

# **Heroes in the Dark**

A Novel

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**Fish Press**

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First edition

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Flish Press

This book is dedicated to my parents and to my wife.

Dad, thanks for making me play outside.

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## PRELUDE

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A thousand drops of rain pelted the car. They coalesced into continuous streams of water that snaked down the windshield. Outside, the glazed surfaces shimmered, reflecting the colors from the nearby coffee shops and streetlamps. The stoplight turned from amber to red, casting a ruby streak across the foggy glass. It rained harder. The deafening sound drowned out the radio noise. He parked in the lot away from the other cars and turned off the engine. He was one man, alone and afraid. As the water flowed down the windshield, so did the tears stream down his cheeks. He drove his fingernails deep into the skin of his scalp, scratching, digging. His entire body convulsed, and his head throbbed from the pain of sleepless nights. He felt weak, as if he could barely lift his head.

“I’m out of tune.” He repeated the phrase again, slower. He marveled at the unfamiliar sound of his own voice while remembering the first time he had recorded himself as a child.

*I've never liked the way my voice sounded*, he thought. I hate hearing myself. I sound so nerdy. But what does it matter now? It'll all be over soon. His tears subsided. His agony was replaced by an emotionless drive to complete the task. *It needs to happen tonight*. Until now I've only had vague thoughts. I can't take any more. The pain is too much. I won't do another night. It's time to face the music.

His mind contemplated methods and tools. *I wonder if I already have what I need*. The glove compartment swung downward and slammed against its stops. He shuffled through the papers, dollars bills, and booklets until he found the items he sought. The three bottles reminded him of a baby's rattle, such was the chatter of the many pills within. Outside, a distant twenty-year-old screeched in mock indignation, having been pushed into the heavy rain by a male in her party. *Those moments used to drive me*, he thought. Flirting with a hot girl like that. Look at her. What I wouldn't give. Briefly his mind returned to its ruts, but he nipped the machinations. *How many times have I been down that path?* I've seen her in bed. I've seen her a thousand times. It's pointless—real life, videos—it's pointless either way. It's all meaningless, this whole life. We're dead. It's that simple. We distract ourselves with work and pleasure, but we're all dead men. If my life will end in fifty years and I'll decay to nothing, then why not end it now? It's better to invite the inevitable early than to prolong the torture I suffer when the sun goes down.

He whistled his favorite melody from childhood, *The Minstrel Boy*. The song always reminded him of the movies *Black Hawk Down* and *The Man Who Would Be King*, the latter a top-ten of his father's. He thought of Sean Connery and Michael Caine hiking through the mountains toward limitless adventure. He tried to whistle the notes again, but his quivering lips couldn't

create the resonances. *Going to war, exploring new places, I'll never have any of that*, he thought. I'm out of tune, and I'm out of tries.

The lone man poured out the contents from each of the bottles. A few of the drugs spilled out from his overflowing hand. He retrieved each of them and gingerly placed them on top of the mound of capsules in his right palm. The colors of the three pill types mixed pleasantly. Their tactile feel was novel. They felt like something between a handful of sand and the links of schoolyard jump rope. His thoughts drifted to his mother. *She won't understand*, he thought. His sadness returned, and the tears rolled down the moist paths of his face. *But she's dead, too*. These feelings that she'll feel, these emotions that I'm feeling, they're biological, they're physical, they're all neuron paths and electrical currents in the brain. So who cares? This collection of atoms, me, I'm dirt and water.

He raised his hand to his face.

"I'm done with this farce."

He stuffed the pills into his mouth.

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## LIKE ANY OTHER

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**S**teven wandered down the sidewalk with his head hanging downward. He read comics on his phone. His strides, although mechanical, did not impel efficient forward motion. He spent vast energies withdrawing from the world around him. His body displaced the least air possible, and each step of his feet made barely a sound. He melded with the crowd. Washington, DC surrounded him. The trees, the grass, and the bushes filled the scene with a million shades of green. Massive cumulus clouds trudged overhead and contrasted sharply with the deep blue of the late April sky. Though hot, a slight breeze leisurely surged and faded, and the temperature was pleasant. Steven had traveled this commute a thousand times. He thought nothing of it. Most days he cursed the blinding sunshine or the slushy snow, depending on the season.

A gaggle had already formed near the bus stop. Each human ignored the others. Steven rapidly punched the letters on the screen of his phone, and he tweeted,

9 days off from work!

He had accrued over two weeks of vacation and had decided to use four days in conjunction with the Memorial Day holiday. He had expected himself to feel excited, but inside he felt nothing. Leaning against a streetlight, he outwardly examined his shoes while his mind entertained trivialities. He wondered what he would eat for dinner. He wondered if his augmented reality glasses had arrived in the mail yet. He calculated the XP needed for his RuneCraft character to reach Level 63. Meanwhile, a topless woman danced for him on his smartphone. He quickly pocketed the device as a pale blonde in a pink dress passed.

