



*Cries
from a
Crusty
Heart*

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Paperback: ISBN 978-098580828-0

Kindle edition: ISBN 978-098580829-7

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Prologue

Scene 1

A lonely Saturday night in the city.

He was easily six foot four, pushing three hundred and then some, without an ounce of fat to be seen. Tree trunks for arms, bridge piers for legs. She fell back from the peephole, gasped, and looked again. Yes, the Incredible Hulk was standing outside her door.

He was just standing there, calm and relaxed. Topping off the muscular mass was a gorgeous face with a solid chin and light colored hair. He was a handsome Hulk, though the only green thing about him were his eyes. She couldn't miss their sparkle, even through the distortion of the cheap lens.

I should have bought that fancier peephole, she thought. He knocked again. She jumped back. After catching her breath, she answered in near shout, "Just a second!"

With that, she dashed on tiptoe to her bedroom, heading straight to her nightstand. The cold steel of her father's old pistol calmed her nerves. After clicking the safety *off*, she slipped it into the waistband of her jeans, hiding it in the small of her back. She adjusted her shirt to conceal the weapon as she sped back to the door.

"I'm coming," she announced as she fumbled with the chain bolt. *Come on, I've got necklaces that are heavier than this chain.* She secured the chain, flimsy as it was, and opened the door.

"Hello?" she asked quietly, looking at his face. His brilliant blue eyes seemed to strip away any defense she could muster, leaving her naked. She let her gaze wander down his body; though *wonder* would be a better verb. His jeans must have been custom made and his heavy, dark blue cotton shirt fit exactly right. She forced her eyes up to meet his. "Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes. You Evelyn," he replied, the corners of his mouth lifting just a tad. "May I come in?" It wasn't really a question.

Her first impulse was to slam the door and hope that the seven rounds in the Colt .45 would slow this ape down long enough for the police to arrive. Instead, she found herself closing the door and removing the chain.

He walked in, the floor groaning with each step, and with each groan, the room shrank in around her. He stopped in the middle of her living room. It was decorated in the "vintage eclectic" style, meaning that most of the furniture had been abandoned by previous college roommates or found on Craigslist under "Free stuff". Ignoring the muted TV, he glanced at the kitchen to his left and, after studying the dirty dishes in the sink, stepped halfway into the hall that lead to her bedroom and bathroom. The inspection complete, he moved back into the living room.

"A bit out of date," he said matter-of-factly, "but quite adequate." She hoped he was talking about the room and not her.

"Who are you?" She nervously fiddled with her hair, primped her blouse, and quickly caressed her hidden insurance policy. She wasn't used to having stud-muffins knocking on her door, much less looking for her. She was pretty, or so she was often told, in that average, no-one-really-notices kind of way. She had her father's soft green eyes, but her five-foot-five frame wasn't as sleek as she would have liked and her hair was the wrong shade of brown. But her least favorite feature had to be her breasts. Everyone assumed they were fake. She wished they were; it would be easier to get them knocked down a size.

"You couldn't pronounce my full name. Most just call me Pale for short," he answered while making himself

comfortable on her third-hand sofa as it groaned in protest. "I've been sent in answer to your prayers."

She could only stand silent and stare. She knew her mouth was hanging open but she couldn't seem to find the energy to close it.

"Seriously, the Lord God Almighty has sent me."

He looks sane, but one of us must be crazy, she thought as she backed slowly closer to her bedroom door and its deadbolt, never taking her eyes off of him, her fingers now touching the pistol.

"So, God sent you to me?" She shook her head. "Look, you're a nice — okay — a really nice looking guy, and I would normally welcome the attention..." She paused as she slid her fingers around the gun's grip. *Let's see if he's smart enough to get sarcasm.* "Well, if God sent you, I suppose we need to head straight to the bedroom and—"

To her surprise, he interrupted her. "Oh, I fear that you misunderstood." He shifted forward, leaning his massive bulk toward her. "This will be a strictly platonic relationship. Don't need to worry about getting romantic, making babies and all that stuff. I'm sorry if that thought scared you. No, I'm here to help fix all those other problems in your life."

