

Tap, tap, tap.

Jim's finger drummed on the keyboard. Each time, a completed sentence filled his psyche with elation and grandeur. So at ease with each word, soothed by creativity as hardened finger tips tapped across the keyboard. Just over 25,000 words done within a few days and a new idea for the next tale.

*Is this the idea that will do it?*

He stared at the notebook screen, tired eyes browsed a line: *a young girl finds herself stalked on the way home from work by a shadowy figure, she turns and the figure shrinks into the darkness of a low-light street, she pauses, she turns, a ghostly face stares right back at her...*

"Or something like that," Jim shouted as he sank back in the chair, increasing the distance between him and the idea. Clammy hands rubbed a weary face after another hardcore writing day. Strained eyes from hours of the written word regarded the apartment. "Fuck's sake. Will I still have this place in a few months?" He grumbled. The central Cardiff swanky apartment required a higher cost of living and Jim likes luxury.

Sun rays beamed through arched windows warming the lounge's ambience. Jim closed his eyes and wished for a great idea. *Conjure it. One outstanding story to avoid any chance of a rejection upon a phone call to Gerald.*

Gerald.

Jim visualised a dismissive face as he rejected yet another idea. Jim peered up at wall framed photos of *Dark Tales*—his successful series of kindle books. Gerald's publishing company commissioned all the stories under *The Fright Time Factory* label. The photos at a convention showed a happy smiley team playing bunch: Gerald wore a horror mask based on a creature from one story, Jim's cheesy grin with a thumb up to the camera. Twelve

successful short stories in each of many spine tingling volumes, lots of sales on the website, strong results for a new independent company—and all due to Jim’s stories.

“Rejects all my ideas now, insists on casting me out,” Jim continued to whine to himself muttering the words.

Jim punched up a word document sent to Gerald full of proposed titles and synopses for the next volume, number nine. Each labelled: REJECTED. And all due to bad reviews of his latest collection, slandering posts on Amazon and top book review sites.

“These are as good as previous volumes, why so many ugly comments?” Jim mumbled.

A bleep, an email lifted Jim’s spirits for a few moments as his heart raced.

*Did Gerald give more thought?*

Jim clicked the email. Mary, his good friend or more if he bothered to invest the time. She dogged him with the same unrequited enthusiasm every time she mailed of late - a straightforward invitation to meet for a drink later at the pub. Jim closed the mail, unable to dwell on anything, rife with frustrations over the low sales and bad reviews.

Jim punched up his Amazon page. With *Fright Time Factory* traversing down the path of rejecting his ideas, he could still rely on other self-published kindle books for many sales to bolster enough income—but not this time. Sales were down, a lot. Someone had posted a scathing review on many of the latest novellas too. More nasty smears appeared on a recent Facebook ad.

And by the numbers.

A roll of bitter insults down the pages of numerous books on big online stores. Dates plain odd. Most reviews up within hours of each other, minutes on Amazon from different readers. Jim was not buying it. Always the same user names rotating through a series of piss

filled comments, the same style of writing on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other popular sites.

Jim had convinced himself. All verified purchases from a guy who hates Jim's work. Oh yeah. Jim had his fake review spotting mental detector telling him with sheer clarity. He'd asked several editors, ones of treasured value over the years in helping with proofing and viewpoints. Editors with no punches pulled on grammar issues or weak story arcs, able to be honest with any writer.

All agreed, something was fishy here.

"What's that about. Not one good review from these user names for the books, this is the work of one schmuck. Makes no sense at all that someone spends money to screw me up."

The user names rotated between the same suspect bunch. Almost a ton of differing user ids, the same poisonous bunch including *PhoenixZ*, *GeekZ*, and an actual name *Thomas*.

The implicit reviews, read over many times in similar styles and wording written to scathe and scorn and fire projectile sarcasm at Jim. Each time, a snarl at the sneering words, feisty fists readied, able to smash the nearest object.

*'I realise so many horror readers like Jim Cole's books and view him as a talented author, but upon further thought, there are people who relish being peed on...'*

*'Found a new cure for my insomnia...'*

*'Bought this as it is a horror story but instead I was laughing at the bad grammar, cliched phrases, laughable stilted characters, I could go on but found a new author instead...'*

“Damn I need to find this guy,” Jim’s words echoed around the apartment, “Guy has an agenda, not impartial, some fuckhead. That’s it, I am coming for you Gerald, so pick...up...the phone.”

Jim grabbed his phone and tapped Gerald’s number.

That familiar ringing and no answer syndrome.

An answer arrived. “Hi Jim, how are you today. Are you okay?”

Apart from some odd concern which chimed as false, Jim clammed his lips before saying the first words brewing: *Shut up schmuck, and listen*. Scratched. Jim cleared those words as this guy’s publishing label carried too much needed value in Jim’s literary life. Dark Tales, the collections, one man’s work and a way back into Gerald’s faith if handled well. He cleared a noisy throat, grinned to help pick himself up and spoke.

