

Apostle

Michael William Goodman

Copyright © 2025 Michael Goodman

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 979-8-9917171-8-2

The Apostle

The Apostle

Content warning:

This book contains explicit descriptions and references to drug use, alcoholism, gambling addiction, self-harm, and suicidal ideations.

If you or someone you know struggle with addiction or their mental health, you are not alone. Help is available at:

na.org

aa.org

gamblersanonymous.org

988lifeline.org

The Apostle

The Apostle

To my wife, Katherine, and my father for always
standing by me.

The Apostle



1

Bile rose up, burning my throat, threatening to upend everything I had consumed in the past 24 hours. I closed my eyes tighter, pushing past the vertigo as the world performed a few wobbly cartwheels. I had to fight another wave of vomit as the spinning motion continued, even with my eyes closed. There was a horrible, acidic, woody taste that came up with the bile.

What the hell did I eat?

My head felt fuzzy as I tried to wade through the fog of my mind for my last meal. The repeated painful thumping of a nauseating headache was making even the most basic thoughts difficult.

After trying and failing to remember any meal in the last 24 hours, I gave up, seemingly exhausted from just a simple thought. I took a risk against the vertigo and peeled one of my heavy eyelids open. I was lying on my stomach in what looked like a filthy sewer. Before I could find my bearings, the grimy wall did a 360, and another wave of nausea forced my eyes closed. *Where the hell am I?* I had a horrible case of cotton mouth, and I ached all over. *God, I really needed a drink.*

I gave up on thinking and chose to lie on the cold ground until the world stopped spinning. The sewer smelled like crap. A horrible mix of weeks-old stale booze and vomit. The smell was almost worse than the nausea. *I need to get out of*

The Apostle

this place. To move or not to move? Before I could decide, a tidal wave of water rushed over me.

My eyes snapped open as the arctic wave pummeled me, plunging my body into shock. I sputtered and gasped, weakly batting at the stream of water that engulfed my face. I curled into the fetal position, trying to escape the icy cold. It did nothing to help or protect me from the geyser of water. My arms felt heavy, as if I were trying to wade through mud.

The tide of water continued to lap over my face, making it hard to take a full breath. My fight-or-flight instincts kicked in, and I tried to scramble to my feet, but my body refused to respond to my will. Instead of leaving the flood of water, I flopped on the ground like a fish, continuing to be hosed down. When I told my leg to go up, it slid to the side like a marionette was pulling my strings in all the wrong directions. I sputtered and coughed against the torrent of water. My already throbbing head was screaming for oxygen. Drowning in the sewers had to be one of the most pathetic ways to die.

Just when I had given up and accepted my fate, the cascade stopped. I gasped for fresh air, spitting out the remnants of water that had gotten into my mouth. I had somehow managed to survive the surprise waterboarding. Before I could get my bearings or do anything but breathe, I was wrenched into the air by two thick ropes curling under my armpits.

The useless things called my legs were sprawled behind me as the remaining parts hung like a damp rag. Being jerked into the air brought on another wave of bile, this time tasting a little like rum. Or was it whisky? It's hard to tell the two apart when they move the wrong way. I swallowed down the liquid that had made its way halfway up my throat.

The Apostle

My body moved at less than half speed, but I managed to look sluggishly to my left and right. Contrary to the smell and look, I wasn't in a sewer, but a dark, musty alleyway. At least it was a step in the right direction. I wasn't alone either.

I had been dragged off the ground by two muscular men with thick, veiny arms that held me in the air. Black shirts hugged their bodies, accentuating their bulging muscles. The one to my right had a dark, jagged scar that ran from his cheek down his neck, disappearing under the shirt collar. There was zero strain in their arms as I dangled hopelessly. It seemed a little sad and pathetic to just hang there, so I tried to pull my legs under me. Molasses would have beaten me if it had been a race, but I finally managed to balance on my own two feet after a few sad attempts.

"Hey, are you listening to me?" The loud, commanding voice brought my attention forward. I was still celebrating my ability to stand up straight with a weak grin that stretched my cheeks.

The barking was coming from a third man I had yet to notice. He stood a few feet in front of me, looking annoyed with his hands on his hips like a disappointed parent. He was smaller than the giants to my left and right, but no less intimidating. His expensive-looking vest and slacks stood out from the grungy, dim alley. His jet-black hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail, and the three golden rings on his hand made him look like a TV gangster. A sneer was plastered on his ruggedly handsome face as he tossed the water hose he was holding to the side and stepped forward toward me.

"I can't believe this little piss ant is ignoring me." He grabbed my face and forced me to look at him. It's not like I was trying to avoid eye contact. I just didn't know which of

The Apostle

the four and a half copies of him in front of me was the real one.

Whatever cogs in people's brains link conscious thought to actions were struggling to get over the fact that I had just been called a piss ant. I barely had time to recognize the fist moving toward my face. The three golden rings smashed into the right side of my face, snapping my head to the side. An uncomfortable warmth trickled down my cheek as he drew his fist back, the gold speckled with bright red blood.

Memories flooded back to me as the punch restarted my brain. The well-dressed man was Ryan, and the two muscle heads to my right and left were known to me as Thing 1 and Thing 2. And while he wasn't a gangster, it wasn't far off the mark. Ryan was a loan shark from whom I made the mistake of borrowing \$10,000 a few weeks ago.

With the undeserved confidence of a man on a winning streak, I brought the money to a local casino. As most things in my life went, I was this close to making it big when my luck took a turn for the worse. Not only did I lose the ten thousand from Ryan, but I also lost every cent I had on me in a futile attempt to win it all back.

Terrified and penniless, I spent the last week trying to dodge Ryan's lackeys and calling in all my favors to get the money to repay him. The problem was that the number of people who owed me a favor was less than none. It was the opposite. I owed most of them money. In the end, I managed to sell a few shadily acquired goods and scrounge enough to give myself a break from hiding from them.

After dropping the cash off, I trudged to the bar with my last few bucks. Things became foggy afterward. The bartender definitely dropped a whiskey bottle in front of me, which started full. It looked suspiciously similar to the now-

The Apostle

empty bottle a few feet away, submerged in a puddle of vomit.

My brain was still sluggish, and the wire that connected my head to my mouth wasn't functioning properly. I looked up at Ryan, whose forehead wrinkled with anger. My mouth opened and closed twice, trying to speak. When nothing came out, I smiled weakly, hoping to convey that I needed a moment to collect myself. I wasn't sure what face I actually made, but it earned me another hit to the face. Ryan looked at his rings, a little disgusted that I had dirtied his jewelry. The whiskey still in my system numbed the pain of the punch, but the jarring motion reconnected my voice box.

"Boss Ryan, it's been a while." Well, that's what I meant to say. The thick slur of my drunken stupor had the words sounding something closer to "Bos Ry, spin a wile." I swayed a little and blinked rapidly. If the two Things weren't holding me up, I'd be back on the ground.

"Shut up, Aaron. I don't have time to listen to your bull shit," Ryan spat at me, using a piece of cloth to clean his knuckles as if punching me made him dirty. "I was happy to give you an extension on your loan with a slight increase in interest. That was before you left this in my mailbox."

He reached into his vest pocket and pulled a dirty cocktail napkin with a wrinkled circular stain in the center. He turned it around and showed me the art skill of a 3-year-old who scribbled 'IOU' in horrible squiggly letters. I looked dumbly at the napkin and blinked a few times. I had no idea why he was showing me that. What idiot would give an IOU to a loan shark?

"I'm getting tired of hitting him," Ryan said, stepping back and pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.

Thing 1 shucked me into the arms of Thing 2 and stepped in front of me. The action of being tossed aside

The Apostle

made me lose my footing, and I slumped into his arms. Thing 2 was shockingly gentle, like a big teddy bear holding me up. The thought made me smile. A flash of disgust and concern jumped across Thing 1's face as he took his position. He clenched his frying pan of a fist and smashed it into my gut.

I retched as my already upset stomach heaved from the blow. Everything finally rebooted in my head, and the rest of the blurry night came crashing down on me. I had pieced together some money by selling a stolen watch to the pawn shop and a pair of shoes still warm from taking them off a drunk in the alley, and while that may make me sound like a horrible person, I had a reason. I knew the guy. He had once taken my pants when I was passed out, so it was payback.

My nerves were a wreck. The money I collected was nowhere near enough to cover my debt, but it might buy me a few more weeks. I knew how his kind handled people who didn't pay. My face could attest to that one.

I swung into a bar on the way to get some liquid courage. I knew most of the regulars there. Who else was in a bar on a Tuesday at 1 pm?

"You want in on this?" One of the regulars, named Luther, asked as soon as I sat down at the bar. Luther had a leather-bound cup in his right hand. Five snow-white dice rattling at the bottom. They were playing dice.

"Not this time," I said, putting a few crumbled bills on the bar.

"Suit yourself," Luther said, turning back to the other two regulars. A glass was pressed into my hands as I watched Luther shake the cup before slamming it onto the counter. I brought the whiskey up to my lips as he lifted the cup and added the numbers on the dice. The feeling of

The Apostle

anxiety and worry that had been eating a pit in my stomach faded as the slow burn slid down my throat.

After adding the amount, he scooped up the dice and passed them to the other regular. Markus took it and did the same, passing it to the third and final regular Adam. Dice was a simple game. The person with the highest number won and got the money on the table. If you played for drinks, then the highest person didn't play the next round, and that would continue until there were only two people left. The loser bought a round for everyone.

"Fuck you, Luther," Marcus said, pulling out another five-dollar bill and setting it on the counter. Luther happily scooped up the winning and placed a fresh five on top of Marcus and Adam's money.

"Sure, you don't want in, kid?" Luther said with a twinkle in his eye. I bit my lip and shook my head, looking down at the now-empty glass. A wrinkled hand came into view with a bottle and refilled my glass. I muttered a thanks under my breath.

The clattering of dice on the hardwood bar top rang out between the cheers and groans of the other three. Each time they struck the counter, I felt an itch. The bundle of cash in my jacket pocket felt heavy. It was nowhere near enough money. In total, including the crumpled bills I used to pay for my drink, I had a little over \$1,000. Right now, they were playing for five dollars, but I knew these three. It would take only a few rounds before they started pushing more. I doubt there was enough cash in this entire bar to pay off my debt, but if I could just win a little more, it would help.

"Alright, count me in," I said after the fifth game. All three of them smiled as I scooted over. The bartender filled my glass as soon as it was empty.

The Apostle

For every pot I won, I seemed to lose two more. The thousand dollars I had slipped away, five dollars at a time for the first hour or so. After that, we bumped it up to 10 and then 20. At some point, the bartender left the bottle on the counter, and I whittled away at it, fueling my frustration.

Everything got hazy after a few hours of dice. The dim lights inside the bar soon outshined the one from outside. My pockets were all but empty, and the panic set in. Alcohol only does so much to dull the emotions. At some point, I must have scribbled the IOU on one of the napkins and dropped it off at their mailbox before stumbling back to the bar.

"I mean, at least it made it easier to find you," Ryan said, pulling me out of the fog of memories. I focused back on him as he flipped the napkin over. The back of the napkin had a red circle with 'Ted's Irish Pub' written on it. In all my wisdom, I had not only lost all his money gambling again, but I also went back to the same bar where I had written the note. I wanted to bury myself in a big hole. The little sneer on Ryan's face faded, and he backed up, nodding for Thing 1 to continue. At the rate the night was going, I might end up there either way.

"Wait, wait," I stammered, slurring a lot less than before. I was too slow to stop another frying pan fist from knocking the wind out of me.

"Let's hear what bullshit you have to say this time," Ryan said, sounding bored.

"I know this looks bad, but I have the money. My brother is driving it down to me, and I'll have it by tomorrow. As I said when I got it from you, my father is very ill, and we needed the money for the hospital fees. Now that it has been paid, we have been pooling our money together to repay you. I swear I will bring it to you." It was a complete

The Apostle

lie. As far as I knew, my father was fine, and my brother wouldn't drive down to meet me if my life depended on it. The look on Ryan's face told me I was as transparent as glass. I stumbled for anything to say to spare my life. "That's why I came here. For a celebratory drink."

"You know what? Fine, I'll believe you. Because I'm such a nice guy, I'll give you until the end of the week. But let me warn you, Aaron, if it's even a minute late, I will come find you." His smile grew wider as my face paled. He looked like a lion staring down a helpless gazelle. He wasn't pitying me. He was just trying to make the thrill of the chase a little more exciting. He broke eye contact and turned away. "Let's go."

