

CHAPTER 1

MAD WORLD

I was born into a mad world—not because of the alien invasion and government conspiracy, not because of the tigers that roamed the city, nor my confrontations with the false god in his temple; those things came later. I was born of the desert, birthed into swirling dust and sand that stung my newborn face. Shockwaves overwhelmed my system and loosened the bindings between molecules, nearly rendering me to dust before I had taken my first breath. My mouth tasted of something metallic that momentarily choked back the screams following my emergence. It was a mad world filled with chaos and pain.

The world was drowning in one big scream: ordinance exploded, shrapnel blew through the air, sand pierced—matter twisted out of recognition and shrieked. I stood in the

middle of a battlefield under a blinding, infernal sun with a disassembled man at my feet who quickly melted into the sand—his own blood dark and sinking into the earth around him, dragging him under. The man’s arms and legs had been blown off, his face burned and a portion was missing so that I could see clearly his jawbone and the teeth along one side. His desert fatigues were in tatters, ripped and torn and burnt away in places.

He twitched while he screamed through his gashed mouth and jaw, “Kill me, kill me now! Kill me!”

His bulging eyes glazed with pain. Trauma shook his body. Still he screamed. I looked nearby but only saw one of his missing limbs and was certain I couldn’t repair him. Something flashed past my shoulder and whispered in my ear its message. That was when I understood my purpose in the world. There on the battlefield—newly awakened to life with the dying man below me and the infernal sun above, with the sounds of war all around—a clarity settled over me and the voice in my head was clear and concise. I had one choice as a healer, only one, the voice said. I reached to my side in a practiced manner, the motion oddly familiar: drew, aimed and fired my pistol.

An explosion lifted me from the sand and hurled my body away from the man. Later, when I had time to contemplate, I would realize it had been the man’s life-force that had hurled me away from the incoming munitions. Later, as I recovered from the birthing, I would understand the choices a healer has to make are not always simple. But in that moment I twisted through the air and smashed into a

stone wall—shoulder first, then my backside, inverted to the ground—and my delivery into the world completed when I dropped to the sand and was discharged into the rage of life.

From all this destruction: life—creation and annihilation the same act. I was born of the desert into a mad world; Then the world went dark.

I woke days later to white walls and curtains and the antiseptic smell and muffled quiet of lingering death. An old clock hung on the wall above the hospital room door—*tick, tick, tick*. ‘CINCINNATI’ was printed in an odd font above the six on the clock. There were black hands for the hours and minutes and a red second hand that occasionally stuttered through its syrupy rounds. Hospitals are hateful, surreal places where time is forgotten, bypassed or suspended; the clock was an ornamental reminder of the world beyond, a taunt.

The second hand’s movement—*tick, tick, tick*—demanded attention and siphoned energy, growing louder in my head as the seconds passed in the outside world. It rattled around in my brain, attacked me, seized control of my focus and drew me ever nearer until nothing but the *tick, tick, tick* remained, echoing in my mind.

“Make it stop, please. Please make it stop. I can’t handle it anymore,” I heard myself whining and almost crying, though in a detached manner. I clenched at the blankets, my chest tightened as well as the muscles in my legs. “Make it stop, please.”

I curled up on my side, fetal, not unlike any other newborn, and rocked; my rhythm matched the clock’s. The room

was ready to explode. I could hear the countdown. I could feel the tension, the anticipated energy release that would threaten to loosen the bonds between molecules again.

A hand on my shoulder, a woman's voice soft as a children's song intruded and cut the tension. "Still struggling? Time for more medicine. This should help."

I couldn't see her face. It took too much effort to look and focus my eyes. But I knew she wore wings, don't all angels? She reached to one of the tubes above my head and adjusted it.

The *tick, tick, tick* receded slightly. I hate Cincinnati, I thought, and before the room had time to explode things went dark again.

When I next woke I was attacked by people speaking—droning on and on, repeating the same things over and over, their voices cutting like knives. I couldn't escape them. They burrowed inside my head like ticks under the skin. They repeated selected words such as "alleged" and "terrorist" and "dollars" as if they were a mantra that had to be repeated or the words—and maybe the thing itself—wouldn't be real, as if they had to speak them into being every several minutes.

The television was on in my room. The words slowly sliced up my brain each time I filtered from sleep toward consciousness. I couldn't emerge into the world so I lay whimpering in bed, my birth protracted. Each time the woman with the soft voice, my angel, would lull me back to sleep, more drugs, telling me it was okay, that I just needed more time.

Thus went my birth into the world: a battle for order over

madness, the struggle of molecules to maintain their cohesion and not relent to anarchy, a conflict between life and death, existence and annihilation. Each time I attempted to surface and join the living something pushed back, rattled my brain and turned me away. My mind lost cohesion when I tried to focus, the world disjointed and angry and chaotic. My body shook and loosened my molecules.

People talked around me but all I could register were words and snippets of conversation. My lack of understanding caused great fear in me. Questions arose in my mind. Why did the universe drop me here as an adult? I had no memory from before the battle when I was born. I had no history. At times I felt broken, but mostly I felt new to the world. But always I was under attack. A dropped tray in the hallway left me shaking and feeling as if molecular cohesion would finally break and reduce me to dust. But somehow I survived intact.

The people speaking around me: were they friends or enemies? How would I know? Certainly the one I thought of as Angel was a friend. My fear made me guarded. I didn't dare speak.

With time the resistance to my being in the world lessened and more hope surfaced when I woke. The attacks on my system dwindled. The days and nights of terror decreased. Their intensity diminished and the shaking subsided. Finally, one day several weeks later, I overcame their feeble attempts to bind and control me. I found the world placid, almost welcoming, though my trust of it guarded.

The blur of existence came into focus but I still had no

past. I thought back to the earliest memories I had: the battle-field, standing over the disassembled man. There was a voice that told me I was a healer and I had to make a difficult decision. That was it; My earliest memory. Before my vision and my mind clouded up again I came to the conclusion that I was new to the world. The only possible answer was the universe had placed me here for a reason. I was a healer, the voice had told me that in the desert, but to what end?

Doctors came then and spoke to me. Once a day they came, no more than that. The nurse buzzed in and out of my room, always smiling and happy. The doctors asked questions but I was guarded. I didn't trust them so I said nothing to the doctors and little to the nurse. They grew frustrated with my silence but I didn't dare speak. I knew my enemies waited, unseen, for me to make a mistake. Then it would begin again, the shaking and the attacks on my system.

I heard the doctors talk to each other, as if I wasn't in the room. "Too bad," said one doctor, "he has PTSD, I'm certain, though the attacks seem to have gone away. His wounds have healed nicely."

"Can't rule out a psychotic break," said another. "Classic signs, even if he doesn't speak. The nurse reported some of what he said in his dreams. And the dreams were bad."

"I read that. I don't know what more we can do," said the first.

Then, in this mad world I hadn't begun to learn or navigate, the One-Eyed God of Money, that devilish and omnipresent marionette I would come to know too well, stepped forward and declared Himself.