanted to be a father, even back in his early 20s when he first proposed to Marigold at Point Pleasant, New Jersey. He had seen children in her auburn eyes. They looked more like her than him. Back then, he wanted to have at least two kids, a boy and a girl, because it wasn't fair for a child to grow up all alone like he did. His teenage years had been tough, especially with his mom's...problems...and an older brother or sister would have helped tremendously getting through those tough times. Hell, even having a younger sibling would have helped, as he wouldn't have felt so helpless after mom died. Dealing with dad by himself had been torture. He still found it difficult to talk to him today, even on the phone.

But that opportunity to have two children never came, as they couldn't get pregnant, no matter how hard they tried. Some doctors said it was because of his narrow urethra, and others said it was because of Marigold's low egg count. But for whatever reason, having children seemed impossible, and their two attempts at In Vitro fertilization resorted in two early

miscarriages. Neither attempt made it past two months. It was for that reason that he didn't believe Marigold at first when she called him four months ago crying.

"I'm pregnant, Jeff," she had said through tears over the phone. "Jeff, you're going to be a daddy."

He had checked the number twice just to make sure he hadn't gotten a wrong call. But he hadn't and it was the happiest moment of his life, and all the happier because *she* had never given up hope. For many years after their two miscarriages, he believed that a baby just didn't *want* to be born in her womb, and that for some reason, they were being punished. But this proved he was wrong, as not only did they not need medical treatment this time, but they hadn't even been trying to get pregnant. Or at least, he hadn't been.

And while they didn't have much money, he vowed to buy a crib as soon as he could. He would put it at the foot of their bed. It would be blue, the color of his—

The bell at the front of his classroom rang. His preparation period was over.

Damn. He wished he could have taken today off. To hell with the 30-day improvement plan. He needed a break and he wanted to be with Marigold. A growing fear settled upon him like ominous storm clouds.

God, please don't take this baby away from us. It means everything to her. Please let her keep it.

He crossed himself—an old habit—and cracked his stiff back as the door to his classroom swung open. It banged next to the chart of the Periodic table on the wall, making him jump.

“Yo, that nigga here?” Haunt’s eyes widened at that familiar voice. He scrambled to put on his glasses.

Oh, my God, It’s Wednesday, he remembered. How could he have forgotten that it was Wednesday?

Every day in this inner city school in Paterson, NJ, was the worst day of his life. But his D, E, and F days, which were on the tail end of his six day block schedule, were even worse than the worst days of his life. That was when homeroom 712 came to his room at third period. Homeroom 712 made his other classes look like Mormons. He had heard mumblings from the teacher’s lounge that the other middle school in the district was much better than this one, and that was why some of them were transferring. But he doubted the other school was any better than Springfield Avenue Middle. He doubted it highly.

When he had first interviewed for a job at the school a year ago, he had gotten lost and drove almost the entire length of the city. In doing so, he could attest that all of Paterson was a shit hole, from Main Street on down to the hospital. Location, of course, wouldn’t matter if he actually *liked* his job. But his yearning to teach, even after a single year, was nothing but a fizzling spark plug after both the kids and the administration wore him down. He would have quit if he didn’t need the money and the health benefits that came with the job.

One of the kids who walked in wore a backward Miami Heat hat. He stopped and crunched in his nose and lips.

“Son,” he said. “It’s mad musty in here.”

“Everyone please take a seat,” Haunt said, standing up. He cleared his throat as his students shuffled in, “Please, just give me a—.”

“Daaaamn, son, what the fuck happened in here?” another student said. He wore a red doo rag and his jeans covered half of his butt.

“Quadir, watch your language,” Haunt said, but even *he* was embarrassed at how filthy his room was now that he looked at it. From his desk alone, he saw crushed Cheese Doodles and homework papers with footprints all over the floor. There were spread open text books on desks, one of them straddling a window sill. Usually, he cleaned up the paper balls and litter from his previous classes during his prep period, but he had been so busy looking online for a part-time job that he had lost track of time.

If Mr. Jaffe ever saw this, he thought, Or even worse, Ms. Davis...

“What we got to do today, Mr. Haunt?” one of his students asked, lowering her wide butt into her seat and squinting. She always squinted.

He clicked on the SMARTboard at the front. It revealed the Do Now assignment for the class.

“I don’t know why you always callin’ him, Mr. Haunt,” someone said. “His name is Jeffrey.”

“Al-Jahtay, I heard that,” Haunt said.

“Nigga, you think I care?” Al-Jahtay responded. Haunt shook his head. He still couldn’t understand why they kept calling him “nigga.” He was as Polish as the sausage and as white as the Irish.

Haunt brought his mind back to the lesson. He displayed page 22 of their textbook on the SMARTboard.

“Yo, say that again, ma’fucka.”

Haunt looked up and the student who said it was out of his seat.