“Ahem. Hi Gerald,” a nice fake upbeat tone back at him, easy breaths, controlled anxiety, “Listen, I know what you mean by needing more writers but we are ready for another series. I have at least...”

“Jim, Jim, mate, we have been over this,” Gerald cut in and took a deep breath before he continued, “I need to mix up the writers. The latest collection got bad reviews as did a lot of novellas you wrote. I have to bring in other writers to write about half the tales before I can go ahead with talking about another volume. We need an anthology to pick up the pieces here. So how is everything else?”

“Why Gerald? Why do you ask? Supposed to be our collection, Not an anthology. I am not against us doing anthologies, hell, I’ll help get the writers. Just not Dark Tales, that’s all I ask. Not sure you give a fuck.”

“Come on Jim. That is far from true.”

“I want to talk about Dark Tales. The next collection and so on as we don’t need an anthology. Some idiot has faked those reviews, you know my tales are all that Dark Tales needs, our history of fans and growing fan base proves that,” Jim swallowed hard before his point, “Some idiot, to flame me down, some sneering little weasel but who? A spate of negative reviews. And false ones. Just look at them, the user profiles, same idiot gang of user names, these are all fake. Those blog comments, fake email addresses, dickhead used the same ids on the blogs as on Amazon. I spoke with my editors, they all agree. While it looks like the comments are coming from different folks, pretty sure, it is the same...fucking...fucking...weasel...”

Jim sifted through some book review blogs on his notebook and glared at the troll’s hateful comment trail littering his book pages.

“I’m not deleting any of my blog comments. I intend to fuck this guy over when I get him for this malicious libel. This blog comment here, slander and nothing more, what another shock left by penis breath user Thomas. ‘No scares for me, only laughs at how bad it is...’ “

An awkward silence numbed the conversation as Jim paced and Gerald clutched his forehead.

Jim threw his arms up in the air. “Look. You know me. I never deal badly with negative remarks. You know of my thick skin over the years. But this, all this, these are different. Comments showed within minutes of each other according to the dates and times. You must see it. Fabricated bullshit to bring me down, some freak, anyone can do it. Same user names on different sites all around the same period. Why would anyone bother to flame me this much unless, the slander was intentional? You don’t get a load of bad reviews in one big heap like this.”

Jim read a review out loud.

“You hear that. All great reviews and then for many weeks, BAM, a spate of crappy posts saying I am this and that and this and that...and...”

“I get it, Jim.”

Jim resumed pacing up and down his office room in a stiff foot-dragging gait, one finger tapped the base of the phone.

Gerald’s voice hardened. “Yes Jim, but you don’t know for sure. That said, I realise that fake reviews are used nowadays to ruin writers but I feel we need to diversify, we need to recover somehow, adding more writers will...”

“What, so, a replacement?” Jim spat as he retorted. “This prick has caused you to lose faith. We can get past this. I’ll find this prick. And stop these reviews. Gerald, I have at least fifty stories here, we only need twelve for another series, why wait, you can...”

“Jim, with respect. I love your passion, really I do. But the Dark Tales anthology sales plummeted for us recently and it still goes down and we spent a lot on marketing those books. We have to work on other projects right now too. If you have a spec for something else, let me in on it and we will talk it over.”

Jim rested the phone against a heaving chest. “Wait till I find the bastard who smudged my credibility,” he muttered, “Gonna rip his fucking heart out and send him to hell, the fuckwit...”

A sigh from Gerald. “Getting angry Jim is not helping. Ride through this. Just a bad patch, it will pass.”

The stale reviews distributed to a dense population inhabited by Jim’s fan base. And audiences pulled away from Jim’s YouTube channels, blog and Amazon pages over a painful year. He stared at dwindling kindle sales figures, boy they were down.

*Who did this? Thought my readers offered more faith my way. They like my stuff.* The words looped in his sore head.

With great pride, Jim had printed off annual Amazon figures and blue tacked them to a wall. Now, the prospects of more of those monthly four figure sums as fictional as his tales.

“It was not one bad review, but lots Jim. With our brand on many Amazon pages. It was very damaging,” Gerald said, his tone cradled sympathy, “I am not happy about what this guy or a few guys have done, may have done, but...”

Jim cut in. “Have. This is an attack. The same guy, certainly all the ones I am seeing. It makes no sense. Why did so many come so fast and steady for weeks? All good reviews for a while and with increased intensity over months...a stream of nasty reviews...I don’t get it.”

“No matter what happens from here on Jim, you will always be the guy who gave the horror fans the *Dark Tales* series. And you have a fan base. Sales will pick up for your books,” Another sigh, and a long pause, “Be thankful. So many writers never get so lucky. So you have a dip. Give it time,” Gerald cleared his throat, “Now, we have chosen another writer, and we are waiting...”

“Another writer? Already? Pretty sure you said you were *adding* writers but sounds like you’ve *added* someone, yep,” Jim’s voice sunk.

