

فُوهُ وَلَيْسَ فِي
لَأَنْفُسِهِمْ سُبُلًا
فِيهَا لَا يَعْرِفُونَ
تَعَدَّ الْحَقُّ عَنَا
رَأَى فَإِذَا

أَمْسَى
بِلَا

طَرِيقُ الدَّ
مَسَالِكِهِمْ
مُعَوَّجَةً
سَلَامًا

BOOK 1
WOLVES OF THE APOCALYPSE

BEHOLD DARKNESS

LC CHAMPLIN

Wolves of the Apocalypse:

Behold Darkness

Book 1

FIRST 9 CHAPTERS

By LC Champlin

Thanks for checking out the book!

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Wolves of the Apocalypse: Behold Darkness, by LC Champlin.

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Edited by Doug Harrison at Lucid Edit

Cover by me, since apparently if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself – even if you try to pay someone.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Special thanks to...

Dragon,

Scorpion,

Fish,

Bear,

and Slug

for helping make this series possible.

WARNING:

This book is intended for MATURE AUDIENCES due to –

Blood and gore

Strong language

Intense situations

Extreme violence

Mature humor

Sexual themes

Interested yet? Thought so.

Isaiah 59:8-10

They do not know the way of peace,
And there is no justice in their tracks;
They have made their paths crooked,
Whoever treads on them does not know peace.

Therefore justice is far from us,
And righteousness does not overtake us;
We hope for light, but **behold, darkness,**
For brightness, but we walk in gloom.

We grope along the wall like blind men,
We grope like those who have no eyes;
We stumble at midday as in the twilight,
Among those who are vigorous we are like dead men.

Chapter 1

Earth Shattering

Nightmare – Avenged Sevenfold

“*NIGHTMAAAAAAAR—*” *RIIIIIIIIIINNNNNGGG!* The St. Regis San Francisco Hotel fire alarm overpowered Avenged Sevenfold’s fury. Nathan Serebus’s ropy muscles locked his elbows, twenty-five pounds of dumbbell in each hand above him. He lowered them to his chest, sat up from the bench and set the weights aside before pulling the Bose buds from his ears.

“What in the—” he muttered, voice lost in the din. Fire alarm lights strobed across the fitness center’s weight cage and multi-function gym. He sighed as he hit pause on his phone’s music.

A voice over the loudspeakers announced: “*A fire has been reported. It may affect your floor. Please proceed to the nearest exit. Do not use the elevators.*”

Probably some millionaire playboy lit a cigarette in the residence levels while drunk off his ass—no, *rear*. No profanity, he’d promised Janine six years ago . . . but old shipboard habits died hard.

He swung off the bench and onto his feet, grabbed his water bottle and shoved it into a pocket of his black gym shorts.

The alarm paused again to replay the warning message.

Nathan wiped his tanned face and tar-black goatee with the bottom of his University of Alaska Anchorage tank top. “Better get a move on.”

His Skype call with Janine would have to wait, as would Davie’s bedtime story. The little wolverine would be pissed about not hearing the end of *Ragnar and the Wolves*, his favorite (but his dad’s least favorite) story.

Janine . . . Janine was already displeased with Nathan because he’d missed her presentation to the Manhattan Borough Board. She didn’t need him to be there, she simply believed that as CEO of Arete Technologies, he should make an appearance. Skill, not marriage, had earned her the PR and Marketing Liaison title: she could convince the board to buy Arete Tech’s dust bunnies, much less the company’s surplus servers.

Normally she shrugged off his absences, but her father’s latest seizure made her edgy. Nothing for it; the software development team needed Nathan to make the last arrangements for

the technology summit this weekend. To make up, he'd take her to an extra sparring class at the dojo or to an NYU debate.

He had planned the summit months earlier. Maybe he should've called it in NYC. Let his Silicon Valley friends fly to *his* territory for once. But no. Better attendance on the West Coast, said experience and the engineering departments.

As he made his way toward the exit, he raised his phone. For an instant, the blank screen reflected his features, ones that prompted second looks from the smarter sex. He woke the device and thumbed to Contacts, ICE Albin Conrad – Family. A thumbnail accompanied the number: a man with blond hair and blue eyes, near photonegative coloring of Nathan; narrow-featured but handsome; clean cut as a campaigning politician; and looking mildly perturbed. Albin couldn't understand why Nathan wanted a photo or *needed* to use every one of his smartphone's capabilities. Appreciation for technology highlighted the difference between Nathan's master of computer science and Albin's MBA plus his juris doctor.

The Call icon lit. Knowing Albin, he occupied his room fourteen floors above, reviewing paperwork minutiae Nathan would've cursed at.

Calling . . . Jamming the phone to his ear, Nathan waited. "Come on, hurry up!" No ringing. And . . . no reception, data, or Wi-Fi. Perfect.

Nathan snarled and hit End. Ah, for the days of receivers you could slam! Back then, when you hung up it was a communication in itself, capable of a range of emotions, but mostly rage. Now the best he could do was clip the phone inside his waistband.

He grabbed the exit's handle, just as a string of automatic-weapon fire punctuated the alarm's clamor. He threw himself back and landed on his stomach, hands over his head. "Oh ffffuck!"

Chapter 2

Bullet Time

I Just Wanna Run – The Downtown Fiction

Combat breathing took over. Instinct made Nathan scramble, bent double, to the gym's rear. Cover, cover, he had to find—Why did all the equipment have to be damned plastic! No defense. Then let offense be the defense.

He halted at the nearest treadmill, grabbed its strut, screwed his Nikes into the carpet, and heaved with all his six-feet-two-inches of muscle and adrenaline. The machine growled away from the window.

The last rays of day mingled with the gym's fluorescents to illuminate the machine's thick power cord. He yanked the plug out of the wall. Then he turned to the treadmill, braced a foot against the motor housing while wrapping the cord around his arm, and pulled until veins stood out on his forearms. *Crack!*

“Finally, a use for these stupid hamster wheels,” he hissed, cord in hand.

From the free weight rack he grabbed a ten- and a three-pounder.

More gunfire—and screams. They sounded closer, on his floor. But buildings skewed sound, so he couldn't tell for certain. He crouched. *One, two, three, four.* He counted as he inhaled. Hold for four. While his sympathetic nervous system calmed, he knotted the cord's end around the ten dumbbell. Being proactive kept fear at bay. A tug on the cord proved its security. He tied the three-pounder on the other end. Improvised nunchucks complete.

