

EMPIRE
OF THE
GODDESS

Matthew
Warner

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*For Owen, when you're old enough
to understand.*

CHAPTER 1

The day he disappeared, my four-year-old son, Walter, asked to mow the yard with scissors.

“Sure. Just stay clear of the lawn mower when I come around, okay?” As I spoke, I finished a pass across the back yard of our Virginia home. I turned my push mower around for the next one.

Chinese prisoners were forced to mow football fields with scissors, but Walter didn’t see it that way. Lopping off dandelions was second only to cracking open ice cube trays. If he didn’t say any potty words for a few hours (the worst were *pee*, *poop*, *butt* and *fart*), I would let him wax my car. It would be a good way to spend a sunny Memorial Day afternoon before our guests arrived for the barbecue.

Squealing, Walter unlocked the gate on his way to the front yard.

Mowing along the edge of our patio, I frowned as he disappeared around the corner of the garage. His mother and I didn’t like him to be out of our sight, but lately we’d given him more free rein. He knew not to run into the street, so it would be okay. Besides, I would be done mowing in a few minutes, and then it would be time for lunch.

That’s when a wave of goosebumps passed over my hairy arms, and I felt lightheaded.

I glanced at the portion of Alextine Drive visible between our house and the next door neighbor. A wave of shimmery air blurred down the street.

What was that? Maybe the heat's getting to me.

Natalie opened the sliding glass door and poked her head out. "Lunch time."

"Good. Sooner than I thought."

I shut off the mower and stretched my back. Natalie liked to watch the muscles in my bare chest flex as I did this, which was entirely the point. Losing twenty pounds over the past year certainly made me feel good about myself.

She smiled. "Looking good, baby. Where's Walter?"

"In the front. I'll get him."

I pulled off my work gloves as I walked around the garage. Yep, I looked better now, at age forty-one, than I did at age thirty. Aside from an occasional cracked rib and hyperextended joint, joining the local martial arts school was the best thing I'd done for myself in years. Walter would soon be old enough to attend the kiddie class. Maybe I'd bring it up with Natalie over our meal.

"Walter? Lunch."

I scanned the lawn and mulch beds. Across the street, cars pulled up to the neighbor's house for a Memorial Day picnic.

"Walter?"

I climbed the steps to our front door. His safety scissors with the purple plastic handles lay on the concrete stoop. The metal glinted in the sun.

"Walter!"

I stepped around the mulch beds to check the other side of the house. I started to walk faster.

As I crossed the street to the neighbor's house, Natalie came out of the gate from our back yard. "Thomas? Where's Walter?"

"I'm looking for him."

I swore as I circled to the neighbor's back yard. Two men sat on a patio, drinking beer and grilling hot dogs. "Have you seen my son? Little boy with blond hair?" I held a hand level with my stomach to show how tall he was.

They shook their heads.

I believed them at the time. But in the following hours, as the soup Natalie cooked for lunch cooled to sludge on the dining room table, my paranoia cast aspersions everywhere. The cops questioned those men at least twice, at my urging.

Natalie and I didn't sleep at all that night.

The next night, once we finally shooed our concerned friends back to their own homes, my wife vomited what little food she'd managed to ingest into the kitchen sink. She peered at me with red-rimmed eyes. "You should have never let him out of your sight."

"I know. I'm sorry."

It was a refrain we would no doubt exchange again.

We went to bed in different rooms.

* * *

The police detective assigned to us had the bedside manner of a coroner. Almost every time we talked, whether at our house or on the phone, he reminded us the first twenty-four hours were the most critical in a missing person's case. Maybe he forgot he said that the first time.

We didn't find Walter in the first twenty-four hours, or in the first forty-eight, despite the K-9 unit searches and all the kind-hearted souls who tried to help. I brought up the shimmery air and nausea only one time to the police. They politely made a note of it and never mentioned it again. Neither did I.

Our neighbors organized a search party and fanned out to explore the numerous cul-de-sacs and wooded areas that comprised our small town. The state police issued an Amber Alert. The local police canvassed door-to-door and scrutinized footage from traffic cameras. They even searched all the creeks and sewers within walking distance of our house—anywhere Walter might have wound up if he'd become lost or hurt. Meanwhile, I posted his picture everywhere I could on the Internet, starting "Have You Seen Me?" memes on Facebook and message boards. I even posted flyers on telephone poles, as if he were a lost dog.