“Jaylon!” Haunt shouted. “Sit-down.”

Jaylon was about 20 pounds lighter than the guy he was shouting at, but he still stood over him with his fists balled up, ready for action.

“Yeah, sit yo’ bitch ass down,” the bigger student said, still seated. “You act like you really gonna do somethin’ wit’ yo’ punk ass.”

“Haamid, stop provoking him.” Haunt kept his distance. He didn’t want to jump in the middle of a fight like the last time when he was punched in the face and broke his glasses. He couldn’t afford to buy a new pair.

“Son, say that again,” Jaylon said, and another student stood up in the corner of the room and pointed at Jaylon.

“Yo, Haamid, you gon’ take that shit sittin’ down, my nigga? He was talking shit about you on the court too, son. He said you take it in the ass like Mr. Haunt.”

“Kayson!” Haunt blushed.

“Yo, son, stay the fuck outta this,” Jaylon said to Kayson. Then Haunt saw everything happen in slow motion. The bigger kid’s fist crashed into Jaylon’s stomach. The slim boy

collapsed into a desk and banged his head on the metal bar of a seat where a girl sat. The girl leapt up and cursed him out.

Jaylon sprung up and threw a fist at the big kid's face, but the fat bodied boy pushed his desk into Jaylon's midsection. The other students moved out of the way and said, "Ohhhhhh!"

"Haamid! Jaylon, Stop it!" Haunt ran over to the wall-mounted gray box and pushed the red button. As the boys yelled in Creole and girls cursed and fists flew, he heard the click over the intercom to the main office.

"Michelle, you have to send somebody up here quick, there's a—"

CRASH!

Haunt cringed at the noise. It was the sound of shattered glass.

Chapter Three

Without even turning around Haunt knew what that sound had to have been. The class computer broke. He forced himself to turn his head and saw the now silent crowd spread apart and revealed the classroom's only computer on the floor. It lay face down, its blue backside pointed up like a capsized ship with glass pieces glimmering on the floor like dead bodies, floating in the sea.

"Mr. Haunt?" the secretary's voice came from the speaker. Something was off about the way she said his name.

"Yes, Michelle."

"Hold on, Mr. Jaffe wants to speak to you—"

Haunt's eyes widened.

"Mr. Haunt," Principal Jaffe's gruff voice said from the speaker. The students picked up their overturned desks at the sound of the principal's voice and sat in them quietly.

"Yes, Mr. Jaffe?" he eventually said.

"What was that noise I heard when Michelle clicked over? Did something shatter?"

"Yes, Mr. Jaffe...It was a...a computer screen. It fell on the floor."

"And it broke?"

Haunt exhaled and lowered his head.

"Yes, Mr. Jaffe. The screen shattered."

Principal Jaffe let out an angry sigh over the intercom. Haunt practically felt the hot breath on his face.

“I’m sending up security,” Jaffe said.

Haunt’s eyes stayed glued to the speaker. The principal’s voice came blaring through the P.A. system: “I want the nearest security guard in Mr. Haunt’s room *now!*” he said. His voice was hard and demanding like a jackhammer on concrete.

Haunt watched his newly reformed students take out work from their bags as he dragged himself back to his desk. He sat down and leaned forward, resting his chin on his forearms. Why did bad things always have to happen to *him*? He looked at his students, hating every one of them.

Mr. Lawson opened the door. His thick frame was covered with laughing skull tattoos from his neck to his forearm. His dark blue uniform, which had short sleeves and revealed his muscles, commanded every eyeball in the room. Lawson zeroed in on the smashed computer in the corner, and then on Haunt. His gaze made Haunt perspire.

“I’m here, Principal Jaffe. Over,” Lawson said into his walkie talkie. His eyes never left Haunt’s face. He looked angry and disgusted.

“What’s it look like in there?” Jaffe asked in bits and pieces on the other end of the walkie talkie.

“Bad. There’s a busted computer on the floor. There’s even a textbook hanging out the window.”

Did he have to mention THAT?

“And what about the kids? How do they look?” Jaffe continued.

“Well, I see one knucklehead trying to hide that his shirt’s been ripped, and another has a bloody nose, so you *know* the two of them were goin’ at it.”

“Tell Mr. Haunt that I want to see him in my office *immediately*,” Jaffe said.

“You got it,” Lawson said. And when Haunt stood up, his legs almost gave out beneath him.

“Watch his class while he comes down here,” Jaffe said.

“Yup.”

As Haunt dragged his feet past him, he heard Lawson whisper, “Boomshakala, bitch. Justice is served.”

Haunt walked out of his class and stopped at the top of the third floor stairwell. With trembling hands, he reached into his pocket and took out a picture from his wallet. It was of his wife when she was younger. Her beautiful hair was still lush and brown, and there wasn’t a wrinkle in sight. Haunt closed his eyes, and kissed the picture for good luck. He planted one right on her lips.