With the three-pounder in his left hand, the cord wrapped around his wrist, and the ten dangling from his right, he headed for the back door.

He should call 9-1-1 when he found cell reception. Wait, the data and networks worked fine an hour ago. Did the towers malfunction, or suffer sabotage?

Fucking—damn it! The bastards were making him break his no-profanity promise. It would have to wait until this shitstorm subsided.

Two bursts of gunfire, then yells from right outside the main entrance. Get Albin and get out.

At the door, Nathan pressed an ear to the cherry paneling. The steel between the wood

dulled the hall's sounds. Dropping to one knee, he pushed the door open a crack. Gray Employees Only doors stared back. The green exit sign on the left marked another cherry door.

He slipped out, just as the other gym door slammed.

"Get down!" yelled a gunman.

Cold filled Nathan's gut. Had they seen him? He peeked out the exit, which opened at a right angle to the gunman's entrance. What a ridiculous floor plan!

To the right and ahead ran carpeted halls, their walls the color of dying moss and glowing in luxury hotel lighting designed to calm. Cherrywood doors and overpriced art helped guests rationalize shelling out over \$500 a night for a bed and the opportunity to spend even more on amenities.

The fire alarm continued to blare, so no elevators functioned. Stairs. At least the addle-brained designers had put the stair door on his right. He sidled out, shoved open the first fire door, then the second.

Fourteen stories of battleship-gray stairs awaited, if Albin hadn't started down. "I never should've agreed to the nineteenth floor. 'Great view, just like home,'—my ass."

How long had the alarm been ringing and hot lead spraying while he was pumping iron to the battle songs of Death Metal? The first gunshots had sounded distant, but since the building's skeleton of concrete and steel dampened the sound, he could only guess at their origin.

With the ten-pounder in his left hand, he bounded up the stairs. He slowed near the sixth floor landing: gunmen could burst through any of the doors.

Slam! The fourth floor fire door. Savior or slayer?

Nathan reached for the handle, but the door crashed open before he could touch it. A yuppie, pale as a sheet and in gym clothes, stumbled out. The man's eyes bugged out at the sight of Nathan's raised dumbbell, but momentum and panic drove him on.

Nathan grabbed for him. "Stop! There are—" The idiot plowed past.

"Fuck!" Nathan took a step after, but the yuppie rounded the staircase and disappeared.

Then: yelling, gunfire, screaming.

Unwilling to look over the railing and risk getting blown off, Nathan yanked the door open and lunged through.

Ears ringing from the shooting, he took a right and sprinted down the hall. He couldn't think about the victim who probably just got a closer look at his own guts than he ever wanted. Nathan needed to keep running.

One slip and they'd chase him down like wolves after a caribou. The temperature

dropped ten degrees at the thought. Jaws, panting, growls. *They're coming for me!* He shook the thought—and memories—from his head.

The sixth floor hosted half the spa, which housed the Infinity Pool, steam rooms, saunas, and whirlpool. Because he hated the chlorine baths hotels called pools, this floor had remained a mystery.

The fire door to the stairway at the other end of the floor thudded closed.

They didn't identify themselves as police, meaning he'd landed in an active shooter situation. Hide, run, fight, went the government recommendation. Hiding in a hotel proved exceptionally difficult, as most doors stayed locked. He needed an employee access card, but as none dropped out of the clouds, he'd make do: the spa.

He headed for the white double doors, and from his pocket he whipped out two black keycards, one to his room and one to Albin's, from his back pocket. The odor of Vicks or similar spa crap stung his sinuses. He slid his room card into the reader. Red light. "You've gotta be fucking kidding! How many hundred bucks and—" He jammed Albin's card into the slot. Green light.

Inside, on the left, glowed the blue Infinity Pool. On the right lay the spa's hospital-white, black-trimmed entry room, where guests began their "fabulous sojourn of indulgence and relaxation." He'd read the website description to Albin in a lisping accent during the drive from the airport, courtesy of the St. Regis Bentley. Albin deadpanned that it sounded perfectly suited for Mr. Serebus, assuming it contained a shooting range, the latest in computer systems, and Mrs. Serebus.

Suddenly Nathan went deaf—no, not deaf, the fire alarm had stopped. The emergency response teams must have cleared the alarm.

A heartbeat later, the lights died. Darkness pressed in on him, tried to steal the air from his lungs. He grabbed for his phone. The emergency lights came up, transforming the reception room's atmosphere into one more appropriate for the nightmare he'd blundered into.

Even if the ERTs had arrived, the silence gave the hotel occupants a false sense of security. The E lights should tip people off, but with spoiled rich fucks, you couldn't take common sense for granted.

Fortunately, at this hour most people had better places to be, so few guests would need to be evacuated. The spa had closed earlier, and the employees seemed to have left.

Since no staff member arrived to escort Nathan to the "luxe locker rooms," he barged through the women's-side door. The gunmen, if they'd seen him, wouldn't think to look for him

here.

He'd give the shooters a minute or so, then return to the stairs. Albin being Albin, he had likely already reached the bodyguards' rooms, assuming they hadn't come to him first.

Bodyguards. What a pointless expense. Then again, you never knew what nutjobs would show up at a summit: Greenpeace maybe, or . . . an anti-processor group? Now, after spending all day tripping over the bodyguards, he actually wanted them. Damned irony.

The main door hissed open and closed. No rest for the hunted. His lip curled, resentment chasing away the fear that gnawed the edge of his mind.

He forged deeper into the women's area, past the showers, into an anteroom with doors marked for the steam room, sauna, and hot tub. He ducked through the closest door, marked Jacuzzi. A glass and brushed-aluminum railing bordered the square pool. Chlorine tainted the air, made his eyes water.

Shoving his water bottle between door and jamb, he put his back to the wall adjacent to the entrance and gripped the ten-pounder with both hands.

One, two, three, four. Hold.

If his shoulder blades pressed any harder into the wall, they'd leave dents. *Control yourself. Fear makes the wolf bigger than it is.* He didn't often picture himself in a terrorist attack, but when he did, he looked badass: tricked out in 5.11 Tactical BDUs and body armor, complete with goggles, helmet, and hard knuckle gloves. Gym clothes never appeared. An assortment of weapons always accompanied his fantasy: Kimber Raptor II 1911s, one for each leg; KA-BAR knife; M48 Tactical Tomahawk; AA12 shotgun across his back; and M246 SAW rifle on his shoulder. And he couldn't forget copious grenades and ammo. Dumbbells and his Krav Maga skills didn't cut it.