The local newspaper camped out on our lawn. They ran front-page photos of the candlelight vigil organized by the First Presbyterian Church, where the minister was a family friend. We'd never attended church before Walter's disappearance, but Natalie started going every Sunday.

I refused to accompany her, rationalizing it was important for one of us to always be at home in case Walter returned. But the truth was I didn't want to face the concern and scrutiny of other human beings. Natalie and I weren't immune to suspicion. *The Washington Post* must have thought they were doing Walter a favor when they sent reporters down from D.C. to cover our "small-town tragedy" and dig into our pasts. They discovered my twenty-year-old misdemeanor conviction for marijuana possession while at college and my more recent DUI. They mentioned Natalie's first, failed marriage, and her short stint on public welfare before we met, when she also pled out on a charge of tax evasion. All ancient history, but that didn't matter to the busybodies in the Twitterverse. Those things obviously reflected on our parenting abilities. If Natalie and I weren't reformed white trash, Walter wouldn't be missing, or so the subtext read.

A round of Facebook flame wars ensued, along with newspaper editorials supporting and judging us. We were

accused of offing our son to collect life insurance despite the fact we never took out a policy on him. I deeply regretted ever moving out of the D.C. suburbs to this shitwater Bible Belt town, supposedly a safer place to raise children. The quote that stung the most was, "True, Thomas and Natalie Dylan may not be model parents, but . . ." and I can't remember what followed the "but" because I was so angry. I want that written on my tombstone: *Here Lies Thomas, Not a Model Parent*.

The furor eventually died down, and our family dropped out of the news. But our friends stopped visiting with home-cooked meals. No more "let me know if there's anything I can do for you" platitudes. Now, when I ran into them at the grocery store, we made small talk about their landscaping projects. Hypocrites.

But we didn't give up hope during that long, sweltering summer. Not even when the detective stopped returning our calls. Or at least I didn't give up hope. Natalie said she needed to make peace with Walter's disappearance or she would self-destruct, and she wanted me to forge that peace with her.

"What's there to make peace with?" I stood at the kitchen sink, guzzling water from my tumbler. The whiskey had dehydrated me. "Fate? Want me to make peace with fate?"

"No, honey. I'm just saying—"

"Fuck fate. And . . ."

I trailed off, catching myself from adding *And fuck you, too*. It wasn't Natalie's fault I was so stubborn. Stubbornness was necessary at that point. If Natalie was too weak to carry our son's torch after only a few months, then I would goddamn well carry it alone.

A typical day went like this. Natalie left at 8 A.M. for her job at the dentist's office, where she was an administrative assistant. I would then blow off the first two hours of the

day, from my home office job as a website designer, to roam aimlessly around town in search of Walter. At first, I traveled on foot, but after facing off against too many dogs as I crossed somebody's property, I took to circling neighborhoods in my car.

I would return home to place my daily calls to the two private investigators we'd hired. Then I would ingest breakfast: two Advils and a cup of black coffee flavored with Jack Daniel's. Or should I say, Jack Daniel's with some coffee in it. Sometimes, it was just Jack.

I would read my email, deleting the ones Natalie sent me about grief support groups she wanted to join. That was a mistake. Natalie didn't actually want me to share my grief with a group; she wanted to share her grief with me, and I wasn't letting her. Maybe she was even ready to forgive me for letting Walter out of my sight and to admit she was being unfair. But I was wallowing in immaturity and driving her away. Instead of letting her draw strength from her husband, I forced her to seek it from others.

After idiotically deleting Natalie's emails, I would take an hour's nap on the hardwood floor of my office. That was typically the only good rest I got, apart from a couple alcohol-assisted hours around midnight.

After a lunch of whatever random crap I found in the pantry, often Pop-Tarts with a side of yogurt or half a block of cheese, I would go to work. That meant sending emails to my website clients, lying to them that I would turn in something by the end of the week. Then I'd surf the Net for a couple hours, entering variations of my son's name or watching the stream from a web cam in some random city, hoping to see his face.

By the end of the summer, my income dried up, and Natalie had to take on a second job as a Starbucks barista. I think she was relieved because it meant more time away from watching me drink and grow fat again. Her parents

kept pestering her to take an extended break to stay with them in Kentucky. They claimed it would help both of us center ourselves so we could continue the search for Walter. My own parents were dead, and I was an only child, so I had no family to flee to.

"Go ahead and stay with them."