“Yes. My hands are a little tied here after all the sales drops. His name is Tom Larsky. Actually, he is eager to speak to you. I don’t think he intends to muscle in on your turf as much as co-write with you. Anyway, he contacted me and spoke of some great ideas. Think he feels guilty as he gets to work on the *Dark Tales* series...”

Jim knew this guy, vague familiarity as Gerald repeated his name, Larsky. He punched up Google, and Googled *Tom Larsky*, phone hard against his ear. “That may be true, fine, find out, but what if he is the one doing this? It all seems a bit too coincidental Gerald. What else can you tell me about Mister Larsky?”

“Now Tom has had lots of great reviews on his horror stories. Plus one that became a movie...”

“Yep, that is right,” Jim sought to hide a snigger as he cut in. The movie, a slasher horror title came up displaying a mere average of one star on the International Movie Database site, then scoffed more, “Maybe I am fast to judge here but right now, Larsky is under arrest from my end. And Gerald, that movie, for want of a better word – sucked. No fake reviews, all genuine you suck Larsky reviews.”

“Well, yes, but that Jim could be the fault of the film company or bad marketing screwed it up. Try his books. Look at his reviews.”

Jim tapped his name into the Amazon site search box. A series of novels, all 4 to 5 stars scrolled down the screen, not one bad review. Jim wheezed, nervous taps on the phone again.

Gerald continued to highlight reviews of Larsky’s work, “And look at his blog. He has sold quite a few screenplays too. So, he can be a big plus for us when I talk to my film producer buddies about some tales.”

“Except I am not a part of this *us*, am I? You mean cast a shadow over my misfortune,” Jim’s bloodshot eyes read over Mister Larsky’s blog detailing his background, “Wonder if he is the culprit here?”

“What, Larsky. No way. Stand-up guy.”

“So you say Gerald, but I remembered something, I know his face. And I met him, you recall the convention. I caught that hateful stare at me.”

Jim remembered. Time to point a finger.

The horror convention over a year ago. Larsky, Yes, Jim recalled meeting this one.

Busy Jim rushed off his feet by the number of fans grabbing *Dark Tales* books at the convention. Big smiles on him and Gerald as the customers kept pouring into their midst, signing, buying, more sales.

Jim recalled the face.

How he glared at Jim handing books over to a media circus sized fan base. Larsky observed as Jim's exhibition cubicle attracted an audience: arms crossed, the stiffest posture, the coldest eyes.

"When did you find him or he contact you?"

Gerald mulled over the question for a moment. "About three weeks ago, he pitched us with an offer for *Dark Tales*. Liked his pitch so we talked, and a few days ago, I chose him. I have to admit, I liked his first book in the *Crimson Death* series he developed. Guy has potential."

Jim sank into his couch, phone pressed hard against his cheek. "Three. A few weeks ago. Heh. This guy has nibbled at my success piece by piece over the year. Shortly after you lose faith, he pitches you. Asshole knew the reviews would drop my sales. Right? Doesn't that timing seem somewhat...odd to you? And why would he do that? Nobody ever pitches you for *Dark Tales* specifically. Yeah, you get pitches but not the series. And like that, in comes Tom, like he knew the sales were down." A hushed few words followed, "Prick knew."

Gerald sighed. "Okay, where are you going here?"

"That's it Gerald. he wants in, and me out. And he found a way to..."

"Jim, Jim, mate. That is so far-reaching. You have no idea who is responsible. Look. We've swayed off the point here."

Jim barely heard Gerald's words. Was this the guy slating him? A stretch, plenty of rogue writers abound. He may have muscled in on Jim's baby and that fact offered enough reason to hate him.

"Gerald, have to go."

Jim ended the call and marched to his desk chair. Self-satisfaction set in: they'd uncovered the rogue. He convinced himself and flicked the phone onto the sofa. With hands clamped on head, a quick click through to Tom Larsky's blog.

"So, let's look at your little blog." His deliberate condescending tone breezed out.

Larsky's home page displayed his recent books, reviews and praised the bad movie.

"Tom Larsky. A stretch? But it all feels pretty thin to me, you striding in on my series, so well timed. Yeah, I have questions for you...like...what makes you think you, YOU, can have MY series," Jim exhaled dwelling on potential prejudgement, "Best find out more about the reputation ripping rogue. Ah. Gotta find out more before I point sweaty fingers."

Outside the apartment block, a serene night rested on the street.

From the wide open apartment window, Jim's frustration erupted shattering the serenity.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!!!!"

A dog barked and an old timer passing by jolted on the pavement, close to keeling over. The old guy, heavy breathing, yelled back, "What the bloody hell is your problem? Almost gave me a coronary you idiot."

Jim smirked back and raised his middle finger.

The old guy stuttered. "You...you...piece of shit..."

"Can't you tell, I," Jim raised his voice, "don't give a fuck."

Jim slammed the window shut.

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A few hours passed.

The evening meal had sent Jim to the land of Nod. Unread text messages on his phone kept bleeping. Another louder bleep from his email on the notebook. Jim stirred. His weary eyes opened followed by a long yawn. He leaned forward to check his phone first.