The door opened again, and boots thudded outside. A crash, then rustling, panting. What in hell? Footsteps too light to belong to his pursuers padded on the tile.

"I know you're in here, bitch," a man called. His breathing was heavy, like he'd just watched the climax in a porno.

A young woman in a Remède Spa polo shirt dashed past. She made it to the sauna door before a gunshot exploded three yards from Nathan's position. Crimson sprayed as she sprawled across the floor. Blood pooled around her thigh while, gasping and pale, she clutched the wound.

Goddamn fucking cock-sucker bastard! Nathan fought back the urge to jump out at him now.

The boot steps approached, then their owner appeared, wielding an AK: a Caucasian

male wearing a hoodie and a predator's grin. "Well, well. Here I thought I'd be grabbing execs today," the bastard commented, "but I can take a break to fuck a little rich-bitch slave." As he stepped past the Jacuzzi door, he shifted the rifle to his back to free his hands.

On the floor, the woman scooted back with her good leg, hissing in pain. She met his leer with bared teeth and a glare, but tears shone in her eyes.

Chapter 3

Save the Cat

Monster – Imagine Dragons

Nathan toed the door open and stepped out behind the thug, ten pounds of iron raised over his shoulder.

The woman's eyes flicked from her attacker to Nathan, her breath catching. "I—I—"

Noticing the shift in her attention, the gunman turned just as Nathan swung the dumbbell. Reflex saved the terrorist's skull as he twisted aside.

His rifle butt snapped out, catching Nathan in the ribs hard. Bastard! Righteous rage surged with the pain. Stepping in, Nathan brought the dumbbell back up to catch the motherfucker's jaw.

The crunch of bone under his blow, the snap of teeth colliding with teeth frenzied the beast of rage in Nathan like blood frenzied a shark. He could rip the bastard apart with his bare hands!

He dropped the dumbbell, grabbed his prey by the back of the neck and slammed his elbow into the shit's windpipe. Cartilage collapsed under the force. Gurgling, eyes bulging, the dogmeat scabbled at his throat.

Teeth bared in a grin, Nathan caught him by the collar and drove him backward through the door into the Jacuzzi room until the railing stopped him.

A flash of metal from under the hoodie—Nathan leapt back, his stomach pulled out of blade range.

The thug stumbled left, away from the railing. His breath rasped through his crushed trachea. In the E lighting his skin already looked dead, as if the rest of his body just hadn't caught up.

Eyes on the enemy, Nathan crouched and reached back for the dumbbell. He lunged.

The foe, weak from lack of oxygen, attempted a stab and slash. Nathan knocked the knife aside and bashed the ten-pounder into the dead man's face. The blow sent the bastard toppling between the handrails. *Splash!*

The sensation of iron meeting skull and the triumph of seeing the murderer fall, dying,

into the pool deluged Nathan. “Fuuuuuuuar!” he roared as he sprang after his foe. Shin-deep in water, he snagged the twitching enemy by the hoodie, dragged him to the pool edge.

Then he grabbed the back of the meat’s head. Up, *slam!* Up, *slam!* Up, *slam!* Bones cracked. Teeth shattered. Blood gushed and splattered over the tiles. Retribution!

“H-hey. Hey! Are you okay?” A Danish voice.

Sanity snapped back like a broken bungee cord. Nathan looked up toward the female voice, the mangled cranium poised for another bash. *Drip, drip, drip* . . . Blood pattered on the floor. It drowned out all other sound, even Nathan’s panting. What the hell just happened?

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he grunted as he hauled the corpse half out of the pool.

The wounded woman had dragged herself across the hall outside to discover her rescuer’s fate. Now she sat with her back against the door jamb. She was holding the door open with her good leg. She looked about twenty-five, Janine’s age. European, pretty but not beautiful. She looked familiar. Pain glazed her wide-set blue eyes, but behind it shone determination. Very good. Shock would come soon, though.

He came to crouch at her side, attention on her torn left thigh. “Hold on, all right? You need a tourniquet.” Blood oozed between her fingers as she held pressure. The bullet had ripped through the outside of her thigh but left the femur intact. Lucky girl.

“What’s going on?” she whispered, wincing. “What do they want?”

Nathan shook his head as he ripped her pant leg into two strips. “I’d hoped you would tell me. Hold still. Don’t let go.” He slid the towel under her leg and triple knotted it. The wolves wouldn’t take another life on his watch. Why had they chosen her, anyway?

“They’ll come back.” Her head thunked back against the door. Veins pulsed in her temples.

“Then they’ll join their friend.” Nathan moved back to the meat sack and pulled the rifle off its back. His hands shook. *One, two, three, four.* They steadied. Ten rounds in the magazine. The weight of the assault rifle in his hands made him feel a modicum of control.

He pulled the hoodie up. The thug wore an armor-plate-carrier vest. Bulletproof. Did the bastard carry a trauma kit? Nathan hunted through the armor’s cummerbund pouches: zip ties, mini crowbar, QuickClot. Aha!

Returning to the victim, he knelt beside her and ripped open the package. “Let go.” He leaned across her line of sight as she removed her hands from the ragged hole. “What’s your name?” Distraction worked wonders when his son skinned a knee and hovered on the verge of tears.

“Katerina,” she grunted through clenched teeth.

He glanced up, throat tightening. “Katerina?” *That* was why the wolves chose her.

“Kate.”

“Kate what?” He pushed the bandage into the wound, then replaced her hands over it.

“Aah!” Kate breathed, eyes squeezed shut. “God, that hurts!”

“All right, Kate Godthathurts.” He pushed the mini crowbar between the tourniquet knots. “You have two options.” A few turns of the windlass tightened the ligature.

She hissed, stiffening and grimacing. “What?” The E lighting exaggerated her pallor. Damn it, what was keeping the ERTs? His mariner first-aid skills only went so far.

“I help you walk or I carry you.”

She looked exhausted—and terrified. “I—I don’t think—”

“Hold the tourniquet.”

He slid one arm under her knees and the other around her back. He hefted her with ease and started toward the locker room. She hissed her pain with every breath.

“You refilled the towels in the gym, that’s where I saw you.” More distraction.

