“He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping.”

~ Heart of Darkness, by Joseph Conrad

PROLOGUE

1943, Columbia University, New York

It began as an idea, only an idea, but a beautiful one, dazzling and brilliant in its conception, like a flash of lightning crossing the heavens and landing on earth. There was no feeling or attachment to it, no perception other than seeing the moral rightness of a profound commitment, an unfettered faith to it, something to which you could offer sacrifices…

She was quite beautiful, though, that girl in his history class, a photographer's delight. Her skin had an exquisite dewy quality to it when the light shone across her body, as if she were made of alabaster and polished to a soft sheen. Her long black hair, trailing down to the small of her back, radiated a kind of blue light, having an otherworldly, almost ghostly quality to it. Her dark blue eyes, though, were her best feature, framed by thick, black lashes. She was a virtual love affair for the camera.

Thomas happened upon her quite by accident outside that history class. He already knew her schedule intimately, knew her quirky little habits when she sat outside the café in town, her lack of friends, all of it. She accepted too easily the invitation to go with him – young girls are always flattered by the prospects of romance. The jolting idea percolated throughout that first conversation, while her full, dark lips expressed all the disappointments in her life closing in on her. Her thoughts were foolish, silly narcissisms and he knew she could be easily manipulated with the right words.

For several weeks, they engaged in long talks where he had to endure her endless soliloquies about her fruitless life, the recitations of her maudlin poetry, talking about a brutal darkness within her, the many depressions and the unsuccessful attempts. He began to doubt that she even deserved the divine spark she wanted to give up so easily. She was incapable of seeing the disillusionment was of her
own making. He had been advised by his friend that she would fail him, that those kissable lips wanted to prattle in any willing ear, that she couldn’t help but disembody every one of her secrets. However, he pressed on, ignoring his friend’s warnings.

She, of course, came upon the plan first. He only encouraged her to go through with it. A sacrifice would provide the proof he needed for his thesis, his manifesto. He never had an appetite for the threat of death, but in her case it was possible, with her affectations and woeful exaggerations that bored everyone into a coma. Then came the histrionics because he stopped coming to her, stopped feeding her insatiable need and he knew it was time.

He insisted on procuring the means, saying he wanted to do it with her. She wanted to cut into her body, and he couldn’t have that. That alabaster skin had to be perfect for the light, for him to see it escape as she expelled her final breath. He was the witness, the worshiper of the idea, recording all of it with his camera. She finally agreed. The day was set, and he could feel the savage moment descend into their midst, the exhilaration of anticipating the moment, like trails of light all around him, falling from the sky, he finally had a sacrifice for his idea.

He ran from class to class, his trembling hands unable to write a single note or sit through a lecture. He couldn’t sleep, knowing that they were standing on the edge of a new but dark continent, the thrill of discovering what lay within it lighting up his brain. He was like those intrepid explorers setting sail for the new world, and finding feral creatures in the form of humans inhabiting the place, innocent of civilization and, yet, barbarous killers not having the moral compass of Christendom, or regard for any life.

It wasn’t until the police stormed into his dorm room that he realized she had changed her mind, and broken their pact by divulging their scheme to someone else, who questioned the sanity of their well-crafted plan. He could easily visualize the scene: she was seated cross-legged on her cot, her hands flapping about as she blathered on and on, her extravagant prose filled with wretched sentiment, and she, with that tortured look on her face, receiving the pity she so desperately wanted, while punctuating each sentence with a prolonged bout of weeping. Then, this friend, her fellow student with no vision, convinced the girl to not go through with it and, in terror that Thomas might coax the girl into it again, rushed off to the professor’s office expressing their horror over the affair. And the professor believed the tale, knowing that Thomas would make another attempt to carry out the scheme, and called in the police, demanding he be arrested and removed from school. They confiscated his camera, his film, all his equipment, even the first draft of his thesis, forcing him to promise that he would never do it again. And he lied to them, a delightful and convincing lie, filled with regret and sorrow, all tied up
with a ribbon of tears. Everyone willingly purchased the lie, packaging and all; his parents, the school, even the police. But not the professor; not him. He had another sense, that sixth one that could reach into the soul of another human and yank out the truth.

The professor naturally knew Thomas was capable of future dark deeds, seeing through the golden lie, even with the admission of the use of drugs that muddled his mind, the heroine-cocaine induced frenzy. But the professor was committed, he wanted Thomas expelled, saying he was a danger to others and that he should receive the help he so desperately needed. "The boy is disturbed," he proclaimed. And people began to be convinced.