"Other problems?" As far as she was concerned, she had suffered from *lackofahusbanditis* long enough. *Making babies doesn't scare me,* she thought despondently, *not ever getting to making babies, now that scares me.* "What kind of problems?"

"You seem to be having a lot of relationship related issues with different people and the Almighty One decided you could use a little heavenly assistance."

"What? You're an angel or something?" She suppressed a laugh. *All those steroids have cooked his brain,* she decided. *Well, at least I'm not the crazy one.* She let go of the Colt and crossed her arms.

"More or less," he replied as he leaned back with his hands behind his head. The couch groaned again. "Actually *more.* I'm not your average, standard-issue angelic being. I'm specialized. I was created to deal with specific human problems."

It was hard to breathe, so she stopped. As the situation dawned on her, she took a deep breath and said, "Oh, I get it. You're like that angel in that old movie my mom always watched at Christmas. Do you need to help me so you can get a promotion or something?"

"No, no, Heavens no." He held up a hand as if to stop her from any more foolish talk. "The one where the silly angel is trying to earn his wings? I know the movie, we all do. What theological poppycock. No, completely wrong idea."

"But you can't just knock on my door and expect me to believe that you are some kind of super-angel?" She was rather unsure of her own question. "Can you?"

"Come here," he ordered as he stood up and took a step toward her. "Look into my eyes."

Her hand dashed back under her blouse to the pistol. It was gone; raw fear took its place.

"Nice piece," he stated casually as he admired her pistol, his hands dwarfing it, making it resemble a toy. "A Colt .45 but made by the Ithaca Gun Company. Must be a World War Two relic."

"It was my grandfather's, then my father's," she replied, her voice now full of confusion. "How did you do that?"

He ignored her question. "Obviously well cared for," he stated to himself as he slid the slide back just enough to confirm that there was a round in the chamber. Then, holding the gun by the barrel end of the slide, he offered the grip end to her. "Here. Mankind has not invented a weapon that would have any effect on me."

She took the piece in her right hand and held it tight, hoping that it would provide some level of comfort. It didn't.

"Now, come look into my eyes." His voice was firm but he had dropped the commanding tone.

Without wanting to, she walked toward him. With nervous anticipation, she lifted her eyes to meet his. "I thought you had blue eyes? Wait, they were green," she stuttered as she looked into his eyes. "What color- are they? I've never seen..."

His irises were shifting between shades of blue, green and gray, mixed with colors she had never seen before. As if this wasn't disconcerting enough, she now had to tilt her head back to look at his face, for he was eight feet tall. His hair had grown to shoulder length, shimmering like golden tinsel. A gold breastplate covered his chest, adorned with cryptic symbols and foreign words. The work clothes were gone, replaced by a white robe that reached just below his knees and secured by a wide golden belt. Hanging from the belt was a sword, as long as she was tall, its blade the width of her hand.

She had just noticed the elaborate leatherwork on his sandals, when, with no detectable motion on his part, the sword was out of its sheath and the edge of the blade against the side of her neck.

Her pistol rattled on the floor. She stood motionless, sensing that the sharpest edge the world has ever known was pressed to her skin. Slowly a gentle smile crossed his lips, simultaneously and very methodically, he drew back his blade, straining to move so slowly, and returned it to its sheath.

As the hilt of the blade hit home, everything returned to normal (if such a state could ever exist again.) He was once again just your above average hunk in a blue work shirt and jeans.

"Wow," was all Evelyn could manage. Her voice quivered and she instinctively pressed her hand against her neck. It felt damp. Looking at her fingers, she saw traces of blood. That's when her knees gave way. He caught her by her arms and guided her back to her chair. Somehow, she sensed his apprehension. To him, she was a china doll. The slightest squeeze and he would snap her bones like dry spaghetti.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "It is only a scratch, it will heal within minutes. Though it will leave a minuscule scar as a subtle reminder."