"Damb, Mary, shit, forgot." A few messages from Mary wondering about meeting up gone unread. He shook his head, busy mind heavy laden with frustration over other matters.

Then a headline in the subject box of a message sent out to all members of a writers' group caught Jim's attention: *More than one hundred Indie Horror writers vanish without a trace.*

"What the fuuuuck?" Jim rubbed the back of his neck and clicked the message from the LinkedIn group. The article written by one of Jim's LinkedIn writer friends mentioned an alarming high number of strange disappearances in the global horror writers' community. Jim focused on a paragraph: *The authors along with members of their family have gone missing. The vanishings seem linked and occurring across the globe. Local police reports mention that all were horror story writers, and in all cases, they found signs of a violent fight from a domestic disturbance and mysteriously melted computers on their premises. A journalist leaked the information on the crime scenes for Freak Movies magazine just a few days ago upon discovering the connection, all horror writers...*

Photographs of the missing writers followed. Jim knew a few.

"Gotta be shitting me."

Phone ringtone. Mary's tone.

"Hi Mary."

Mary, always the close buddy and screaming for more. Jim knew it. Far too wrapped up in writer problems to absorb the obvious fact that she wanted him.

"Hi. Up to much. Heading over to the pub in an hour or so to meet a few peeps. You fancy it?"

"Urrmm...yeah...urrmm...sure...no...maybe..."

"I'll take that as a yes, see you later."

The call ended with an abrupt nature that meant - Jim is going out with Mary, moody or not.

Jim drank what remained of a cold coffee, crunched his face from the vile aftertaste and checked over unread email on the notebook.

One unread message.

Jim gasped. The subject line: *Book Contract Offer - Would like to meet you.*

"Really spammer, that important, well shucks. Why don't I humour you before I delete?"

He opened the email sent through Jim's ailing blog; a short message accompanied by a PDF file.

*'Hi Jim*

*This is Hell On Earth Publishers. Hopefully, this email has reached you from your website.*

*We are impressed with the Dark Tales series and your many stories on Amazon.*

*We would like to meet you and discuss how your tales can fit our readers.*

*To that end, I have attached a PDF file with details of our submission requirements, and contract, before we meet.*

*That said, if you so wish to reject our offer, do not ignore this email, simply reply with the words NOT INTERESTED in the subject.*

*Then it's all over and thank you for your time.*

*Sincerely*

*The HOE Crew'*

This stirred Jim, hope grew, unfelt for some time. A peep at least.

He paused for a moment. "If I am not interested, you won't hear from me schmuck. Is this spam? Knowing my luck. Anyone is naive to decide this is for real."

The virus scanner lay silent, no alert pop-ups as usual if a file was suspect.

Jim exhaled and drummed the notebook. The mouse pointer drifted away from the attachment to click on the publisher's website link. "Well." Jim clicked through to the website, "Bullshit or screw you Gerald."

The screen paused to load while page text showed.

*The depths of hell are coming your way.*

On the dark home page, a background image littered with glyphs and crimson wild-eyed human faces; not human, sketches of humanoid beings with jagged teeth and scornful stares. Down the page, photos of authors published with their full names, or pseudonyms, each accompanied by short but odd publisher testimonials including for one author Jim knew: *A thrill to the end.*

Jim blinked a few times. "I take it they refer to the end of a contract, or a book project, hah, of course."

His bright eyes and smiley face swung its attention back to the attachment.

The mouse pointer hovered over the PDF.

Jim slid the pointer away.

"No way." Jim chuckled to the silence of the spacious apartment.

He Googled the name: Hell On Earth Publishers.

Nothing.

Not a scent or a trail anywhere.

Jim paced across his lounge again, occasional peer out the bay windows for angered pedestrians.

Bleep.

An email from Gerald. Jim raced for the notebook.

*Hey Jim, Listen I felt so guilty about this whole debacle that I got in touch with a contact of mine who set up a new publisher recently. Call themselves Hell On Earth Publishing. Sounds promising. Why not give it a whirl? The new brand comes highly recommended from my peers over at the Writers Guild whom say the editors come from years of experience with other labels. Helped a lot of authors see the light and become part of the best in horror. I'll talk tomorrow Jim...*

He glared with wide curious eyes at the words. "No way. Talk now Jim."

*Anyway, call me tomorrow when I have more time to talk. Reply when they email you. They are so blown away by your work that I believe they are sending a copy of the contract they are offering. Give it a read and sign if it meets your needs. This could be a new beginning Jim. Later. Gerald.*

Jim clutched his mussed hair and squeezed. “Wow. Not shitting me. This is Gerald. New publisher,” Jim muttered to himself, “Since you feel guilty, probably dismissed me now for bum hole Larsky. Okay, let’s have a look at this contract. What do you want from me? What’s your offer?”

He dragged the pointer back to the attachment and raised an excited finger above the mouse button.

“What you got for me?”

Jim fidgeted on the chair, one shaky finger hovered above the mouse button.

Double clicked.

The screen faded to black.

The notebook vibrated.

A strange hiss emerged from its little speakers.

