

BLACK SPOONS AND BRIMSTONE

A Fantasy Novel

by

K. P. White

Julian Briscoe knew that this was going to be a very bad day.

One – he had woken up, all alone, in a smelly, horrible place
in the middle of nowhere.

Two – he had woken up dead.

Short-listed for a 2012 Reader's Favorite Award



“A deep and multidimensional story that will leave the reader pondering the meaning of the tale even long after they close the book.”

- ReadersFavorite.com

BLACK SPOONS & BRIMSTONE

KP White

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Dedication

To Narcotics Anonymous
for the millions of lives you've saved...
including mine.

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CHAPTER 1

Another Story Begins

It was the whitest of places... white walls... white ceiling... a large, bright, white light overhead. And people dressed in white, bustling about... a hive of activity, and noise.

And voices, saying things like: "What's the heart rate?" and "Just breathe, Baby, breathe."

And then a single, long, high-pitched scream.

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CHAPTER 2

What is this Place?

Julian knew that he was dead. He had seen the gun pointed right at him; had heard it go off; had felt the impact of the bullet striking his chest, like a great fist, and him falling backwards, the warm blood rapidly soaking his t-shirt and chest as he fell, spreading like wildfire... and then his vision failing, the periphery blurring and blackening, and then that darkness rapidly encroaching the centre, like a candle going out.

He never actually felt himself hitting the ground. But that is where he now was... opening his eyes to find himself lying... where? He didn't recognize this place. It was not at all like the misty, shadowy alleyway that he last remembered being in; where that last fateful drug deal had gone bad.

It wasn't the hospital... this was dirt he was lying on... it certainly wasn't a gurney or hospital bed. And that was a sky he looked up into... a dark, ominous sky that threatened violence.

This obviously wasn't Heaven... the sky told him that. And he knew... yes, he knew that there was no way in Hell he would end up in Heaven, not with the life he had lived. First of all, he'd never believed in the place. Maybe if he had... no, even if he had believed in Heaven, and in God, Julian was someone who wanted things now, not later. To Hell with this eternal reward crap! And he had loved his lifestyle too much... the money that selling drugs brought him; the cars; the nice apartment; and, most of all, the girls... the women, the beautiful women who flocked to him and would do virtually anything to please him.

He should never have been able to have such beautiful women. He wasn't that good looking... slightly below average in height; wiry; some would say almost sickly in appearance. And yet, he had had more beautiful women than most men ever could even dream of. And, even in his early thirties, with his scruffy beard and a couple of scars on his forehead making him look all of that, girls in their teens and early twenties still loved him... or at least pretended that they did. Not last week, he had had two gorgeous girls - one blonde, one brunette - both still in school, one on each arm as he led them to his place "for some fun".

No! He never would have changed all that... even had he believed in Heaven and Hell. Life had been too sweet.

He was smart, especially in math and science; but he was lazy. Early on in college, he had been introduced to drugs. He tried them, and didn't like

how they made him feel. But the girl he had taken to the party, who he shared his drugs with... he loved how SHE made him feel, choosing to please him right there in the middle of the party, all so he would give her a little more of the dust in his pocket. That had been a first for him. He'd had countless similar encounters since then, by countless different beautiful women. Some of them he'd insisted service him and his 'buddies', whatever other guys were in the room, just for the cynical enjoyment of seeing how desperate they were. One pretty teen in skin-tight jeans and a blonde ponytail had been so desperate (and he knew it), she agreed to please half a dozen guys, most of whom Julian didn't even know, just because Julian told her to. He'd enjoyed watching her performing her duties, but her eyes always on him.

'Just another crack whore,' he noted, with amusement, to himself.

Hell no! This could NOT be Heaven!

But now, growing increasingly uncomfortable on the cold hard ground, feeling what he perceived to be a sharp rock pressed into his back, he sat up. It took a moment for his eyes to focus, because there was virtually nothing to focus on. Wherever he was, it was flat for almost as far as the eye could see... almost, in that Julian could make out what seemed like a stretch of black mountains in the far, far distance.

Everything was black. It was as if the earth was made of coal. In fact, everything had the strong foul smell of coal or sulphur or something in between. He inspected one hand that had been supporting him as he sat. It was black with soot. Maybe this was coal. And the dark clouds overhead made everything that much darker. What an awful place! Maybe this WAS Hell.

But it was cold! Not the fire and brimstone he'd been told about, by the very few who had cared enough to fear for his soul. But then again, maybe these bleeding hearts all had been wrong. Maybe Hell was cold. He used his sooty hands to help himself stand, and his eyes again scanned his surroundings, as he pulled his expensive jean jacket around him.

He was alone. There was no sign of life anywhere.

'Of course there's no life,' he thought sarcastically. 'You only get here if you're dead.'

But there was no sign of anything, besides him, that ever once could have been alive. No people. No animals. No vegetation. Not even any bugs. He'd always envisioned cockroaches, rats and snakes in the land of eternal damnation. But there were none here. Even if he wasn't, this place

was dead. There wasn't even anything to sustain life... no food, no water. And, for some reason that he found puzzling, under the assumption that he was dead, he was thirsty.

"Ah crap!" he said to himself... and started walking towards the 'mountains'.

Instinctively, he started to look at his wristwatch, a 14-karat gold-plated Bulava he'd bought with some of his drug money. But then he realized how ludicrous looking at his watch now really was. If he was dead, why would time have any meaning? He looked up at the sky. For some reason, he knew that there was no sun behind those clouds. There would be no day... there would be no night.

"Fat lot of good you'll do me!" he said to his watch, his voice dripping with disgust.

He walked for a long time, getting thirstier and thirstier. It seemed like the mountains were getting no closer. And yet, it wasn't hot, and he didn't feel nearly as tired as he thought he might. He'd never been one to exercise, in life. Maybe he was dreaming.

An idea suddenly came to him. Scanning the ground around him, he spotted a small, flat, sharp rock, like shale. He picked it up, paused a moment to consider the pain, and then slit his arm. Not deep, but enough to bleed. And it did hurt. And he did bleed. He tasted the blood; and it tasted like what he thought blood should taste like, like how blood had tasted when he'd bled from a punch in the mouth... he'd had a few of those in his lifetime. If he was dreaming, it was one hell of a dream! Eventually, he came to a large rock that he could sit on, and so he rested for a bit; more because he was bored with walking than anything else. Again, he looked around him; but this time, he pondered more. What WAS this place?