After sitting for several minutes, she spoke. "Sorry for doubting you."

Scene 2

"I probably owe you the apology," he said, his eyes flashing one of those indescribable colors. "I must confess, I rather enjoy startling you humans when I get the chance." His voice as smooth as the butter she had left next to her toaster that morning. "I knew that you wouldn't believe me and I expected that you'd jump to some rather carnal conclusions."

"As you are undoubtedly aware, if you've been listening...do you get to hear my prayers?" She was still collapsed in the chair, her bones now felt like overcooked spaghetti.

"Not directly, no. The Holy Spirit handles that personally. He passes on what information we need."

"Well... Anyway, I guess you know I've been asking for a husband for some time."

"Since you were fifteen." His voice contained a hint of disapproval. "But that's not why I'm here."

"Then what prayers are you going to answer? I haven't prayed about much else." Her breathing slowly returned to normal.

"Actually, you don't pray much at all."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. I'm not the one being ignored."

"Believe me, after that little demo of yours, I'm sure that will become a higher priority. So what *are* you here for?"

"I'm here to deal with some of the relationship issues you've been struggling with."

"I didn't pray about those. I suppose I should have." *I'm not interested in winning Miss Popularity. Yikes, I wonder if he can read my thoughts?* When she remembered who *was* reading them, she cringed.

"Not with words, no. But remember, the Spirit hears the cries of your heart, the longings of your soul. He translates the moans and anguish of your true and undiluted desires into words that only the Almighty One understands." Pale sat down and was resting his elbows on the arms of her easy chair, his hands finger tip to fingertip, like a wise old college professor. "We need to clear up these issues first and then you'll be ready for other things."

"Like a husband and a family?"

"That is not mine to know."

"Okay, so how does this work?" she asked with a flip of her wrist, her open palm emphasizing her bewilderment. "Let me guess. You'll follow me around but no one else can see you but me and you'll help me become friends with those people that are bothering me?"

"Not at all." His voice had shifted; it was an octave deeper and as ominous as a tornado siren; it matched his now dark gray eyes. "You need to forget those silly movies. That is not how it works."

"Okay." She slid forward and sat at attention on the edge of the chair. "I know I'm not the woman I'm supposed to be. You'll help me become a new woman?"

"No."

"You had better just explain it to me."

"It's really pretty simple. You've got a long list of people you're having trouble with. You just give the order and I'll *take care* of them."

"You'll make them like me?" she asked. "That doesn't sound fair. I suppose you could set up situations that would push them that direction..."

Pale stood up and crossed his arms. His eyes had lost their color but not their fire. "I'm not a camp counselor."

"Just what are you, then?" she asked suspiciously.

"An executioner," he replied as calmly as if announcing he was a plumber.

"A what?"

"You've got a list of people you can't stand. A long list. Let's be honest, you hate them." His voice was so cold she could see his breath. "You give the order, I kill them." He slammed his right fist into the palm of his left hand. The impact sent shock waves through reality. Her heart stopped and everything in the room rippled like a pond hit by a meteorite.

After her world stopped shimmering, she jumped to her feet in horror. "I've never," she shouted the word with what little energy she had left, "ever asked God to kill anyone. That's just ridiculous."

"I can't judge whether or not it's ridiculous, but apparently you have asked." He was firm, but not condemning. "You forget, the Lord Almighty hears the true cries of your heart. Sometimes your words can get in the way, but He, the Holy One, knows what you're really asking for."

"You can't go around *killing* people."

"That's my job," he answered calmly.

"Who are you? The grim reaper?"

"No, I'm more an equestrian kind of guy. Haven't you ever read about me in Revelation?"

"Equestrian—horses?" she asked in confusion, wishing she had paid more attention to a certain sermon series.