A shrill and horribly discordant mocking laugh vibrated through the casing.

A picture opened.

Jim lurched in the chair.

Shell-shocked eyes took in the image manifesting on the screen.

He slammed the notebook shut. He wiped a layer of bubbling sweat from his face.

The notebook flipped open.

The image colours intensified.

Jim lapped up the detail with scared eyes: a half man with the head of a goat and six arms that protruded from the torso, one arm outstretched with a menaced stare at Jim. Behind this figure, an inverted pentagram and the archaic glyphs from the web page etched into every part of the pentagram shape.

The image disintegrated to a series of blurry dots and vanished. A sentence formed across the middle of the screen.

The words read:

*Time to play with Jim.*

He gulped. "What!"

A cold breeze rustled around him, some sheets of papers fluttered on a coffee table, furniture quaked, more intense with each second, reverberations rippled through the armchair.

Jim clutched the wooden arms with a tight grip.

The chair shook, convulsions passed through his body as though a seizure progressed.

Then, the chair and other room objects ceased.

Jim rolled his eyes around the room. "Bad vibrations."

In a flash, Jim and the chair launched upwards along with a low coffee table. He dangled in the air, winched by a chilly force that gripped his ankles. It let go. He fell into a heap by the door. The coarse laughter echoed around the room. Objects flew at high speed towards Jim: books followed by a shelf of DVDs one by one and pulverised his forehead. He covered his face as they battered and struck over and over, cackles filled the room.

Jim yelled and pushed himself off the floor; he sprinted out of the lounge and across the hall to the kitchen and shut the door hard.

He backed away from the door. A breeze brushed his face, it flowed across his legs, some utensils hanging from the wall jangled.

“What the hell?”

Jim winced at the rattling utensils, some were missing.

A small pan raised behind his head swooped down.

SMACK.

It struck his sore skull with rapid jabs. Jim swung a fist at the pan sending it sliding across the floor.

A sharp flinch, he froze and focused on an object heading closer.

In front of him, a meat fork stabbed his forehead, one jab after another.

Jim lashed out at the fork with frantic arms, it parried a little then dropped to the floor; the same laughter erupted again.

He yanked the kitchen door open wide to get out quick, yelling. “Bastard. What are you?” Streams of blood streamed from brow cuts.

Jim gasped. "So this is how...those writers...vanished. What the hell? Who carved this hocus pocus up?"

He made fast for the lounge. The notebook still on, the image back on the screen. Jim shut the notebook and picked up the phone nestled under a few books.

An unseen force snatched the phone and tossed it to one side.

An upward punch from something unseen bashed his nose followed by another.

His eyes filled with water, dazed, he staggered.

Jim let out an angry cry and lashed out again with flailing punches to the air.

One book flapped through the air like a swooping eagle and smothered his face, a tight skull clasp. He staggered in a dazed zigzag gait across the room carpet.

Crash.

He tripped over the coffee table, the book still pressed against his face like a stressed bird.

The book wrenched itself from Jim's bloody face and flew off down the hall to the kitchen, a chatter of belly laughs trailing behind it.

Jim snarled. His stance that of a readied boxer, fists high. "I'll get you, you little prick. You have no idea what kind of a shitty week I am having, you messed with the wrong wri..."

He sniffed something.

Smoke, coming from the kitchen; he scampered down to the kitchen. The crackling, something burned. He stopped dead in the kitchen doorway. The book rested on the stove,

frying bright with the gas on a full blue flame. Utensils were flying around the room in a circuit, the dinner table clanking about as the legs bounced from side to side.

Jim lunged for the fire. The utensils screamed as though alive, gliding around the room and battered his head upon attempts to turn off the gas.

The smoke alarm activated, the head pounding alarm drowned by the wailing laughter.

“What are you? What do you want?” Jim’s voice strained, chest heaved. Beaten, he backed out of the kitchen and closed the door.

The laughs ceased.

The door creaked open till it thumped the wall.

Smoke drifted from the kitchen, it seeped along the hallway and clung to the walls like serpent tentacles. Wispy tendrils flowed across the ceiling and both sides of the hallway.

Jim stepped back a little as the smoke gave way to no visibility.

An object crept through the smoke clouds into the hallway.

A *shing* like metallic blades burst through the smoke: one after the other, a circle of Jim’s sharp deluxe butcher knives. The birthday present from Mary formed a threatening poise.

They hovered for a second.

One by one, the knives spun through the air at Jim with high speed; he ducked or rather collapsed covering his head. Each pierced an old portrait of Jim’s creative writing graduation day.

Jim cried out, "Arrrghh. Now you get it fucker."

He yanked one knife from the spoiled pierced portrait.

A carving knife cut through the smoke.

It raced at his head. Jim whacked it to one side with the knife. The steel blade came again, Jim fenced off the attack each time it made for his neck, backing off a few inches at a time. Jim and the entity, armed with kitchen knives, swash buckled down the hallway to the front door.

The ghostly butcher knife fell to the floor.

Jim grinned.

"That all you got."