Thing 2 released me. I slid off his tree trunk arms as gravity and alcohol acted as one.

Thud.

I was too sluggish to brace myself and only managed to turn my head to avoid breaking my nose. My cheekbone met the ground first, bouncing my head and rocking my brain around my skull like the world's worst pinball game—bright colors danced in my vision, adding to the vertigo of my drunken stupor.

"And Aaron," Ryan said over his shoulder, flicking the half-smoked cigarette at me. "Don't even think about running." The glowing blunt landed a few inches away in a shower of ash.

"Fuck," I said, pushing myself onto my back. A thick layer of clouds covered the sky, blocking out the moon and stars. The sky grew fuzzy as tears welled up and dripped down my cheek, burning the fresh cuts. I put my hands over my face. "What am I going to do?"

It took a few minutes to stop the flow of tears, and my eyes grew heavy. I let my head fall to the side, ignoring the obvious pain in most of my body. I just felt so exhausted

The Apostle

with life. Part of me wanted to sink into the concrete and never come out. I let myself drift off into an uncomfortable sleep.

A loud bang jolted me awake. My back ached with the motion, a tinge of pain running down my spine. I instantly shivered, wrapping my arms around my body as water covered me for the second time. I looked around for Ryan and his hose, but the water was coming from above. A steady stream of rain showered the world around me. I was drenched with a cold that seeped into my bones.

"You can't sleep here, kid," an old man stood beside a large, overfilled dumpster. He looked tired. His shirt was stained from the long hours behind the bar. The wispy grey hairs on his head were stuck to his skin, plastered there by the rain. I hadn't learned his name, but I recognized him as the old man bartender. He was the one who left the bottle in front of me. "We are closing up for the night. Get out of here before I call the cops."

"What time is it?" I asked, using the wall to stand. Whether it was the cold or the passage of time, I had sobered up a little. It was terrible. At least my legs were more responsive as I got to my feet.

"Four in the morning. Those goons came in and got you around midnight," he said, watching me get up. His face was set in stone of a man who couldn't care less about the world, but pity was evident in his eyes.

"Thanks, old man," I said, stepping away from the wall and testing my balance. I should be able to walk home with no issues. My clothes were a few sizes too big, and since I had the frame of a skeleton wrapped in a thin layer of flesh, they threatened to slide off me with the added weight of water. He grunted in response, heading back into the bar, shutting the door behind him. The bolt thudded into place, locking from the inside.

The Apostle

I slowly moved into the dark, dead streets. The only movement was a homeless man pushing water off a tarp that protected his cardboard home. He eyed me with suspicion. His hand reached for something under a pile of rags to his left. I had no intention of taking his house, so I walked by and kept an eye on him. It was a stab to my pride that I looked rough enough for a homeless man to think that I might try to take what little he had.

Sobering up sucks.

My arms and legs shivered violently. I wrapped the drenched pieces of fabric I called clothes around me in an attempt to warm up. They just stuck to my thin frame like an unfortunate, useless coat rack. The few streetlights that worked were spaced out far enough, leaving large patches of darkness that hid the uneven sidewalks and deep potholes scattered on the unkempt street. I leaned into the cold rain and let out a long sigh, the sky responding with a loud bang of thunder.

"I could really use a drink." I felt like crap. My body was starting to hurt. I instinctively looked at my wrist for the watch I had pawned off a few months ago. "Damn."

I hunched my shoulders against the cold rain coming down even harder. My apartment was only a few blocks away. Each step was uncomfortably wet. My shoes had so much water in them that I might as well have been walking barefoot. It was miserable, even more so after the events of the evening. I just wanted to bury myself in my bed after a hot shower.

The walk was slow, and with each step, pain started to build up in my joints. My knees first, then my ankles, until it just hurt to move altogether. I wanted to sit down and rest, but staying here in the soaking rain was out of the question. My tongue grazed my lips, tasting the salty sweat that was beading up even in the freezing rain. My hands started to

The Apostle

shake as the muscles in my abdomen began to cramp. I wish it were a reaction to the cold or even the beating from earlier, but I knew all too well that it wasn't.

I knew the slow pain that was creeping into my body. It was the feeling that told me that I was a little too sober. Without a watch, I had started gauging time by my withdrawals as I yo-yoed between alcohol and drugs. I quickened my step as a putrid wave of nausea washed over me. I thought I could make it home, but each step worsened. I clenched and unclenched my hands as they cramped and tightened.

The muscles in my abdomen tightened dangerously, forcing me to a stop. It took a few breaths before I could start walking again. I blinked against the sheets of rain now coming down in a torrential downpour. I knew where I was; I had made this walk drunk a thousand times. A small 24-hour convenience store was to my left, half a block down. It would be a good place to get out of the rain and take care of the pain.

The clerk barely looked up at me as I walked into the store, escaping from the rain. I made a beeline for the bathroom to the right of the door and pushed into the small room. My numb fingers forced me to fumble with the handle before it snapped into the locked position. My hands hurt as I struggled to get them into my pocket and pull out a small silver tin. It was an old tin that held mints at least a decade ago. I found it one day while dumpster diving, and it seemed like the perfect fit.

A painful cramp caused me to fumble the tin, and it clattered to the floor. As if the universe was against me today, the corner of the tin struck first, sending the contents scattering in all directions.

"Fuck," I said a little too loudly and dropped to my knees. I had to clench my hands, trying to get the tight pain

The Apostle

out of them before I grabbed the syringe that had slid perfectly behind the toilet. I gingerly picked it up and looked at it. Luckily, the syringe was intact. The rest of the contents were scattered around the room: a spoon blackened on both sides, a lighter, and a small bag of fine white powder.

Even with stiff and trembling hands, I managed to scoop out some of the heroin on the spoon. The lighter flicked to life and licked the base of the spoon. A familiar popping sound filled the small bathroom as the powder darkened and melted. The whole process took a few minutes at most, but it felt like an eternity. Once it was fully melted, I picked up the syringe and drew the dark brown, almost black liquid into the tube.

I practically flopped against the wall, wrenching my soggy jacket off. It was at least three sizes too big for me, and it once had a design on the front that had faded from years of use and sun bleaching. I had picked it up behind a dumpster a year ago.

Once free of my soggy constraints, I needed to place my hand on the toilet seat to keep it steady as I slid the needle into the vein. Most of the veins in my hands, feet, and arms were either filled with scar tissue or had just collapsed from overuse. The vein of choice the past few weeks was at the base of my wrist, behind my thumb. The skin stretched a little from the slightly dull needle before sinking in with a light pop.

There was a flash of red in the syringe as the blood from my vein pushed back against the heroin. I pushed the plunger down, filling my arms with a warm, comfortable feeling. The muscles and joints that had been worsening with every passing second seemed to melt. I leaned back, letting out a long sigh and closing my eyes. A loud knocking on the door made me jump.

The Apostle

"Sir, is everything alright in there?" It was the voice of the cashier. I thought I had been quiet, but yelling fuck and throwing a metal tin on the ground probably ruined that.

"Yup, I'm good," I said, getting to my feet. "I'll be out in a second."

I gathered the scattered contents of my drug habit and stuffed them in my pocket. The young man was standing outside the bathroom, looking both worried and irritated. I shuffled past him, moving for the pouring rain. He glanced into the restroom before closing the door. I could feel his eyes watching my every move. It wasn't an uncommon feeling for me. It happened every time I entered a store. They always watched me like I was going to steal something. I was never offended; I had stolen enough stuff from most stores around that it was a justified suspicion. I headed back into the cold rain and trudged toward my apartment.

Calling my place an apartment was a bit of a stretch. After being kicked out of my previous place, I somehow convinced an old lady to let me live in a tiny attic converted to a loft. Ms. Glenda was close to 80 years old and seemed to be trying to match her age with the number of cats she owned. She was a bitter old hag who never missed the opportunity to chastise my way of life. Even so, she had allowed me to stick around as long as I was quiet and didn't cause trouble. I have lived here for the past four years, beating my previous record by three years and nine months.

I made my way through the downpour, giving up on hunching against the cold. By now, my clothes were completely soaked. I turned off the dark and dirty streets into a slightly nicer, well-lit part of the city. The homes were evenly spaced out, and all the streetlights worked. The street, empty this late at night, was lined with large oak trees that created a broken canopy over the road, giving me a break

The Apostle

from the rain. Clumps of Spanish Moss hung from the branches like tufts of fur and gave a ghostly, haunted look. It seemed as if I had stepped off into another place entirely.

It took a few more minutes before the house came into view. A two-story home painted a pleasant robin egg blue. The cute, white picket fence ran around the front yard, defending a wall of rose bushes and the freshly cut, grassy yard. If there was one thing in this world that Ms. Glenda truly loved, it was her roses. All the bushes were neatly manicured and trimmed to perfection. They were in full bloom, filling the humid air with a warm floral smell. From the street, the house looked nice enough to be on a magazine cover.

The rain lifted the smell off the bushes and filled my lungs as I walked along the fence and up the tilted driveway to the left side of the house. There was a small staircase in the back of the house that led up to my loft. I had never been allowed into the main house, but I assumed it smelled of roses and cat fur. I fumbled with my keys before shoving them in the lock and jiggling them left and right.

The lock refused to budge. I cursed into the storm, perfectly lining up with a loud burst of thunder. I twisted hard, shaking the doorknob and door frantically. It stood strong, unwavering to my tantrum. After a few minutes, I gave up and dropped my forehead on the door, letting out a defeated sigh. No matter how hard I turned, the lock seemed stuck. Another bolt of lightning lit up the sky as I lifted my head and blinked the water from my eyes. A sheet of paper had been taped to the door that I hadn't bothered to notice until now. It held on for dear life from the wind that whipped at the edges. The writing was barely legible from the ink bleeding down the page in long streaks of dark blue.

The Apostle

'Aaron, you are now 3 months behind on rent. I have changed the locks and will give you the new key as soon as you pay rent. Respectfully, your landlord, Glenda.'

I pressed my head on the door, too tired to even be sad. Today was shaping up to be one of the worst days in my short-lived 28 years. I debated breaking the door down, but ruining the only place I had to stay seemed like a bad idea. I let my forehead squeak down the wet window before turning away. It was too late to bother Ms. Glenda, and there was no way I was getting into the room tonight.

A vicious shiver shook my body as I headed to the street again. My clothes were drenched. If I didn't get somewhere dry soon, catching a cold would be the least of my worries.

There was nowhere close by where I could take shelter, and no one in the neighborhood would open their door for a stranger this late at night. My best bet was to head back the way I came and find an empty building and sleep with the other homeless.

I began the cold walk back the way I came. My chest heaved as I trudged through the storm. I wasn't moving fast enough to breathe hard, but I couldn't seem to get a full breath. Both eyes began to sting, and the world turned a little blurry. *What the hell is going on?* A streak of lightning shot across the sky, lighting up the dark world around me. I could see my reflection in the window of a car. Something in me cracked as the sky let out a loud wail.

The weight of the world came crashing down on me. I placed my hands on the car, feeling a rush of emotions. Anger, sadness, pain. Things that I hadn't felt in a long time. *Why me? Why did things like this always happen to me? Why did I always have to suffer, no matter how hard I try?* My breathing accelerated as the storm's winds intensified.

The Apostle

The sky opened up again with another crack of lightning like a starting gun. I took off running, leaving behind the haggard excuse of a man in the reflection of the car. In every window I passed, I could see him chasing me.

I ran, not caring where I was going. Like it was possible to leave the problems that pulled me down. I ran until my lungs screamed and my legs threatened to give out. The chain-linked fence clattered as I rammed into it, coming to a halt. My chest hurt, and my legs wobbled as rain came down in buckets.

The fence I was leaning on surrounded a large construction site, a concrete skeleton of what it would become. It loomed over the neighboring buildings, standing out next to the blocky red bricks that surrounded it. A variety of construction equipment and scaffolding were scattered around the dirt courtyard. It wouldn't keep out the cold, but at least the inside looked dry.

"Better than freezing to death," I said, still huffing from the run. I grabbed the chain-link fence. The cold steel bit into my skin as I hauled my body over. I had practically zero muscles, but I was also the size of a twig, so it wasn't hard to pull my body up.