The bus meandered into its port a minute early. The pneumatic system released a bit of air as the dirty behemoth slowed to a halt. Steven embarked and sat in the middle. The seats faced inward. He plopped down between an old man with wild, silver hair and an exhausted, professional woman of roughly thirty years. *I wish I was home already*, he thought. The small cloud of body odor wafting into his nostrils augmented this desire.

Seven people wore headphones, replacing the rhythms of the city with formulaic ditties. Twelve wielded their phones, tablets, phablets, or readers. Some listened, some messaged, and some read. None spoke. Steven streamed music from his Cirrus account to his earbuds. His eyes wandered lazily. To his right, across the aisle, sat a young woman who was about his age. A pretty face outshone her well-proportioned figure. An aura of softness surrounded her. He knew her face. *She was in my class*,

he thought. Yeah, with Mr. Akin, sophomore year. What was her name? Anne? Yeah, I think it was Anne.

Like Steven she, too, watched the people around her. Unlike Steven, she sat up as straight as a board. A large, festive bag covered her lap. Perhaps she wanted to talk with someone, with anyone. The expression on her face suggested it. Steven rated her in his mind. She lacked glamour, but Steven found her incredibly attractive in that moment. Their eyes met. Some force prevented him from turning away. She smiled. Steven's heart skipped a beat, and he quickly dropped his gaze. He reproached himself for staring.

Steven Frederickson was handsome. He rarely, if ever, used his looks to his advantage. Yes, he stood slightly below average in height, and he was a bit overweight, but his extra pounds were distributed well. He looked strong even if he wasn't, supported by the powerful features on his face. Steven daily wore t-shirts or untucked polo shirts on top and jeans or shorts on bottom. Perpetually uncombed, brown hair encircled his head, curling about to consistent shagginess. He shaved about every four days. The stubble created an older appearance rather than a disheveled one.

He could not help but think of the girl across the aisle. Instead of applying his mind to charm the young lady, he curled inward, and he unchained that wild beast called Imagination. A series of events ebbed and churned until a semi-logical story formed in his brain.

This Venus exits the bus at Steven's stop, preceding him. She walks ahead of him, hips swinging side to side. Flash! Suddenly, a darkly dressed man backflips into the scene from a nearby alleyway. Two other men materialize, one with a bat and another with a knife, each ready to harm the innocent maiden. The first

grabs her purse. She tries to resist and, losing her grip on the bag, stumbles backward onto the ground. Steven's voice booms down the street and everyone freezes.

“Reach for the sky,” he says.

Steven exited the daydream. “No, that’s stupid. Who am I, Woody?” After a moment of deliberation, he reformulated and resumed.

“Hey you! Leave that girl alone.”

“And who’s gonna stop us? You?”

“Yeah, me,” Steven replies. “Now get out of here.”

“For you, punk, we don’t even need these,” says the largest badman, holding his Ka-Bar out from his body. The knife bounces once, twice, and three times on the pavement before settling. It rings like a bell. He approaches Steven and throws a quick right punch. The square impact produces a small drop of blood that dribbles down Steven's chin. The evil man laughs defiantly and stands back while his comrades yell profane taunts. Steven wipes the blood from his face with his left thumb. His eyebrows crinkle in annoyance.

“Alright, now I’m mad,” he whispers. Plastic bags and assorted trash blow across the emptied street like spaghetti-western tumbleweeds. Steven raises his fists, steps forward, and delivers a powerful blow with his famous left jab. He follows with a right hook, sending the criminal backward. Cool and collected, he knocks the deviant out cold with a devastating uppercut. One, two, three, and it's over. The damsel cries out, warning him of the other two men approaching from the periphery.

“Everything will be fine,” Steven boldly proclaims. “They’ll be tasting concrete like their buddy here.” The men draw near, ready to avenge their fallen comrade. They continue their taunts,

but the smiles have left their faces. The skinnier of them spits on Steven's shoe and steps forward. He throws—

The bus lurched to a stop, jolting Steven back into reality. The young beauty stood, and her keys fell onto the ground in front of him. As he picked them up, the chains and the charms jangled in his hand. He held them out to the girl. The tips of their fingers touched during the exchange, hers softer than velvet. Something like an electric shock pulsed throughout Steven's body. Her eyes pierced deep into his. Her beauty stole his breath.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah um ... no problem,” he said. “It's good to see you again.” He could see the gears turning in her mind until something clicked.

“Oh, yeah, from class,” she replied. “It's nice to see you, too.” Her eyes darted to the ground and back to his. “Well, I'll see you later,” she whispered. And with a flick of her hair, she was gone.

He savored the ecstasy of her presence until his pattering heart returned to a resting cadence. When it did, he felt forced to confront the memories of the day's events. Steven had taken the afternoon off for a job interview, unbeknownst to his current employer. He felt anxious about the interview. Their prodding questions filled his mind, jabbing him, and his confidence was sucked away.