The smoke thickened and choked him. He made for the kitchen, utensils littered the floor. Fragments of fiery paper floated in glowing orange embers, all that remained of the cooked book. Jim swivelled the gas dial off. He opened a window, and the smoke dissipated. Another smoke alarm near the front door fired off. Jim ran in long strides to the alarm and punched it off.

Just at that moment, it erupted again, that mockery in the chortle.

Jim yelled. "What the fuck Gerald? Why? Why did you do this?" Jim hushed his voice as he thought about the devils invited at home, "How the hell did you do this? If you wanted me ousted, you made that clear." Jim shook a pained head. "No, nope. This is not Gerald's work, he couldn't have known what that attachment, what it, no, how could a digital document do this?"

It touched, some kind of icy chill locked up his joints. He opened his mouth wide and edged towards the lounge - in vain.

A tight arm grip, something clung to him. The strain made Jim quiver. “Agggghh, what is happening, someone hear me.”

From the windy street, Mary walked to the doorstep, her face one of impatience. She leapt up the stone steps and thumped the door a few times. “Jim, are you there? Can’t reach you on your phone.” Wind brewed outside, wisps of brunette strands brushed across her face.

Jim’s outstretched arms struggled to reach for the front door, locked in a curl. He fell to the floor. He tried to speak, but something gripped his throat, a slow squeeze.

Mary pressed her cheek to the door. “That smoke I can smell? Yep, what is happening with your next cooking disaster? Why won’t you answer?” She huffed and smacked the door with her palm.

Jim struggled to crawl across the carpet as the entity kept a tight grip on his limbs. He strained to move any muscles, cheeks pulled back as something with many more hands than him held a firm and unyielding hold on his legs, arms and head.

“Keeeeeeeeee...” Jim tried in vain to communicate with a frustrated Mary on the other side of the door.

She struck the door again. “Heard you muttering in there. You still leave a spare key in the flower pot here?”

Jim strained a nod, not that she could see his struggled acknowledgement through the door.

“Okay. I am coming in if the key is there.” She fished around the pot and checked in the soil. “You need to get out of there and grab time away from that damn keyboard...ah...” Mary dug for the key deep in the soil. “Got it.” She skipped up to the door. “Coming in.”

The key turned in the lock, Mary burst in.

She shut the door and strode ahead. "So, get yer shoes on and..."

She halted in her tracks and winced.

Jim lay on all fours on the carpet; his face contorted until features created a hideous skin stretched mask.

Mary coughed. "Jim...what the...what...you having...a panic attack? So much smoke."

In a heartbeat, his body rose to an upright position and floated a few feet off the ground; a contorted face akin to a scary clown with a wide grin. His body hovered there and jiggled; arms and legs moved up and down like a large entertaining puppet held by invisible strings.

A throaty laugh emerged, not from Jim, from whatever suspended him as it gloated over Jim's humiliation.

Mary stepped back, face one of abject shock and terror, colour fading to ashen. Her eyes closed, she swooned and hit the floor hard.

Jim rolled his eyes around. "Yuuuu....bsssttttaaaaaarrrrrrrrd....." He forced a few words of abuse as the entity maintained a tight throat grip.

It laughed again.

The land line phone in the hall rang.

Jim's body dropped to the floor. He squirmed on the carpet and sought to collect himself, his muscles agonised. The answerphone started.

*Hey Jim, it's Gerald. Listen bud, we need to talk. Has Larsky tried to contact you. Listen, call me back as soon as you get this. That Larsky is a scumbag, you were right. I looked into what you said. Some of my convention buddies confirmed it. They suffered the same bullshit.*

Jim lifted himself off the floor, his back aching, his jaw almost dislocated. "Huh."

Gerald's answerphone voice continued.

*We got an insider on the phone, an agent for a horror writer, seems Larsky had posted fake reviews on his Amazon pages, and nasty ones like the ones on yours on many writer's book pages. Anyway, we will tell you more about this creep when you get back, but basically, it seems you were right, your bad reviews were all from him, all fake, he used the same user names on other writers' book pages. Anyhow, get back, sorry Jim, should have had more faith, let's talk about Dark Tales. On another note, you heard about the writers? Collins, Drake, so many others, disappeared. It's shaking the horror literature world. Also seems Larsky hacked my email or someone did. Just read this email about a contract offer with some Hell On Earth firm, never heard of them. Anyhow, I didn't send it. Get back to me.*

Jim dazed, grabbed the phone, his nerves shattered. Faint words tried to emerge. "Gerald...call...you...later...got...bigger...problems..."

The phone flew from his hand.

One strike after another, the phone buried itself in his forehead, one quick smack after another.

Jim fell back unconscious. It released the phone to the carpet. The mockery filled laugh echoed throughout the apartment.

Gerald's concerned voice crackled. *Jim, Jim, you there, what the hell was that?*

The entity wrenched the wire from the wall.