By now, he was pretty sure he either was dreaming... or dead. Part of him believed the former, because the latter went against everything he'd ever believed; or, rather, it all was inconsistent with his lifetime of non-belief. On the other hand, this was by far the most realistic dream he'd ever had. He certainly felt awake. And this brought him back to his initial question: What was this place?

Heaven: not a chance. Hell: maybe. But, then again, he was starting to feel like, perhaps, it was more like Limbo, the place between Heaven and Hell, where people waited for final judgment. Was that it?

He shook his head.

“Wherever it is, this place sucks!” he said.

After a few more moments, he stood up and started walking again. And he walked and he walked and he walked. Every so often, he looked at his watch, not really paying attention. But then it dawned on him that the hands of the watch weren't moving, other than the second hand jerking forward and back every second, as if rhythmically struggling to break free from invisible bonds; the minute and hour-hands stayed still.

“Weird,” he said.

The sky above him was a constantly moving series of dark, dark clouds, with no break in them. Once in awhile, he thought he heard thunder, but it was a long, long way off. What the heck would he do if it rained?

“You'd tilt your head back and open your mouth, you moron!” he chastised himself, his mouth now feeling as dry as cotton.

He kept on walking.

And the sky never changed. He was right about there being no day and no night. And the mountains still were so damn far away. It almost drove him crazy. It was nuts! This endless nothingness; this lack of any change, of any movement other than the fruitless struggle of the second hand of his otherwise useless watch; the clouds and the wind - a foul, carbon-scented wind!

The ground remained like black soot, with flat pieces of black shale here and there; but no rises or falls... no curves at all, except for the mountains, in the distance, that never drew nearer. He felt, by now, that he must have walked almost ten miles. But the mountains seemed not one inch closer. It was as if he was walking the wrong way on a treadmill; except that, if he stopped, he didn't even have the pleasure of going backwards.

After awhile, he wondered if, maybe, he had chosen the wrong direction. Maybe the mountains weren't mountains after all, but just a black horizon, like the end of a flat planet. Or maybe this was a test, to see if he would be falsely lured towards the 'mountains', when he should have chosen another way. He stopped, and again his eyes scanned the horizon in every direction. Only in the direction he had been going was there anything other than flat blackness.

He certainly did not feel like just turning around. Somehow, the thought of walking another ten miles or whatever to end up exactly where he had

started just was not acceptable to him. He thought about turning right or left though. But, ultimately, he discarded this idea as well. He had to forge on. What if those really were mountains? Hell! Even the end of a planet where he could jump off seemed more appealing than this endless lack of change!

And so he continued on. But, after awhile, he sank to his knees and, for the first time since he was maybe a 10-year old kid, he broke down, his entire body heaving with sobs of grief and despair.

He started looking for another piece of sharp shale. He'd slit his throat. He'd end this, if he could. But then he looked at the arm that he had slit earlier, and there was nothing. No blood... no scar. Even the blood that had been on his t-shirt was just black soot now, the bullet hole in his chest nothing more than a black mark.

"Damn you!" he screamed, looking up at the clouds. They rolled on, paying him no attention.

He stood up again. But now he staggered, not from tiredness, but from despair.

He started to scream with every step now, profanities as vulgar and degrading and seething as he could possibly think of, in a voice as loud and as angry as he could muster, as if he hoped that, maybe, he could make God or Satan or whoever oversaw this hellhole get tired of him and just obliterate him.

But nothing happened; and he just trudged on.

If this had been Earth, if this had been life, he would have seen the sun rise and fall at least a couple of times by now, that's how long it seemed to him; but still the mountains in the distance grew no closer. His thirst grew worse and worse, but seemed to cause him no harm. The same with hunger; though, admittedly, the foul stench all around him usurped most of his appetite.

He rested, by times, but never seemed to need sleep. Besides, the ground was so hard and uncomfortable, and the smell of the soot so strong and foul, he sensed that no sleep would come anyway.

At one point, he put his hands in his pockets and noticed something in the right one. In fact, there was more than one thing. He pulled the objects out and looked at them. He shook his head. He'd never seen any of these things before; and he had no idea where or how he had gotten them.

There was a key; to what, he had no idea, but it seemed like the key to some door. There was a paper clip; he NEVER used paper clips. Why the hell would he use paper clips? There was a 52 cent stamp, another thing he virtually never used, what with email, cell phones, texting, and Facebook, and on-line and automatic payment systems. There was a small magnet; what the heck was that for? And there was what he thought was a sort of coin, but not of any currency he had seen before... a round silver piece the size of a silver dollar, but without markings. He was tempted to throw all of these things away; just ditch them; but something stopped him, and he returned everything to his pocket instead.

'You never know when you might need something when you're vacationing in Hell,' he thought.

He then resumed walking, every so often reaching into his pocket to make sure that everything still was there, even though he sensed the futility of this exercise.

Every so often, the debate re-emerged in his mind over whether or not he should change direction. What a fool he would feel if he turned left or right and came to some nicer place within a few miles! Ultimately, he decided to angle towards the left, so that he still would be making 'progress' towards the mountains, if such progress were to be made. But nothing changed. Mile after mile after mile... step after step after tired step... nothing changed.

Finally, he came to something that seemed like a very shallow pit, the earth sunk only a few inches below everything else, so that it had gone unnoticed until his foot came upon it and even the slight change made him stumble forward, as if stepping off an unseen, low stair. He squatted down. Here, in this space of sunken earth maybe 6 by 4 feet in size, the ground was slightly softer... almost like black sand.

He shook his head, and felt yet another tear trickle down his cheek onto his mouth.

"Damn this!" he said quietly, having given up screaming long before, because the lame concept behind it had failed so dismally.

He lay down on the earth, in this small shallow pit, and looked up at the clouds still rolling by. He sensed another distant rumble of thunder, oh so subtle.

"To Hell with this!" he softly said again; and closed his eyes.