“Ja.”

“Here we are.” He eased her onto the padded bench. Blood seeped into the white upholstery.

“Thanks. What . . . what’s your . . . name?”

“Nathan.”

With Kate stabilized, he jogged back to the Jacuzzi and corpse. Locating the knife, he flipped the gunman over and sliced through the hoodie. A black, low-profile vest with a generic security patch on the chest. He wrestled the plate carrier from the corpse, blood and dead weight complicating matters.

He pushed to his feet, then ducked into the armor and secured the Velcro. “It seems I’ll have armor after all.” If this kept up, he might even get the tomahawk from his fantasy. The vest came with free gifts: a .40 Glock 22 pistol with an extra magazine, and four full mags for the AK. He swapped one for the rifle’s current magazine.

The plate carrier even included a radio. The mic clipped to the left shoulder. Its wire snaked to a side pocket to join a Retevis H-777, an HT like the kind families bought to keep in touch across the wilds of Disney World. Apparently the attackers spent their money on weapons, not communications.

He grabbed the carcass by the back of its T-shirt and pulled it back into the pool. Blood

wafted through the water. The room no longer smelled of chlorine.

In the hall, he tied the cord and dumbbells around his waist: you never knew when you might need them. He retrieved his water bottle, then slung the AK across his chest.

He returned and grabbed several towels from a nearby rack. “How are you doing?”

Kate grunted. “Nathan . . . what?” Her voice grew soft and her eyes unfocused. Shit.

He stepped to her side. “Nathan who saved your life and who needs you to *stay with me*,” he urged, hand supporting her cheek. “Got that, Kate?”

She nodded once.

“Good.” He spread two towels over her for blankets.

“You . . . are military?”

“Military Channel viewer with military friends.” He smiled as he draped a towel around his neck. “Don’t panic. Never leave home without your towel.”

“I . . . shouldn’t have left home . . . at all,” she murmured

“Kate, I have to go. I’ll try to get help. In the meantime,”—Velcro ripped as he produced the Glock—“use this if they come back.” *Click*. The mag dropped from the pistol. Brass glinted through the view holes. He slapped it back in and set the semi-auto on the bench. “One in the chamber and fourteen in the magazine. You know how to—”

“Point and click,” Kate mumbled with a half smile, her chin resting on her chest.

“Atta girl. Now I need a favor. I need your keycard.”

Silence reigned for a moment, and Nathan’s hand itched to grab the ID off her shirt so he could *get the hell up to Albin*. But people called him a bastard, not a beast.

“Take it. Keys . . . pocket.” The towel moved at her side.

He didn’t need a second invitation. “Thanks. Take care.”

Chapter 4

Search and Rescue

Safe and Sound – Capital Cities

At the spa double doors, Nathan peeked outside. Rifle at the ready, he slipped out.

He made the stairs without incident. After easing the door closed, he charged up the stairs two at a time. *Be safe, Albin.*

Seventh floor.

The E lights gave just enough illumination to make things look worse. Dim industrial stairs screamed *horror movie*, the kind with ax murderers or slaving monsters, where buxom blonds died of acute lack-of-common-sense-itis.

Eighth floor.

If that little side quest made him miss Albin or arrive a second after the gunmen invaded his room, he'd . . . he'd what? He'd make the bastards pay most dearly.

Ninth floor, the Overlook Terrace. Ten to go.

Playing hero got people killed, but he couldn't have left the girl to bleed out.

Tenth floor.

The wolves. Blood roared in his ears as resentment and frustration surged. The wolves had finally returned. They wanted her as compensation for the years of sacrifices he had denied them. Why today? Why here?

Eleventh floor.

Where the hell had the rest of the hotel guests gone?

Thirteenth floor.

What to do now? He'd just bludgeoned a rapist's skull into pulp, for fuck's sake! Could they be terrorists? A working theory, anyway.

Fourteenth floor.

How well had the terrorists planned the attack? The shitbag said he came to kidnap business executives. Who, and why? They must have the guest roster.

Fifteenth floor.

Almost there. He paused to check his phone. Seventeen minutes since he'd called Albin.

If Albin had started down the stairs, Nathan should've met him by now. Perhaps he'd detoured to find the bodyguards like a sane person. A second possibility did not exist; Nathan wouldn't let it.

The remaining floors ticked past with his mind locked on the goal. No more worst-case scenario speculating.

Chest heaving, he finally saw the 19 on the wall ahead. He swallowed hard. *One, two, three, four. Hold.* AK raised, he cracked the door open. And froze.

Ten yards ahead, two bodies lay contorted in pools of blood. Neither resembled Albin. Guests? Employees? Nathan's breath returned, but his teeth clenched as his heart thudded with rage. The next terrorist he saw better pray to Allah, or whoever he worshiped, that Nathan's AK misfired. If it didn't, he'd see firsthand what a chunk of lead traveling at over twenty-five hundred feet per second did to a body.

Silence dominated the dim halls. Red sprays glinted across the minimalist decor in the E lighting, accents from Hell.

1909, 1910, there! 1911. He swiped Albin's card in the reader. Green light, turn, shove. The room slid by beyond the AK's barrel.

"Albin! You here?" Heart hammering, Nathan stepped into the room.

Slice the pie around the corner, lean. Bathroom clear. Living room clear too. That left the bedroom.

He swung around the corner, ready to double-tap the enemy. But only the made bed, empty desk, and blank TV greeted him.

An art piece, or possibly a chunk of flattened scrap metal, hung between the windows. Red lines curved and slashed across it, looking too much like the bullets' painting in the hall.

Nathan moved to the window. Sirens wafted from the street. Confusion reigned below, with people scrambling for safety. What a herd of sheep for the predators to pick off. Shouldn't more emergency vehicles be surrounding the St. Regis? It looked like most just screamed by the hotel.

At least he didn't need to worry about Badal and Mikhail, the other members of his team. Several of Silicon Valley's moguls hosted the heads of Arete Tech's software and hardware teams tonight. If he'd gone with the two to their schmooze-fest rather than opting for the hotel . . . Fuck. *Yes* and *no*—one-syllable words that turned the course of lives.

As if mocking him, the building swayed. A quake. He ducked under the nearby desk—just as a ceiling tile crashed to the floor. The shaking stilled after a few heartbeats. "That was a strong one," he muttered, emerging from the shelter. Earlier he'd felt a tremor.