"Pale? Pale horse, remember? I'm the fourth horseman." He held out both massive hands, palms up, as if she should suddenly recognize him. "Or will be someday, I don't know when I'll get sent out. It's kind of frustrating waiting all these millennia, you know. Thank the Almighty One that He sends me out on these special assignments every so often. Anyway, that's where I got my nickname. My real name is usually translated as 'Death', but its full form is rather long and cumbersome. Besides, people find it too intimidating."

She vaguely remembered a sermon that had mentioned four horsemen and the apocalypse, but the details were too foggy to be of use to her now. Without thinking, she stammered, "You *like* killing people?"

"That's why I was created. But I'm just the executioner, not the Judge. Blaming me is like blaming a gun"—he pointed at the Colt laying on the floor—"for firing when you pull the trigger. Besides, I can only kill on His, the Almighty One's, order. If I were to kill a human without being ordered to, I'd be put in chains to await judgment."

"How can you sound so casual?"

"Look, Evelyn, most humans have an immortality complex. Granted, it's more common among the young"—he paused for a second—"and fighter pilots. They've got it real bad. Of course most of them have an *immorality* complex as well, but that's another problem. Anyway, all humans die. Your problem is your perspective. You see it as the end, when, from heaven's perspective, it is just the beginning."

Evelyn sat back down and stared into space. Pale waited. When she looked up at him, he began again.

"Here's how it works. All you have to do is say, 'I wish they were dead.' I'll take it from there."

"How?" she shrieked, surprising herself by her own volume. After a deep breath, she asked, in an artificially

calm voice, "Strike them with lightning?" She was now pale herself, her voice trembling.

He laughed. "Forget the clichés. Look, I get to decide how they'll die and I have seven hours to make it happen. I usually like to be quick about it, except in extraordinary circumstances, when a delay would give them time to confess or would have other eternal consequences. In fact, you should expect your request to be fulfilled almost instantly."

She stood up and put her hands on her hips. "You didn't answer my question. Do you just walk up to someone and swing that sword at them?" Her fingers unconsciously stroked the fresh scar on her neck.

"I'm never that crude," he said with a sneer. "I can usually manipulate events and circumstances to make it look natural. However, I have many options..."

He stepped toward her, his hand reaching toward her chest. The thought of being groped was making her furious, when his hand reached her—and kept going. No pain, no blood, just frozen terror. Soon, she could feel his fingers caressing her heart. Even more terror, now mingled with nausea. Her body wanted to tremble but couldn't. She couldn't even breathe; screaming was out of the question.

"I could just as easily crush it." His voice was once again soft and smooth, its casualness amplifying her terror. He withdrew his hand. There was not a sign that it been anywhere unusual. She could only stare at it in shock, not sure if she was going vomit, faint, or both.

"Oh, don't worry. I washed my hand first. You'll be fine," Pale said with a grin. "I know, that always freaks people out. But it really helps get their attention."

"Oh, you've got my attention. I think I need a drink." As she said it, she glanced at him, expecting disapproval.

"Sure," he said, to her surprise. He stopped to pick up the pistol as he walked over to her kitchen counter. Exchanging the gun for a half empty bottle of Riesling, he pulled the cork and poured her a glass. She was even more surprised when he poured one for himself.

"Here," he said as he handed her the glass. "Sit down and let me explain the rest of the rules. Now, first of all, the King of all Kings doesn't like to get legalistic about this kind of stuff." He squeezed back into the easy chair again; she took the far end of the couch. "So you don't have to use those exact words. Anything that gets the message across will suffice. For example, 'I hope you die soon,' 'I hope someone kills them,' 'go jump off a cliff', or, like you told your friend about the rude barista at the coffee shop, 'the world would be better off if he had never been born.'"

"That counts?" She could feel the nausea restarting. She gulped the last of her wine. "I don't even remember saying it."

"Sure, it's really just a variation of the old, 'your mother should have had an abortion.' That counts too, of course. The quickest is just a simple 'drop dead.'" He swirled his wine around in the glass and took a sip. "Of course, the all-too-popular 'd-a-m-n you' and 'go to h-e-l-l' will send them to their Maker." He seemed to shudder as he spelled out the words. "But the Almighty makes the decision regarding their eternal destiny."

