

GUY QUINTERO

DOOR  
TO  
DARKNESS

U. S. A.

UNHOLY SLAYING AGENCY

BOOK THREE

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GUY QUINTERO



*Sinister Raven Publishing LLC*

DOOR TO DARKNESS

Book Three of Unholy Slaying Agency Series

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First edition: September 2024

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ISBN: 978-1-958828-06-9 (Ebook edition)

ISBN: 978-1-958828-07-6 (Paperback edition)

ISBN: 978-1-958828-08-3 (Hardback edition)

*This novel is dedicated to all the individuals out there battling demons in silence, not matter what form they come in. Stay strong and remember the words of the wise magician King Solomon.*

*“This too shall pass.”*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank all the brave men and women that I had the privilege to serve with during my tours in Iraq. Especially the bad ass recon soldiers of 7-10 Ghost. Thank you to the bookstagram community for all the love and support. You all have helped this washed-up old soldier live out my dreams of entertaining you with my stories. Thank you to my editor Sally Odgers, and my manager Simone. Thank you to actors Carl and Gavin Manes for starring in my book trailer. Thank you to Jeff Fox and Nashelle Brown of Star Fox Media, the most talented video production group in San Diego.

A very special thanks to my ARC/Beta Team:

Agent Kelly Horrocks @Kelly.the.Jabberwock

Agent Tera Dugan @TheBookishAbyss

Agent Katie Stewart

*Let me warn you  
Against the nightmares that await this dive.  
You may suffer a fate worse than death,  
And still remain alive.  
Oh, what I say here  
And what I say there.  
May seem as I'm simply rambling  
Without an aim or a care.  
But you'll know my words ring true  
When your widened eyes see.  
The Pale Furnace in its horrific glory,  
Cooking screaming souls with glee.*



*You should be going now.*

# CHAPTER 1

## GRASP FROM BEYOND

PRESENT DAY: SANTA FE, NM - 2200 HOURS

**Y**oung Joey Ridgemont lay staring at the dark ceiling of his bedroom. Tension melted away from muscles roiling with the ache of fatigue. His eyes drooped to half-mast. The sweet aroma of green apples and cinnamon diffused throughout the two-story home, permeating into his room from the kitchen, where his mother had labored. He rubbed at his bulging stomach, filled to capacity with celebratory pizza purchased by his coach, and the pastries that awaited his arrival home.

The loud crack of his homerun swing resounded in his memories. A smirk arose through his weariness, his vision carried away by imagination. He felt his heart racing with the clamor of excitement from the surrounding stands. The wooden bat's throbbing bite resonated in his palms after it rolled out of his fingers, clanging with the home plate. Wind rushed over his face, whisking under the visor of his helmet during the mad dash to first base.

“Keep going!” his coach urged. “Dig! Dig!”

Cheering rose from the crowds as Joey gained control of his breath, gazing across the brown sand that morphed into the shining grass of the outfield. The ball landed on the outermost fence that shuddered as it bounced against it. Fervor swelled in him, pumping his legs across to the second, then the third, his cleats stomping into the dusty base pads.

The white spot of the ball rose high in Joey’s peripheral, gunned by a desperate outfielder trying to salvage his team from the magnificent play. Arms and legs pushed through the expanding weariness of heaving lungs, driving Joey closer to home plate. The catcher positioned along the baseline, impeding his path in a squat stance with her wide glove centered for the speeding ball.

“Run her over, Joe!”

Joey collided with the catcher, breaking through the blockade of humanity as his feet scampered over the plate. Squeals erupted as they both toppled to the dust. Clouds of brown rose around them, staining their white uniforms in faint traces. The ball missed its mark, colliding with the backstop, and rattling its chained links. The two little leaguers groaned, rising to their feet. Joey reached out to help the catcher.

“Sorry, Wendy,” he said.

“Don’t be.” The girl took off her mask and cap, setting free long brown locks sprinkled with sand. “I would’ve done the same.”

“Sophomore year is right around the corner...”

“Yep. Don’t remind me.” Wendy paused, taking a deep breath. “I was wondering. If you weren’t doing anything this weekend, my folks are going to the movies and said I could invite—”

Cheers grew louder with scrambling cleats and his giant

coach closing upon them. Within a few seconds, Wendy had been cut off by the swarm of bouncing little leaguers. Their smiling faces flashed through his mind's eye. Hands came into view, some with gloves, others bare, all of them smudged with sweat and dirt. He rose into the air, carried aloft by those surrounding him, and paraded around the catcher's mound.

"You did it, son!" his coach bellowed. "You broke the tie with two outs! We won for sure!"