I spoke to her across our darkened living room. She'd just come home from work to find me sitting on the couch, sucking down my second whiskey of the evening. A pile of Walter's drawings of leprechauns, dragons, and ninjas lay scattered across the coffee table. I'd been looking at them all day.

She put her hands on her hips. "Why did you bring those out?"

"Why not?"

"You think that's going to help? To throw those in my face? Don't you think I miss him, too?"

"I didn't throw them in your face."

I controlled the urge to throw my drink in her face. Getting tipsy brought out all kinds of ugliness these days. Instead, I buried my face in the couch's pillows and sobbed. In a few minutes, I passed out.

I woke up later, as headlight beams passed over the front of the house. I looked out the window to see my wife driving away.

* * *

Walter's birthday came a few weeks later. I bought him a Lego toy and a chocolate cake. I had my own pity party with them on his bedroom floor, assembling the toy as I drank and cried out chocolate snot.

The next morning, Natalie emailed me for the first time since she'd left. "I don't think I'll ever stop blaming you

for letting him go. You should have been with him. If I ever have another child, as God as my witness, I'll lock him in a bubble before I ever let any harm come to him. But that child won't be with you, Thomas."

She was only twisting the knife. Thanks to her polycystic ovarian syndrome, we'd failed to have a second child. Someone else's sperm wouldn't perform any better.

"You're a bitter, self-pitying little man, and it's taken this tragedy for me to see that I shouldn't be with you. Not only are you a terrible parent, but you're an absent spouse. Instead of sharing your grief with me, you shared it with a bottle. You allowed yourself to slide into a hole of depression, despite everything I did to pull you out.

"Well, now I'm done with it. Our precious boy is gone, and we'll never know what happened to him. I refuse to spend the rest of my life thinking about that every time I look at you. I'm filing for divorce."

Ironically, she signed the email, "Love, Natalie."

I laughed for the first time in months.

* * *

I had no choice but to pick myself up. I'd already missed one mortgage payment, and the bank wouldn't allow for two.

I maxed out my credit card during the months it took to rebuild my client base and get some checks flowing in. I sold my car in favor of a bicycle, and I canceled everything nonessential, like cable TV, Netflix, and my membership at the martial arts school.

There was no savings left over to buy Christmas presents, but that didn't matter because I had no one to buy them for. Still, I finally had enough to pay the mortgage and to make headway on the credit card debt. I

stopped visiting the food bank to scavenge the stale bread donated by the grocery store. That was good, because I always pictured my former friends passing over that food on their way to the ice cream aisle. ("Those rat bastards," I would rail at night, pacing off months of pent-up frustration.) By the time spring rolled around, I even had enough to settle the lawsuits the private investigators had filed against me for their unpaid invoices. I bought a used Honda Accord for a pittance. It had torn upholstery, but it carried me wherever I needed to go.

I still went out on my self-guided search missions, although not as frequently as before. I explored the woods past the cul-de-sac near the end of my street. I ignored NO TRESPASSING signs to tromp through sewer pipes and acres of private property. I think the neighbors considered me a nuisance, but I didn't care. I found two dead deer, fifty dollars in cash, and a broken compass. When a stray cat followed me home—*bad idea, kitty*—I took it to the animal shelter. Lots of finds, but not the one I wanted.

The likelihood was Walter had been abducted, driven out of state, used, and dumped in a field. Or he'd been smuggled out of the country to be sold as a sex slave. That was probably the best I could hope for. So I did lots of reading on those topics on the Internet, wondering if I could become a vigilante. One day, I would bust into a Central American bunker where a gang was holding my son, and with guns-a-blazin', I'd bring him home. I also read every page of every website sponsored by or affiliated with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

My efforts didn't matter. Walter remained missing, without a trace. It was like aliens had beamed him up and flown off.

Sometimes, I thought about the peculiar sensation I'd felt in the back yard that day. Did the goosebumps and lightheadedness mean anything? Maybe it was a case of

spontaneous telepathy with my son. I'd felt his distress. It proved I loved him and would never give up hope. And how about the wave of blurry air moving down the street? I'd assumed it was a heat mirage and avoided thinking about it too deeply. I couldn't keep bringing it up to the cops without them questioning my sanity.

But I wondered it about it now. Had the mirage caused my physical distress? Had it taken my son?

Aliens beaming him up didn't seem so far-fetched anymore.