CHAPTER 3

The Rain

Of course, Julian never would know how long he slept; or how he came to wake up in such a different place.

The first thing he felt was nausea... as if he was on a boat at sea, rocking back and forth. The second thing he felt was rain striking his face and bare arms. He opened his eyes, and had to close them again, because of the rain. And then he knew that he was being rocked.

“What the...?” he said, quickly sitting up.

He looked around him. The air was thick with rain, so thick you almost couldn't see anything. But he knew that he was in a boat; just a small one... a rowboat, without any oars.

There was no seat in the boat. In that way, it was almost like a coffin. Julian's back was soaked from having slept in six inches of water. He moved to his knees now, pulled his jacket over his head like a hood, and crawled as far forward in the boat as he could, holding the gunwale on each side to steady himself, and squinted, peering out into the steady rain and darkness to see if he could see anything... any sign of land... any sign of a break in the clouds or the rain... any change at all.

But there was none.

And still his watch showed no movement, but for the senseless twitching of the second hand. How long this went on – the rocking of the boat and the endless, changeless rain – he had no idea. Time now truly had no meaning for him. He couldn't even estimate distances anymore... miles travelled or steps taken. There was nothing even to count. But, again, it seemed to go on forever.

He used his hands to scoop water out of the boat, to prevent it from sinking. But, eventually, he stopped. The water started to rise in the boat and kept rising, until it reached the gunwales. But the boat never sank. And when he lay back down in it, trying to drown himself, nothing happened. He breathed as if in the air.

Again, debates arose in his head. Maybe he should jump out and swim. But, to where? Ultimately, he figured that having to swim endlessly with no hope of progress was worse than sitting in a boat. And maybe sharks

would take bites out of him, and he'd be slowly and excruciatingly devoured, piece by piece, without dying. It'd be no fun for the sharks or whatever other monsters lurked below the surface in this hellhole if he just died!

And he also tried to fall asleep again, hoping that maybe he would end up in a different place. But thoughts raced through his mind... would the next place be even worse, even more hopeless? In retrospect, the flat, endless, black desert had seemed like a resort next to this.

The only possible advantage was that he could drink the rain... but now he wasn't thirsty.

He started to scream obscenities again. But the steady, hard rain drowned out his cries, so even he couldn't hear them.



CHAPTER 4

The Cave

Julian awoke this time with no recollection of how or when he had fallen asleep. And he woke up shivering, lying in deep powdery snow with a cold, biting wind howling all around him, so intense it was hard for him to breathe. Was this how things were going to be from now on... going from one terrible place to another even worse... again and again and again?

But then there was something different. He struggled to listen through the howling wind. There were voices. He was sure he heard voices. Pulling his jacket tight around himself, he rolled over onto his knees and looked around. At first, he saw nothing but white, the snow and fog were so thick. Everything was covered in snow. But then he saw what seemed to be a spark... a transient, bright, orange glow. So he started to crawl towards it.

“Hello?” he called out, pleadingly. “Hello?” he continued crawling towards where he had seen the spark.

He thought he saw one again, in a slightly different direction... and then it too disappeared. He altered his direction slightly and aimed toward where the second spark had been.

And then... nothing. He kept looking for another spark, but none came... listening for further voices, but heard none. He started crawling again.

For awhile, he thought as if this was to be the cruellest hoax of all, giving him the hope of voices and a fire, when he was so alone and cold. He wondered whether it would be just as it had been before, with the mountains in the distance, never getting nearer... but even worse. Black mountains, after all, were just black mountains. But he was sure he'd heard voices, though now they were silent. And he was sure he'd seen sparks.

He kept crawling; and, because he'd closed his eyes to keep out the blowing snow, didn't even notice, at first, when he crawled into the shelter of a cave. In fact, it wasn't seeing the cave that alerted him to it. Even when open again, his eyes were so blinded from all the snow that he could see nothing. But the wind had stopped; the sound of the wind was behind him; and, as he crawled forward even more, its howling became like a wolf in the distance.

The snow seemed to be getting less deep until, finally, he crawled out of it, unto bare dirt. He wiped his eyes, and saw how dark it was. But then he

saw the fire a little ways off, and three people sitting around it. And he heard an almost constant high-pitched moan coming from the shadows.

“Here’s another one,” one of the three said.

“Who the hell are you?” asked another.

“Oh God!” was all Julian could say, starting to sob again, and burying his face in his hands.

“Goddam it!” a third voice said. “Another damn crier!”

Finally, Julian caught his breath, and crawled further towards the fire.

“I’m sorry,” he said, breathlessly. “I’m sorry, but it’s been...”

“Yeah! We know, you moron,” the second voice spoke again. “We’ve all been there.”

Julian stopped. He was still catching his breath.

“I’m Julian,” he said at last.

“What?”

“You asked who the hell I was,” Julian explained.

“As if we care,” the second voice said.

By now, Julian could see that the three by the fire all were men, like himself. One, who was gigantic in size and looked to be the oldest, maybe in his forties or fifties, but built like a biker, was covered in tattoos, including a couple on his big, bald scalp. The other two, more average in size and thinner, had scowls on their faces, and long, dirty hair... and were younger, cynical and contemptuous even in their twenties... younger even than Julian. And then there seemed to be some sort of moaning body curled up in the corner, whose face he couldn’t see. No one seemed pleased he was there or the least bit welcoming.

“Where is this place?” Julian asked, as he came to sit among them, still struggling to get warm.

“Are you for frickin real?” the first voice asked.

Julian just stared at the three faces.

Finally, and to Julian's surprise, the scariest of the three, the giant with the tattoos, spoke up, and spoke without hostility.

"He doesn't really know anything more than you do," he said calmly, and then motioned with his head towards one of the others. "Clyde was the first of us to get here."

"How long ago?" Julian asked quickly, without thinking.

The three just smiled and shook their heads.

"Have you been out to lunch the whole time or what?" Clyde said, disdainfully.

"Okay," Julian nodded. "But, I mean, don't you have any idea?"

Irving, the one with the tattoos, just shrugged.

"Weeks, months," he said. "They all roll together after awhile."