I threw one drenched leg over the top of the fence, hearing the oversized jeans slap the other side. I gingerly moved my hips over the pointed metal tips to avoid skewering myself between my legs. Once clear, I flung the other leg over. This time, the partially shredded pant leg snagged the top of the fence. I tried to yank my leg free, stuck in a position similar to one I saw while watching gymnastics. I was a little too aggressive, and instead of pulling my pant leg free, I dislodged the foot holding me up.

I swung in an ark still held up by the strands of my pant leg and slammed into the fence, dangling by one leg. The rapid movement made my head spin. Before I could try

The Apostle

to right myself, the strings snapped and dropped me on my skull with a loud thud. I collapsed on myself, folding in an unnatural pose before my spine rebounded and sprawled me out flat on the muddy ground. At this point, I couldn't even complain. I tried to ignore the new pain in my back and rolled myself to my feet, brushing off clumps of mud that clung to my jacket.

I gave up after I realized I was only smearing the mud deeper into my saturated clothes. The building was another 40 feet away, and I made my way there, feeling the lump on my head growing. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a spot where the fence was open for access. I chose to ignore that.

Inside, the building was no warmer than outside, but at least I was no longer getting poured on. My feet kept carrying my aching legs. I didn't want to stop walking. I was afraid that if I stopped now, the world might collapse around me. So I walked around the building with a mixture of fear, boredom, and hope that I could warm up a little.

The building was divided into multiple living spaces, likely making it an apartment complex of sorts. Each area was several times the size of my current accommodations. When it was all done, this would be a place that someone like me could never afford. I grew bored after my third lap around the ground floor and made my way to a large concrete stairwell. There was a small trickle of water rolling down the stairs as the wind blew rain through the large openings that would become windows. I began moving up, counting the stairs. Each floor was a carbon copy of the one below, making me lose interest in exploring after the fourth floor.

"186, 187, 188, and 189," I said, coming to the last step. The stairs ended in a small concrete box with a would-be door frame that opened onto the roof. Luckily, the

The Apostle

building had no doors yet, and nothing to stop me. My legs, already sore from the short run, were now shaking.

At some point during the long trudge, the rain stopped. The blanket of clouds was already beginning to disperse, allowing small specks of stars to twinkle between the dark clouds that had left me soaking wet. The exercise had done little to warm me up, and I pulled the thin clothes around me as I stepped out into the open air. This building was taller than the ones nearby, giving me a view of the city I had never seen before. Seeing the city from this height gave me an almost magical view. I sat down on the ledge and looked out at the sleeping world.

I was usually scared of heights, but for some reason, today, as I sat on the edge of a building, I felt calm. I leaned my head back and looked up at the sky. One of the stars peeked through the thinning clouds and seemed especially bright, staring down from above. I could feel a warmth radiating from the little star as it winked at me. A slow-moving cloud covered it, sending a dull chill back over my body. I wrapped my arms around myself and looked down, stretching the muscles in my sore neck. The ground was at least 100 feet below. The large construction equipment looked like toy cars scattered around the work site. From this high up, all my problems only seemed to amplify.

As if to emulate the sky, my mind began to clear for the first time in years. The little voice in the back of my head that I had buried with drugs and alcohol for so long clawed its way to the surface.

As of a week ago, I was, yet again, jobless. And as of tonight, I was homeless. I had no money, no phone, and no way to get around. I was too poor to even buy a skateboard. I owed the loan shark over \$10,000 with no way to pay it back. Not to mention the mountain of debt that I owed the banks.

The Apostle

I had already burned every bridge in my life. Forcing everyone, including my family, to turn their back on me. When I still had a phone, I tried calling my mother, only to find out that she had blocked me. It was hard to be mad at them. I had borrowed and stolen from my parents on more than one occasion. It wasn't just them. I'd also taken from my siblings and my grandparents. I was alone. I had nothing and no one to turn to.

"And it's all my fault," I said, feeling the pain and sorrow in my chest. This was the first time I had ever said those words. The first time, I had not blamed a cruel god or my family for all my misfortune. The first time, I had actually taken responsibility for my choices. It hurt more than I thought to say those words out loud.

I left home at 18. Well, it's more like I was kicked out at 18. I had hung out with the worst people and gotten into some substance abuse. My grades plummeted, and I skipped school more days than I attended. So much so that I wasn't allowed to graduate. The day I turned 18, my dad told me to pack my bags, and I did so willingly. I bought the first bus ticket to a big city, hoping to start anew. I was mad at my family and mad at myself. I tried to escape the poor decisions I had made in my life up to that point.

It wasn't easy to start anew. It didn't take long before I found the same type of people from before and got back into drinking and doing drugs. I ended up in jail a few times. It was only a small slap on the wrist with some nasty fines. But it forced me to sober up and get a job. I thought I had finally started to turn around.

But once I hit 21, everything went downhill. It was in the bars that I learned how to gamble, and it was addicting. Some days, I won and partied it all away; most days, I lost and drank my depression away. I borrowed and

The Apostle

stole to fund my addictions. Took out loans from legitimate banks and people like Ryan.

The months turned to years, and I lost job after job. I couldn't hold employment for long, much less a place to live. That was until I met Glenda four years ago. But even then, I never worked at the same place for more than a few weeks. Every time something went wrong, I blamed the world for my issues. I cursed and hated everyone and everything for a long time.

"What a mess," I said into the world.

For some reason, atop this barren roof, my life seemed pointless. What had I been doing all these years? I was alone; I didn't have a single person I could even call a friend. It was a sad existence, and even harder to swallow knowing that I was the only one to blame.

"And the truth will set you free," I said, placing my hands on the edge. Without realizing it, I scooted forward an inch. The ground below turned hazy as fresh tears dripped down my face. The ache in my chest deepened. It hurt to admit that everything was my fault. Like a hand was wrapping its way around my heart, squeezing it tight. I clutched my chest, sobbing uncontrollably. I leaned forward, putting most of my weight over the large drop below.

What was the point of staying here? I had nothing. Even if I moved somewhere else, I would still have nothing. Starting new was not an option, and changing my ways seemed impossible. I leaned further as tears drained down my face, falling from the tip of my nose. It will be okay. At least I won't be a bother to anyone anymore. I felt my loose jeans slide along the concrete ledge as I moved forward.

"Hell of a view, isn't it?" I screamed at the soft voice behind me. My body jerked, and I almost launched myself off the roof. I scrabbled to stay on and looked for the voice.

The Apostle

A girl stood a few feet behind me, her hands shoved in her pockets as she looked out over the city. If I had to guess, I'd say she was close to my age. She wore a black hoodie and black jeans with holes ripped into the knees. Unlike mine, hers were a fashion statement. Her hood was pulled up, protecting her hair from the humid air post-rain. To say she was beautiful was an understatement. If the run hadn't sobered me up, I might have thought I was hallucinating. The streetlights of the city glinted off her eyes, filling them with a bright twinkle.

"You going to jump?" She asked, moving over to the edge. She looked down as if judging if the distance was enough to kill me.

"No," I said defensively. I hesitated. "I don't know."

Was I about to kill myself? I realized just how close to the edge I was and looked down. Maybe I was? I didn't know anymore.

"Mind if I join?" She asked. I looked up at her, confused. It was odd to ask if someone was willing to have a suicide companion. I noticed she was pointing to the concrete edge next to me.

"Oh, not at all," I said and watched as she hopped down next to me without an ounce of hesitation. She was either brave, fearless, or suicidal. The last one seemed most probable, considering the company. "Aaron."

"Nybia," she said before going silent. I lost interest in her and looked out over the city. We entered a calm, almost peaceful quiet. She was the first to break the silence.

"Do you believe in a god?" I looked over at her and chuckled a little. It seemed an odd question to ask a man contemplating jumping. Maybe she was one of those highly religious types.

"No, I don't believe in God," I said, looking back at the city.

The Apostle

"And why not?" I wasn't even sure why I was humoring her questions, but a part of me wanted to answer her. Maybe I was just looking for someone to talk to.

"Too many bad things happen to good people." I was too embarrassed to say that part of the reason I didn't believe in a higher power was because my life was shit, especially after finally admitting that it was me all along. It seemed like a cheap shot, given the situation. "And somehow, it seemed to never happen to the bad ones. If there were some all-powerful god, then they either are a sick, twisted bastard or just don't care about us. Either way, there is no need for me to pray to such a thing."

"Fair," was her only response. We went back to silence. This entire thing was all too weird. I was starting to wonder if I was still drunk. Or maybe the hit to the head was a little harder than I thought. She was again the first to break the silence. "I don't believe that gods are all-powerful. I don't think they're much different from you or anyone else out there. They can laugh and cry, love and hate. They can even bleed and die."

"That doesn't sound very godlike to me." She snorted at that.

"Maybe not." A breeze blew her hood back, revealing jet-black hair. I hadn't noticed before, but she had dark olive skin and bright green eyes. She was smiling now. Somehow, she looked even more beautiful than before. "If there was a higher power. What would you say to them right now?"

"Fuck you," I said loudly and confidently. That made both of us laugh. For the first time in a few days, I smiled. It kind of hurt. We fell back into a happy silence after that. The longer we didn't talk, the more I mulled over her words. We stayed silent for over an hour, just enjoying the view. Far on the horizon, I could see the tiniest glimmer of the new day.

The Apostle

"If the gods are, like you said, not all-powerful or all-knowing, why do people pray to them?"

"I don't think they are all-powerful, but that doesn't mean that they don't have power. I think people pray for hope."

"Then if gods do exist, it is the people that are stupid," I said with a huff. That seemed to catch her by surprise.

"Why do you say that?"

"Humans used to give to the gods when asking for help. Offerings of food or sacrifices to pray for a simple rain. But now. Now, people don't. People started to rely on thought and prayers more than sacrifice and worship. If going into a church and dropping a few coins in a donation box could garner any respect or love from a higher power, then things would be much different. Now we as a race are all about the take and none of the give."

"Maybe you are right. Maybe that is why the gods don't answer people anymore," she said. There was a hint of a smile on the corner of her lips. "Does that change your answer?"

"No," I said, thinking it over. "Maybe."

"Why hesitate?" There was one major flaw in my logic. If the gods required sacrifice, then...

"I have nothing to give."

"Nothing at all?" she said, looking at me. Her green eyes seemed to bore into my very soul. I thought about the question again. If I were to ask a god to help me, what could I give them so I wouldn't be screaming at thin air? The longer I thought about it, the more I realized how little I had. There was only one thing that came to mind.

"Me. That is all I have to offer." It seemed a small price for a man who had almost jumped to his death. "I

The Apostle

would give them me. My body and soul. Of course, only if I am worth anything to them."

"I think it is worth a lot," she said, looking up at the sky. I followed her gaze, with the sun coming up, the stars were fading. The large bright star from earlier was nowhere to be seen, but the same warmth touched my shivering skin. "Why not try?"

I peered at her. She closed her eyes and clasped her hands together, her face still looking up. Another breeze rustled her hair. I'm not sure if it was my desperation or the woman sitting beside me, but I wanted to believe her. I followed her motions and closed my eyes, facing the heavens. After a moment of silence, I opened again and peeked at the girl. She was looking at me.

"What should I say?" I asked dumbly. I had no idea where to begin.

"Just say what's in your heart. If you put your heart into it, I'm sure the gods will hear," she said with a pleasant smile. I closed my eyes again.

"Here we go," I muttered under my breath. "I am a pathetic man who has blamed the world for every problem and misfortune that I have ever experienced. I have probably cursed your existence a million times by now, and it might be wrong of me to ask, but I can't help but be selfish. I need you. I have nothing to give except myself. If you can help me, I, Aaron Carter Brite, offer you everything I have: myself, my soul, and my services. Help me. Help me change my ways and be better than I am. Help me, and I am yours."

The heat of embarrassment burned my ears. Starting off by saying I was pathetic and then asking for help. I wouldn't blame a god for striking me down here and now. But no divine retribution came as the seconds extended to minutes.

The Apostle

When I finally opened my eyes, I felt stupid. Stupid for what I said and stupid for having hope that someone would actually answer. It hurt my pride to be this vulnerable, but in some weird way, I felt a little better. Like a small weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I couldn't help but smile, even if I was embarrassed beyond words. It helped my mind clear up some. With the weight gone, I quickly became acutely aware of how close I was to the edge.