Jim's limp body swivelled 180 degrees, his legs hoisted up. His body slid across the floor. It sniggered as Jim's tortured body glided into the lounge and alongside the notebook atop the desk as it seeped slimy transparent goo from the keys; the image of the goetic figure filled the screen with smeared spots of bright white light that burnt the glass. Mary's body slid alongside Jim.

The screen burnt out to a brilliant white; Eye piercing bright rays seeped through the notebook screen as the plastic casing swelled and melted.

The entity's laughter changed to a coarse roar.

Jim stirred and lifted his heavy eyelids. Weary and beaten, trickles of blood running down his brow, he peered across at unconscious Mary.

Jim tried to stare at the blinding light spilling out of the melted notebook as the rays filled the room. He covered his eyes. The monstrous roar ceased. Words, croaky and slurred emerged.

*More souls to reap, mine to keep.*

The laughter resumed.

He reached over for Mary. "Mary, get out...get...out..." Still out cold. Jim clutched and shook her. "Get out...Mary...now.."

Mary tried to open her eyes.

The white light converted the lounge into a washed-out room almost burning out all objects except for Jim and Mary; a swirling tunnel of revolving sparkling blue and white light burst from the melted notebook alongside a crescendo of tinny sounds.

Jim swung his attention to his mobile phone on the carpet a few feet away.

He grabbed it.

Dragged towards the light, Mary too, Jim tapped Gerald's number.

They slid to the cackle at the centre of the swirling tunnel.

Ringling.

He tried a few numbers, but all faded to static.

*Think, think, Jim, how to escape this*, Jim's thoughts raced against what little time remained.

"The PDF," Jim uttered, "That publisher, the offer, contract..."

Jim recalled the email.

"Reply, saying not interested...in the subject..." He panted, a curt nod, "That's it. please God, please be it..."

Both he and Mary slid further towards the burning light, gripped by its malevolence and intent to consume them.

He opened Gmail. "Not yet asshole...you are not getting us," Jim muttered. His email messages flickered on the screen, the energy from the light disrupted the phone.

He persevered and browsed through his messages.

"There." Jim pressed down on the mail, he glanced at the attachment, the contract, no contract. "Screw you."

Both he and Mary's visibility dissolved close to a whiteout, white-washed in the intense light.

And it burned like the searing heat of a close bonfire.

Immersed in the light, Jim hit reply and typed NOT INTERESTED in the subject, raised his finger above SEND.

Tap.

He shut his eyes.

Silence, the laughter ceased. He lifted his eyelids.

His first thought—Mary. She still lay unconscious next to him. The lounge, a mix of smoke and a dank aroma from around the smouldering parts of the notebook.

Jim bolted upright, dropped the phone and rested on his palms. A long sigh of relief broke the stunned silence of the messed up room. Just about every lounge item Jim owned strewn across the carpet. He shook Mary's arm.

"Mary, Mary."

She stirred a little. Jim held her close. "It's over." Jim rested her head against his chest. He sent the smoking notebook a satisfied grin. "Boy, Gerald. Have I got a story for you?"

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One month later.

Jim chatted with another magazine journalist though telling his story reached a repetitiveness that bored him. So many editors wanted this quirky true life tale alone. "Yes, that's right...well, don't care if no-one believes it, that is how the writers vanished...I got lucky...No, I told you, can't find anything on this Hell On Earth publisher...you are the journalist, see what you can find, maybe get answers as to why."

Jim peered out his shiny clean windows at the sunny afternoon brightening up the street. He rolled his eyes at Mary wanting to end the call.

“Yep, I have no idea how a digital attachment became a demonic instrument conjuring up poltergeists and many dark spirits. I’ll tell you this, it’s still out there. I have warned as many as I can, told hundreds of writers to watch out for the attachment. Plus, I am at a convention next week where I intend to talk about this to a big group of global horror writers. I don’t want to hear about anyone else falling foul of this...whatever it is.”

A huge exhalation of impatience and pent-up breath.

“Yes, yes, they will think I am just trying to scare them. Fine. It’s a convention....don’t you recall the writer staying at the Amityville house? The one claiming to have seen demons right before a new book launch on a story set there...that was just a load of shit, my story is truth. Yep, all writers have to do is pretty obvious, do not open the PDF, that easy but whoever, whatever, sends these can be quite convincing. They know how to phish and hack. They will catch you in your darkest hour, at your most vulnerable, and they will find a way to get you opening it. Communities of global writers are aware, the problem is too many dismiss me as bullshit and think it’s one fat publicity stunt. Couldn’t care less, it happened, I was there, so was my partner...”

Mary glided her hand across her throat to tell Jim to cut him off. Intense period. So many editors had contacted Jim begging for his tale after photos of a paranormal disturbance at the apartment reached their desks. Gerald told Jim’s story to a big magazine journalist and so many believed every word of how Jim fell victim to a demonic force. Even got him a TV spot on ITV’s morning news. The damage inflicted by the poltergeist reached chat programmes like The Wright Stuff where Jim found both shock and ridicule.

No matter what people thought, things changed with a rapid succession over a few weeks.