"A long frickin time!" Clyde answered the original question, with hostility. And, from the hostile man's unkempt appearance and the length and scraggly appearance of his hair and beard, Julian believed him.

Irving continued: "Then me... then Tom here..." and then he glanced over towards the corner of the cave, where a body was sleeping, curled up like a foetus, but shivering... "And then her... and then you."

"Is she okay?" Julian asked, his voice concerned as he stared at the girl.

"She's a bloody crack whore. Who the hell cares?" said Clyde.

"She's only been here a little longer than you," Irving explained, calmly ignoring Clyde's comment. "It looks like she's still jonesing."

"She moans all the frickin time!" Clyde said. And then he yelled at her:

"Shut the hell up, you dirty little slut!"

Julian was a bit taken aback by the hostility, but was relieved to be out of the snow and wind, relieved to have the fire, and to no longer be alone. But his eyes were unable to stray away from the girl who was lying there, shaking and moaning so miserably.

He could see little of her, except that she was skinny and wearing dirty jeans, sneakers and a long-sleeved sweater that was way too big for her.

Her hair was in obvious tangles. And all that he could see of her skin was one hand, and a little bit of one cheek that wasn't covered in hair; and both were dirty and very, very pale.

The others kept talking, in low voices. Once in awhile, someone asked him a question, like "so, what kind of a'hole were you?" But he answered distractedly, and they soon seemed to forget about him.

Finally, Julian crawled quietly over to the corner where the girl was, and sat with his back against the cave wall.

"Are you okay?" he asked her, his voice low so the three others would not hear. Somehow, he didn't think they would approve of his interest. But she didn't answer, except to moan all the louder. This annoyed Clyde again.

"If you don't shut the hell up, I'm going to bash your frickin head in!" he yelled.

But the girl just kept moaning.

"And you, you dick! Unless you're going to strangle her, just leave her alone!"

"Sorry," Julian said, and then decided it was best he return to the fire to get warm himself.

As with everywhere else, time seemed endless. By the time what he thought must be several hours had past, the girl's moaning was getting on his nerves too.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked the others, a bit irritated. "I mean, I've seen people jonesing before, but this..."

"If you get a good look at her, you can tell she's a frickin princess turned whore," Clyde said. "You've had lots of girls like her before, I'll bet Julian, in your line of work."

Julian stopped breathing. He hadn't told them he'd been a dope dealer.

"Hey! Maybe you even sold her the stuff," Clyde was smiling sinisterly. Julian glanced back at the girl and suddenly felt a wave of shame.

Then Clyde's face scowled again. "But if she keeps this up much longer, she's going back out into the frickin snow."

Something changed in Julian then, at least a little bit. The girl's moaning continued, continuing to irritate everyone to some degree, but Clyde the most and Tom next. But, as Julian's eyes had adjusted to the shadows of the cave, he had come to realize that the girl was a young woman, probably in her mid twenties; and, though skinny and sickly, curled up as she was she looked nice in her jeans. And though he still had never caught a good look at her face, given how she never left her foetal position and her hair always covered it, he figured that she probably was pretty, in some way. He found himself unable to stop watching her, and a pang of remorse shot through him like a shock.

Again, Clyde noticed Julian's interest. "Hey! Why don't you slip over there and ask her for a quickie... you seem to like her so much."

Julian didn't respond, other than to ask: "What's her name?"

Predictably, Clyde was first to answer, with "Who the hell cares?"

Tom laughed and shrugged. He, Julian surmised, was Clyde's yes man. Everything Clyde said he'd agree with, or laugh with, or repeat.

Irving told him that he'd been unable to get that out of her. "I don't know how with it she is," he said.

It was quite a bit later, when the other three seemed quite distracted by a game of checkers they'd created using rocks and squares drawn in the dirt, that Julian slipped back to rest his back against the wall of the cave again, sitting not far from where the girl still moaned. He watched her for the longest time. Then, finally, he slowly rolled over onto his knees, slipped his jacket off, and carefully draped it over the girl to keep her warm.

"It'll be okay," he assured her, even though he didn't mean it.



CHAPTER 5

Jennifer

The first time Julian actually got to see the girl's face, he was filled with both awe and horror. Of course, the girl was so out of it that this all happened probably twelve or so hours (or so it seemed to Julian) after he had arrived in the cave. By this point, Clyde and Tom had decided to get some sleep. Even the girl's moaning had quietened, though her breathing still seemed heavy and laboured. This left just Julian and the older biker (again, Julian assumed this, based purely on appearances) named Irving awake, the former still sitting near to the fire, staring blankly ahead. Julian's eyes went back and forth between the girl and the biker. The latter's face had the strange glow of the fire on it, the tattoos and the orange glow making it seem stranger and scarier than normal, almost like a Halloween jack o' lantern; but, somehow, Julian had stopped fearing this burly man, for he seemed to have the softest heart of the three.

Julian didn't say anything for a long time, even though he knew that there was something, unknown, that disturbed him. Finally, he realized what it was.

"Irving?" he called out.

"Yeah," Irving answered, his voice calm and quiet.

"When I was out there," he pointed to the outside, "It seemed that, every time I fell asleep, I woke up in a different place. And, this cave aside, each time it seemed that I woke up in a place worse than the last."

Irving nodded.

"What happens when you fall asleep here? I mean, why haven't these guys disappeared?"

Irving shrugged. "That just isn't how it works here. You don't disappear when you fall asleep."

"No? Do you think that this is our final destination?"

Irving shook his head.

"Why not? How do you know?"

“I told you that Clyde was the first one of US here,” Irving explained. “But there was someone here who’d gotten here before him.”

“What happened to him?”

Irving shrugged. “Clyde just said that the guy suddenly was gone. He didn’t see how or where.”

Julian paused, and for several minutes, there was silence again. Finally he asked Irving again if he knew anything about the girl at all. Irving shook his head.

“She hasn’t said a word since she’s been here. Man! She’s been a mess. All that whining and crying and shaking. This is the quietest she’s been.” But then the man’s face softened. “I feel sorry for her. She’s so young.”

“Is that your sweater she’s wearing, Irving?” Julian asked him.

Irving just smiled sadly and shrugged.

