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R I C H A R D M I L L E R S H I P

CHAPTER 1  
DAGGER

12:48 a.m., Sunday 4 November 2018, Chelsea  
Techno-Club District, Manhattan, New York City

The young woman staggered against the brickwork, retching as she fought not to vomit. It was raining, a cold wind breathing steadily from behind her, the faint wafts of neuro-techno. The alley was all but empty, the city lights casting dim halos in the winter night.

She craned her neck, letting the freezing water splash on her upturned face, watching it sparkling prettily in the red and green of the club's garish neon, forming odd vortices in the wind. All at once, the world began to revolve; lazy, swaying circles. She lurched sideways, fighting the nausea, only to feel herself toppling slowly, her hands slapping against the wall as she let go and emptied the contents of her stomach onto the ground.

She leaned there for long minutes, wishing the world away; only vaguely hearing the harsh cackle of laughter from the doorway behind, the hypnotic beat of the music

Standing suddenly, she braced herself for another assault from her intestinal tract, and when it didn't come, swayed unsteadily off into the night. Her brain screamed at her as she walked, flashing colours into her eyes, roaring at her in its drug induced stupor. Her footsteps rang out like drum beats, her ears catching the sound like mini electronic amplifiers, the row crashing at her in a furious, head crushing tempo. The rain continued to fall, heavier now, drenching, and paralytically cold.

It was then that the noise began, a soft rap against the brickwork, the wall against which she steadied herself picking up the dim vibration and translating it through her cold-numbered fingers. She frowned, water running down her face, into her eyes, feeling as much as hearing the beats, steady, monotonous, hypnotic. She tried to concentrate again, scowling with effort.

The sound. Louder, closer.

She thrust herself from the wall, feeling a sudden something as she peered into the darkness behind her, and then set off again.

Her mind was racing now, a thousand images flitting in and out of her consciousness. The rapping followed her, echoing hollowly - drawing her, turning her. From somewhere deep within, somewhere primal, something told her not to turn, to keep walking, but her legs wouldn't

function, somehow managing to tangle her. She stumbled, her hands flying out as she fell onto all fours, retching again. The knocking sound was back, steady, rapping loudly in the darkness. Bleary eyed, she swung her head, peering back up the alleyway behind her.

A flash of light, yellow orange, sparked for a moment. Darkness. Another rap. Simultaneously, a long rake of sparks flared along the wall, raining gently before they flickered out. But she had seen something else in that brief flicker of light - a shape, looming, huge, fast.

She struggled to her feet, the world swaying dangerously as instinct took over and she tried to run. The rapping was louder now, faster,

*Beat, scrape, beat, scrape.*

She ran, the beats keeping time her.

*Beat, scrape, beat, scrape.*

Sparks flickered again and she tried to shout, but her sickened closed up, making her gasp and gag.

*Beat, scrape, beat, scrape.*

She turned, the noise right behind her, sparks lighting the ground, her heart a trip hammer in her chest.

The first blow was merely a shock. Rapid, immensely powerful, it threw her backwards, winding her. As she hit the uneven cinder blocks, she felt an odd sensation, hollow, empty, the night's cold seeping into her midriff even as her hands came up to her stomach and were drenched with warmth.

She looked up.

Something was there, standing over her in the shadows. A cruciform figure, its arms straight out to either side.

The thing fell upon her, landing on her stomach, sending her intestines tumbling from the appalling gash across her midriff as she roared, the air thrust from her lungs. She felt blows raining down, stabbing, lancing. Heard the warbling shrieks, the ring of metal striking the stone beneath her, through her, ripping, tearing - and her own screams, filling the night.