Apart from the brilliant part being Jim's book sales up and on a fast train to normal sales volumes, his true life tale of a supernatural demonic attack - while met with the expected cynicism - also propelled his book sales through the roof.

"Failed writer makes a comeback with digital demon story...that your angle...really fruitcake...I never failed, my sales dropped, I have not come back from failing as a writer...oh so you think it's all just for publicity then...why are we speaking? Okay, bye now." Jim switched his phone off, sighed. "Schmuck. No more calls."

Jim leapt onto the sofa and cuddled up to Mary, a peck on her cheek. Both all snug and relaxed on the sofa. A horror movie reached its end, and the credits rolled.

Jim kissed Mary's lips and smiled. "We should have done this a while ago."

Mary nodded. "A girl has been trying."

"Yep, and someone with a new contract and a brighter future as the Dark Tales writer," he touched her pale nose lightly, "just knows."

Mary sighed. "I can tell no one, you know, nobody will take in a word. Unlike you, letting Gerald put you on national TV. Anyway, helped your books despite nobody believing a word."

Jim smirked back. "What, some supernatural force hell bent on killing horror writers, what's not to believe?" he sniggered, then a smug almost cheesy grin, "Gotta admit though, one dark tale."

Mary leant back, her voice quiet. "You should take it more seriously. When you think about all the stuff you write about, maybe you writers have tapped into this...benign entity...somehow."

Jim grinned at Mary, wagged a finger. "You have read too many of my books."

The answerphone recorded a message. Jim clicked off the television.

“Time to go out.” Mary said resting her hand on his chest. “Yep.”

Gerald’s all new excited and fiery enthusiasm spoke: *Hey Jim. Just to let you know, apart from lots of sales moving forward, I am going for a movie adaptation for next year; I am talking the next Twilight Zone dude. Shall talk more about that tomorrow with you. Seems a film company has picked up on Dark Tales and wants to talk. They particularly like your true life story of a possessed digital attachment tale. Truth is truly scarier than fiction. Seems a lot support you, that will drown out the naysayers. It’s all big now Jim...*

Jim and Mary held each other’s hands and headed off averting attention from Gerald calling, no more work talk today.

*Tom Larsky, his reputation in ruins now. Won’t be hearing from him at all since I fired his arse. Guess good riddance to bad rubbish ay Jim.*

Jim winked at the brand new answerphone as he opened the front door, the grin of a born again writer.

For a moment, he dwelled on the terrifying experience at home.

“Even a snake like Larsky can get another contract. He tried emailing me about something, probably a very guilty conscience eating him. Did not even open it.”

Mary stopped Jim for a moment, a light hand on Jim’s smiley face. “What if he’s a victim just like the others and us?”

Mary stared deeper into Jim’s inquisitive face.

“You said it yourself, the true evil behind this is still out there. It’s not done yet.”

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Rock music blared out of computer speakers as a portly man sank into his chair and devoured a cheese burger. He browsed over Jim's blog, sneering, snorting, same old cold stare in the eyes. A series of emails bleeped into the mailbox.

"Tell me these are not more slander at me."

Tom opened the first.

He bounced off a rocking chair dumping devoured burger remains onto a cheese stained wrapper. Tom wiped his face as he stared at the accusations hitting his email box - again. For days, this relentless stream of abuse from readers hit his mailbox. Gerald along with a few other publishers had gone to great lengths to create blogs revealing how Tom had faked his reviews and deposited bad ones on other writers' books.

"Guys, no. I did not do that. I did not post any bad reviews."

Tom glared at his Amazon pages. The great reviews - but who from? The same user names littered his other book pages: Thomas, Geekz, PhoenixZ and more.

"Thanks for all the great reviews. But I didn't fake these. I thought they to be genuine. Surely. Books bought. Reviews."

Tom read several nasty emails from publishers. Gerald had emailed many partners in publishing expressing his disgust and disappointment on how Tom sank this low. A few used to respect Tom, now he found his ideas rejected and sales plummeting.

He spun around. "Gerald, I did not post these, not on Jim's pages and not on mine. If these are fake accounts, they are not mine. I...don't...know who..."

Bleep.

His email notification popped up.

He hit the mouse button and munched the burger remains. Tom's eyes widened, a slow disbelieving head shake. And read the email.

*Hi Tom*

*This is Hell On Earth Publishers. Hopefully, this email has reached you from your website. We would like to extend our passion for your work. We read your books and as you may have seen, there are lots of reviews, great reviews.*

*Why? We think you have what it takes to be the next piece of gold dust in the horror books business.*

*We loved your first book in your Crimson Death series and that is why we gave you the ratings. We had many of our writers read your work and so hope you like the reviews. Sure blew them and us away.*

*Want you to write for us.*

*The team here has come up with ideas on how your series can push forward so please read over our thoughts in the attached document.*

*Of course, if you wish to reject our offer, do not ignore the email, simply reply stating **NOT INTERESTED** in the subject...*

A smile grew across his sweaty face, widening eyes sparkled.

Times now desperate.

Someone did not believe the warnings.

Double click.