“She looks pretty,” Julian finally said.

Irving slowly shook his head, not so much to say ‘no’ as to express regret. “I’m sure she once was.”

It was still some time after that when Julian noticed the girl starting to moan again. But then he heard her speak, though it was mumbled and he couldn’t make out any words. He thought maybe she was mumbling in her sleep; but he crawled over to her and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Can I get you something?” he asked, gently.

At first, she just kept moaning. But, finally, she stopped, opened her eyes, turned her head a bit and looked at him.

“I want to die,” she said, weakly.

In that moment, Julian’s heart, a heart he never even knew he had, pained him more than he ever could remember. The girl’s eyes already looked dead, or as if she was blind. There seemed to be no sight, and no expression in them. They seemed as black and as distant as those black mountains he never could get to. And her face was covered in scabs and bruises and scrapes, almost all of which he knew had been self-inflicted.

He had seen it before. He had done this to girls and guys both, selling them a cheap drug that made them claw themselves half to death.

THAT was the horror.

But the awe, and the pain that he felt, were not from any of this.

Instead, they stemmed from how unbelievably beautiful he knew this girl would be, if you could take away the scabs and bruises and abrasions, and put just a little bit of life back into her eyes. Looking at her, his eyes welled up, until he could barely see.

He spoke: "What's your name?" he asked her, quietly.

She stared out at him, for a moment, not comprehending.

"Are you going to rape me?" she asked him, and he felt his breath knocked out of him. In life, he might have. Certainly, if taking advantage of a girl who is desperate for something you have is rape... then he had raped hundreds. He felt a lump in his throat.

"No," he shook his head emphatically. "No... I... I just want to know your name."

She said nothing for a moment. But then she volunteered: "Jennifer."

He nodded recognition.

"I'm Julian," Julian said. "And this is Irving," he pointed back over his shoulder. But Irving said nothing. "He's the guy who gave you the sweater."

"I want to die," Jennifer repeated, as dispassionately as if she had been ordering a tuna sandwich at a restaurant.

"Are you cold?" Julian asked her, seeing her episodic shaking. It had lessened, overall, he noticed.

She nodded.

"Why don't we move you closer to the fire," Julian said. "I'll help you."

"I just want to die."

"Well, let's warm you up a bit first," Julian said, and a sad smile crossed his lips.

For the briefest moment, Jennifer smiled too.

She resisted leaving the relative warmth of her foetal position, lest the severe shivering set in again. But Julian and Irving worked together to gently lift and carry her a few feet closer to the fire; after both of them had cleared the space of rocks. Julian straightened Irving's sweater on her and repositioned his jacket over her shoulders and trunk.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

She nodded, swallowed, and then closed her eyes again. And it took all of Julian's restraint not to lean over and kiss her forehead.

Even though she was quieter now, Clyde and Tom were not nearly so nice to Jennifer as Julian and Irving when they woke up, again calling her a "little crack whore" and recalling how weepy and whiny she'd been when she'd first arrived.

"Why the hell did you move her closer to the rest of us. She's probably got AIDS or something," Clyde said.

"Or rabies," Tom piped in, seeming impressed with his own cleverness.

Then they joked about having wanted to shove their rods down her throat "just to shut her up, if she weren't so dirty." Irving just shook his head. Julian said nothing, but seethed inside. He knew, looking at them and how callous they were, that he was looking at how he had been, almost his entire life. And this made him hate himself far more than he hated them. Luckily, Jennifer seemed to be sleeping again, and to be sleeping a little more soundly. Julian hoped that she hadn't heard all this.

Besides relative warmth and shelter, snow as a replacement for drinking water, and some company, there were no other comforts to this cave. Food was nowhere to be had, not that anyone seemed to be all that hungry. Occasionally, one of the men would wander to the mouth of the cave and scoop up some snow, pack it into ice, and then chew on it, just for the pleasure of it. Julian asked if anyone ever had ventured outside to see if there was anything edible to find, but the others assured him that there would be nothing.

"The wind and snow never stop," he was told, though he wondered aloud how the snow didn't just keep piling up to bury them all.

"Maybe one day it will," said Clyde, with cruel sarcasm.

Julian spent more and more time puzzling over his watch, now that he seemed to have endless time in a relatively protected and comfortable spot. A while ago, because he'd found the senseless quivering of the second hand irritating, he'd placed his watch in his pocket with the other five things; but now he pulled it out, from time to time, to look at it, if only for a minute. Why in Hell did the second hand continue to jerk to and fro like this, and nothing else move? If the battery was almost dead, surely it would have died by NOW. He wished that there was some way to tell the passage of time. As a dealer, things like his cell phone, blackberry and watch were almost as important to his work as the drugs themselves. As his clients became addicted to his drugs, he became addicted to his devices. His cell phone and blackberry were gone; which left his watch. He became increasingly upset that it didn't work.

"Screw the watch!" Clyde chastised him.

Julian cast him an angry glance.

Jennifer rarely was awake; but when she was, Julian went to her.

"Are you thirsty? Do you want some snow to chew on?"

Still lying on her side, she shook her head.

"How old are you?" he asked her at last.

"Twenty-six," she answered.

"What happened to you?" Julian then asked. "How'd you end up here?"

Jennifer just shrugged, and closed her eyes again.

Finally, after what Julian was sure had been several days, if not a week's worth of time, Jennifer asked to sit up, and Julian and Irving helped her. Strategically, Tom and Clyde were asleep again, which led Julian to believe that Jennifer knew what they had been saying of her, and wanted to avoid them. Her neck was so weak she could hardly hold her head up. Julian sat next to her, allowing her to lean against him and protectively supporting her head with his own.

"I don't really know what happened," she finally answered the question Julian had asked, at least a day before.

“Do you know where we all are?” Julian probed her, cautiously. He didn’t want to hurt her.

“I can figure,” she answered. Then she turned her head to him. “What happened to you? How did you end up here?”

Julian looked down. How could he tell Jennifer that he had been a drug dealer and had been shot haggling over a debt? Surely, she would hate him, given that someone like him, and maybe even he (had he met this girl before?), had caused her to be like she was now, essentially had killed her... and especially because he had no drugs to give her now. After all, why would anyone ever like, or even tolerate a drug dealer who had no drugs to give away or sell?