"That was wonderful," I jumped a little at her voice. I had been so deep in my thoughts that I forgot the woman was still beside me. When I looked her way, I noticed that she was a lot closer than before, practically on top of me. Her emerald green eyes, like flawless glass marbles, reflected my face. I looked haggard and weak compared to the beauty standing before me.

Her fingers gently caressed my cheeks, eyes never leaving mine. I wanted to recoil at the icy feel of her fingers. Something felt off as she slid one hand to the back of my head, tangling with my unkept hair. I instinctively tried to pull back, but I couldn't. My body wouldn't move, as if I were frozen in place by her mesmerizing gaze. I reached my hands up, grabbing her wrists. I wasn't frozen in place; no, she was just insanely strong. Panic overwhelmed my senses as she got within an inch of my lips. Her voice broke the silence like a crack splitting an ice burg. "I accept."

Her lips touched mine. They were soft and warm and seemed to fit my mouth perfectly. My body leaned into the kiss, feeling the world's burdens melt away, my arms dropping to my sides uselessly. The pleasant feeling that washed over me didn't last long. Pleasure turned to pain with the flip of a switch.

Pain, unlike anything I had ever experienced, filled my body as molten lava dripped down my throat. It felt like I was being melted from the inside out. I tried to pull back,

The Apostle

yanking as hard as my frail body could. She was so strong, I couldn't even move an inch. My eyes snapped open to hers, staring back at me as tendrils of smoke drifted up from my lips. It felt like I was drinking acid while someone poured hot iron around my heart. *How the hell is she so strong?*

I fought as hard as I could, thrashing and punching. My hands deflected off her perfect skin, not even ruffling her hair. Her green eyes deepened, shifting from a light emerald to a dark night. The pain grew until it was too much to handle. My arms fell limp by my side. I was at her mercy.

The pain grew until it was too much to bear. My body went limp, waiting for death. Just when I was about to reach my limit, she pulled back. I doubled over, gasping, taking a breath of fresh air for the first time in what felt like 10 minutes of agony. She pulled back, getting to her feet with an unnatural grace. I turned to look at her, ready to ask what the fuck she was doing to me. Before I could speak, she placed her hand on my shoulder and gave me a shove. My jeans scraped along the concrete, and then nothing. Her smile vanished over the edge of the roof.

"Fuck." This was the worst way to go. The ground rushed up at me too fast to react. I felt no pain as I made contact with the ground, and everything went black.



2

I jolted awake, springing up from the ground. The feeling of falling still fresh in my mind. My heart pounded in my chest, filling my ears with the beat of a marching drum. I spun around, instinctively patting my body, expecting to feel broken bones and massive gushing wounds. I seemed intact. Nothing seemed to be immediately broken.

"I'm alive," I said as both a statement and a question. My hands were shaking from shock and fear.

It took me a few moments to slow my breathing and look around me. I was still inside the construction zone, which was a ghost town, even with the sun blazing down from high above. The ground was still damp from last night's rain. I peeled a large clump of mud off my face as I searched for life-threatening wounds. *I guess the rain stopped them from coming to work early.* I was not about to question my luck.

My eyes tracked the building up to the roof, counting the floors until I reached the ledge I sat on last night. A fall from that height definitely would have killed me.

"Was it all a dream?" I asked. One hand remained clenched over my chest as if I was trying to grip my heart to quiet it. My heart was finally slowing down enough that it was no longer drowning out the sound of city traffic.

Everything from last night had felt so real. I could practically still feel the girl's lips pressed against mine as my insides fried. It seemed too vivid to be just a dream. Yet here

The Apostle

I was, alive and well. I let out a little laugh at my own imagination that turned into a mad cackle. The thought of dying made my legs tremble. I didn't want to die. Real or not, I had actually thought about jumping last night, and now it terrified me.

To calm myself down, I gave my body another look over, seeing if I missed anything the first time. Besides a bruise where I had been lying on a small rock, I was perfectly healthy. More than that, I felt good, better than I had in a long time. The sun overhead told me it was near midday. The normal aches and pains that I felt after sobering up seemed to be late to the party. I couldn't help but smile a little. Not falling to my death was much better than the alternative.

I turned to leave, heading for the opening in the fence that I missed yesterday. I patted my pockets unconsciously. My hands froze as they smacked my jacket. The normal, familiar tink of my old mint tin was replaced with silence. My heart froze, and I frantically reached into every pocket, finding nothing.

"No, no, no. This can't be happening," I said aloud as my newfound optimism vanished. I spun on my heel, kicking up loose dirt, and sprinted back to my resting place. The sun was unable to warm the ground where I had been lying, leaving a strange imprint of my body in wet mud. I dropped to my knees and scraped the ground, spinning around like a dog, looking for the perfect spot to do its business. There was nothing there. "Fuck."

My eyes darted up the tall building, and I scrambled to my feet. While I may not have fallen from up there, that doesn't mean that it was all a dream. I hit the stairs as fast as I could, tossing off my jacket, which was slowing me down. I took the stairs two at a time.

"Ow, son of a...Mother. God damn it," I screamed as I slipped on a stair and slammed my shin into the concrete corner. A stream of half-completed curses echoed off the empty walls. In a flash of wisdom and rage, I punched the

The Apostle

stairs. The second half of the curses came out as pain erupted from my fist.

I got up, still fuming, and continued my ascent one step at a time with a painful limp. By the time I reached the top, I was drenched in sweat again and huffing like a pack-a-day smoker running a marathon.

"Where the hell are you?" I whispered through gasps of air. I scampered around the roof, searching every nook and cranny. The problem was that there were few nooks and even fewer crannies in the concrete frame of the apartment complex. I knew it wasn't up here. I could tell the moment I exited the staircase. "Just my luck."

I sat down on the first stair, trying to catch my breath. Even if it was a dream, I made sure to keep some distance between myself and the edge of the building in case I really did fall off this time. My shoulders slumped, and I let out a long, painful sigh. *Why? Why me?*

My usual tsunami of blame got stuck in my throat. Dream or not, I answered that question last night. It was all my fault. I was the one who ran away last night. I was the one who passed out on the ground after getting both drunk and high. Again. I was the one who got me addicted to drugs. And I was the one who let myself get robbed while passed out.

Why me.

This time, it wasn't a question but more of a depressed statement. Why had I let it get this far? Why had I given up everything and always taken the easy way out? I couldn't even feel sorry for myself anymore.

I pulled myself to my feet and made my way down the long staircase, scooping up my jacket on the way out of the building. The sun beat down on me with a sickening level of optimism, seemingly mocking me and my newfound clarity. Thankfully, no one from the construction crew had arrived yet, and I was able to leave with only a few glances from passing bystanders.

The Apostle

My feet carried me as my mind spiraled into a pit of self-despair. While toxic at first, the small voice in my head that had been locked up for so many years began to speak again.

Maybe this was the chance that you have been waiting for. Maybe, this time, you can really change.

The thought almost made me laugh... almost. Perhaps that little voice was speaking the truth. I stopped as I passed an old store, boarded up from the pressure of a horrible economy. The window had been shattered at some point, cutting off the word 'antique.' I could see my reflection in the little glass that remained.

My god. Is that me?

The bags under my eyes were so deep that it hid my hazel eyes behind a mask, darkening them into black beads. I might as well be walking on death's door. The top of my head was thinning and patchy, and I had a permanent 5 o'clock shadow that made my face look dirty. The usual brown strands of hair that remained seemed dull and greying. I quickly tried to brush it around into something that could be considered nice. I gave up after a few failed attempts. Even if my hair was perfect, the rest of me was not. My collar bones jutted out from the stretched head hole of a shirt meant for a man three times my size. They seemed to be struggling to hold up the thin frame of a neck without an ounce of muscle on it.

My cheekbones had all but given up holding up my face, and the skin sagged in a sickly way. I leaned in and ran my hand down my face. The loose skin on my cheeks pulled down, showing my bloodshot, squinted eyes. I no longer looked like the me that I remembered, but instead, a haunted version of myself.

I wanted to turn away from the ghost looking back at me. To run from my problems and smash every window and mirror along the way. A feeling that had been buried deep inside me almost a decade ago came crawling back to

The Apostle

the surface as I turned from the shattered version of myself. My own self-esteem ate at my chest.

Everything about me bothered me. The way my shoulders slumped, and my eyes looked only at the ground. I rounded my shoulders and puffed out my chest, straightening my back, standing tall for what felt like the first time in a long time. It was like I magically grew 2 inches. I began to walk, taking extra care in my steps, trying not to sway or limp. My eyes stayed forward, looking to the end of the street instead of tracking my feet.

I made it a block before my back started to hurt from proper posture. I could feel my shoulders try to sag and fight the urge to relax back into my old ways. It took all of my concentration to keep going, so much so that I didn't even bother to think about the reality of my situation. It hit me as I rounded the final turn toward Ms. Glenda's house and the loft that I called home.

I had been so fixated on the fact that I hadn't died that I forgot why I was there in the first place. My empty pocket, even lighter without my heroine tin, reminded me that I didn't have the money to pay rent. I stopped, keeping the white picket fence just out of sight. Once again, I became aware of myself. My clothes were filthy, covered in mud and sweat. Even if I didn't believe the voice that told me I could change, I still needed clean clothes to try.

Maybe I could convince Ms. Glenda to open the door so I could shower and change my clothes.

I lifted my shoulders, ignoring the pain in my back, and stepped toward home. As I neared the house, I saw the front door open, and Ms. Glenda stepped out. She was a stout woman, no more than 5 feet tall, with snow-white hair that was pulled back in a tight bun, reducing the amount of wrinkles on her face. I rarely saw her smile except when taking care of her roses. She had a cane in her right hand and a cloth bag tucked under her left. I had never been brave enough to ask her age, but while her body looked 80, her

The Apostle

eyes danced with youthful vigor. She turned to lock the door as I came up to the white gate that blocked off the yard from the rest of the neighborhood.

"Ms. Glenda," I said as she walked down the three concrete steps to her front door.

"It's proper to greet someone when wanting something, Aaron," she said in her normal, cold voice. I couldn't help but smile at it. While she seemed cold and rigid on the outside, she had let me stay here for all these years and put up with a lot of my shit. She had probably shown me more kindness than anyone else in this city. She seemed to recoil at the smile I attempted.

"Good morning, Ms. Glenda," I said, correcting myself. "I am glad that I caught you. I saw your note. I'm sorry that I am behind on rent."

She used the butt of her cane to push the gate open. Ms. Glenda was a little shorter than eye level in her raised yard. Once she went down the four steps to the sidewalk, I needed to look down to see her.

I offered her a helping hand as she descended the stairs. She looked at my hand like it was an insult. She stopped and turned to look at me, smacking the cane on the ground. She may be old, but I had seen this woman beat more than one drunk with the cane who tried to mess with her rose garden. *Come to think of it, I have never seen her bear any weight on the cane while walking. Did she just carry it for beating purposes?* I pushed that aside and stood tall. I needed to persuade her to let me into the loft, if only for an hour or two. I dropped my head in a small apologetic bow. When I rose up, I began to recite the little paragraph I had been playing in my head for the past minute.

"I don't have the money, and I am sorry. I know I am asking a lot, but, if possible, can I just go up and get a change of clothes and maybe a shower? I will leave after that." I had tried to have a business-like voice, but instead, it came out like a plea. I was practically begging. It was the only

The Apostle

place I had left, not to mention the measly things I possessed in the room.

She looked me up and down a few times before clicking her tongue. With a movement befitting someone half her age, she thwacked me in the shin with her cane. The sharp pain forced me to hop on one foot, grabbing my leg.

"Boy, I have told you time and time again to get your act together. And each and every time you mess it up with alcohol, drugs, and gambling," she said, slamming the end of the cane down with a loud thud.

"I know. I'm sorry," I said, lowering my gaze. I had nothing to say. I could feel her blue eyes boring into me.

"Ha. Even a rabid dog can apologize, I guess," she said, sounding irritated. She let out a sigh, and her voice softened. "Don't let me down again, boy."

"What?" I asked dumbly, looking up. I barely managed to catch the keys that were flung at my face.

"Last warning. Next time, you'll receive a beating of your life," she said, a small smile touching her cheeks before turning away, heading down the street.

"But why?" I asked, looking at the keys. She stopped at the question.

"Who knows? Maybe it's my old age or maybe it's just pity, but something seems different about you today," She began walking again. I just blinked at her for a moment.

"Thank you," I said loudly once I found my voice. Tears began to well up in my eyes. I forgot how long it had been since someone believed in me. "I won't let you down. I promise."