The girl left school that same night, rightly feeling the humiliation of her stupidity. And two days later, she was a thousand miles away from him, away from those who knew, and there, she finally succeeded, drawing a line up each arm with a razor. And he was not there to record it. A complete waste.

And he was about to be saved. Money was spread thickly by his attorney and he was freed from the police investigation. But the professor vowed to not stop, for he was a missionary of the truth. He was advised by his friend that the die was cast, that he was right to protect himself, to lie and remain in school. How his friend knew that she would betray him was a puzzle, but then he understood people, could see inside them and know what they would do. He was a splendid hunter.

As Thomas sat in his dorm room, he happened upon another resplendent idea.

CHAPTER 1

22 years later

May 1965, Manhattan…

Esther pushed on the dough with the heels of her palms, her mind in a reverie while the embryonic mass on her oak kitchen table began to take form. She was taking her time, her mind more focused on the baby, the eight month old child in her womb, than her bread, her thoughts flicking from one name to another, still unable to settle. Her eye was suddenly drawn to the window above her stone sink. Something dark overshadowed the sun, which was shivering through the leaves on the tree outside her brownstone. It was fast approaching, rushing directly toward the pane. The glass cracked with a loud
snap and the object disappeared, the sun rainbowing through the fissures. Her body shuddered and she loosed a small shriek, her hand flying instinctively to her swollen belly.

A wavy lock of her auburn hair fell over one green eye. She brushed it away with the back of her floured hand and sighed. That tiny voice in the back of her head scratched across her brain, sending a frisson of fear spiking up her spine. She drew in a deep breath, swallowing hard on the sudden fright and blew the air out in one long exhalation, willing her heart to slow. She eyed the cracked window and sighed again.

*Just when the remodeling was nearing its end. Now this…*

She waddled to the door, her pregnant belly leading the way, and stepped outside to the landing before the stairs leading up to the sidewalk in front of her brownstone. Once upon a time, the door leading out of the kitchen to the steps outside was the entrance the help used, and for deliveries. This relegated the cook and the staff to the basement, where all the meals were cooked, food stored, and the laundry done with efficiency. Her parents had kept the door, using the landing at the bottom of the steps to keep their trash bins, but also opening the kitchen inside to the entrance by the front door, with steps leading up to that level, opening access from the kitchen to the rest of the house, rather than taking the old lift to just get a glass of water or cook a meal.

Esther liked the kitchen, enjoyed sitting in it and having her morning and evening coffee in the space. She and Mac increased the size of the opening to the foyer, and dedicated one end of the room for breakfast or lunch, sometimes dinner if they didn't feel like eating in the dining room. To keep the kitchen from feeling basement-like and claustrophobic, they raised the ceiling to see above the sidewalk, allowing more light to filter into the room from the front of the house. The only room above the kitchen was her father's study on the second floor, affording plenty of space to raise the ceiling significantly. And the window above the sink, once a series of small rectangular panes peeking out at street level, were opened into one large one, stretching gracefully up the wall so you could see anyone approaching the steps as you glanced up from the sink.

The warm spring day enveloped her, chasing the cold fright away with its affable embrace. She glanced up the stairs and spied a blackbird, laying on the edge of a step, a rivulet of blood trickling over the creature's smooth, black beak. Its head was flung backward and its mouth opened, as if it were about to cry out, to shout a warning, but its body's momentum had already sealed its fate. She sucked in a little startled air at the sight of it, that frigid alarm stabbing its icicles back into her body. Even the high seventies temperature was unable to evaporate the icy feeling from continuing its course.
A shadow fell across the front of her building as she eyed the poor dead thing. She glanced up at the tree and the sky. A cloud had moved in front of the sun, blotting it out, but then, it slid away, scattering the white puff into spidery threads.

“It’s just a bird,” she declared. “A poor dead bird.” She sighed again, trying to catch her breath, which was becoming more and more difficult as the baby grew within her.

And the day had begun so beautifully; no shadows, just the morning sun drifting through their bedroom windows with dust motes dancing in the shafts of light. She and Mac had eaten their breakfast on the patio, and they had laughed over how difficult it was for her to drive because her belly was so big. Even Tilda, their housekeeper, with her apron tied around her ample waist and graying blonde hair tamed atop her head in a tight bun, had joined in, her usual stoic Finnish personality lifted into a jovial mood. The morning proffered a sun-speckled day, literally dripping with the honey of family and laughter.