“I got shot,” he said after a pause, yielding as little information as possible, but for once not wanting to outright lie.

“Why?” she asked him.

He chuckled weakly: “Wrong place, wrong time” was all he could come up with.

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at him, but said nothing.

“Don’t pick your face,” he told her, as gently as he could, a few minutes later when he noticed that she was doing it.

She looked at him. “What does it matter?” Her voice was resigned, not angry.

“It isn’t good for you,” Julian said. “And maybe those two would treat you nicer if you, you know, looked a little better.”

Jennifer snickered and shook her head. “Then they’ll really want me to blow them.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Julian said, sincerely.

“Thanks,” Jennifer returned, having faith in his intent, but not his ability. Nonetheless, she put her hand down from her face, and didn’t resist every time after that when Julian reached out to gently lower her hand for her.

“Do you think this actually is Hell?” Jennifer asked Julian some time later, when they again were sitting together with the others, who all were engaged playing a form of three-person checkers in the dirt. Clyde and

Tom largely were leaving the girl alone now, now that she had stopped moaning and was obviously awake.

“I don’t know. I thought it was, at first, when I first woke up in that endless black plain.”

Jennifer looked at him with a puzzled look.

“Weren’t you ever there?” Julian asked her, having noticed her expression.

She shook her head.

“Where did you start?”

“You mean, after I OD’d?”

“Is that what happened to you?”

She shrugged. “It was bound to happen.”

“What happened to you, Jenn?” Julian asked, sadly.

“Why’d I OD?”

“Why’d you start drugs in the first place?”

Jennifer hung her head. “I don’t know. It seemed fun at the time. I had an older boyfriend. He got me some. I didn’t know then that he was a dealer.” She looked up. “By the time I figured things out, I was hooked.”

“On drugs?”

She shook her head. “On him.”

Julian said nothing after that. He could see how a dealer would use his wares to lure a beautiful young girl to him, capture her for himself. Hell... he had done the same. He sat back against the wall and looked blankly ahead of him. Maybe Hell was a better place for him... at least he couldn’t go on hurting innocent people anymore.

.....

In many ways, this time in the cave was so much better than his time chasing that black mountain or in that Godforsaken boat in the driving rain or in the snow. But, in other ways, it was worse. Before, there had been the fear that nothing ever would change... that he would be in that same

exact torturous predicament for all eternity. But here, there was that, as well as the extreme sadness that someone he was starting to truly care about was having to go through it too.

Jennifer still slept most of the time, and much more than the other four. She told him that she still was tired; and maybe she was, having been jonesing for so damn long. But he also believed there were other reasons for her to spend so much time sleeping, or at least pretending to sleep.

Even though she didn't moan nearly as much or as loudly as she used to – just when she clearly was asleep, or sometimes when she suddenly started shivering violently again – Clyde still treated her very badly, calling her a bitch, a slut, a whore, a crack whore, and worse.

Jennifer never answered back, but you could see that she hated him. Tom wasn't that nice either, often joining in when Clyde started in on her; but Clyde initiated everything. Tom essentially ignored both Julian and the girl otherwise.

Julian was too angry to ever say much; he just boiled inside and told Jenn privately to ignore everything.

Irving was much braver than he was, telling Clyde and Tom openly to “shut the hell up” and “give her some slack;” and, like Julian, telling Jennifer to “just ignore those two A-holes.” Increasingly, Julian was coming to like and admire the big, burly man with all the tattoos.

It turns out that Irving actually was a biker, the most consistent love of his life having been his Harley. But he also was a poet, having published three books of poetry and done moderately well with one of them. In fact, the largest part of his time in the cave he spent thinking up poems in his head; and his greatest curse was that he had nothing on which or with which to write them down. Of all the poems he had written, his favourite, and the one he still remembered by heart, he had called ‘Blinding Love’. It was Jennifer who asked him to recite one of his poems to her.

“Okay,” he said. And then he gazed upward and yet inward, and started to speak in a voice that seemed different, somehow, than it ever had:

“Blinding love - visions apart. Side by side, yet distant they stand.
Sad and lonely tales of the heart; forcing smiles, they do what they can.

Blinding love – they cannot see. They can't know what they're choosing.
Lost in the shadows of what used to be. They can't see what they're losing.

Strong, strong love brought them to one, brought them here to this calling;
But, spirits weak, they chose to run. Now they're helplessly falling.

Blinded and lost, tumbling down, all their love has no meaning.
With no direction, they wander this town, as their lives go careening.

Blinding love - visions apart. Side by side, yet distant they grew.
When does it end and just how do they start mending the lives that they
once knew?

Blinding love – visions apart. Blinding hate seems to follow.
How do we break this rape of the heart? How much pain do we swallow?”

And then he stopped and looked at Julian and Jennifer, and smiled sadly.

“It’s beautiful,” Jennifer said.

“You wrote that?” Julian asked, in awe.

Irving just shrugged, much the same way he had shrugged so many times
before; like the time, what seemed like a day or two into Julian’s stay in the
cave, when it had dawned on Julian that the fire they all seemed to rely on
seemed to be perpetual, not needing to be replenished with wood, and to
never give off smoke.

“It’s all part of the plan, I guess,” Irving said.

Jennifer’s reaction to Irving’s poem caused Julian later to ask her if she
still had a boyfriend, prior to OD’ing.

“The same one,” she answered.

“The drug dealer?”

“Like I said... I was addicted.”

Jennifer still picked at her face, but Julian’s persistence was paying off.
Time, of course, remained immeasurable. But over the presumed weeks
and months they spent in the cave, most of the scabs fell off, and her
bruises and abrasions mostly healed. Having no comb, she used her
hand to try to get the tangles out of her severely matted hair. Julian offered
to help, and was as gentle as he could be. But he invariably caused her
pain, and Jennifer could not handle pain.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!” she said.

“Shut the hell up!!!” Clyde yelled.