She never looked around, but I saw her nod as she walked away.

If this wasn't the wake-up call I needed, then I might as well have jumped off the roof yesterday. I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the rose garden that permeated the air. The sun's warmth washed over my face. It was

The Apostle

probably my imagination, but for a split second, I thought I could see a single bright star glinting down at me.

"Maybe," I said, toiling with the possibility of last night. I laughed it off, brushing the idea out of my mind. I didn't have time to believe in fantasies. There were more important things to do.

It took a few tugs to wrench the old keys from the door. But after that, the new keys worked wonderfully, and I entered my room. It was a small place that had two rooms in total. One was my living area and kitchen, and the other was a simple bathroom. The whole thing was, at most, 300 feet.

The loft was a horrible mess. Stale air mixed with weeks-old beer and takeout made me turn up my nose. Beer cans, whiskey bottles, and empty pizza boxes littered the room. It was disgusting. *I can't believe I live like this.* I desperately needed a shower, but there was no use in getting clean if the room was this dirty.

I tossed my oversized jacket onto the small hook next to the door. It missed and fell into a pile on the floor. The jacket had seen better days. There were various small holes that were there before I thrifted it, and even more that I had put there myself over the past three years. It was the only jacket I owned, and now that I was looking at it, I saw that it was a mess. It reeked of alleyway stench and was covered in dark stains. One of them was a vomit stain from last night. I tried to ignore just how fresh it looked.

I let out a long sigh and picked up the jacket, carrying it with me to the tiny closet. It was hard to call it a closet when it wasn't even deep enough to put a hanger in it. It held a brand-new broom and mop still wrapped in plastic. They were a gift from Ms. Glenda, a little over three years ago. I hadn't used them once. The only thing in the closet that I used was the box of laundry detergent.

I tossed the mop and broom onto my unmade bed and carried the soap to the bathroom. It had a small tub/shower combo, a sink that was at most three feet from

The Apostle

the shower, and a toilet sandwiched in between them. I stripped down. The jacket, pants, shirt, and underwear were all tossed into the tub and drenched in detergent before turning on the water to soak. They were all stained dark with alley filth, and I tried my best to ignore how gross I felt.

As the clothes soaked, I moved to the main room, only slightly bigger than the bathroom. It had just enough room for a bed, a dresser, a table for one person to eat at, and a small kitchen tucked into the back. After throwing on the cleanest pair of underwear that I had, I got to work.

Every flat surface had something on it. Boxes, bottles, and cans were scattered haphazardly around the room. A few boxes with food still inside now housed something green and fuzzy. I tried not to gag as I tossed the filth that I had been living in into the black trash bags.

"Hey, I thought I lost this," I muttered to myself partway into the cleaning process. Under a half-eaten pizza was a smoking pipe made of blue and white glass. It was dirty with black soot around the bowl and the pathetic remains of some leftover weed. I lost sight of it a few months ago and assumed it was either stolen or left in an alley I passed out in. I walked over to the sink and ran some water into the bowl, scrubbing it clean with my finger. There was an obvious darkness to the bowl from years of use, but it would work.

I rolled the pipe in my hands, looking around the filth. Why was I doing this? It's not like cleaning my room was going to change me. It wasn't going to change the situation I was in. *But what if it could?* What if this was the first step? I hesitated over the trash can, caressing the smooth glass.

"Damn it. Why is this so hard?" I gripped the pipe, holding it over the trash. "Ow. Fuck."

I winced, tossing the pipe into my other hand. Warm red blood was welling up from a cut on my thumb. Blood pooled in a chip on the edge of the bowl. I grumbled under my breath, turning on the faucet and letting warm water

The Apostle

wash the blood away. I set the pipe on the counter and scrubbed the wound with soap. It had already stopped bleeding, even if it hurt a little.

Once I was sure my wound was clean, I turned back to the room, getting back to work. In the end, six trash bags filled with the disgust that was my apartment were piled next to the door. The trash cans were next to the house, and I hauled each bag down. *Hopefully, trash day was soon.* Two of the bags couldn't fit in the can. I returned to the loft, trying to ignore the wet streak that one of the trash bags had left on the floor. The most disturbing part? I hadn't thrown anything wet away.

Now that the big things were taken care of, I grabbed the unused broom and pulled the plastic cover off. For a room so small, it was horrifying how much dirt, dust, and grime had accumulated on the floors. Because of that, I felt that I needed to go the extra mile and ran the mop over the laminate floor. The hinges of the window above the sink creaked in protest as I forced it open for the first time in four years. I propped the door open on the other side of the room. A cold cross breeze pulled the stale, musty air out.

I left the room to dry and returned to the bathroom. My clothes had turned the soapy water dark brown. There are puddles on the street cleaner than this. I thoroughly scrubbed the clothes three times before the water stayed clear. I shuddered at the idea of how long I had been wearing them.

With the room clean and clothes hung up to dry, it was time to clean that last dirty thing in the apartment, me. No matter how poor I was, thanks to Ms. Glenda, I always had a roof over my head and a warm shower. This place had been the one thing that made me feel like I hadn't hit rock bottom. I could tell myself that at least I wasn't living on the street. Although if I didn't find some money soon, I would be in trouble shortly.

The Apostle

I stepped into the steaming water and let it run down my body. It felt amazing, even if I needed to ignore the dirty water running into the tub. I scrubbed voraciously every inch of me until my skin was tender and pink. It may have been a little overkill, but I couldn't get the dirty feeling out of my head.

Once convinced that I was clean, I turned off the steaming water and tossed the curtain open. Wisps of steam swirled in all directions. I had only one towel in the loft. It was by no means clean, but it wasn't dirty enough not to be used. I dried off, stepping onto the damp tile floor. Steam fought to get out of the door, swirling into the cold air of the main room. The mirror was half-defogged by the time I was dry. I lazily glanced at my reflection. I would only see the lower half of my torso in the exposed section of the mirror.

I ran my fingers along my ribs, bouncing like the world's creepiest xylophone. I brushed a few scars that I had gathered over these few years. One in my abdomen that sat lower than my ribs was a perfect circle from a time when another drunk stabbed me with a broken beer bottle. There were a few knife wounds from bar fights and a nasty scar on my abdomen when I fell while breaking into a gas station. It's not like I was littered with scars, but I had my fair share. Each of them a reminder of my own stupidity or drunken escapades.

With one stroke, I cleared off the fog, showing the rest of myself. I looked only moderately better than the haggard skeleton I had seen in the widow, but at least it was moving in the right direction. I tried to ignore the pitted scars that traced my veins. A harsh reminder of a past I might never escape from.

I leaned back, flexing my puny arms. Anything that might have been called muscles at one point had withered away over the years. *Maybe I should try to work out. Some push-ups might do me good.* I turned around, flexing the poor excuse of back muscles in the mirror.

The Apostle

"What the hell?" I said, straining my neck in an attempt to pull my back to my front. "Is that a tattoo?"

The image of a large jet-black scythe was sprawled across my back. The base of the staff was at my left hip, with the head that ended in a large bird skull running up to my right shoulder. The beak of the skull extended along the top of the blade, arching across my upper back. The detailed work was incredible. It looked 3D, as if I could simply reach back and pull it off. I slowly did just that, waiting for the pain sensation I expected a new tattoo to give. There was nothing. I couldn't even feel the difference in my skin as I ran my finger along the tattoo.

As someone who had never had enough money to think about getting a tattoo, I was at a loss. I racked my brain, trying to remember getting it. I couldn't even remember the last time I had a solid meal, much less a tattoo. But even so, it was crazy not to remember getting it. Something this big had to take hours, right? I generally tried to keep away from mirrors in my horrid state, so I didn't even know how old this tattoo was.

"What would my mother think?" I muttered out loud—a large pit formed in my stomach at the words. I hadn't seen or heard from my parents in over two years, and that silence probably wouldn't end soon. *Out of everything they knew I had done, a tattoo was probably the least shocking.* I splashed cold water on my face, choosing not to think too deeply about my family. The tattoo was odd, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

"Today is all about positivity," I said as convincingly as possible. It was a sad attempt, given my gangly appearance. Not to mention painfully cringe to say, but at least I was trying something new.

There was an unused rag hanging from a hook next to the sink. I grabbed it to dry my face and scrubbed my shoulder just in case. The tattoo seemed permanent enough. I did a quick once-over, ensuring I had no other tattoos or a

The Apostle

missing kidney that I didn't remember. Everything else seemed normal enough.

"Maybe it's a good thing to stop drinking." I stepped out into the main room. The floor was dry and, for the first time in a few years, clean. It almost looked brand new. It was crazy what a good, deep clean could do for a living space.

The clock on the stove said that it was a little past 3 pm. On a normal day, I would already be asleep, waiting for the nightlife to come. My usual wake-up time was between 5 and 8 pm. What was more shocking than being awake was how long I had been sober. I flexed my hands, not feeling the usual tension that told me I was coming down from my high. It was an odd sensation to not be in pain. My mind went back to last night, to the prayer that I said to the stars.

"There's no way," I said, shaking my head and laughing at the thought of some divine intervention.

I pushed the thought out and paced my now clean room. Ms. Glenda had given me some time, but not much. And I couldn't forget about Ryan and the two Things that were going to come looking for me sooner rather than later. I needed some money, and I had a week to try to get it.

"Easy as pie," I lied to the empty room, trying not to spiral into despair.

The ideal situation would be to get a job. The problem was that I had been fired from about every small-time and under-the-table job in the city. Mostly, I had been fired for not showing up, stealing, or showing up on something. A few times, I ended up fighting with a coworker or customer, but that was few and far between. Every place that would hire a degenerate like me had either banned me or knew me well enough never to hire me.

My pacing became quicker, anxiety and frustration slammed down on me, threatening to crush me. I could feel my heartbeat quicken. The cool breeze was doing nothing to stop sweat from building up on my forehead and neck. I flicked my wrist in irritation. My hand felt tight.

The Apostle

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" I said through gritted teeth. The thought of failing and losing everything squeezed my heart. Was it even possible to turn my life around? Why would I succeed this time when I had failed time and time again?

My stomach gave an unpleasant sound accompanied by a wave of nausea. I rushed into the bathroom as the pain that I thought I had escaped came rushing in all at once. I threw up more bile than anything else, emptying my already hollow stomach. I curled up on the floor in pain.

Withdrawal wasn't anything new to me. I had spent every dollar I had either at the casino, bar, or on drugs for the last 8 years. When money was tight, which it usually was, I would have to go without until I scrounged up enough for my next hit. But this was something else, something different.

The usual aches and pains were amplified, as if someone were jamming a jagged knife into each of my joints while twisting it. Wave after wave of nausea slammed into me with cramps strong enough to cause me to curl into a ball. To top it all off, a throbbing in my head made every movement, noise, and light hurt that much more.

I weakly pulled myself over the bathtub rim, dropping into the cold porcelain. Sweat made my skin stick a little as I slid down and fumbled for the faucet. I felt so hot. I cranked the water on, jolting from the shock of the cold that washed over me. The sharp movements made me heave. I had nothing left in my system to upend anyway.

This went on for an hour or more. I alternated between hot and cold water as my body bounced between burning up and freezing. Eventually, the pain subsided a little, enough that I could pull myself up over the rim of the tub and onto the floor. I fell like a damp rag and scrambled to my bed, leaving a wet trail like a slug. What the hell was I thinking? Trying to go cold turkey out of the blue. Was I insane?

The Apostle

I reached under the bed and pulled out a black box. It was a plain tackle box that I found behind a department store. It looked like the first place that a cop would check if my place ever got searched.

My hands shook as I fumbled with the two latches on the lid. They popped up with a loud clang that made my headache hit the back of my skull. The box was shockingly well organized for the mess the rest of my house had been in. There were cardboard dividers that I set up, creating a neat, organized space. A mostly empty bag of weed was folded into one section; next to it was a bag of white powder. I snatched it up and pulled a clean spoon from the box, along with a syringe and needle still in the wrapping.

They were from a box of diabetic needles that I got after convincing a young pharmacist that I was a diabetic with no insurance. The needles were small, but that was only a problem if I had any meat on me. I was easily able to hit the vein with them.

Even with shaking hands, I was able to hold the spoon steady while I heated the white powder. When it was fully melted, I pulled it up in the syringe and squeezed my thumb in my hand. The needle mark from last night was still visible. A rush of excitement ran through me as blood flushed back into the syringe. I slowly pushed the syringe down, feeling a wave of relief flood over me.