She raised the lid on the trash can and fished for a saltine cracker box she knew she had just thrown out, along with the front page from yesterday’s New York Times, declaring interest rates had risen again. She trudged up a few steps, covered the dead thing with the pages and wrapped the creature in its paper shroud, making her hands look sooty from the black print. Two more blackbirds descended and perched on the curlicues of the wrought iron on her fence running along the sidewalk, watching her, cocking their heads to eye what she was doing with their friend.

“Sorry for your loss,” she said to the dark beings, as they examined her movements with curiosity. Then they suddenly took flight and disappeared into the sun drenched sky.

Sliding the feathered beast into the cracker box, she happened to glance up, noticing a man standing across the street staring at her. He smiled and bowed a little, tipping his hat, when some oranges he held in a paper bag escaped and ran away along the sidewalk and into the gutter. He leaned over, gathering the fruits, stuffing them back in the bag and smiled at her again. She smiled back. A bicyclist whizzed by and the man’s attention was caught by the flash of color, his head jerking in its trajectory. She glanced up and down the street, an odd feeling possessing her, the same one she couldn’t seem to shake in the last few days. But only the two of them were out on the street at this early Friday hour.

*Where is this feeling coming from?* she thought.

She shuffled across the kitchen toward the breakfast area which led to the patio, feeling a tad wistful. She opened the door, then struggled to bend over in order to set the bird on the terracotta tiles, but found it too difficult. Finally, she bent her knees, squatting, feeling like a Sumo wrestler holding onto the door frame, and set the box to the side. Later, she and Mac would bury the creature, laugh
about the visual, and call someone to replace the window. She rose smoothly and gave a cursory glance to the frame to see if she left a black mark from her ink stained hands. There was a hand print, wrapped around the wood, all her fingers and her thumb imprinted in perfect whorls and lines, like a child's hand pressed in clay. Her mind flashed to her son Freddie's hand print pressed into a round piece of clay when he was five years old. She hung it proudly on the livingroom wall. She missed him.

Closing the door to the backyard, she maneuvered to the sink, washed her hands, and wiped them dry with a kitchen towel draped over a metal hanger above the sink. For a moment she had forgotten how much she loved being home again, back in her brownstone after an absence of several years. Running away to Los Angeles to heal and leaving all the bad memories behind seemed like a good idea at the time. It took their return to New York to rediscover her good ones, all those memories that had been buried under all the pain resurfacing, and she was happy. No, she was content: a great deal better than happiness, which can be fleeting.

She glanced back at the door frame and back to her dough. “No more interruptions, please,” she declared to the kitchen. “At least not until I'm finished kneading my bread.” The black mark would have to wait. Anyway, Tilda would undoubtedly notice it and scrub it away.

The baby kicked at her insides, like it was engaged in a game. She pushed the fingers of her left hand into the sticky lump of dough and sprinkled flour with her other over the mass. It yielded to her touch, responding with each push of the heels of her hands and her fingers, drawing the lump forward in a fold. This was one of her favorite moments of the day. The act of making something so elemental had meaning and purpose for her. Everything else she did around her house paled in the light of baking bread. She would form it and let it rise, then bake it, the smell of yeast filling the house with its delicious fragrance.

Then, a voice scratched in the back of her head, just loud enough for her to hear, though its scrape of sound was as thin as a cobweb. It said, “So, it begins.”

The doorbell rang three times. Then rang three more times in rapid succession. She startled, her heart leaping then pounding in her chest, her baby reacting again, kicking her violently. The black dead creature came to mind; the first sign the day wouldn't end well.

She sighed. “It has to be the McManus gang.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was eight in the morning. “They're early.” She could feel the baby push on her diaphragm with both feet. “I realize you're anxious to come out and meet Mommy and Daddy, little one, but you still have to spend more time in there. Just make yourself comfortable. Relax.”
The dough was nearly the perfect consistency for shaping it into a round before placing it in her linen-lined basket for rising.

Ding dong. Ding dong. Ding dong. The bell chimed in rapid succession.

She sighed again. “Mac, would you please get that,” she called out. “My hands are all sticky.” The dough began to firm as she pushed her knuckles into it and folded the mixture onto itself, then turned it to press and fold again. The voice etched a thin line across the back of her head, again. “Tilda's at the market,” she said with her voice raised.

Ding dong. Ding dong. Ding dong.

“Mac, are you out there?” Her forehead wrinkled, her eyes scanning the doorway. She hadn't seen him in the backyard. Unless, he was in the shed, potting a plant or making something out of wood. He might be upstairs in the study, immersing his fertile mind in her father's old papers.