So Julian gave up. Jennifer’s hair got better, to a point, but still remained quite tangled. If only she could give it a real nice wash, Julian thought, starting to envision how beautiful Jenn would be with her long, blonde hair flowing free. At one point, he came up with the idea of her using snow to wash her hair, but rubbing snow against her head until it turned to water only gave the girl a headache and more derisive remarks from Clyde and Tom.

Her eyes, in fact, were deep, deep brown, not at all black and lifeless as they had appeared in those first few days. Julian started to feel his heart melting every time he looked at them. He sat next to her virtually all the time she was awake now, their shoulders often touching. And they talked.

From time to time, despite assurances from both Clyde and Irving that conditions outside never changed – there always was howling wind and endless snow – Julian crawled as far out the front entrance of the cave as he could to peer outside; and they were right... nothing ever changed. Initially, he used to check quite often, what he perceived to be every day or so. But repeated disappointment led to reduced hope, so that for a long time, he rarely ventured out to look. As Jennifer became more and more ‘alive’, however, and as his intense interest in saving at least her grew, he started checking the entrance more frequently again. And, even though nothing ever changed, he had changed. He had to find a way out of this cave, for Jennifer and him, and so he kept on checking.

In the meantime, he and Jennifer grew closer, talking more and more. He was fully aware that he was falling in love with her, and wondered how such a thing could happen, if this actually was Hell. It made him start to believe that it couldn’t be. Surely, love could not happen in Hell, especially new love, like this. But then again, he increasingly grew to believe that she never could come to love him. He was a drug dealer, without drugs to give her. He had ruined so many lives in his lifetime; if ever she found out, she would have no choice but to hate him. And, every time he saw how horribly unkempt Clyde and Tom were, especially their hair, it reminded him that he hadn’t shaved either, and that his hair was far too long and, of course, unwashed, And he still had black soot under his fingernails from his time on the black plains.

No, maybe falling in love with a girl, a beautiful girl – and truly falling in love to the point of caring about her more than himself; caring about her without even asking for anything in return – with absolutely no chance of receiving love from her – maybe that was the worst Hell of all.

But still, they talked. He found out from her that this cave had been the first place she had awoken in, after her presumed OD. She hadn't been outside on a black desert or in the rain or in the snow. Her Hell had been being in this cave and going through her withdrawal, while being criticized endlessly by Clyde and, to a lesser extent, Tom.

She puzzled at Julian's experiences, wondering what each of his 'steps' had meant.

"Maybe it's a test," she offered.

They engaged Irving in conversation, from time to time, and learned that his experiences had been different still.

"Let's just say that I've been here a long, long, LONG time."

Julian and Jennifer both looked at him strangely. Hadn't he said that Clyde had been here first?

"Not just here. I mean ALL of this place," he explained, recognizing their confusion. "I've seen more guys like you two to ever count."

"When did you die?"

Irving shrugged. "Too long ago" was all he said.

Jennifer wondered what kind of work Julian had done in life, but he always evaded the question.

"This and that," he answered.

Luckily, Clyde did not overhear this conversation, or he almost certainly would have voiced his suspicions, and Julian would have been sunk. Julian was open about his childhood, however, as Jennifer became over time. He admitted that his family had been wealthy, and that he'd done well in school, all without trying, until he just got so lazy he stopped going to class, half way through his second year of college. He didn't mention the drugs.

Jennifer told him about being an only child, raised by her mother alone, because her father just up and left before she was born. And that her middle name was Marie, her full name Jennifer Marie Ostrowski, because her mom's family was Polish and her mom and dad had never married; and how she never really had liked her name.

"It's a beautiful name," Julian told her, and he meant it. The name definitely was beautiful to him now that he had met her.

'Jennifer Marie Ostrowski', he found himself saying over and over in his mind over the days that followed.

But Jennifer insisted repeatedly that she did not like her name; and later she told him she had always planned to change it... "everything except the 'Marie'."

"Why?"

She then explained that her dream had always been to be an actress, and that the name 'Ostrowski' would be horrible. "Could you imagine?" she said, smirking. "My mom would have a cow if she knew I was even considering changing my name."

"What would you change it to?" he asked her, with sincere interest.

"I don't know. I like the 'Marie' part, but I prefer Sarah" she said again. "Since I was about thirteen, I've liked the last name 'Summers'. I like summer." She explained with a smile. "So, maybe something like Sarah Marie Summers."

Julian nodded. And then he admitted that he didn't like his name either. "Julian Briscoe?" he said, raising one eyebrow and sticking out his tongue. "It sounds like a meat dish."

Jennifer laughed again.

"What would you want your name to be if you could change it?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he shrugged.

"How about Marcus Jason Winters?" Jennifer said.

Julian cocked his head.

"In our next life, I'll be Sarah Marie Summers and you be Marcus Jason Winters, and then when we meet each other someday, we'll know."

"We'll know what?"

"I don't know," Jennifer brushed the hair from her eye with one hand.

“Maybe that we’re meant for each other!” And the smile that she gave Julian was one he would never, ever forget.

Jennifer later opened up about the time she was raped by a neighbour when she was twelve, and how her mother had refused to believe her, in fact punishing her “for telling such lies.” Her mom’s reaction had hurt Jennifer more than being raped.

Julian told about how he’d had a younger brother who died within hours of birth, and how Julian himself had always somehow felt responsible, because he had been so demanding of his mother during the pregnancy, up until the very last few hours.

“I never forgave myself,” he said, quietly.

“You were how old?” Jennifer asked him.

“Four or five.”

Jennifer shook her head slowly. “You can’t blame yourself. You were still a baby.”

Julian chuckled cynically and shrugged.

Jennifer spoke sadly about how she and her mother hadn’t ever really gotten along, something the girl perceived was because her mom blamed her for her father having left. When it was clear that Jennifer was growing up to, one day, be an extraordinarily beautiful young woman, things got even worse. Jenn was so proud of her long blonde hair, and her mom kept threatening to cut it, sometimes even to shave her bald.

Then, when Jennifer was 13, just before starting high school, she and her mom were arguing, Jennifer pushed past her mother to get to the door and go outside, knocking her mother, not down, but backwards into a wall, and her mother called the police. Jennifer spent the summer before starting high school living at a home for troubled teens in another city, even though she had never been in trouble at school or elsewhere, and was a straight ‘A’ student. She spent those 7 weeks at the home growing to hate her mother more and more each day. The two of them never mended their relationship.