The cramping subsided, and a calmness came over me. The old euphoria that got me addicted to drugs had been replaced with a feeling of normalcy. The angst that had felt like a crushing weight was gone.

"That was dumb," I said to the room. My chest was starting to slow, and the cold breeze that wafted through the room reminded me that I was drenched in water on the floor. I pushed myself to my feet, trying my best not to fall on the wet surface. The shower was still running when I went into the bathroom to get a towel and attempted to dry myself and the floor.

The Apostle

Now that I could think again, I remembered just how bad my situation was. I was still penniless, jobless, and soon-to-be homeless. Maybe I can just leave.

You can't keep running away forever. The small voice in my head whispered past the anxiety. It was odd. This voice seemed different from my everyday inner thoughts. It was deeper and more pronounced.

"I know," I said out loud to the voice. "But it's not that easy."

But it still must happen. I knew it was true. Of course, I knew. I was the one telling it to myself. I took a deep breath, shoving the voice back down.

"Fine." I hated that I had put myself in this situation. I didn't have the luxury of time and needed to do something now.

With my resolve set, I ambled over to the poor excuse of a dresser. Well, the dresser was actually quite nice. It was made from stained wood, and it was the sturdiest thing in the room. What made it a poor excuse was that I only owned about three sets of clothes, and one of them was dip-drying in the kitchen. I opened the drawers to look at my options. The other two sets were jeans, one ripped and one less ripped, and plain t-shirts, one holey and one slightly less holey. I chose the less tattered of the two and threw it on.

The light grey t-shirt was a little too big for me and hung loosely across my shoulders. It was clean-ish but still smelled of oil from a brief run at stealing catalytic converters. The pants were about three sizes too big. They dropped to my ankles a few steps in. I ended up using the trusty two shoelaces tied together as a belt to keep them up.

I stopped in the still-open door. A pit of anxiety gnawed at my stomach. I glanced behind me at the black box still sitting on my bed, the pain of withdrawal still fresh on my body. *I can't risk going through that while job hunting.*

I moved back to the bed and expertly prepared another three hits. It was my usual amount to keep me on my

The Apostle

feet for a few hours. I felt no rush or relief with these, though. The high that had hooked me on heroin years ago had faded. Now, I simply did it to keep going. After I was done prepping for the evening, I pushed the box under the bed and headed for the door.



3

By the time I locked the door behind me and set out to look for employment, the sun was already starting its slow descent from the sky. If I wanted to find employment today, I needed to move fast. I hit the street at a brisk walk and headed toward my part of town.

It was the only part of town that accepted someone like me. The dark and rundown area that never seemed to get any of the money for road repairs or new buildings. Half the businesses here when I first moved in had either changed ownership or were boarded up and home to the less fortunate. I had to remind myself that I would join them soon if I didn't get a job.

I made my way through the dim streets toward the only place I could think of. One man had offered me a job when I first arrived. I returned that kindness by laughing in his face and pissing on the side of his building. Even after that, he continued to offer me a job on multiple occasions. The only reason I hadn't burnt this bridge yet was because I had always turned him down.

The man in question was named Alex Clifford, and he owned the only butcher shop in this half of the city. It was a large operation, and he had run it for the last 20 years. He was known for selling good-quality meat at the lowest possible price to everyone around. His business had given many people in the lower class food for their table. All the

The Apostle

gangs here respected him and everything he did for all of us. Because of that, his store was never robbed or held up. It was almost a neutral zone in the backstreets.

"Aaron Beck, it has been a while since I've seen you crawl by my store," Alex said, sitting on the large loading dock at the back of his building. It was a concrete wall about 6 feet off the ground that the trucks could pull up to load and unload the meat.

He was in his 60s with the body of a man in his early 30s. Refined muscles flexed along the dark brown, leathery skin of a man who had worked every day of his life. Compared to me, he was a well-respected part of society. His bald head glinted in the dying light, but the thick hair that hugged his face was snow white with streaks of black hanging desperately to his youth. He was puffing a massive cigar.

"Mr. Clifford," I said, dipping my head in greeting him.

"Rare to see you up and about this early, much less walking straight," he said, pulling the cigar from his mouth. He was a blunt man, but that was what made him so likable. Now that I was standing face-to-face with him, I was nervous. I hadn't expected him to be outside like this. I shuffled my feet like a kid who knew he had done something wrong.

"Mr. Clifford, I was wondering if that job offer was still available." I couldn't even look him in the eyes as embarrassment flushed my face. Silence permeated the air.

"Shit, I'm sorry kid. I'd love to, but I just hired two more and can't afford to have you here right now," he said with genuine sadness. I looked up at him. It was clear that he felt terrible about this. He was rubbing his balding head with an embarrassed look on his face. I knew his words were true. He was the type of person to tell me straight up if he didn't want to hire me anymore. I gave him a small smile. His sincerity made it hurt less, not that it changed how I felt.

The Apostle

"No worries, Mr. Clifford. Thank you anyway. I'll get going. I have something I have to do," I said quickly before turning around. It was far too awkward to be there right now. Neither of us knew what to say now that things had gotten weird.

I hurried out of sight of the shop, not wanting to look back. After a few blocks, my ears no longer burned, and the pit in my stomach had loosened. *This sucks*. I had no idea what I was supposed to do now. Clifford was the only idea that I had come up with. I wandered around the streets, unsure of where I was going or what I was doing.

I guess you will need to look somewhere else.

"I know that. But I have no idea where. Anywhere that would hire me won't hire me again." I snapped back at the voice in my head. A small part of my mind was checking out the abandoned houses, looking for a place to sleep after I was booted from my place above Ms. Glenda. "You know that building doesn't look too bad, and I only see a few makeshift tents inside."

Ha-ha, you crack me up. You know it's bad when your inside voice doesn't think you are funny, either.

The screaming of a thousand recorders played by toddlers exploded in my head. The sudden sound made me jump, clapping my hands over my ears. It did nothing to muffle the horrible sound. I spun around, looking for the cause of the horrible symphony. My head decided it was equally as angry as my heart and began fighting back with an intense pounding. Assaulted by both internal and external pain, I located the direction. It was coming from my right, but it was so loud that I wouldn't be surprised if it were right on top of me. My hands were useless as I tried to plug my ears.

"What the hell is this?" I screamed, turning away from the sound. A homeless man from the building I was eyeing as a potential home peeked out of his tarp at me. He

The Apostle

was wary of me. Somehow, I was the crazy one in this scenario. How could he not be bothered by this sound?

My fingers dug deeper into my ear, ignoring the pain they caused, and I sprinted as fast as my legs would let me. I had no idea what was causing that sound, but I just wanted to put as much distance between it and me as possible. The noise was behind me, but the sound got louder with each footstep. Fear welled inside me as if whatever was making the noise was chasing after me and gaining on me every second. The fear only made me run faster until my lungs burned and my legs screamed at me to stop, yet the noise only increased.

My vision blurred as the sound hit a nearly unbearable level. I slowed, gripping my skull, and screamed gutturally. This was a type of pain that I had never felt before. My brain was vibrating with the frequency and threatening to liquefy at any moment. I staggered forward, desperately trying to put distance between me and the noise. Unable to see through the pain, I slid pathetically along the brick wall.

I don't remember falling, but at some point, I ended up on my knees. A small puddle under me, reminiscent of last night's rain, rippled as red drops interrupted the surface. The face looking back up at me was streaked with blood. I shakily reached my hand up, hoping that it was some sort of hallucination. My red fingertips told me that it was not.

What the hell is happening to me? My head felt like it was going to split in half, but I managed to stagger to my feet as the world spun. My shaky legs stumbled back, only the wall keeping me up. Ever so slightly, the sound lessened. It was so small that I didn't know if it was real or in my head. But it gave me hope.

My feet carried me back, almost unconsciously, begging for anything but the pain. With each step toward the horrendous noise, the pain faded. I began to move faster,

The Apostle

needing to escape even if faster was barely a crawl. Every step took all my concentration, but gradually, I moved.

It took a few hundred steps before I could breathe normally again, and after a block, I could walk without the assistance of the wall. I glanced in the reflection of a passing window. Blood had started to drain from my nose, eyes, and ears. Thankfully, it had stopped, and I could wipe off the red streaks.

I tried again to plug my ears. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't block the noise. It didn't even dampen it. A woman on the phone pushed past me, trying to avoid eye contact. She was talking in a normal voice.

"No, I will swing by the store on the way back," she spoke to the person on the other end of the phone. Somehow, I could hear her clearly over the screeching. It was like she wasn't bothered at all by the noise.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I said, stepping toward her. She took a step back, wary of me. I saw her eyes glance to the sides. There were enough people in the streets that kidnapping would be hard.

"I don't have any money," she said briskly, moving around me.

"No, ma'am. I'm not asking for money. Can you hear that whistle sound?"

"I don't hear any sound like that." She didn't stop walking as she spoke. She did take the time to glance back at me like I was the crazy one in this whole situation, curling her lip.

I looked around. The street wasn't busy, but there were at least 10 people within eyesight. None of them were covering their ears. They were all acting like nothing was going on.

Maybe I am crazy. The sound was still loud enough to make even my own thoughts hard to hear. The pounding in my head was relentless, and I was starting to feel sick from the pain. I had no idea what was going on, but all I knew was

The Apostle

that the closer I got to the source of the noise, the quieter it was in my head. It made absolutely no sense.

I subconsciously patted at my pockets, feeling for my tin. *Oh yeah, I lost it.* The idea of drowning out my pain with another hit was the first thing on my mind. I hadn't brought anything with me.

I had no idea what was going on, but one thing was clear. The longer I stood there kicking myself, the louder and more painful the sound was. All I knew was that this hurt like hell, and I needed it to stop.

I headed back the way I came slowly, trying to get my mind straight. After a few more blocks, the sound was bearable, and I slipped into an alley, leaning my back on the cold bricks. Even with the noise greatly diminished, my headache showed no signs of fading.

"What the hell is going on?" I muttered to the brick wall. I patiently waited for my inner thoughts to say something useful. There was only silence in the alleyway. "Great. No help when I need you."

I tried to catch my breath and let my body rest a little. Between last night and now, this was the most physically active I had been in years. My legs wanted to give out on me, and my lungs burned with each breath. Before I could catch my breath, much less get a real break, the dull whistling got louder and more intense. It was as if it was irritated that I was standing in one place too long. I let out a small curse and continued on my path, this time slower.

The sound wasn't going to let me stay in one place. Whatever was happening, I would have to play along with my own insanity. I kept a watchful eye for anything out of the ordinary as I walked into the street and headed back the way I came. The only one acting abnormally was me.

I hadn't paid too much attention to the sound while I was running away, but somehow, it wasn't coming from only one direction. It didn't fully dawn on me until I passed an alley, and the sound suddenly shifted from in front of me

The Apostle

to my right. After I exited it, the sound was once again coming from the old direction. It was as if the sound was leading me somewhere.

I had no idea where this magical sound GPS that only I could hear was leading me, but I had no choice but to follow. I walked at a slow but steady pace, making sure not to anger the buzzing sound. The noise didn't get louder as long as I maintained a constant speed.

I left the shady, low-income part of town and entered the middle class. There were no boarded-up windows and closed-down shops. The roads were distinctly void of potholes, and stray weeds did not litter the cracked sidewalk. It almost felt like a different world. Unlike the dull and almost depressed feel I left, this place felt alive.

In a place like this, I stuck out like a sore thumb. I had only been to this part of town once when I first arrived. I had clothes that fit back then. Now, my ratty, dirty clothes and disheveled appearance made me look homeless compared to the name-brand clothes of the middle class. I saw some of the looks in their eyes as I walked by. It was a mix of pity and disgust. It was the first time in a while that I felt conscious of my appearance. *I wish I had a drink.* I wanted to turn around and head back. Back to my tiny loft and the streets that I knew. Where I was only judged by those in as bad a situation as I was in. Unwillingly, the sound continued to pull me along further into the unfamiliar city.

I straightened my back and walked faster, trying to ignore how people moved away from me. Parents pulled their kids to the side, as if I might snatch them away. I hated feeling this dirty as if I were the problem. I was happy when the sound led me down another alley, and I could leave the eyes that followed me as they checked their pockets when I passed.