A snickering Wendy came into view. Joey reached for her. The girl smirked, shaking her head and mouthing the word 'later.' Chuckles escaped from the boy as he nodded. Joey's head dipped back in surrender in a toothy beam. They continued floating him around to the hoots and clapping adulation of the audience rising in the bleachers.

"We got pizza waiting for us at Tony's restaurant!" Coach continued. "Let's finish this game and head out! Is your gorgeous mother coming? Perhaps you can put in a good word for me?"

Joey chuckled along with a few others and nodded. *Coach is a good guy. Why not.*

After he was set down, Joey stared over to the opposition gathering near their dugout. Wendy waved from the mob of her teammates, disappearing among them. Joey sighed, turning to meet his younger sister Phyllis. The curly-haired brunette pressed her slipping glasses even with her freckled nose before presenting a small black box.

"Where have you been?" Joey asked, ruffling Phyllis' hair.

"Sorry I missed the game, but I was in line at Mr. Crespo's Electronics Store." She pointed across the street from the field.

"What else is new, nerd!" Joey teased. "To get what?"

"To get us this!"

Phyllis held up the rectangular black box with a

triumphant grin. ‘Sons of the Apocalypse,’ was displayed in bold red lettering over two bare-chested, muscle-bound, soldiers carrying machine guns and firing at hordes of monsters.

“No way!” Joey hugged his sister. “You did it!”

“Yep, yep!” Phyllis chuckled. “It was free while supplies lasted, just like the commercial said. And after we register with Partridge Games, we get a free 3D screen saver, too!”

“Yes! So cool! We’re going to be slaying mutant monsters tonight!”

“Let’s go home right now and—”

“Can’t. The team is going to celebrate.”

“You and these stupid sports. Ugh! Fine! I’ll install it on our computers and get a jump on the first quests. Don’t get upset when my character is like ten levels ahead of yours with better weapons!”

Joey sighed, nudging her with his elbow. “All good. Just show me the ropes. See you at home.”

The theater of memories evaporated from Joey’s vision as light pierced into the room from the hallway. His mother appeared at the opening door, peeking in with chocolate locks dangling over the flanks of her face. Her gaze went to the computer desk, where the flashing lights from the screen saver portrayed animations of blaring guns as they fired at growling red monsters.

“I thought you were still up playing that awful game.”

“Nope, just a screen saver, Mom. I’m too tired. Not going to last much longer.”

“Good, I had to pull your sister away from it just now. Glad at least one of my babies has the sense to get some proper rest. I’ll see you in the morning, Joe-Joe. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom. Goodnight.”

The door closed, pinching away light until there was only the illumination from his computer and the glowing moon. Faint rays beamed through branches and leaves from the oak tree looming in the front yard.

A loud and hoarse cawing whisked his attention to a raven staring through his open window. The haze of slumber melted away. The boy's eyes widened then narrowed on a tiny black face staring back. The gleaming pupils of its big eyes locked with Joey, who rose from his bed, yawning while he lumbered to the sill.

"Dang thing woke me!" Joey grumbled. "I should've closed this window."

A shifting commotion lowered Joey's attention to the base of the tree. Staring up at him was a tall silhouette draped among the shadows. Its narrow face remained obscure within the night. The boy felt the figure's attention bearing up at him. Black feathers spiked along its crown. The silhouetted presence lowered its gaze, fixating through the sprawling front windows of the living room.

"Mom! Come quick!" Joey turned, screaming into the hallway.

The bedroom door swung open with Phyllis Senior rushing through. Her son wielded his bat, taken from its stand near the headboard. Joey cocked the weapon behind his frame with both arms, taking slow steps back to the window.

"What is it?" his mother inquired.

"There's someone outside, looking into our house!"

They peered around, staring down among the bushes lining the home's outer wall. Their eyes found nothing, but the shadows given shape with the contrast of moonlight and the evening gloom. The boy shook his head.

"I saw someone. I did!"

“I believe you. Go grab your sister and get your cell phone ready. I’m going to the safe and I’ll check downstairs, then outside. If I’m not back in ten minutes, call the police.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Joey rushed into Phyllis’ room, his view washed from the blaring of her computer monitor, flashing with gunfire, and screaming mutant monsters. She turned in the computer chair with wide-eyed dismay, before sighing in deflated relief.

“I thought you were Mom! Don’t just rush in like that! So rude!”

“Philly, we got a problem. Someone’s outside. Mom’s going to check it out, but you’re going to stay with me until this gets resolved.”

“Drama queen. Probably just one of your jock friends playing a prank.”

“No, this doesn’t feel right.”

“Whatever. Least you could do is hop online with me.”

Joey shook his head.

“Oh-Em-Gee. You’re seriously spooked? Joey, you’re such a pussy.” Phyllis stormed over, leaving the spinning chair for her window with an adjacent angle. “I don’t see anything.”