A last scan of the room showed Albin had gathered the essentials . . . or the terrorists had stolen them.

Nathan stepped to the door to his half of the suite. A quick check found it empty. A painting occupied the back wall, the mirror image of the piece in the adjoining room. Art came cheap in bulk; luxury hotels, for all their opulence, knew how to make wise use of finances. This painting, however, spread beyond its canvas, across the wall and windows.

One, two, three, four . . . Arterial spray lanced over art and wall, with cast-off drops and back spatter as accents.

The control and security the AK imparted turned to ash. All the firepower in the world couldn't undo the work of one damned bullet. Avenge, yes. Amend, no.

Across the carpet and into the corridor he followed the bloody footsteps, which thanks to the shadows, he hadn't seen earlier. The trail merged with the chaos of the hall.

Several doors down, a cleaning cart lay on its side. A body sprawled beyond it in a pool of blood.

Chapter 5

Semper Paratus

Ghosts That We Know – Mumford & Sons

Legs acting on their own, Nathan moved closer. Not Albin. Nathan let out his breath in relief. “Thank you!” No time for pity for the fallen.

Back in his room, he collected his thoughts as he collected essentials, or at least tried to collect them. Pulling back the dresser he found his cache empty. “No wallet.”

And no Albin. Perhaps the bastards wounded him and dragged him off as a hostage. Images of Albin on his knees with a masked terrorist holding a scimitar to his neck flooded Nathan’s mind. His knuckles turned white on the AK.

If they demanded ransom, he would pay. He would pay every mercenary on the market to take the heads of the fuckers who dared touch his people.

Shoving the thoughts aside, he continued his task. His clothes lay in a stack on the bed linens that housekeeping had half stripped before catching lead. “No backpack and . . . no pants.”

With each missing item, circumstantial evidence mounted, pointing to Albin gathering critical gear and escaping.

Next stop, the bodyguards’ room. Under the bedside clock lay their room key, right where he’d left it.

He ducked across the hall, slid the card, and shoved the door open. In a moment he cleared it.

Blankets lay strewn across the floor, the closet door stood open, drawers hung from the dresser.

In a waste basket, he found a bottle. A fucking Crown Royal bottle! He hurled it against the wall, and the glass shattered. A kick to the garbage can sent it ricocheting off the wall.

“Drinking on the fucking job?” He gritted his teeth. “Incompetent bastards. That’s the last time I hire former congressional lackeys.” If the bodyguards had stayed alert, maybe they and their charges could’ve reunited and escaped by now.

He stormed out into the hall, heading for the stairs. Maybe Albin made it out. Or maybe the terrorists forced him to take cover somewhere. The phone came out, but when its screen lit,

all connectivity icons showed gray. “Perfect. Damn perfect.”

Wheezing hissed behind him. What the—he turned to find a man at the end of the corridor, leaning against the wall. E Lighting drained his acne-ridden face of color. A rivulet of red-black tricked down the corner of his mouth and onto his shirt. His breath rattled as he took a twitching step closer. Raising his head, he stared at Nathan with blood-shot eyes.

“Get to cover!” Nathan stage whispered.

Wheezing answered.

Then gunshots thudded, distant. Above? Below? The walls dampened the sound. Since the wheezing fellow could walk, albeit with the wall’s help, he could find his own way out. Albin took precedence.

Nathan slipped back into the stairwell and started down.

The St. Regis San Francisco towered forty-two stories above the SoMa Arts District, with the top half consisting of residential flats. Multi-function floors totaled seven: ground through sixth, and ninth. If Albin detoured for cover, logically he’d head for one of these. The main guest-room floors—with their locked doors and lack of cover—would be his last resort.

Nathan winced at the idea of searching the sprawling floors, especially the fifth and sixth. Sixth, Kate . . . He should check on her. *Why?* logic asked. What could he do for her if her condition had deteriorated, other than give her water or cover her corpse with a towel?

Sixteenth floor.

Descent beat the hell out of ascent. The big 9 would appear in no time.

Fourteenth floor.

The gray stairs matched Kate’s pallor when he left her. If he left her, the wolves would take her. But carrying her would make him a bigger target. Fuck, he’d sworn an oath of fealty to pragmatism seventeen years ago, and he kept his word. Wait, her ID and keys. She had assisted him; thus, payment for services rendered would come into effect and eliminate heroism. And if he could snatch a life from the wolves, all the better.

Tenth floor. One more.

Bam! Metal slammed metal as a door above opened. Not now!

Feet pounded down the stairs. One flight separated him from the newcomer.

The 9 flashed past. No time for the detour. He needed more room to secure an optimal position, if one could call anywhere in the downward end of a stairwell optimal.

Eighth floor.

He skidded around the inside railing at its switchback. Crouching against the railing of

the lower flight provided the best vantage.

Boots thudded above. Then an explosion reverberated through the stairwell, making his ears whistle. Spent gunpowder tinged the air. A shot fired, but at whom and by who?

More footsteps padded, still descending, but lighter and slower.

One, two, three, four. Hold. The AK's front sight settled into the notch of the rear, a stick figure with circular arms raised in praise of Aries.

The other stair-goer should show right about . . . now.

A pistol muzzle's black eye appeared in the sight picture—aimed at Nathan's head. Shit! His finger tightened on the trigger. Then his brain caught up to the images his optic nerves relayed.

“Wait!” He threw his hands up, finger off the trigger and a grin on his face.

The handgun lowered, providing a clear view of its operator: tall, Armani-clad, Aryan as a damned SS officer and looking just as cold behind his wire rims.

“*Semper paratus*, Mr. Serebus?” Albin drawled in his half blue-blood Brit, half Nowhere, USA, accent. He gave a thin smile.

Chapter 6

Carpe Jugulum

We Stand Alone – Covenant

Nathan barked a laugh. “*Carpe jugulum*, at this point, Albin.” With Albin at his side, they could get the hell out of this Tom Clancy flop.

Albin held the Springfield 1911 pistol at low ready as he trotted down to join Nathan, who quenched the urge to headlock his friend in relief. Albin would *not* appreciate that welcome. So Nathan settled for a clap on the shoulder and, “I’m glad to see you’re all right.” The understatement of the millennium.

“You as well, sir. Then again, *we* are always all right. Allow me to retrieve your essentials,”—Albin glanced upward—“and we will be on our way.”