After a little longer slipping between streets and alleys, the buzzing sound of a mosquito stopped getting quieter. It was just loud enough that I could pinpoint the

The Apostle

direction. It remained at the same annoying level as long as I kept moving forward. I was sure that whatever it was leading me to was close by. The thundering of my heart and clammy palms made the anticipation of whatever was to come more nerve-racking.

"Maybe I was wrong," I said after another ten minutes of walking. I was stuck at a stoplight with a red hand. With each passing second, the sound got louder as I waited for traffic to stop. Nerves had been replaced with seething rage at the stupid noise. I eventually snapped and screamed into the oncoming traffic, "I am going as fast as I can."

The few people waiting at the stop with me backed up a step. I'm sure I looked crazy with ripped clothes and screaming at nothing. I was too mad to be embarrassed. The sound grew to a shrill shriek, and I contemplated running into traffic as the hand changed to the walking person, and I took off at a jog. The sound was back to normal before I even got to the other side of the road.

The noise led me down the busy street for a few minutes before taking me down an alley again. For the first time, it sounded like the noise was coming from outside my head. I stopped, pushing myself against the wall even though it gave no cover. My first scan of the alley didn't reveal anything out of the ordinary. It was between two large shops, and as far as alleys went, it was rather clean. The only source of mess was a large trash can with three bags to the side, neatly tied and stacked.

I hesitated to move further until the sound increased again, forcing me deeper into the alley. I was getting tired of whatever was happening. The source of the noise was nowhere to be seen. But somehow I could hear it coming from the center of the alley, seemingly floating invisibly at head height.

"Maybe I should check myself into a mental hospital." I was mildly regretting the small amount of heroin

The Apostle

that I had this morning. It wasn't a fresh bag. *Maybe it was spiked? Did heroin go bad?* That was a question that I had never contemplated and really hoped that I never would again.

I moved deeper, trying to scan every inch. There was nothing there, nothing to explain the noise, much less the crazy GPS that it caused. I inched down the alley, growing considerably more irritated with the day. Nothing made sense, and I didn't know what to do.

Thick, heavy air engulfed me like an invisible sludge. Suddenly, it was hard to move, and breathing became difficult. I felt like I was being compressed on all sides, walking through mud. The world around me was smothered with an invisible blanket, making the heavy traffic behind me barely audible. Panic set in as I tried to pull back. It was impossible. The heaviness had a hold of me and was pulling me in. If I had been able to take a full breath, I might have started to hyperventilate. Instead, I was forced to take long, deep breaths, forcing my chest to expand against the pressure that surrounded me.

If you have ever gotten off one of those flat escalators at airports and instantly hit the non-moving ground way faster than you are used to, then you understand what I went through. As soon as my body left the sludge, I was launched forward, stumbling like a newborn fawn. I failed to catch myself and sprawled out on the ground in a mess of arms and legs.

"Ouch," I groaned, getting up from the ground. I glanced behind me to make sure no one saw my foolishness.

Something was wrong. It was still early evening, and the sun was high enough to cast light in the alley. But somehow, everything was dim. Even the busy street, only a dozen feet from me, looked like dusk, as if a thick grey haze had settled over the world. Not only was the color dim, but the sounds were muffled. Like the world was covered in a thick curtain. A sports car drove slowly by the alley, blasting

The Apostle

music with the top down. It was impossible to make out the muffled voice, and the bass thudded quietly.

I glanced up, looking toward the sky. It was a similar case, a grey mat with the slightest hints of blue that faded through. It was like it had been transported into a black-and-white movie, trying to claw its way back into reality. Even the walls had a sort of fuzz to them. I gingerly touched the brick wall beside me, expecting it to feel different. On the contrary, it felt ordinary, only its appearance was off.

"Shit, I must really be losing my mind." Before I could answer myself, a loud bang, unnatural to the eerie silence that had engulfed me, made me drop to a knee. Spontaneous gunfire tends to have that reaction in most people.

Even spending the last few years in the 'bad' part of town, I had done my very best to avoid any situations with guns. It didn't matter what I was on that day. I made sure to keep away from the other end of a barrel. And I was not looking to change that any time soon.

I crouched lower as the next volley of gunfire was followed by a bone-chilling howl. It was the farthest thing from human-sounding that I have ever heard, and it sent a shiver to my very soul.

"Nope, fuck this. I'm out," I said, standing up. I spun on my heels, facing the dull road I came from. Another round of gunfire, followed by the howling of a beast, turned my walk into a run. I'd take the weird invisible sludge and even the painful ringing over whatever was inside this off-world.

Instead of hitting the sludge barrier, I ran full speed into what felt like a brick wall. My face crunched against the solid air, flattening my nose. I didn't have time to back off before a bolt of electricity shot through my body, launching me back off the barrier. My feet were off the ground before I could register that it hurt like hell. I slammed hard on my back, sliding along the concrete.

The Apostle

"Ow," I groaned, coming to a stop. My nerves caught up to my body, and I doubled over in pain. A sharp burning on my back let me know that my only good shirt was ripped along with the skin. The shoelace that I had used to keep my pants up had snapped, and they had been pulled down a little from the friction of the floor. A painful burning told me that I had some road burn on my lower back. "What the hell was that?"

I slowly got to my feet. Besides my back, ass, and nose, everything was as good as it had been when I started the day. I brushed off the dust and attempted to retie the end of the shoelace belt. It was barely passable. A large rip in the back of my shirt made this another useless outfit. No one would hire me looking like this.

"Not that a job is my biggest concern right now?" I muttered and looked back the way I had come. Looking back at the street, still filled with a haze, it was impossible to distinguish this world from the real one. My face knew the barrier was there, but I couldn't tell where it began. I gingerly approached the barrier, reaching my hand out in front of me like I was wandering in the dark, looking for a light switch. The palm of my hand pressed against something solid. It felt like nothing, and yet here it was. It was like the air had turned into a solid. I placed both hands on it, pushing with all the strength my already exhausted legs could come up with. It didn't even pretend to budge.

The shock must have messed up something in my head because I completely forgot about it—another bolt of electricity shot through my arms. My shoulders gave out as I stumbled back, dropping the useless twigs I called my arms to my side. I yelped, my arms flapping in the wind. My pants dropped to the ground, wrapping around my ankles. I fell back flat on my ass.

I lay there, completely ignoring the gunfire that was still echoing in the not-far-off distance. The stinging in my arms faded enough that I could pull my pants up and retie

The Apostle

the broken shoelace again. It was holding on for dear life at this point. Once done, I looked longingly at the street. Getting out of this place seemed impossible. That left only one direction.

"You always knew you were probably going to die young," I muttered to myself in a half-joking way. I turned from the invisible barrier and stepped quietly toward the gunfire. From the volume of the echo, it seemed that the gunfight was only a block or two away.

The alley ended and opened up into a road. Even looking past the fuzzy, hazy world, something was wrong with this place. It took me a second to realize it. The strange feeling I was getting was because there were no people. I should have walked out into a busy street with cars zipping around. Instead, I was looking at an empty road. The odd thing was that while no cars were driving along the deserted road, there were parked cars lining it.

I placed my hand on the closest car. An old truck that had the tiniest hints of red past the grey veil that covered it and everything around. The cold steel felt normal despite the look. I was just stalling now, anything to not walk into a gunfight. I wanted to turn back and wait for this freak show to end, but with my terrible luck, it wouldn't stop until I went over there.

"I really wish I had a drink," I said before sprinting across the street. No one was around, but it still felt weird to be out in the open.

I entered the alley on the other side of the road. It was similarly clean, even in this hazy otherworld that I was in. As someone who had slept in more than one alley over the past few years, I was a little jealous. At least I would have been if the gunfire hadn't been a serious distraction.

With each step I took, the sound of gunfire grew clearer. I instinctively lowered my body while sliding along the brick wall of a blurred pizza joint. A wail of a wounded beast split through the explosions, turning my blood cold.

The Apostle

This is dumb. What the hell am I doing?

Only a dozen feet separated me and the firefight. I was scared, but I kept inching forward. I took one last breath as I approached the end of the alley and peeked around. I leaned over so only one eye could see what was going on. The alley ended and opened into a large plaza at the far end of a massive shopping center. There was a fancy-looking water fountain in the center of the plaza. The water looked frozen in the air as it attempted to flow from a large black-and-white iris.

Like the road behind me, this plaza was void of the expected customers and pigeons. Void of everything but five people running around. Well, there were five things moving around the plaza. I couldn't even wrap my head around what it was. Four people wearing blue and white uniforms, that seemed unusually bright in the greyscale of the rest of the world, ran around the open space. Besides the color, I couldn't tell you what they looked like. My eyes were drawn to the fifth thing.

The creature was airborne, flying 20 feet off the ground like a nightmare from my most horrible acid trips. It flapped its four massive wings, sounding like a loose tarp in a storm. It looked humanoid with skin a sickly green color. Dark black ooze dripped from what I assumed were various bullet holes. The creature's face was angular, like a dog with large green eyes and a pair of curled horns sticking up out of its forehead. It might have a name of its own, but the only thing running through my head was 'monster.'

Before I could make sense of the insanity that was unfolding before me, three flashes of light, followed by the bang of a gun, made me jump back and hide. My pounding chest was telling me to get as far away from here as possible, but my head was begging me to look. Against my better judgment, I peeked around the corner, keeping myself lower to the ground. The four color-coordinated ones looked human: three men and a woman, all wearing similar silver

The Apostle

and blue uniform-type clothes. The clothes looked like a strange cross between a priest's outfit and a military uniform. Their horrible taste in fashion, not that I was one to judge, was the least concerning thing about them.

The one closest to me was holding a rope wrapped around the monster's ankle. He had managed to get the rope looped around the top of the fountain, keeping the monster from flying away. Muscles bulged on the man's arms, stretching his shirt as he struggled to hold the creature in place. The monster was spinning around him like a loose kite in the wind. A kite that hissed and growled and seemed to be spitting yellow globs that the four were doing their best to bob and weave around.

The monster took a dive at two of the others who were running around in a zig-zag pattern, dodging mucus. Both of them were holding silver pistols, firing them at it as he dove at them. The girl looked thin with long brown hair that was pulled back in a ponytail. She was clearly a better shot and hit the demon at least three of the four shots she took. The man had short, curly hair and needed to come to a complete stop before firing. His accuracy was less than 50%.

The monster dove into a hailstorm of bullets from both attackers. The rapid succession of bullets rammed into the beast with an audible thud before clattering to the ground. None of them seemed to leave a scratch and only succeeded in pissing it off. Undeterred by the bullets, the creature swung a large, clawed hand at the closest one. They were easily out of arm's reach, but the man dove to the side in a perfect tuck-and-roll motion. A loud tearing sound echoed over the gunfire as the ground was shredded where the man had stood before.

I flinched at the sound and tucked away again. I was horrified, too terrified to even speak. But something in me wanted to stay. Wanted to look and watch. Wanted to know what nightmare I had landed myself into. I slid forward on my chest and peeked around the corner again.

The Apostle

You should leave. The little voice in my head that was deeper than my own tried to warn me of the dangers. I batted the little voice to the side. This was too good to miss.

The girl slid to a stop and turned around, facing the monster, seemingly taunting it. It swung her way, lowering itself into another dive. The man tried his best to hold the demon with the rope, but it slid forward as it pulled. He dug his heels into the ground, stopping the monster a few feet from the girl. The amount of trust she put in him was more than I had ever put into anyone.

The monster lurched to a stop, throwing his clawed hand in a wide arch. The ground to the left of the woman was shredded, like before, throwing bits of concrete into the air. She didn't even flinch as she lifted the barrel of the pistol and pulled the trigger. Her accuracy was impeccable.

Something like a whimper and a snarl escaped the monster's open mouth as his head was slammed back. Hissing angrily, it spun to look at the guy holding the rope. He was the one thing keeping the monster from killing the girl. The monstrous wings flapped as he tried to turn, but bullets hit him from all directions as the large man yanked hard on the rope, throwing the creature off balance. It flapped frantically, trying to keep itself in the air, putting some slack on the rope. The muscular man quickly backed up, tightening the rope. He maintained the perfect amount of tension to keep himself safe and keep the monster from reaching the others.

The creature angrily swiped a clawed hand at him. The dust that had been kicked up from the fighting split in two as the invisible attack shot out at the man. He easily stepped to the side, dodging it.

It's dangerous to be here. I was getting tired of my inside voice. It only ever gets this loud when I sober up.