* * *

As Memorial Day neared, I was once again sober, out of debt, and gainfully self-employed. But Natalie's divorce attorney was beating me up, making my daily trip to the mailbox an act of will. Worse, my soul was a hollowed-out husk, just like the house I stubbornly refused to leave in case Walter ever returned. I'd long since packaged up his belongings and allowed Natalie to retrieve whatever she wanted. I'd taken down all the family pictures. I slept on a cot in my home office so I wouldn't have to pass Walter's bedroom door.

But a futile hope for my son's rescue wasn't enough of a reason to go on. Not anymore. Hope couldn't counterbalance hopelessness.

Depression overwhelmed me, typically, every day shortly before noon, at about the time Walter disappeared. Perhaps the sun was responsible. It went down at night, bidding me to sleep; it rose in the morning to wake me up; and at noon, its gravity pulled me out of my office chair to pace the house and scream, as loudly as I could, "Oh God, what's the point?"

After several weeks of this, I listened to what I was saying. I decided to kill myself. The only thing surprising about this was that it didn't happen when drunk. Now that I was sober, I assessed my existence with cold clarity.

I drove four hours south to Linville, North Carolina—a beautiful, mountainous resort area I remembered from family trips growing up. On a sunny spring day, I hiked up to the Flat Rock Overlook, at an elevation of nearly four thousand feet. And it was here, so high above the world that the rolling hills of forest were like green hair follicles growing to the sky, that I hit my low point. Isn't that funny? Go high to reach the low. That's how we know God has a sense of humor, by the way. In the irony. The bastard.

I shuffled to the cliff's edge and hung my foot into space, feeling my heart pound with my imminent demise. And then—

I lost my balance, twisting my ankle. Folding like a cheap tent, I collapsed onto the massive granite slab I stood upon, one of many that gave Flat Rock its name.

As I howled in pain and began sobbing, I clutched my ankle and rolled onto my back. I stared up into the sky and cussed out God. I wasn't even religious, but there you go. God's an easy target.

That's all I could do until the pain abated enough for me to move again. But when I stood, I no longer had the courage to jump.

I sat on a rock to massage my sore ankle, and I stared at the panoramic scenery for the remainder of the day. Hikers came and went, but we ignored each other. By the time I limped down to the parking lot that evening—unable to see the trail in the dark, dehydrated and in severe pain—I'd made a decision.

And that was to exist. That's all life meant anymore. No joy, no human connection, no point. But I vowed to go

through the motions, eating and sleeping and shitting because my body required those activities, and working because I needed to finance said activities. That's all the engagement I felt I could muster. I would plod on—not out of hope anymore, because I didn't expect life to get better. I would plod on out of stubbornness. Because I'm a stubborn bastard. If I had to limp right on through my remaining years as an unhappy ox towing a cartful of woe, then so fucking be it. My Chinese birth sign, after all, is an ox.

I would win against life. Because it was better to be a miserable, angry plodder than a dead one. Plus, if I were dead, my chances of murdering the son of a bitch who stole my son would diminish from point-zero-zero-zero-one percent to zero percent.

That's the best I could manage. I hated the world and everyone in it. But I would go on breathing. Out of spite.

* * *

Memorial Day again.

Shortly before noon—exactly one year, by my reckoning, since my personal D-Day—my computer's Windows system asked to install fourteen updates. It would otherwise run at the speed of cement, so I consented. I took a walk while they configured.

Alcoholics are gluttons for self-torture—or at least I've always been—so I went outside to stand in the place where my life flushed down the crapper the previous year. I rarely mowed the lawn anymore, so I stood in ankle-high growth and tried to calculate where I'd shut off the lawn mower and how I'd been standing. The sunny weather was identical.

I stretched my back for a make-believe Natalie. When she frowned, I grinned as I slapped the bulge spilling over my belt line. "How do I look?"

And that's when I felt it again. The wave of goosebumps. The lightheadedness.

Was I doing it to myself? Frowning, I opened the chain-link gate Walter had passed through. I followed his memory to the front yard.

I was about to turn toward the front stoop when I felt the goosebumps again. This time, it was only on my left arm. I looked in that direction and saw the distortion of a heat mirage. The same as before. It moved down the street like a giant ocean wave.

Except it couldn't be a heat mirage. It was only seventy-five degrees outside. I lived on *Star Trek* episodes once upon a time, and this bulge in the air reminded me of the passage of a cloaked spaceship.

Maybe it was a cloaked van—the one responsible for snatching my little boy.

I ran after it.