He stopped again to admire the wine. "Nice wine. Not quite as sweet as I prefer but still nice. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. Here's a really, really important thing to remember: another human being has to hear it. Doesn't matter who, and yes, it can be the target themselves."

Evelyn started to interrupt, but he raised his hand to stop her. "I know what you're going to ask." He paused for another sip, smiled at the glass in satisfaction and continued. "'Do phone calls count?'" He stopped and pointed a finger at her to emphasize his response. "Yes. As long as they can identify your voice and you can recognize theirs, a phone call is just as effective. And don't worry about inconveniencing me. I can dash to that call center in India and take out that inconsiderate jerk you talked to last week, no problem. However"—he shrugged—"texting doesn't count. I don't really understand why. But I don't make the rules, I just have to kill by them."

She just sat in disbelief, staring at her empty glass.

"There are a few other rules but only one that is really significant: once you pronounce sentence on

someone, there's no taking it back. You announce that you want them dead: they're dead. Period. Seven hours on the outside, usually a lot sooner."

Pale put down his wine glass, stood up with the grace of a ballet dancer and wandered over to the door of her balcony. He stood in silence, with his massive back to her, giving her time to process everything.

Scene 3

After a few, long minutes, Evelyn finally asked: "So what else do I need to know?" Her voice still dripped with disbelief.

"You have to address each target individually," Pale replied. "You can't stand up at your class reunion next weekend and yell, 'I wish you were all dead!' You'll have to pronounce sentence on each individual; condemn them one by one."

"First, I have no intention of attending that snipe-fest; besides, it's not like I'd want them *all* dead. But seriously, there's no limit? I could wipe out an entire stadium if I could talk fast enough?" she asked, still not believing her own questions.

"There's no real kill limit. However, I'm only assigned to you for the next seven days, starting at midnight tonight." He waited for her response; she had none so he continued. "Some legal technicalities that most people worry about: first, no one will ever be able to connect you to any of their deaths and, second, even more importantly, there won't be any 'bad karma' coming back to harm you. That karma stuff is just bunk anyway."

"What about God, isn't he keeping track?"

"Yes, but"—Pale grew even more serious—"it's your heart that matters. Remember, from His perspective, hating someone is just as evil as killing them. The fact that I'm here to carry out your wishes is only a technicality."

"Great, I've always wanted to get away with murder."

"Well, judging from how you talk about your boss at work, I guess I'm not surprised."

"I was being sarcastic!" she snapped.

"Oh? Well, in any case, will he be your first target? Now on that subject, I cannot select targets for you. I will not advise you or make suggestions. However, I may try to dissuade you, if I think you're going overboard. As long as you ask me *before* you announce a sentence of death. Remember, once you say it, I've got to carry it out."

After several minutes of silence, she realized her jaw was hanging open, again. It seemed that the only solution was to keep it moving.

"Can you read my thoughts?" she asked, her face betraying her nervousness.

"No, only He, the Almighty, knows your thoughts. But I'm very good at picking up on physiological signs that will give me a pretty good indication of what you're *probably* thinking. For example, I can hear the blood pumping in your veins, and I can read your heart." He looked even more serious, if that were possible. "Frankly, yours is getting a bit crusty."

"Yeah, it probably is," she acknowledged. "I think it started when my father died. I guess I kind of lost hope. He was a good man, just not very religious."

"So is my dad in heaven?" she asked before realizing that she really didn't want an answer, at least not right now.

"Ah, I forgot to mention that I'm not allowed to disclose *anything* about the afterlife or the future." Pale shrugged. "Sorry."

"You won't answer. That probably means he's not." She tried to keep the sadness out of her voice.