With a nod Nathan jogged after him, taking the lead to ensure the area’s security. At the landing of the ninth level, he paused before the poor bastard on the receiving end of Albin’s .45 caliber round. One shot, back of the head, dead center. The thug had rag-dolled, his momentum carrying him onto his face. A puddle of blood expanded around the carcass.

Albin sidestepped the carnage, pausing to hold the fire door open.

“All that dry-fire training paid off, it seems,” Nathan observed as he grabbed the back of the corpse’s hoodie and dragged it into the fire door airlock. “With attorneys’ single-minded drive to achieve a goal, I always thought they would make fine combat operatives.” Nathan rolled the body onto its back. The bullet’s exit had left a fist-sized hole in the terrorist’s face.

“I thought you might cite ruthless attacks, opportunism, and mercenary spirit.”

“They’re all efficient means to an end.” The corpse held an AK, but the rifle held no rounds. Nathan’s combat knife hissed from its sheath. He sliced the hoodie, neck to hem, to reveal a load-bearing vest. The camo pockets bulged with gear.

“‘Adapt, advance, achieve’ is a fitting company slogan.”

“Never let a crisis go to waste,” Nathan grinned back at Albin while working a black 9 mm semi-auto pistol from the former owner’s grasp. A CZ 75.

Albin wore the same unimpressed look he adopted whenever Nathan detailed the merits of a new, in-no-way-redundant piece of technology he’d just bought. “It’s fortunate you have an

empty holster for that, sir.”

Nathan shrugged. “Have it your way.” Further investigation produced two empty mags for the AK, two full mags for the pistol, another H-777 radio, and a combat knife. He ignored the corpse’s cigarettes but tossed the Zippo to Albin.

As a last gift, the scumbag’s leg holster supplied two full mags and a black .45 semi-auto Rock Ultra. Heavy, reliable, a brother to Albin’s 1911.

Nathan stepped past Albin and into the ninth level. “You *are* taking these,” he stated as he pushed the holster and sheathed knife against the blond’s chest. “It goes with your tie.”

“Certainly.” The knife vanished under Albin’s suit jacket before he situated the holster.

Twilight sifted through the glass door at the end of the hall, which opened on the Overlook Terrace. AK ready, Nathan trotted to the vantage point.

Choppers prowled the skies between columns of smoke. Something big was happening.

“Your pants, sir,” Albin deadpanned as he joined his employer, but Nathan caught the flicker of dry amusement behind the glasses.

“You’ve been waiting eight years to use that line on me, haven’t you.” Nathan snatched the Blackhawks Albin held out. The straps of Nathan’s wayward VTAC RUSH72 backpack occupied Albin’s other hand. Good. The level III AR500 Armor insert in the pack provided defense against most bullet calibers.

“Never waste a crisis, as you say.”

“You think of everything.”

“It’s why you pay me to advise you,” Albin replied as he looked over his shoulder toward the stairs. “It appears you have the towel front covered already, however.”

“One of the most useful things in the galaxy.” Nathan’s quip earned a shake of Albin’s head.

Nathan began to remove his pockets’ contents. “Fine shooting out there. One shot, one kill.”

“One is all that is necessary.” Albin returned to watching the hall as Nathan pulled pants over shorts.

“If you have the luxury of a firearm.” Images of his own kill flashed like home movies across his mind’s eye.

“Personal experience, sir?”

“A very recent one. I assume the weapon is from the bodyguards’ room?”

The younger man raised a thin brow before turning back to the window. “I assume you

use the term '*bodyguards*' loosely."

"Very. Where did the attack begin? Above or below our floor?"

"Below," Albin answered, shouldering the VTAC and adjusting the straps to fit his lanky build. "I ascended one flight and waited."

"The gunmen are on at least the fifth and sixth floors as well, so you may have saved your life by staying put."

"Leaving the building without you was not an option, Mr. Serebus," He refused to use his employer's first name, and Nathan had given up trying to change him. "I couldn't very well face *Mrs.* Serebus after abandoning you."

Nathan snorted. "Janine does stress accountability. Did you see anyone else on the way down? This place seems deserted, aside from the lunatics trying to murder us."

"There was a call on the hotel line, asking everyone to remain in their rooms, as there was a police matter that needed to be addressed. A few moments later, the fire alarm sounded."

"A police matter?"

"Another call came after the alarm began, informing guests that the alarm was cleared, and not to leave their rooms. I attempted to verify this with the emergency response center, but the phones are out of service."

Nathan raised a skeptical brow. "What better way to conduct a terrorist attack than to cut the phone lines and pin everybody down? I'm starting to doubt there ever *were* police here." Dollars to dumbasses the gunmen in the gym didn't belong to any SWAT team.

Albin scanned the terrace. "The same thought occurred to me."

"Now," Nathan continued, "let's see if the radios are functional." Power on. Static hissed; Nathan grinned.

"Here." He tossed the other radio to Albin, who caught it and clipped it to his belt. "The usual SOP."

"I assume you mean hunting-trip standard operating procedures for the radio, as we do not have any for terrorist attacks." He paused. "Though perhaps we should."

"It'll do for now." Hunting trips did more than just fill the freezers with moose.

Communication infrastructure established, Nathan opened the door to the terrace, stepped out, and trotted to the railing. Sirens, horns, and shouting washed over him as the wind whipped his hair and towel. Albin followed at a walk. When Nathan saw the vista below, he understood his friend's hesitation. Pileups dotted Mission Street and Third. Red, white, and blue strobed through the growing darkness while sirens wailed. Emergency personnel in neon vests

attempted to direct the civilians, who were panicking like roaches when the lights come on.

Albin joined him at the hellscape. “We may have some difficulty even after we get outside.” All hail Albin Conrad, King of the Understatement.

“With all that going on down there, it’ll take the authorities forever to secure this place.”

Nathan stood taller, like his ancestor Leonidas surveying the Persian enemy before war. A grim smile spread across his face as his hand tightened around the AK’s grip. Let the wolves howl. They wouldn’t make him or Albin their prey.

“You have a plan.” A statement, not a question, in the tone Albin used to comment on the weather. He surveyed the carnage below with a mortician’s detachment.

Nathan’s gaze tracked a chopper as it moved out from a hover.

“A Bell OH58A,”—Albin adjusted his glasses—“belonging to the California Highway Patrol.”

“CHP?”