Jennifer also spoke with remorse about her first and only love, who she met when he was a senior and she just a freshman in high school. At the age of twelve, he’d moved here with his family from Italy, and was dark-

skinned, dark-haired and handsome. She had been his beautiful blonde prize. He used to take scantily clad pictures of her, like one of her in cut-offs and a bikini top, even when she was still just fourteen, posing sexily as if for a magazine. Her mother found one of these pictures and called Jennifer a whore, even though Jenn and Tony, to that point, had never gone past hugging, holding hands and kissing.

Jennifer did, later, turn to escorting once she became addicted to drugs, with Tony actually encouraging her, because he had become addicted too. Now, he took pictures of her with other men, for a price. And he used that money to buy drugs to sell, and used the money from the drugs he sold to buy more drugs for himself and Jennifer.

When Jennifer's addiction really took off, and she became too wasted even to work as an escort most days, Tony became violent with her. But she was too high by now to care. They always made love (if that's what you'd call it) and made up, until he got angry and started screaming, and insulting and hitting her again.

She couldn't even really remember the last few years of her life; they were so much of a blur. She remembered being in and out of the hospital, with various infectious brought on by using needles. A couple of times, she was admitted to the intensive care unit, near death from a severe infection, having OD'd, or both. This last time... she couldn't even remember.

And again, as Julian listened to her, his own sense of shame swelled over what he almost certainly had done to so many girls, and guys, just like Jennifer. How many 'Jennifer Marie Ostrowskis' had he created?

Several times, he found himself wanting to lean over and kiss her, especially now that almost all of the scabs on her face had fallen off. But he resisted. She had one mole on her right cheek – a small, dark one – that she hated, but that he just wanted to kiss. He told her it was beautiful.

"It makes you, you," he said, gently.

She smiled the biggest smile he had ever seen on her.

"You're an idiot," she said; but she was laughing.

"Hey! I've got a much bigger mark than that," Julian said.

"Where?"

"Here," he pulled up his pant leg to reveal a big, dark brown mark just above his left knee. "Now, this one is ugly."

“No, it’s not. It’s just a birth mark.”

“Sure, but I never wore shorts as a kid. I hated it.”

Jennifer reached over and ran her hand across it, and the sensation of her touch sent chills through Julian’s chest.

“It’s just a birth mark,” Jennifer said again.

And then the day came that Julian crawled out to the cave entrance to look outside, and he could see out for a distance, so much further than ever before, including snow-covered trees. He couldn’t believe it.

“It’s sunny outside,” he told everyone when he retreated into the main part of the cave again.

“Screw you!” Clyde said.

“No, really! Jenn, Irving, Tom. The snow has stopped. I think the wind has stopped too. It’s beautiful outside.”

He looked right at Jennifer. “Let’s go outside.”

Jennifer seemed frightened, but took Julian’s hand when he reached out for hers, and followed him as they both crawled out of the cave.

Standing in the soft, powdery snow, without a trace of wind, the two looked about them in awe. It WAS beautiful outside.

It turns out that, all this time, they had been on a hill overlooking a valley, and the hills and the valley were covered in tall, stately trees, bare of leaves, but beautifully adorned with snow and ice.

The sun was directly overhead and was warm. Jennifer still wore Irving’s sweater, but the jacket she had long since given back to Julian; and he felt almost too warm for it now.

Once again, he returned to the mouth of the cave and called in.

“It’s gorgeous out here, you guys!”

Clyde just screamed out a list of profanities.

Julian just shook his head. Clyde was a piece of work.

He turned back to Jennifer and saw her standing there in the snow, and his jaw dropped. All of the wounds on her face were gone. Her hair, which had been so tangled and filthy, now hung inexplicably straight and clean and silky, reaching halfway down her back. Her eyes shone like never before... big and beautiful and brown, like rich chocolate. And her smile was perfect... nothing could have prepared his heart for her smile.

'Oh God!' he said, under his breath, slowly shaking his head.

"Your beard is gone," she called out to him.

He reached up to touch his face, and it was smooth. It even felt younger. And his hair no longer hung long and unkempt. He felt giddy.

And the next thing he felt was a powdery snowball striking his face; and he looked over to see Jennifer laughing.

The two were like children again, chasing each other; throwing snowballs; pushing each other into the snow. It was predictable, as if in a movie, a perfect movie, that he would land on top of her, with her smiling up at him, her teeth so straight and perfect and white; her eyes so bright and happy; and that he would lean down to kiss her.

At one point, he climbed a tree that, incredulously, still had apples on it... ripe, juicy apples that tasted so sweet. Rather than toss one down to her, he reached down with his hand to help her up. And soon they were sitting together on a sturdy branch, feasting on apples, his arm around her, both looking down into the valley. And, as their eyes scanned the horizon, Julian thought he saw something, in the far off distance. Could that be a town?

They could escape this... could escape Clyde and the small cramped cave. They could ask Irving to go with them; Tom if he wanted (even Jennifer agreed that Tom wasn't that bad on his own); Clyde could go to Hell!

"You wait right here!" Julian told her. "I'll be right back."

He scampered down the tree with energy that he never knew he had. It wasn't far, just about fifty steps or so to the mouth of the cave. He kept glancing back at Jennifer to see her beautiful smile. She waved at him.

Afterwards, he cursed himself endlessly for having turned his back on her; for actually having crawled into the cave when no one answered his repeated calls, not even Irving. In retrospect, he knew that he should have known. For when he crawled into the cave to see the others, they weren't there. None of them were. Even the fire was gone, as if it never had existed. The rocks and markings on the ground the guys had used to play their games... gone.

“What the...?”

And then a look of panic hit his face.

“Oh God!”

He crawled out of the cave backwards as fast as he could, but it was far too late. He knew even before he was out that the wind had picked up. He stepped out into the same blizzard that had been there, constantly, for months. He could barely see or breathe.

“Jennifer!” he called out, as loud as he could.

“Jennifer!” he called out, again and again, as he struggled to see through the blinding snow.

But she was gone.



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