"Not at all." He sat down next to her on the couch, his weight contorting its frame and forcing her to readjust her posture. Looking at her gently, he continued, "All it means is I'm not allowed to answer the question." He was firm, but not mean. "Besides, there are a lot of people in heaven that I haven't met and as for the rest—" He paused longer than she liked. "Well, no one is allowed any contact with them at all."

After a moment, she decided that the best course of action was to accept his answer and move on. "One more: why me?" she asked using the universal "why me" voice. "I'm not very religious, you know."

He leaned back and placed his massive hands behind his head. For a second, Evelyn feared that the couch might tip over backwards. "I have absolutely no idea."

"That's your answer?" she retorted, flabbergasted.

"The Almighty One *always* has His reasons. Frankly, I am as surprised as you are."

"I sincerely doubt it," she said half under her breath, without looking at him.

"Well, you're probably right about that. Look, you've got a long list and you only have seven days to work through it. I know that sounds like a lot of time but these things always take longer than expected. Granted, you could start calling people just after midnight but I'd advise you to wait until morning. You should get some sleep."

With that sound advice, she got up and went to the hall closet by her bedroom. She returned with a pillow and two blankets.

"Here, you get the sofa."

"Are you serious?" Pale asked with a grin.

"I most certainly am! You're not sleeping in my bed." She folded her arms and tightened her lips into a straight line. "And I'm not sleeping on the couch."

He stood up, towering over her. "Neither am I." His voice was so deep that it resonated in her bones.

She tried to swallow but couldn't. Nor could she stop the drops of sweat from running down her neck. *I'll bet my blood sounds like Niagara Falls*, she thought. The couch was starting to look rather comfortable.

He leaned down to whisper into her ear. "I...don't...sleep. Ever." With that, he grinned and sat back down on the sofa.

She now managed to swallow. "You have a mean sense of humor." After a deep breath she asked, "What will you do?"

"I'll sprout wings and flutter over you while you sleep, chasing away all the bad dreams." He grinned again. "That's what you were expecting, wasn't it?"

"No, not exactly." She huffed, then nervously replied: "I don't really know what I was expecting. But seriously, what are you going to do all night?"

"I'll probably just sit around and watch television," Pale replied, defying her expectations. "I find most of it fascinating, absolutely pathetic, but none the less fascinating. If I get bored, I'll read your Bible. You *do* have a Bible?" he asked.

"Of course." She walked back to her bedroom and returned with it, hoping he wouldn't decide to inspect the rest of her literary collection.

"Looks like new," he commented.

"To be honest, I find it a bit boring and there's a lot I don't understand that scares me. Why would you need to read it?"

"I just enjoy reading about old friends. After all, I've met most of the people in it." He took the book and put it on the coffee table, by the remote. "By the way, you should worry about what you *can* understand, not what you can't. Now go to bed, tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

Sunday

Morning

Evelyn awoke from the best night of sleep she could remember, other than a crazy dream about a strange bodybuilder wanting to help her make friends and then beating them up. It was actually a bit disturbing.

She turned on the shower, let her robe fall to the floor, and stepped in. *It seemed so real*, she thought. She had just shut off the water and was wrapping her hair in a small towel when she saw a figure outside the frosted glass door.

Pale slid the door open halfway. "Finally done? And before you say something silly: no, it wasn't a dream, I'm real. And we're running late. How long are you going to be?"

She tried to cover up what little she could with the towel while forcing herself not to scream. "What do you think you're doing in here?"

"You're an attractive female, but looking at you clothed or naked has no effect on me. You could just as well be a beautiful mountain scene or rosebush." She wasn't buying it and glared at him. "Okay, I'll wait in the kitchen, but hurry. I want to go over this schedule."

Evelyn emerged a few minutes later wearing her bathrobe. Having now remembered the events of the previous evening and sorted out what was real and what had been contributed by her subconscious during her slumber, she was ready for him. Still rattled, but ready. She pulled up a chair to the kitchen table and sat down across from him.

