

Chapter 1: John Doe

If a nightmare doesn't end, is it still considered a dream? What if the images flow unbroken until you're living it day in and day out? If you can't wake up, it becomes your reality. So how do you know if you're unconscious or insane?

Blinking bleary eyes at the monsters in front of the bed, he willed the hallucination to go away. Awake—asleep—it didn't really matter. The horror *felt* real, so it was. The wall crawled with snakes. Fat ones, skinny ones, big and small they undulated in great piles as he sat with his mouth parted in a silent scream. Frozen by terror, he watched helplessly as one by one the serpents peeled away from the wall to slither towards the bed. The metal frame trembled as they wrapped their heavy bodies around the legs, climbing ever higher until the mattress dipped and sank as one by one they curled around him. Finally, a single cool, dry tail encircled his wrist, pinning his arm before piercing a vein with sharp fangs.

Unable to scream properly, he managed a choked, garbled sound that was more animal than human, but it didn't matter. No one was listening. No one cared about the man in the bed. The fangs remained in his arm, the biting pain making him grit his teeth and strain against the snake's hold. Soft voices warbled from far away as heat raced from his arm to his brain, stripping the fight from him even as the snakes tumbled back into a black pit.

Angry buzzing forced him into awareness just as the dream was getting interesting for a change. Usually he was so doped up that the only thing he saw when he closed his eyes was pitch blackness broken up by random splashes of light. This morning was different though. The transparent images ricocheting around inside his head were gaining substance. He could almost see the bodies clearly. *Humans?* Possibly—at some point—it was hard to tell now. The creatures were misshapen, swollen, dismembered . . . faceless. The gruesome flashes held him fascinated in the grip of their familiarity. The tease of recognition was enough to make him groan with frustration, as all traces of the dream vanished when the outer door opened with a slight hiss of air.

That hiss of air meant only one thing.

Stark terror skittered over his skin, flooding his muscles to struggle, to fight. His mouth went dry. A bead of sweat trickled along his hairline, followed by another and another. The stream disappeared into the rough material of the hospital gown, sticking it to his clammy skin. Instinctively hating the fear, he tried to set his face to a blank mask to hide his weakness, but his breath still came in quick, shallow gasps.

The slap, slap, slap of rubber soles on the tacky old tile quickened his pulse even more. The military cadence stopped outside of his door and he tried to swallow the lump in his throat. Failed, and tried again. It was Isabelle. Wiry, freakishly strong, and sadistic, she was his worst nightmare.

Pulling against the restraints, he managed to twist around and rub the backs of his hands over his eyes to clear his vision so he'd be able to see the bitch's hands when she burst into the room. Would she have the needle this time? Would she use it? He wasn't sure what was worse—the needles or what came after. When he first got here, they gave him pills to keep him calm. That hadn't lasted long. His putting two orderlies in the hospital and destroying the exam room

had pretty much guaranteed a needle in the arm. According to Doctor Raanta, he was a bad patient; a *dangerous* patient. He was *uncontrollable* without the meds.

Sure. I guess.

The idea of his losing control didn't make sense. Something deep inside told him that wasn't true. He was always in control. At least he thought he was. Now, though? It seemed as though something had changed.

As usual, Isabelle flung the door open so it crashed into the wall. The idea was to freak him out, but he was used to it now. Loud noises were fine. He was more afraid of the meds. They weakened him too much; they left him helpless and at the orderlies' mercy. Blinking hard to focus better, he propped himself up on an elbow and squinted into the face of Hell.

"Time for your morning meds, John. Are you going to cooperate today or do I need to call for help?" Her tone was filled with a malicious hopefulness that stirred a barely simmering anger deep down inside of him.

She wanted him to struggle so she could jam that huge-ass needle into his arm and dig around a bit. He jiggled the padded restraints attaching each wrist to the bedframe and curled his lips into a sneer. "It's not like I'm going anywhere, am I? Let's just get it over with so I can go back to sleep. I was having a good dream."

Her beady eyes narrowed as she studied him like he was something nasty stuck to the bottom of her shoes. After a few seconds, she smiled thinly, eyes glittering until his stomach clenched with dread.

Here it comes.

Her mouth twisted as she spat, "Dreaming of killing kittens? Or is it babies now? You sick bastard." Blood-red nails clamped onto the syringe as she filled the needle from a vial of clear fluid.

Whatever was in there would knock him out for another entire day. His brain struggled to form a logical argument against treatment, but he couldn't even form a coherent thought over the panic raging through him. This was wrong!

I have to go—NOW!

His instincts shrieked, *KILL HER AND RUN!* Something was wrong. *Very* wrong. He shouldn't be here. This wasn't his place. Panting with adrenaline, he shook his head violently. *No. No. No!* There was no way to escape if he was too weak to move. The needle gleamed and he swallowed hard. He had to get off of the meds. Had to get his mind right. Cringing more deeply into the mattress, he demanded in a voice too broken to be his, "What are you giving me? I don't need anything. I'm fine."

