

THE REALM

"Wood has superb pacing and a fantastical flair that has earned her a place among the most inventive horror writers of our time."

– Somniloquy

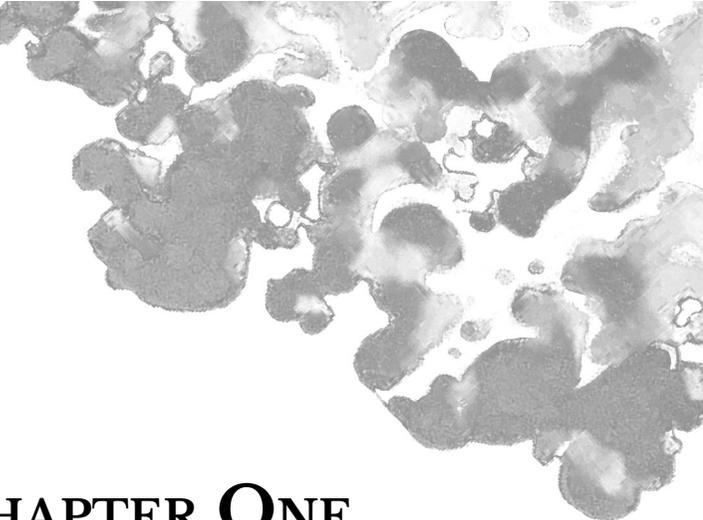
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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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CHAPTER ONE

It didn't happen the way they said it would.

No angels came to greet him; no bright light funneled a path through the darkness. No relatives called to him from the beyond.

He didn't feel warmth, acceptance, or love – he felt emptiness.

He saw nothing in the moments before death. Just an impenetrable darkness that crowded his vision like oil spreading in water, encroaching on the faces of his son and daughter-in-law, blackening them: obliterating them. He could hear them after his eyes dimmed, standing open and blind like black holes. His tear ducts dried up as his son cried over him.

The sound of Doug's grief, the guttural moans roiling and meshing with his pleas—his barter with God to save his father—was more than Patrick could take. Trying but failing to lift his hand from his side and stroke his son's head, Patrick silently prayed that his hearing would dissipate as quickly as his sight had.

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Patrick could only imagine what Doug and Chris were seeing as his body broke down in front of him. Images of eyes ruined by broken capillaries filled with blood, his slacked mouth allowing a discolored tongue to peek through tortured his mind. He struggled for every breath now, death's grip holding fast and firm. The thought of the kids seeing him fight for air, his face a twisted mass of pain and effort, upset him more than he thought it would. Death was not pretty.

Doug moaned and Chris cried while Patrick's eyes grew drier and his skin grew paler. He thought it would never end, the display, the sick, cruel game death was playing. That he should witness it, that he should have to hear the calmness his son usually displayed crumble and fall away, was torture if ever there was a definition of the word. The devil, then. It was his work after all, he supposed. He was on his way to Hell and this was but a taste of what was to come.

And then there was silence.

Utter silence.

The sound of his son's anguish was gone, mercifully. The hum of the respirator, the clicking of the rosary beads the man in the next bed held, the squeak of rubber soles on the sanitized tile floor as the nurses and doctors hurried to his side - all sound had disappeared. He wondered what would be next to go. His memory? He quizzed himself just to see if it was already gone. *What's my name? Patrick Richardson. How old am I? 59. Was is more like it*, he corrected himself. After all, he was dead. Dead. Gone. Finished.

Patrick stood in the pitch-black silence confused and unbelievably sad. He was dead. He would never see the baby that Chris was carrying, his first grandchild. He wouldn't ever watch another boxing match with his son and friends over beer and pizza. He wouldn't get the chance to watch the waves break on the shore from a beach chair in the Caribbean. He wouldn't do anything anymore—not eat, drink, or fuck—ever again. Because he was dead.

And death was dark. Impenetrably so.

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How did this happen? he asked aloud using a mouth he could no longer feel. He thought back to that morning, when he was taking out the garbage. He could remember walking to the back of his house and getting the garbage can. The damned cat had gotten into it again; the little stray he left food and water for had knocked the top of the can off, torn through the garbage bag, and gotten to the trash inside. The little monster made a hell of mess too, strewing soggy newspaper, chicken bones, and juice cartons all over the brick patio. Patrick remembered cursing out loud and casting his eyes around the backyard, looking for the cat. He remembered turning back to the bowl he'd left out the night before and finding it full of food. "That's what you were supposed to eat, damn it!" he'd said as he bent down to clean up the mess.

On his way back into the house to get another garbage bag, a piece of the dream he had the night before came back to him. It hung in front of his eyes like a transparency over real life, framing everything with the hazy film of familiarity, all soft edges and anticipation.

Déjà vu.

As usual after those dreams, the dark ones that made him wonder if he was there, really there, walking, talking, living within them, he wondered if he was the character whose face the audience never sees.

The memory was faint, as it always was the morning after, but he knew what happened next. This time the scene was identical to his dream. There was usually something askew, some crucial piece off center, but this time nothing was out of place. He knew he would turn away from the door instead of going inside to get the garbage bag. He knew he would squint from the sun when he did, and that he would place his hands above his eyes, shading them like a visor. He knew it just as well as he knew his name, for as easily as that knowledge came, it dragged heavy fear and worry in its wake.