No answer.

She could hear whoever it was beat on the door with a heavy determined fist. Her heart stepped up its pace.

“Just a moment,” she called. She wasn't even sure they could hear her up the steps and through that thick oak front door all the way from the kitchen. She wiped her hands briskly on a towel, drew in a breath, and declared, “Pregnant lady on the move.”

She trudged up the steps, then walked through to the foyer and opened the door. “This better be good because I'm right in the middle of baking,” she blurted.

There were two men in dark blue suits standing on her stoop with a deadly serious look plastered on their faces. The thought flashed through her mind, FBI.

“Esther Charlemagne?” asked the man standing closest to her.

“Yes.” Her heart sprung from its spot and began a quick staccato pulse. She could feel the baby kick and twist nervously, as though her child could sense something was dreadfully wrong. Her hand flew to the spot, shielding the tiny being growing within her.

“I'm Agent Todd and this is Agent Lawrence.” He flashed a wallet with a shield and his identification card. The other man followed his lead and unfolded his credentials for her to see.

“What's this about? I haven't been associated with the Bureau for years.” She eyed each one to be sure they were authentic and not some bizarre fake.

“Your life is in danger. We've come to take you to a safe house,” Agent Lawrence announced with dispassion.
The voice in the back of Esther's head spoke again, burning like a blue flame, unwilling to be
snuffed out until its incendiary message immolated her. For three days it had charred a cork screw of
warnings that her newlywed joy was to be interrupted by something terrible lurking outside her beauti-
ful brownstone home, and here it was, its harbinger standing at her door.

She shuddered. That prescient voice she inherited from her mother was always right. It did not
serve to ignore it when it spoke. The bird, the voice, were all sent to warn her. She drew up from her
memory the face of evil, the face of the man who had haunted her for five years, the face of the man
she believed was dead, who had finally receded to the dark corner of her remembrances, and into that
hole reserved for all the bad things in the world she wanted to forget. She reached for the frame, her
head reeling from the vision.

“Oh, my god. He's alive. Isn't he?”

She watched that look of agreement flash across their eyes. It was true. How she hoped he was
dead, longed for it, lit candle after candle in the chapel, all in the hope that he was somewhere at the
bottom of the ocean, his bones picked clean by the fish.

“Ma'am, you have to pack now. There's no time to waste,” Agent Todd said.

Esther glanced over her shoulder into her living room when a strand of flour covered hair
wormed its way forward and fell across her face. She turned her head and looked at the serious faces of
the FBI agents standing on her front porch, their male potency flowing from their carefully cropped
heads and down their dark blue suits into those shiny black shoes fixed to the cement outside her wide
door. They meant to take her against her will, if necessary, for in their company were two New York
policemen, standing at the bottom of the steps by a sleek, black Lincoln, guns prominently displayed on
their hips, at the ready to throw her in the backseat of that cold limousine. It was happening. She could
feel the moment clothe round her like a scorching hate, forcing her to breathe its Stygian, poisonous air.
He was here, coming back to make good on his promise to kill her, all that anger toward her burbling
over the heat of the years until it boiled over, devising the perfect plot.

She had once been a woman who captured men twice her size, whose dead eye helped her win
shooting contests when she was on the New York City police force, but she had exhausted that avenue,
it was finished, dead. That self-sufficient woman paled into obscurity when she took joy in wall paper-
ing the baby's room and baking bread. Mac's child in her round belly made her vulnerable, fragile
against the suffocating, unseen force lying in wait somewhere out there, biding his time, feeding off the
terror in the mere mention of his presence, of his name. Even standing in the doorway made her a per-
fect target. She had trouble walking, sitting, standing and sleeping without a pillow between her legs
and one behind her back. She wasn't capable of protecting herself. She needed Mac, ached for his arms to envelope her, to make her feel safe. Her body shuddered, and she leaned her back against the door frame, both arms cradling the baby.

Throwing her head back, she loosed a terrified howl, "Mac!"

He jumped down the stairs, his long legs clearing the distance from the third floor attic to the first in seconds. Arriving at her side, breathless, his blue-black eyes probing her face, assessing the scene, his wavy black hair falling across his forehead raised in a panic, the look on his face screamed that he knew what was happening.

“Mac,” she said in a tiny, quivering voice, raising her eyes to gaze into his. “He's here.” Her eyes rolled back, her knees buckling. Mac caught her just as she began to crumple to the floor, her belly nearly dwarfing her five-foot-five body.

“There's no time to lose,” Agent Todd said. “We have to leave, now.”