The thin sheet slipped off the side of the bed as he backed away from that needle. The cold air bit at his exposed skin. The gown was too short to cover his legs, but he would rather freeze to death than ask her to re-cover him.

"No, you're not fine. You're out of control. Dangerous. Andrew and Remy are still in the ICU. We can't have you hurting anyone else, now can we?"

"I'm sorry! I'm not dangerous! It wasn't my fault!" He jerked his arm back as far as possible, but there wasn't anywhere to go. The clanking of the shackles echoed in the quiet room. His heart raced so hard his vision turned black around the edges. "They attacked me! I was defending myself!"

She moved closer to the bed, her rancid breath assaulting him before she released a mean chuckle. "Do you really want me to call in Conner and Patrick? They're already upset with you about the bedpan incident. I'm sure they'd be more than thrilled to hold you down for me." Her

eyes lingered on his crotch and she chewed her lower lip thoughtfully before saying softly, “Although . . . Patrick might be willing to work with you if you’re nice to him.”

Bedpan incident? What was that? Fuzzy images flitted across the front of his mind but failed to materialize into an actual memory. Was it his brain or the meds? He didn’t know anymore. He didn’t know much of anything. One thing he knew for sure though—he didn’t want Patrick or any of the other orderlies anywhere near his dick.

Gesturing at the rigid muscles in his arm, she practically cooed, “Oh, please struggle.”

That cold trickle of fear snaked down his back again, mixing with another dose of simmering rage until he was twitching with the urge to choke her out and make a run for it. With both hands and ankles chained to the bed, he wasn’t going anywhere today. One of these days though . . . Gritting his teeth, he uncurled his fist with his eyes locked on Isabelle’s face to memorize every little detail. Some day . . . Yeah, one day he’ll get out of here and track her down. She’ll wish he was only dreaming of killing kittens. The truth was so much worse.

She checked the needle before wrapping her fingers around his wrist, digging her nails in just for kicks. Resigned and determined to hide his fear, he didn’t flinch when she straightened his arm and jammed the needle into a vein.

“I gave you a little extra this time. It oughta make your dreams even more fun. *Patrick* will be in to check on you later. Sleep well, stud.”

Before he could protest, dizziness washed over him. The pain in his stomach became a sick and fiery gnawing as terror took control again. *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!*

The walls shifted as she dropped his arm to the bed. No, no, no! He was going under too fast. Clutching at air, he sucked in a deep breath, desperately trying to ward off the sedation but it was pointless to struggle. As his vision wavered, her nail polish began to flow over her fingers. He could almost smell fresh blood; could almost taste the warm, metallic liquid on his tongue.

Day . . . 14? 22? It felt like an eternity. The truth was he had no idea how long he’d been there. How could he? His mind was a big black hole of nothing. He had no idea who the fuck he was. He didn’t recognize himself in the mirror. The face he saw wasn’t his. The hands he curled into fists weren’t his. The ragged, torn fingernails weren’t familiar. He looked at the shaggy black hair and unfocused green eyes and saw a stranger. The only thing that felt familiar was the burning rage bubbling deep inside. Even that felt off somehow . . . muted and distorted. He looked human but felt . . . *other*. The doctors said he had amnesia. They said the feeling of disconnection was normal. Something told him it was more than that.

The plastic wristband said his name was John Doe. Some of the more friendly orderlies called him Johnny or J.D. now that he’d stopped trying to kill them. It hadn’t taken long for him to figure out that fighting the orderlies only landed him in more pain, and he had been getting tired of being shackled to the bed. His ass was getting bedsores . . . so he decided to play nice and figure out how to get the hell out of here for good. He wasn’t stupid; just apparently psychotic. Or possibly not that either. The doctors hadn’t been able to figure out what’s wrong with him since he wasn’t sharing anything anymore. After the reaction he got when he mentioned the dreams, he decided to keep his mouth shut. Not much to share anyway. He had no memory of anything before he woke up here. The only clues were the dreams he started having when they stopped doping him into a coma. The images he saw when he was asleep were dark. Full of suffering and pain, they seemed familiar. He almost recognized the dimly lit corridors, the stairwells to nowhere, and the black abyss. The endless screaming was oddly comforting. It felt like home.

Jamie interrupted his thoughts with a knock on the door. “Johnny? You ready to go to the day room for some R&R? Dr. Raanta says you’re cleared for the day. This makes three days in a row. You must be making progress in group.”

Big, burly, and bald, the orderly kept any and all unruly patients in line. That included him. No exercise and too many drugs were making him as docile as a kitten. There was no way he could take on Jamie and win. The orderly was just too strong. Underneath the huge human frame beat a weak heart though. The rhythm was off. It skipped a beat every few seconds.

Hold up—when did I start hearing heartbeats? Ignoring Jamie’s questioning look, he focused his ears on the man’s heart so the meaty, thumping sounds came in loud and clear. His mouth watered. Weird.

Whistling to get his attention, Jamie asked with genuine concern, “You feeling okay? Is your headache still hanging around? We can give you something for it.”