“There was a raven or a crow or something and a man. He didn’t look friendly.”

Phyllis rolled her eyes. “Good. Mom was a soldier. She’ll toast that asshole. Just like I’m smoking these monsters!”

“Don’t use language like that!” Phyllis Senior barked from the doorway, a .38 revolver in her hands.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“It’s fine. We’re all a little worked up. Whoever was outside is gone now. Probably just a vagrant looking for an easy mark. I’ll call the police and put in a report, then notify the neighborhood watch.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Joey smiled.

“And you, young lady!” Phyllis Senior snapped. “Didn’t I tell you that’s enough gaming for tonight?”

“Mom, I have to slay the Mutant Overlord of the Alpha Quadrant, or I won’t be able to get the—”

“I don’t care! Now turn off that rubbish and get some proper rest, I mean it, Philly! Or I’ll disconnect the internet for a week.”

Phyllis gasped. Her mother nodded with stern resolve.

“Okay, okay, sorry! Gosh! Speaking of overlords...”

“What was that?”

“Nothing. Going to bed. Sorry.”

“Thanks for listening, Mom.” Joey hugged Phyllis Senior.

“Anytime, kiddo. That’s what I’m here for.”

Joey went back into his room, closed the door, and plopped on his bed. He turned on his side, gazing across to his computer’s monitor. Vibrant yellows of gunfire flashed between mutants crumbling in defeat to men and women wielding oversized guns. Cawing stole away his attention. His heart thumped with rapidity when it called again.

Fear weighed Joey’s steps as he rose from his bed and hobbled to the window, ignoring the large black bird’s stare. At the bottom of the tree was nothing save for the grass growing to ankle length.

*Nothing. Thank God. I need to cut that tomorrow before Mr. Anderson starts griping. I really wish Mom would just get rocks and sand like everyone else.*

Another slow, mouth gaping yawn escaped Joey, before he lay back down on his side, bringing the sheets over himself.

*Really dragging tonight. No more worries. Mom has it handled.*

Eyelids hung low, blurring away the vision of his computer desk. The glowing monitor’s array of lights fused with the

mottled images of his tall lamp and bookshelf. Shallow breaths and the release of control followed, bringing the boy's mind drifting to the currents of slumber. The last visages of Joey's sight traced his arm, wandering to his dangling hand, away from the warmth of the full-size bed. Cool fluxes of the air conditioner rushed against his fingers. A pulse washed over him, vibrating through his body.

A shadow stepped forward, beyond the obscurity of blurred images and the fog of weariness. Alarm surged, jolting the boy. The presence remained within his peripheral, just out of reach from his focus. Its dark outline flickered with instability like rising smoke. The towering presence crept closer, looming over him.

"Heh, heh, heh, heh," laughter came, blending glee with sinister intent.

*Gotta get my bat... I can't... move...*

A tremble crawled down the boy's spine, lingering with vibrations that grew faint as mists of darkness continued enveloping the outskirts of his vision. The presence approached just beyond his fingers. As the shadows of the room peeled away, a man stepped out, his long black coat swaying into view. Yellow feline eyes fixed upon the boy with slit pupils.

*Scream for Mom...*

A crushing unseen force wrestled away Joey's willpower. Attempts to move were met with only a sizzle of communication that carried into his limbs with no response. The presence in the room enveloped him, bearing down on the boy's mind and spirit.

*Help... Someone...*

The desire to move melded with his slumber. The quake of his heart vanished, along with the coolness of the air

conditioning and the soft cushion of his bed. Mind and spirit drifted away from his body.

Joey found himself standing and surveying the emptiness of his room. Waves of light and shadow traced the details within view, like a mirage on a balmy day. His eyes followed to the baseball bat now clasped in both trembling hands, and over his knuckles turning white.

As he stepped from his bed, Joey's perspective shifted with the floor's surface canting to the left. Tremors passed through the room's texture before the ripples ceased. Another lurching move and he found the gradual slope had changed to the right. The world vibrated again, only to normalize with haste.

*Dang... So out of it...*

Staggered steps carried the boy into the hallway, glancing at the adjacent door of his sister's room. The corridor tilted as he continued. Joey's view wobbled until he reached his destination, where the entrance to Phyllis' room opened. Joey rushed inside, stopping, and gasping at the figure before him.

A short and hunched individual rocked in a chair within the darkness of Phyllis' room. The monitor's glare shone over the person's rounded back to a bushel of disheveled graying curls. The glare shifted off the large glasses hugging the wrinkles scrunched together as the being turned to face him.