Shoving the AK to his back, Nathan dodged patio furniture to reach the Overlook’s center. He waved his arms at the chopper in the half jumping jack of desperation.

Crash!

Where? There, two floors above and behind him, a broken window—and a gunman.

Nathan sprinted for the door. Fuck it all, the terrorists had cut them off!

Bang-bang! Albin’s pistol. The attorney covered him from the entrance.

Nathan threw himself into the building and raced to the stairs. The door slammed as Albin followed.

Drawing his .45, Nathan shoved the fire door open. He went high while Albin and his 1911 went low.

“It was worth a shot,” he panted as they made it to the landing.

“Two shots.”

With a shrug, Nathan started down the stairs. “Did you hear the gunmen on the nineteenth floor yell ‘*Allahu akbar!*’ or any other battle cry?”

“No.” Albin leaned over the railing to look up for pursuers. “They appear to be Americans, which may indicate the only prophet they revere is the kind ending in *F-I-T.*”

“Pay a man enough and he’ll walk barefoot into Hell.” What if the man already found himself in Hell?

At the sixth floor entrance, he halted. Albin glanced about, handgun and glasses flashing in the E lighting.

“I need to check on Kate, one of the staff,” Nathan explained as he reached for the door.

“She was wounded?” No emotion.

“Gunshot to the leg.”

“And you played the hero.” Sarcasm melded with skepticism.

Hero? “I *assisted*, like anyone—even you—would have,” Nathan hissed through clenched teeth. “That hero nonsense—sacrifice, courage, mercy, honesty—only gets you defeated.”

“Do remember that, sir.”

Nathan eased the door open. The level received him with empty halls and silence.

Bang! The fire door slammed below.

Chapter 7

Escort Mission

The Phoenix – Fall Out Boy

Nathan motioned Albin through while covering the stairs with the AK. Men's voices and footsteps approached. Two, maybe three of them. His back to the hall, Nathan settled the door closed. Let the bastards pass, then he could attack the rear.

A hand on his arm made him glance back. Albin shook his head. Nathan's eyes narrowed. *Don't get between me and my enemy.* The blond shook his head again. Intimidation by Nathan Serebus cowed 99 percent of people who earned it. Albin composed the 1 percent. It made him even more stubborn. He pointed to the door, then to his ear, then wagged the 1911.

Nathan frowned, but with a nod he agreed that gunshots would attract attention.

After the gunmen passed, Albin whispered, "Mr. Serebus, I will watch the stairs. Please go see to your charge."

Nathan thumped the adviser's shoulder in thanks, then trotted toward the Remède Spa entrance. If the girl had regained some strength, she could direct them to the best way out. She could consider him carrying her out as her tip.

At the double doors, he paused to knock.

No answer.

He cracked the door. "Kate?" he stage-whispered. Pressing his eye to the gap showed the dim, silent entry. The room exuded sterility, the E lights turning modern class to medical chill.

Pistol close to his chest at compressed ready, he slid inside and moved to the women's door. "Katerina!" Silence rushed to fill the vacuum when the echo died. "It's Nathan."

One, two, three, four. Hold. He shouldered in.

Kate lay under the pile of towels. At his approach, her hand twitched toward the pistol.

"It's me!" He caught her hand—as cold as the Glock and as pale as the couch. His mouth went dry.

She blinked, squinted. "N-Natan. Sorry." Fatigue brought out her Danish accent. "I didn't think you'd come back."

"I'm your ride out." He forced a smile.

What are you doing? pragmatism demanded. Armed and armored terrorists everywhere, police and EMS nowhere, and six floors to the ground? *Get out with Albin.*

“It’s far.” She shook her head, her breathing rapid.

There, permission to leave. The gunmen had no reason to come here again. Surely she’d last until the medics arrived . . . in hours.

The Retevis mic crackled. A male made a terse statement in a Slavic language.

Then, “*English, you mudak Commie!*” A man with an Alabama drawl. An American turned against his own country, murdering people and working for goddamned terrorists?

“I speak with my men, Ameriko. When I want you, I tell.”

“Then git on yer own damned channel!”

Nathan glared down the hall at the mental image of the waste-of-flesh traitor. A longing to beat the bastard’s face in surged.

A reply in Slavic or Russian, then silence.

Kate snarled in pain as she pulled to a sitting position. “You have to go. They’re kidnapping guests.”

“Kidnapping.” Even worse than killing.

“The Russian said.”

“*Red One,*” the Southerner resumed, causing an uptick in Nathan’s pulse, “*take six. That’s the last place we heard from Red Four.*”

Six? Sixth floor.

Chapter 8

Easter Egg

This is Gonna Hurt – Sixx:AM

“This is Red One,” replied a Long Islander. *“We copy, Red Chief.”*

Shitshitshit! Nathan grabbed the PTT. Long shot of long shots. “This is Red Four.”
Lucky he knew the dead rapist’s voice. “You copy?”

“This is Red Chief, I copy. Where the fuck are you?”

“Third. There’s nothin’ on sixth.”

Nathan’s heartbeat in his ears almost drowned out the reply: *“Red one, check six anyway, then git to three.”*

“Roger.”

Fuck! “Kate.” He folded her clammy hands around the Glock. “Get ready to shoot anybody who isn’t me, or who isn’t a blond in a suit. He’s with me.”

She nodded, eyes wide.

He raised the rifle as he started toward the entry. “I’ll be back.”

He pounded into the entry room, leapt the coffee table, and hurtled through the double doors.

Bolting across the hall with the AK sight framing the passage, he started for the intersection. Ahead, Albin backed into view, his .45 covering the hall toward the stairs. He rounded the corner just as the fire door slammed.

“Here!” Nathan kept his voice low.

Albin turned and, pistol retracted against his chest, ran combat-style for the doors.

A small canister rolled into the hall. *BANG!* Blinding light, then concussive force downed ceiling tiles, punched in drywall.

Distance saved the men from the immediate effects, but a flash bang meant . . .
Gas-masked gunmen stormed around the corner, assault rifles up.

Nathan retreated. His trigger finger followed once, twice. Deafening double-taps hammered the point men. The 7.62 mms kicked two of the motherfuckers to the floor with aerosols of blood. *Where* the rounds impacted didn’t matter. He just needed enough time to—

Another canister. *Hiiiiisssss*. Fucking tear gas!

