

## Chapter 2

I felt strange. It was pitch black, I could feel the blood rushing to my head. My ankles were tied. I was hanging upside down. My stomach muscles ached disobedience at my attempt to reach the ankle bindings and I collapsed back down. My eyes adjusted to the light, I could make out a shape next to me. "Dave?" I whispered. It didn't reply or make a noise, but a stale smell of decay was drifting from it. I sniffed again, trying to place the smell. I retched, then retched again and finally vomited. I knew the stench of recent death too well. My breakfast poured from my mouth and I was surprised to hear it splash into water several seconds later. Where the hell was I? My legs hurt like hell, the straps ate into the thin flesh of my ankle and my face felt like I'd taken a Tyson right hand. I tried to shout. All I could manage was a strangled bark. The sound bounced off walls I could not see. In the silence that followed I heard a noise above me. I strained to look up, the chink of light that loomed far above suddenly went dark and dust and debris fluttered down onto my face. I tried to shout again and then felt a tug on my ankles. Slowly I began to rise, the rasping of chain on metal getting louder as I ascended.

The little circle of light above me grew bigger and bigger, I twisted to see what was waiting for me. Then I saw the square, scarred face. It was the body that had been hanging next to me. I scanned its twisted features, its dead white eyes. Thank god, it wasn't Dave. My stomach demanded another heave, but there was nothing to come up but bile. My dead companion and I finally emerged into the light, dangling above a metal mesh floor. I felt myself being swung around, the chain clanked and within moments I found myself lying face down. Rolling over took more effort than it should and I had to cradle my aching ribs. They felt like I had been hit by a truck, just a small one. The corpse lay to my left and looking up I saw, standing over me, a dark figure haloed in light. I could not see its face.

"You don't speak" the figure said. "Stay the fuck quiet or I'll gut you like a fish."

He unhooked my bound legs from the chain and dragged me across the floor. As my head scraped against the metal, he pulled me to an open door from which I could hear the faint sounds of jazz. I hate Jazz. When you're bound and abused and readying yourself to meet your maker, trust me, Jazz is wholly inappropriate. Something more ambient or minimalist would've worked better. Maybe some kind of atmospheric soundscape to support the red mood lighting.

My keeper yanked harder. I held my head up to minimise the clattering it was taking as he dragged me up each concrete step toward the music. I came to a stop. I was roughly pulled to my feet. My relief at being the right way up vanished at

the sight of what was now in front of me. The vast red lit room stretched out before me, down each side velvet clad pews abutted the walls and at the far end, stood a tall regal man. His black hair was slicked back revealing a high forehead. His eyes shined like black jet. He licked his lips and prepared to speak.

"Hello again Joe, I'd like to say it's good to see you, but we both know that would be a lie."

I nodded and squinted into the half-light.

"Where am I?" I rasped, surprised at the weakness of my voice.

"I think you know."

I frowned, giving the goon to my left a cue to punch me.

"He will keep doing that until you tell me what I want to know. Understand?"

I wheezed a 'yes'.

"Good, so where is the serum Joe?"

My brain buzzed. What serum? What was he talking about?

Another punch to the stomach caused me to double up.

"Answer me!" he whispered.

"I can't" I spluttered.

He lowered his face toward mine.

"You took it from Helen, stole it, in fact. I can't abide thievery Joe."

"What are you talking about?" I knew my face betrayed my innocence.

"We saw you. We see everything."

I shrugged, "Not this time, Mr Drake."

"Joe, as a former employee I know you understand the seriousness of lying to me."

Drake nodded to the heavy, who hauled me back to my feet.

"I wouldn't lie," I forced a reassuring smile, "Not to you, and not to anyone else at the corporation."

Drake narrowed his eyes.

"Helen is also missing" he said. "So both the serum and Helen have vanished and they were both last seen with you, at your home Joe."

"What serum?" I asked, "I don't know what you mean!"

"The serum for this plague." he replied, pulling a syringe from his breast pocket. "You always had a sentimental side to you Joe. Ever the righteous man. So tell me the truth about Helen and I won't infect your brother."

To illustrate his point Drake activated a computer screen.

"It's a long way from pharmaceuticals, eh Jo!" he grinned as an image appeared. "This is what will happen to your brother if I stick this needle into his leg." The straight-jacket clad person on screen began to writhe, his head jerked from side to side and although the sound was mute I could tell that he was screaming. The camera zoomed in closer, showing his agony racked face in vein throbbing detail. His body spasmed rigid and then convulsed violently and he bit through his tongue. Blood showered from between his lips. The camera

zoomed out revealing a figure in a Hazmat suit. The victim's jacket was unzipped revealing a starvation ravaged body covered in open sores. The Hazmat clad figure checked the body, looked up and drew his finger across his throat. The camera moved back to that now oddly familiar face. He had sat in the cubicle next to me at work.

"Peters..." I gasped.

"Indeed." said Drake.

Peters had been an annoyance, a BO producing geek from the seventh floor. I'd tried hard to ignore him and his witless attempts at humour. He wasn't joking now, poor sod.

"What did he do?" I croaked.

Drake shrugged, "We didn't think anyone would miss him."

I didn't know what else to do, so I shrugged.

"As sensitive as ever Joe" said Drake.

"Funny. Drake, leave my brother out of this, okay?"

"Too late for that, he's in it up to his eyeballs, thanks to you," he smiled.

"I don't know anything!" I said through gritted teeth.

"I'd be inclined to believe you Joe if Greg hadn't gone missing as well."

I simply replied, "Lost a Helen and now a Greg, how careless."

Drake's grin disappeared from his face. He turned sharply to the computer, pressed a button and spoke into the microphone;

"Do it now."

The screen went from its restive blue to showing a grainy image of a small white room shown from a lofty corner CCTV camera. Dave sat at a table reading a comic. The door behind him opened. Dave spoke, head down, his voice tinny; "You got Teen Avengers?" The man in the Hazmat suit moved behind my brother, he held the needle up out of sight and looked up at the camera.

"Last chance Joe. Talk to me about the Serum."

I looked at Drake, my eyes burning and shook my head. Then the world span and my eyes filled with tears as the needle sank into Dave's neck.