Digging a finger in his ear to clear that hypnotic rhythm, he swallowed the saliva pooling under his tongue and unclenched his fists. Taking a slow, steadying breath, he unfolded himself from the bed, reaching his hands above his head in a stretch that felt so good he actually almost smiled. The simple upward twist of his lips felt oddly foreign though, so he relaxed his mouth into a more comfortable scowl. “My head’s fine. No need for more meds.”

That wasn’t entirely true. The headache was blinding today, but he didn’t want to admit it. He refused to give them any more reasons to keep him here. It was part of his grand plan to gain his freedom.

“Whatever, Johnny Boy. You let me know if the pain comes back.” Jamie waved a hand for him to walk ahead before commenting, “You were quiet last night. No nightmares?”

He cracked a twisted smile that Jamie couldn’t see. “Nothing but good dreams for a change.”

That was true. He’d dreamed of a naked woman writhing on top of him and another one straddling his face. He’d woken up with an epic hard-on that took ten minutes to rub out. Good thing he wasn’t shackled anymore.

Just inside the stuffy day room, two bored orderlies supervised the fun and games from an ancient plastic table. They’d set the television to a cartoon channel and paid more attention to it than to any of the patients. The happy cartoon animals were out of place in this dump. If the idea was to give patients a peaceful place to heal, the decorators missed the mark. The faded yellow paint—a cross between baby puke and urine—was depressing. The patched vinyl couches and chairs were sad. Everything about the place was designed to suck the life right out of you. If he had to live here much longer, he’d off himself. There was only one reason to hang out in this depressing room—a long sparkling window teased with a glimpse of the outside world. The brilliant blue sky filled the view today. *Freedom.*

He shuffled straight towards the window, pausing to clutch the back of a chair as the room spun in a circle. Closing his eyes until the dizziness passed, he stood still and breathed shallowly until his stomach stopped threatening to puke up lunch. As he got himself under control, an unfamiliar floral perfume drifted in the air, curling through his senses and taking front and center on his radar. A wounded blond birdie perched near his window, studying the view with an almost fervent expression. Her delicate hand drifted across the lower panes, tracing a pattern on the glass.

“Who’s that?”

Jamie chuckled knowingly and replied, “That’s Dylan. She’s cute, but you need to leave that one alone. You got enough trouble.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever. Don’t you have other patients to bother?”

“Nope. You’re it for now, but I’m going to leave you to it.” Jamie left to join the other orderlies with one backward glance and a quick warning shake of his head.

When John looked in her direction, he caught Dylan’s eyes resting on him. Chewing her lower lip, she ran her gaze across his chest and arms, measuring him from the looks of it. He returned the favor by running his eyes over her body and letting them linger on the V between her legs. She flushed hotly and sent him a withering glance before crossing her arms over her chest like a shield.

She looked so ridiculous he broke into a reluctant grin. That was a mistake. Apparently taking that as encouragement, the fragile thing squared her shoulders and marched over. Leaning back against the wall, he folded his arms and waited to hear what came out of her pretty little mouth.

Stopping three feet in front of him, she blurted out, “Do you see him?”

“Who?” He shot his eyes around the room.

Stepping closer, she lowered her voice and replied anxiously, “The devil in your room.” She glanced around to be sure no one else was paying attention, and insisted in a half whisper, “He comes every night.”

Any sort of smartass comeback got stuck in his throat. A tremor of warning brushed the hair on the back of his neck. The devil in his room? How could she possibly know what he couldn’t remember? He searched her eyes for something—*anything*—that showed she was fucking with him, but she was deadly serious. Or deadly crazy. She could be completely nuts. This place was full of crazy people.

Uncrossing his arms, he casually moved towards the corner so no one else would hear them. With a nervous glance at the orderlies, she followed. Once they were far away from the other patients, he warned, “Don’t fuck with me, little girl. The docs say I’m unstable. Violent. I could snap at any time. I could break you in half.”

She snorted through her taped nose, winced, and explained, “I’ve no reason to lie to you. I’m just sharing what I saw. You can take it or leave it. It’s your life.” She raised one shoulder in a shrug, stating, “I don’t give a shit either way. I just thought you should know so you can fight it. But you can do what you want. It’s your soul.”

“Fight what, exactly?” The room tilted to the left and he clapped a hand to the wall to keep from falling on his ass. His mouth was getting too dry. In another minute, he’d be forced to slur his words. Side effect of the damn meds. They needed to wrap this up before he embarrassed himself.

“The devil.” The frown was back, but now she looked unsure. Her eyes darted back to the orderlies. “Get off of the meds so you can see him for yourself. Seriously. Stop taking the night meds. You’ll see what I’m talking about. I have to go.” She turned on her heel to leave.

He reached out to grab her arm, but she flinched away with a shadow of alarm darkening her pretty scarred face.

“Wait!” he whispered, but it was too late. She was halfway across the room.

Damn it! He wagged his head slowly as more smog gathered between his ears. The meds were shutting him down.

What did the devil want with him?