Squinting, holding his breath, he whipped the towel around his nose and mouth as he got a foot through the spa doorway. Three shots thundered as Albin provided suppressive fire as best he could with a handgun.

Nathan paused for a last strafe of the enemy. Something punched into his chest. As he jerked backward, a second impact knocked him off his feet.

He crashed to the tile floor, stars exploding across his tearing vision while his lungs fought to inflate. The fire alarm had resumed—no, it came from his own ears. Pain blazed across his chest like he'd taken a punch. Or two.

Albin, take my weapon and empty a mag on these fuckers! he tried to roar, but it came out as, "Guh!"

Shouting, cursing, scuffling, then a gunshot. Nathan lifted his head to see as he struggled to move. Smoke, double vision, and the general confusion of struggling men obscured the view.

The terrorist motherfuckers tramped off with a farewell "Fuck you, shitbag!"

A black egg bounced onto Nathan's chest and the double doors slammed shut.

Chapter 9

Sacrifice

The Howling – Within Temptation

Massive amounts of epinephrine in one's system could bestow superhuman abilities: Ninety-year-old grandmas lifted cars off grandchildren. Mountain climbers dragged themselves miles after fracturing both legs.

Right now, the only superhuman feat Nathan needed involved flinging the “gift” behind a counter, lunging into the women's locker room, and getting as much distance and as many barriers between himself and the entry as possible.

No problem—

Thunder exploded indoors. More ceiling tiles fell. E lights flickered. Nathan's teeth rattled in their sockets. His heart stumbled on a beat.

He opened his eyes and peeled his hands from his ears. Still alive. On his stomach in a shower stall, but still alive. Pushing to his feet brought a wave of pain, its epicenter at his chest. It hurt to breathe.

A glance downward showed two bullet holes in the towel. He scrabbled for the armor neck and shoved a hand down. No blood. A shaking breath escaped him.

Albin? Shit! What the fuck happened to him? The terrorists.

“No!” Not separated again! He should have just left Kate here. A side-kick to the wall failed to return Albin, but it cooled the rage that threatened to hit critical mass.

He clicked a full mag into the AK.

One, two, three, four. Eyes closed, he centered his thoughts. Wolves slunk along the edges of his mind. Not again. Not now. The room temperature fell, raising the hair on his arms. E lighting glinted off the white tile like moonlight on snow. His breathing filled his ears like a beast's panting. The wolves moved from the periphery of his mind . . .

Howls fill the cold air like arrows, spurring sixteen-year-old Nathan Serebus to leap for the radio tower's steel bar overhead. His gloves slip on the ice, but boots scabble for and find enough purchase on a strut to send him up. In a panic, he scrambles higher.

Finally he stops, clinging to the metal frame, shaking from cold and terror. Air forty

degrees below zero burns his lungs as he gasps.

Below, golden eyes wink up at him from at least twenty monsters. Around, the tundra stretches away in a sea of snow and night. Nature rules this place, red in tooth and claw. Now Nature wants that red to come from him. No one will miss him until noon the next day, at the earliest. If the wolves don't kill him, the cold will. It stalks the Aleutian twilight in search of any creature foolish enough to challenge it.

The harsh winter made predators and prey equally desperate. These wolves would wait him out. They sense weakness.

Already he shivers under his snowmobile suit. When he stops shivering, that means the beginning of the end. Jaws will tear his frozen corpse to pieces when he falls.

"Oh God, I'm sorry." Sorry for being an idiot with more pride than sense. His breath fogs. "Please, I'll do anything, just . . . just save me." Darkness, cold, and silence answer. Wind moans over the snow drifts. God ignores him, but the wolves do not: they circle and snarl below.

He looks into the murk beyond the ridge, the abyss that birthed the beasts. "Can't you take something else? Anything? . . . Anyone?" His friends had run off in the other direction, toward the broadcast station's buildings. Maybe the wolves could go after—No! The cold is making him crazy.

"Anyone?" the ice and tundra, not God, seems to echo.

"Just not me. Can't you . . ."

"You."

"I don't want to die."

"Die."

He can't feel his hands or feet anymore. The wolves growl and yip as they watch with golden eyes.

"I don't deserve this. Go eat someone else!"

"Someone else."

The chills slow. Thoughts crawl in the cold. "Someone else . . . Yes."

"Yes."

A shadow larger than the wolves slinks over the ridge thirty yards away. It rises from four legs to two, towering half the height of the pines. Its shape wavers. A hallucination? Nathan shakes his head. When he looks again, the shadow has merged with the darkness, but twin orbs of fire stare—stare into his soul and see what coils and slithers there: the anger and arrogance. Nathan squeezes his eyes shut.

“Amarok.” The word sticks in his throat. The Inuit spoke of the giant wolf, said it stalked and consumed anyone foolhardy enough to hunt alone at night. Only the amarok could hunt alone in the Arctic dark. “It’s a legend. It’s not real.”

“Real.”

Ice crust crunches as something big and four-legged crashes through the drifts. Nathan’s eyes open a slit. Ears pricked, the wolves turn, fan out. A caribou charges down the hill in a spray of snow. The crystals glitter in the moonlight as time slows. The animal halts in surprise.

Howls from behind it, then golden eyes, white teeth, open jaws. The pack descends on the caribou in a frenzy. Blood sprays across the snow. It ends in a moment. Snarling, the carnivores drag their kill into the shadows.

What was a lone caribou doing out here at night? “Thank you,” Nathan breathes, eyes closing.

“You.” No longer an echo, now the word resounds in his mind.

“A sacrifice . . .”

“Sacrifice.”

“For my life.”

“Life.”

The wolves surround a silhouette that flickers between human and beast. They spring at it, tear it to pieces, as they did to the caribou. Light more blinding than darkness washes over the scene, erases it.

The temperature returned to the ambient seventy degrees, but chills still rattled his teeth while his heart hammered in his throat. At some point, he’d dropped to one knee. Nausea washed over him, churned in his stomach. He gulped. Deep breaths.

“Enough.” With a shake of his upper body, he gained his feet, straightened.

He had two sacrificial victims to save from the wolves.

Want to know what happens to Nathan, Albin, and the terrorists? Curious about the terrorists' master plan, and how it involves the cannibals? (The correct answer is yes.)

The cliffhanger ends on [Amazon](#).

To keep up to date on its progress, as well as get blog posts about villains, weird science, and more, **visit my site lcchamplin.com**