Man, I really could use a drink right about now. This time, the voice was my own. At least the me in my head was the

The Apostle

one I spoke with. I pushed them both out. There's no need to question my sanity right now. I looked back at the fight.

They worked like a well-oiled machine. The man kept the monster in a small area using the rope. Since it was looped around the fountain, the muscular man was able to run around it, staying away from the monster. When it tried to attack him, the other two would bombard it with bullets, giving the man time to run away. If it were any less terrifying, I might have felt a little sorry for the struggling monster.

While it looked like a good strategy from here, there was one major problem. The bullets were doing little to no damage to the monster. They had already shot at least 30 bullets each, and the creature was still flying around mostly unharmed. At this rate, they were going to burn out long before the monster was down.

A bright flash of light pulled my eyes from the drawn-out battle. The fourth man I had forgotten about was standing off to the side. He looked like some lost prince of a forgotten age with his head bowed, holding the hilt of a sword in his hand. The blade was glowing, flickering with its own light that spread from the man's hands down to the tip of the blade. The whole process took a few seconds at most. When the blade was lit up, he lifted his head, transitioning the blade into a fighting stance.

Well, he isn't the brightest tool in the shed.

While I found his dedication and bravery impressive, bringing a sword to a gunfight when the guns weren't working seemed like a horrible idea. Whether it was stupidity or bravery, the man held the sword ready and charged. His long blond hair flowed dreamily behind him like Prince Charming charging the castle. He closed the distance, keeping the fountain between him and the monster. The monster either didn't notice him or didn't feel threatened by a glowing stick and continued to attack the other three.

He reached the fountain at full speed and jumped 10 feet to the top like it was nothing. He moved with inhuman

The Apostle

strength, passing through the frozen water as if it were not even there. With a graceful lunge, he leaped from the top of the fountain at the monster.

The muscular man pulled hard on the rope, dragging the monster toward the airborne man. The monster spun in the air, noticing for the first time the attack from above. Fear flashed across its face as the man swung the blade in a wide arch.

The monster's wings that had deflected bullets a moment ago cut like warm butter. Black ooze spewed out from the wing, and it was cleaved in half. The horrific scream made me jerk back and cover my ears.

The monster couldn't stay in the air with one set of wings and twisted, slamming hard on the ground, followed by the blond man. Both of them rolled to their feet in a far better show of athleticism than I was capable of. The wounded creature spun on its heels, planting a foot into the blond man's chest. He was launched backward and sailed over 30 feet, slamming hard on the ground.

Everyone moved in sync as the swordsmen scrambled and readied for another attack. The rope was yanked hard, causing the monster to fall into the splits. It let out a howl of pain as its legs were forced apart. The girl came from the side, grabbing the beast's horn. She jumped onto its shoulders, placing the barrel of the pistol point-blank to the back of its head. She pulled the trigger as fast as possible, seemingly turning the single shot into a machine gun. They were well-versed in this and were winning.

Run! The deep voice exploded in my head.

I was so invested in the fight unfolding before me that I tuned everything else out. A shiver shot down my spine, returning me to the here and now. My breath caught, turning my blood to ice in my veins.

It was as if time had stopped for a moment. The fighters in the plaza moved with a painful slowness. It was

The Apostle

only a heartbeat, but every nerve in my body told me to run. Run like I never had before. Run before I die.

Someone or something hit the play button on the world, and my body reacted without thinking. I lurched forward, pulling my feet under me like a deranged frog. The ground where I had been sprawled out just a moment ago crunched under the weight of something massive.

Run! I listened to the voice and took off at full speed.

I may have been smart enough to run, but that was where my intelligence ended. Instead of running out toward the monster-hunting people who would be the best to handle whatever was now thundering behind me, I ran into the alley in the opposite direction. I rounded the corner and sprinted down the empty street, taking a chance, and glanced back at whatever was snarling behind me. A large bundle of fur erupted from the alley, too close for comfort. Sparks scattered along the ground as the creature drifted around the corner in pursuit. It looked like some horrible, mutated wolf covered in white fur. That wasn't the most terrifying part. It was the fact that the creature was the size of a small car and was deadlocked on me.

"Oh, fuck that!" I screamed, sprinting even faster now.

I put everything I had into running and took every corner that I could find, bouncing off walls. My shoulder screamed with pain as I hit one wall a little too hard and stumbled. The hot breath of the wolf tickled the back of my neck as it followed in pursuit, ramming its body into the wall. The bricks creaked in protest as the massive body rebounded off.

It was practically on top of me. Its breath reeked of rot and death. I could almost feel the razor teeth already digging into my flesh. My sad, pathetic excuse of a life flashed before my eyes. I didn't want to die like this.

Crunch!

The Apostle

I ran into the invisible barrier at full speed with a nasty crunch of my nose. Pain exploded in my face as electricity jolted through my body and rebounded me off the wall. My shoulder struck something soft and furry, moving just as fast toward me as I was toward it. I must have hit the wolf in the shoulder because I was sent up into the air, performing more than one unnatural cartwheel. Before I could figure out which way was up, I slammed onto the concrete ground, where something else gave a loud crack.

All the air rushed from my lungs, and my vision wavered. From the corner of my fading eyes, I saw the monster ricochet off the barrier. It let out a loud yelp as it was thrown over my body, landing somewhere out of sight. The smell of burning hair filled my lungs as I took a deep breath.

I coughed and rolled onto all fours. My back was screaming from pain, and warm blood was dripping from my obviously broken nose. Today was shaping up to be the worst day. I tried to get to my feet but stumbled as the world spun in circles. I had hit my head pretty hard on the ground. It was more impressive that I was still awake, much less trying to stand up.

I used the wall to push myself up, screaming in pain. I looked down. My left ankle was swollen. It was already turning purple and puffing up over my dirty shoes. I could still move it side to side, even if it hurt like hell. I didn't think it was broken.

The creature huffed from behind me. He was moving even slower than I was. I blinked back the water in my eyes and got my first good look at it. The fur that I thought was snow white was more of a dull cream color with large patches missing. The exposed skin was a muddy grey color, dry and cracked. The front half of the beast was smoking, and the fur was sizzling. The wall did a lot more damage to this thing than me. I was almost glad to just have a broken nose and a possible concussion.

The Apostle

The barrier had tossed the monster further than me, putting it in my escape route. It let out a toothy snarl as it staggered to its feet and turned to face me. Any chance that I had of getting past it was gone now.

I slowly backed up as the creature shook its massive head and locked eyes with me. Its lips were stained with the bright red color of fresh blood. It wasn't mine, but that meant there was some unlucky corpse around here. It looked like I was about to join the poor sap.

Another pain in my back made me flinch and stumble backward. It hurt. I didn't think I had done something else to my back on the fall, but this pain was bad. It felt like my back was being torn in half. I screamed and reached back. It was hard to keep an eye on the beast now drooling at me, but the pain hurt so much that I would almost rather be torn to shreds. Had I broken my back? Or was there something impaling me?

I expected to feel shredded clothes and bloody skin, or maybe a bone protruding out of my back. Instead, my hand landed on something long and smooth. It was ice cold, cold enough to make me jerk my hand away in shock.

The quick action made the monster attack. It lunged forward at me with its mouth open wide, exposing a row of yellowed, sharp teeth. I dove to the side, trying to ignore the pain in my ankle. The thing in my back made a tearing sound as I awkwardly rolled out of the monster's attack. The beast rammed against the wall only a few feet from me. I screamed through the fear and the pain, pulling myself off the ground and fighting the urge to pull out whatever was tearing my back apart.

Any pain in my swollen ankle was overshadowed by my back. It was bad enough that I wanted to black out, but the creature wouldn't give me even a moment to breathe. It turned, shaking off bits of brick from the now shattered wall. It turned to face me, looking even madder now that it had missed.

The Apostle

I wanted to run. I instinctively turned toward the only way I could go. The thing in my back made a sound of shredding paper. Every time I moved, it made it worse. I reached back and grasped the ice-cold pole. Anything was better than keeping this in place.

I wrenched it from my back. I felt the weight of the object land on my shoulder as I tore it free from my body. The pain that had all but crippled me a moment ago vanished. The motion triggered the beast, and it charged. With nowhere to fly to, my pathetic fight instincts kicked in. As the creature lunged, I swung the heavy block of ice from my back over my head in a wide arch.

The sound of a gong rang out in the alley as a thick, pitch-black pole connected with the beast's skull. A painful vibration shook down the length of a 6-foot-long scythe. The weapon was gorgeous. It looked eerily similar to the tattoo I had found on my back earlier. No, it wasn't just similar. It was an exact match. Everything from the slight curve in the handle to the jet-black bird skull that ran along the length of the blade was exactly the same.

I gripped the top of the scythe only a few inches below the blade. The end of the shaft was planted in the center of the creature's skull. While it wasn't enough to stop the massive beast, for some reason, it recoiled from it. The spot between its eyes was smoking and sizzling as if it were freshly burnt.

The pain didn't deter the creature long, and he faced me again, this time with apprehension. I quickly spun the weapon around in what I assumed was the correct direction. At least, it looked something like what I saw in a movie once.

The icy metal clung to the skin of my hands, never seeming to warm up. Even in this hellscape I found myself in, I couldn't help but marvel at the weapon. The blade, tracing the edge of a long bird beak, was jet black, blacker than anything I had seen. So dark that it seemed to absorb the light around it a few inches from the blade. Oddly, the

The Apostle

scythe felt perfect in my hands, even if it was heavy enough that I struggled to hold it up. I had to rest it against my shoulder just to keep from lowering it. Yet, it felt strangely comfortable.

The beast's golden eyes darted between the midnight blade and me. It was a little hesitant, but the look in its eyes told me that it wasn't deterred from ripping out my throat. I was backed into a wall, literally. The cold bricks touched the scrapes on my back, letting me know that I had nowhere to run. I knew it, and the beast definitely knew it.

I sagged against the weight of the scythe. I was not known for my strength. I saw the beast's eyes flick to me, looking me up and down intently. They weren't the eyes of a monster or mindless beast. No, they were intelligent. It paced toward me with the confidence that it knew I was no warrior.

Fear, unlike I had ever felt before, came crashing down on me. Even if I could run with my ankle, there is no way I could get away from this thing. I was backed into a wall with no hope of running, and a creature of my worst nightmare was standing in front of me. My legs, which had carried me this far, started to shake violently, threatening to give out. I might have done so if I couldn't lean against the wall. Sweat began to bead up all over my body and drip down my spine, burning the fresh cuts.

They say that animals can smell fear. I don't know if it's true, but its eyes twinkled with excitement. His yellowed teeth protruded from under his lips as they stretched in an overly wide smile. I could see the large muscles in its legs bulging under its fur as it crouched down.

If I were going to die today, I had no plans of dying like a scared bug. I stepped off the wall, hoisting the blade off my shoulder. I was beyond terrified. Everything in me was screaming that I was going to die. But I refused to sit here and get eaten.

The Apostle

"Come at me, you fluffy son of a bitch," I screamed, hitting a higher pitch than I intended. I charged forward as the wolf lunged.

The scythe was too long and too heavy for me to swing easily. I slid my hand up closer to the blade as I stepped forward. I had one shot at this. A wild swing held me in the balance between life and death.

This time, nothing slowed down as I ran toward my death. If anything, it was moving way faster than ever. I waited, screaming like a madman, until it was practically on top of me. When the rotting smell of the beast's breath was so strong that I could almost taste the corpses, I swung. The blade was so heavy that I had to use my whole body to move it. This was my one and only chance to survive. For the second time in my life, I asked a higher power for something.

Please, please help me.

The icy feel of the blade grew more intense as it slammed hard into the monster's side. It made something close to a tearing sound as the weight of the weapon drove the blade down to the base. Thick black blood welled up from the wound as the creature buckled under the attack. Its mouth fell open in a soundless howl.

His body slammed into me with the weight of a truck. My already weak and worn-out legs buckled, and I dropped like a stone. The life drained from the wolf's eyes, and its heavy head dropped to the ground with a loud thud. If not for the pile of trash bags under me, I might have cracked my skull on the ground.

As we tumbled to the ground, one of the massive claws dug painfully into my side. I gasped in pain, unable to scream because of the thousand pounds crushing me. I fought pathetically to crawl out from under it, but I was left breathless as it didn't budge. My vision started to falter.

Shit.

My head rolled back as darkness took over.