He obliged. It wasn't like he had a choice.

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Patrick heard a shriek coming from the next door pulling him away from the dream world and into the land of the living with a jolt. It came from Mary Williams' house, an old lady who lived alone despite her diminished vision and limited use of her legs. She got along fine, though. She cooked her own meals and cleaned her own house. She hardly left anything for the day nurse to do. *Spunky old girl*, Patrick remembered thinking. *I hope I'm as "with it" as she is when I get to be that old.* Something cold took up residence in his stomach, grafting itself to his insides and pulsating there.

The shrieking voice didn't sound like Mary's, though. It sounded younger, more vibrant, less gravelly and weathered with age. It was probably the day nurse, Jennifer. With a sigh, Patrick detoured from his front door, crossing his lawn to mount Mary's front steps. *The ole girl might have kicked the bucket*, he thought as he approached the door. He felt genuinely saddened by the idea.

The dream was dissipating, and Patrick was happy about that. Sure, he could still feel it playing along the edges of his consciousness, enticing him to come back to play. But it would lose this time and evermore.

Patrick knocked on the door and called out to Jennifer, Mary's nurse, announcing himself. The door was ajar, and the force of his knuckles pushed it open. Patrick walked inside hesitantly, calling for Jennifer all the while, but there was no response. He called for Mary then, wondering if something had happened to the girl instead. Nothing. Two steps into the foyer and Patrick could see into the living room and dining room on the opposite side of the hallway. There was no one in sight. Patrick remembered thinking he should leave, thinking that he had been hearing things. *But why didn't they answer? And why was the front door open?* That Jennifer's car was in the driveway didn't register in his mind when it happened, but Patrick could remember it as clear as day as he recounted it. If he could do it all over again, he would do the same thing, he was sure of it. What happened was just meant to be.

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He went into the living room, intending to walk through to the kitchen and into the family room. If they weren't in there, he would go upstairs and check the bedrooms, then in the backyard. If he still couldn't find them, he would call the police. Mary rarely went out of the house, even with Jennifer's help. She enjoyed sitting in her backyard or in the window facing the road. "Parks can't give me any more scenery than my backyard can," she always said. "And I even get a glimpse of a handsome young man with his shirt off from time to time." Patrick snickered at the thought (at least he thought he did). Him, a handsome young man? Right. Young wasn't a word that was being used to describe him anymore, at least not by the women he dated. Distinguished? Maybe. Vibrant? Sure. Young? No. But he kept himself in shape, enough that he wasn't ashamed to walk around with his shirt off. The sun on his back always felt good to him, ever since he was a kid working in the yard with his dad. And hell, if you looked hard enough, you could almost see his six-pack hiding beneath the layer of skin that stubbornly refused to flatten out. So, if Mary liked to sneak a peek at him, she could go right ahead.

Patrick almost made it through the living room when the shot rang out. The bullet punctured his chest, immobilizing his left arm and driving him to the floor before he could take his next step. He never saw the man who shot him, never saw what he had done to Mary and Jennifer, their bodies tied to dining room chairs that lined the wall of the kitchen, out of view from the picture window in the family room. All he knew was the hot, searing pain in his chest that seemed to burn his insides and the blood that poured from the entry wound to wet his skin with its warmth.

Patrick remembered the feeling of the bullet tearing through his body, seeming to seek out a place to rest, to destroy.

He woke up in the hospital to Doug and Chris's faces, tear-streaked and raw. There was more wrong with him than he thought, he could see it in Doug's eyes. His son, always the cool and collected one,

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always the optimist. He could find a silver lining in every cloud. But not in this one. This time he saw a rain cloud for what it was, knew the storm was coming and when it was over, nothing would be the better for it.

And then...

Where the hell was Joanne, anyway? Wasn't she supposed to have met him at the pearly gates when he died? Patrick thought bitterly. Doug and Patrick had lost Joanne ten years before to breast cancer. Patrick liked to imagine that she would be there waiting for him when it was his turn. He thought she would come for him, would ease him away from life, his pain dissipating as he looked into her beautiful eyes. That's what they said would happen, those preachers he had listened to and believed over the years since Joanne died – the ones he clung to desperately, needing to believe they knew what they were talking about. So, where was she?

Where was his mother? His father? What about Jennifer and Mary? They were dead too, weren't they? That's what Doug and Chris were talking about when he came to. He remembered hearing his son, his level-headed boy, cursing God for letting his father walk into that house. What about them? Surely, they would come to greet the man who tried to help them, who died because he cared?

But he was alone. In darkness.

Anger coursed through him as he searched the pitch for something, someone. And then, profound sadness overtook him as rapidly and completely as his anger had. His son would raise his child to remember his grandpa instead of actually knowing him. A prayer would be sent up for him on holidays and his birthday for as long as Doug was alive. But after that there wouldn't be anyone left to remember. His would be just another headstone at a cemetery overgrown with weeds; just an old picture in a dusty frame of a man his granddaughter and great-grandchildren would never know. Patrick had ceased to be.

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He felt lightheaded.

No, he corrected himself. Lightheaded might be what he would have felt if he were still alive, still in the body that had walked the earth for 59 years. He longed to feel lightheaded - he wanted it so badly that he allowed himself to think it was what he really felt. But, he realized with more poignancy than he would have liked, he didn't feel anything. Nothing at all.

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