He had the *Houses of Worship* section from the morning paper spread out and covered in ink. "If we hurry, I think we can take in five services but we'll have to skip the sermon at the First Assembly if we want to catch the worship band at Northern Hills. I think that's an acceptable trade off, what do you think?"

"I think I've decided not to accept your assistance in dealing with my *problem relationships*," she said. "I've never liked change. And it's always been forced on me. First my mother died, then Dad. Okay, I'm not perfect and maybe I'm stuck in a rut but it's a comfortable rut and I'm not interested in leaving it. Not right now, anyway."

She stood up, straightened her robe, and tightened the belt. "As for this morning, you can take in as many choirs and sermons as you like. All I'm taking in is a bagel and a cup of coffee from the shop down the street." With that, she went back to her bedroom.

She got dressed, slowly. Standard Sunday morning attire would be the jeans she had worn the day before and the first blouse she found that was still reasonably clean. But today she was making a statement, and it wasn't about fashion. She changed

outfits, twice. By the time she was ready to leave, to her surprise, Pale already had. *It actually worked*, she thought cheerfully, *he'll spend all morning listening to choir music. I'll have some peace and quiet.*

By the time she got to the bagel shop, the morning crowd was already in full attendance. Most of the tables were full and the line was almost to the door.

Fourteen minutes later...

"You know I didn't mean it!" Evelyn pleaded as she tried to turn Pale around by pulling on the sleeve of his coat.

"You know that doesn't matter," Pale replied dryly and kept walking, seemingly oblivious to her efforts.

She released him, and not knowing what else to do, followed him to the edge of the crowd that had surrounded the scene. She couldn't look at the guy lying in a pool of blood on the other side of the street, but she couldn't take her eyes off the bicycle. It was still on the median, its front wheel now a crescent moon.

The intersection had been transformed into a parking lot. Police cars littered the scene, half with their doors open, radios blaring. Cops were pushing back the gawkers, many of whom were holding their cell phones over their heads and aiming, half blind, at the spectacle. Everyone was texting everyone.

A few feet away she heard an officer talking to a couple of junior executives. "So you saw what happened?" One of the men was having trouble with the collar of his shirt; it had suddenly become too tight and he kept tugging at it. The other was standing, mouth agape, with a cup of coffee that he probably didn't remember he was holding since it was dripping on his shoe.

"I'll never forget it," the first guy answered. He had stopped fiddling with his collar and crossed his arms as if to steady himself. "He came dashing off the sidewalk, cut across the lane. I turned to Steve here and said, 'that nut's going to get himself killed.' Just then he swerved and hit the median. He flew off the bike headfirst, straight into that bus."

Evelyn moved away to avoid eavesdropping on details she didn't want to know.

An ambulance weaved its way through the congestion and pulled up next to the bus. The crew was soon busy with the casualty. A news crew arrived on foot and a reporter started asking bystanders inane questions.

A choir of sirens were screaming her name, cutting into her soul. No one else seemed to even notice them. She gasped when the EMTs loaded the cyclist onto the gurney and into the ambulance. Cops were yelling at drivers, who were yelling back. Finally, the ambulance broke free and sped off. Once its siren was out of range, she started to breath again.

"He won't make it will he?" she asked aloud, choking back tears. Pale just shook his head and stood with his hands in his pockets. People politely walked around them, giving them plenty of room for Pale's bulk. No one would risk antagonizing a rhinoceros even if he looked like a male cover model.

"I don't even know his name." She shook her head. "I've seen him at least three times a week for—" She had to stop and think. "At least a year or more. And I don't know his name. Of course, he was always so rude to me. He'd just stare at my chest and smirk. I know he'd bump into me on purpose or rub up against my butt. I don't remember what smart aleck remark he made today and I don't even remember exactly what I said back." She looked at Pale. "Isn't there something you can do?"

"You know there isn't. Your first kill is always the most unsettling. I'll walk you back to your place." He acted as if he had only announced it was time for supper. "I think I can still catch the choir at First Lutheran."