"Joe-Joe, oh I was going to visit you next, dear," the old woman said. "Just finishing up this lovely book about a happy magical unicorn I found for Phyllis. I saw it, browsing the... the online... store... Yes. I tell you... I don't know how these authors come up with such brilliant ideas. Look at these delightfully adorable pictures."

The book's glossy cover was presented to Joey who stepped forward, raising his bat. Brown liver spots came into view over familiar high cheekbones. A face of perfect symmetry

appeared, hinting at the beauty she exhibited during her youth, now wielded by her daughter.

“Nana...” Joey lowered his guard. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be at the hospital?”

“Don’t be silly, Joe-Joe. I always come here, reading my beautiful grandbabies to sleep. I think I have a book around here for you. It has sports in it... You like sports, right?”

“Yeah, Nana. I do.”

“Oh, look at that. She’s gone again. Something is always keeping her up. She doesn’t seem to listen to me when I urge her back to sleep. It’s that youthful energy. I was that way, you know. Up at all hours of the night.”

An encompassing gloom arrived, washing away the textures of light within the room’s aura. Chills ran through Joey, sending goosebumps pressing from his skin, as alarm rang in his senses. *Is someone watching me?*

He peered over to his sister’s empty bed.

“Nana, I don’t understand. Where is Phyllis?”

Joey gazed away into the hall, his attention tethered by a looming aura of doom, before he shook free of it, returning to his grandmother. The old woman had vanished. Soft footsteps with a slow pace circled him. His eyes followed the ground where gentle patters continued out into the hall. A figure cloaked in shadows loomed in the doorway.

Piercing eyes fixed upon Joey, with a solid white glow encompassed by a stern glare. Wide shoulders brushed the doorframe as it moved forward with a muted glide. Black feathers stood from its headdress, scuffing the passage before it stopped within feet of Joey. Wings of midnight hung along its wide portions, the plumes along the length of them the only feature emerging from the darkness of its vibrating presence.

“Come with me, child,” the voice demanded from a mouthless and unmoving countenance.

“No!”

With teeth gritting, Joey swung his bat for the being’s head, only to watch it pass through. Energetic residue sparked from the strike, dissipating into the surrounding world, leaving the entity’s form pulsating. White eyes continued staring at Joey, an incandescent hum tethering his attention.

Nana appeared in view behind the being. A wave of her hand saw the figure erupting into a geyser of blackness, the particles of its essence showering over the room.

Ripples flowed through reality, warping all that Joey witnessed. He shrank back, his legs colliding with the bed and toppling over. His grandmother walked to him, the glistening of her oversized dentures usurping his attention from the rest of her darkening presence.

“That mean ole bird trying to take my precious child away from me. Look at you, Joe-Joe. So yummy I could just eat you up.” Nana extended her delicate and smooth hand, the elongated fingers awaiting his grasp. “Your place is with me. I’ll protect you.”

Scuffing from plastic and wool slippers dragged through the hallway behind him. Joey turned around seeing another image of his grandmother. She continued past the doorway muttering to herself, a paperback novel hugged tight, pressing into her thick robes.

“He’s not in bed,” his grandmother murmured. “How odd... Must be out playing sports...Yes... He likes baseball...”

“Nana...”

Alarm raced through the boy with gripping apprehension slowing his limbs.

Joey’s vision bounced between the two images of his

grandmother, matching the pace of his thumping heart. The fingers before him extended and widened. The former visage of Nana stormed forward. Plodding steps pounded on the floor with a weight greater than her tiny frame. In a quick scoop, the large hand latched around the boy's head.

"Clueless and pathetic." A voice carried hoarse scratchiness with each straining syllable ending in sharp contempt. "You've no idea where you are, child. Such innocence to devour."

Tight darkness wrapped his vision. Surges of pain shut down attempts to resist. Deep and racing gasps grew thicker with each breath, weighed down by tension through his nose and chest. Heartbeats rose to his ears, drumming inside his skull. Efforts to resist melted away in the authority of his assailant. A hum resonated around his core, growing until reaching levels of body quaking convulsion.

*Paralyzed! Can't... do... anything!* A pop echoed in his mind. His presence drifted upon the currents flowing around him as the familiarity of grounding slipped away. Joey's limbs writhed and kicked in open space, until his weariness left him a flaccid husk. Only the dark remained, with his subjugator's heavy rasping breath brushing against his ear. The being drew closer with the masquerade of Nana melting away to a towering figure possessing a pale countenance and a crooked dead man's smile. The wide brim of a large black hat emerged from the darkness that surrounded the being.

*How? What's happening?*

"Mine!" a voice wheezed.

*I'm drowning!*

"To the Pale Furnace. Your nightmare is just beginning. Suffering beyond comprehension awaits, until there is nothing left but the ashes of your burning soul."

*No! Mom! Someone! Please! Nana... Please...*