“Why are you leaving your current job?”

“Do you have any other skills?”

“We'd really like a candidate with some leadership experience. Do you have *anything*?”

“We noticed that your GPA isn't listed. As this is a technical position, we do require all of our applicants to submit their transcript and major's GPA.”

“Have you attended any professional training or seminars?”

“Do you have any work experience not listed here?”

He didn't analyze his own responses, already knowing that they had fallen short. Instead, he repeated their questions in his mind while his bus passed by buildings and people. The remainder of the ride proved uneventful. Steven donned his backpack and embarked on the final leg of his commute, walking a few blocks to his home. A young citizen of a powerful nation, this modern American male wandered apathetically, rarely removing his eyes from the screen of his phone. In league with his heart, his mind ran at idle. He rarely found any need to open the throttle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steven scaled the five-foot stoop and arrived at his front door. He lived in a row house east of Capitol Hill, the same one in which he had grown up. His parents had chosen a quiet home in which to raise their child. The cars drove slowly and the crime rate was low. Their unit was but one amongst a long brick line of abodes, so his family had no front yard worthy of mention. A few anemic trees and patches of brown-green grass dotted the tiny backyard.

Shuffling through nearly every pocket, he eventually produced his keys. With a twist he gained access to his place of familiarity and comfort. Releasing a sigh, he dropped his backpack on a rickety chair in the entryway. His mother watched TV in the kitchen and dining area. He could hear the chatter of a fast-talking real estate agent roping a young couple into a first home much beyond their means—a familiar situation on this oft-watched network. A genuine smile spread across his mother's face at the sight of Steven. She loved her son.

“Hey, Steven! How was the big interview?”

“Uh ... good. I think it went okay. We’ll see what happens.”

“I’m sure you did great, sweetie!”

Steven smiled.

“Well thanks, Mom. Anyways, I’m looking forward to some time off.”

“Yeah, that’s going to be great, honey. You can kick back and relax! Would you like something to drink, dear?”

“Um ... yes, please. A soda, if you don’t mind.” Steven sat on a stool, hunched over, with his elbows on the kitchen counter. He comfortably slid into the daily ritual. Every afternoon, at least on weekdays, they would talk for a time in this particular configuration. Though perhaps not the best place for a conversation, the kitchen was their spot for a few moments out of the day.

“So what’re you doing this weekend, Stevie?”

“Um ... I don’t really have any plans. I’m gonna hang around here, I guess.”

“That’s plenty fine with me, honey. We always like having you here. It’s not safe out there, you know? It seems like I hear about murders and robberies every day on the news. I know I shouldn’t, but I always get worried about you when I hear those horrible things. I’m so happy that you’re back home for a little while. We get to see you all the time and, well, I don’t have to worry about you when you’re right in front of me!”

Steven sipped his soda out of a straw and smiled at his sweet mother. The closed shades blocked the sun. Perfectly conditioned air caressed their skin. Their eyes meandered over to the television. An unimpressive house appeared upon the screen, and Steven read the caption.

“1.8 million dollars? Wow ... ”

His Mom noticed his disbelief.

“Ha-ha. That’s actually pretty cheap for that area. They have much more expensive houses on this show. I guess there are some pretty rich folks out there.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I think I’m going to order pizza for dinner. How’s that sound to you?”

“Good,” Steven replied.

“I thought so, too. Everyone likes pizza, and we don’t even have to leave the house! Plus,” her voice dropped to a whisper, “then I don’t have to cook. After a day’s work, that’s about the last thing I ever want to do.” They both chuckled halfheartedly. His mother was a pharmacist at a small grocery store nearby. She sat on top of another stool at the counter and drank a diet concoction. Steven continued to sip his carbonated sugar liquid, looking at the TV but not really watching it.

Steven’s mother always began her stories with a freestanding, staccato “so.” When Steven heard the distinctive sound, he instantly knew that a narrative would soon follow.

“So, I was leaving work today, and you won’t believe who I saw. Mrs. Pam Shelly! Remember, your old teacher from sixth grade? Or was it seventh grade?”

“Um ... that was seventh grade.”

Steven’s mother droned on, oblivious to his disinterest in the subject. She talked about this woman’s family and about her becoming assistant principal, all while continually reminding him how nice she was. Steven occasionally interjected a “yeah,” “uh-huh,” or “sure” to prove his attentiveness. As it often did during his mother’s rhapsodies, his mind wandered. Vague images of the seventh grade passed his inner eye. He had perceived the world much differently then. He recalled a speech that Mrs. Shelly had delivered to the class one day. She had drawn a crude funnel on the chalkboard with the wide end at the left. The vertical axis

represented choices and potential in life. The horizontal axis corresponded to age. Pointing to the left side, Mrs. Shelly explained that, as children, Steven and his classmates enjoyed many options. He could be many different things and many different people, depending on the choices he would make. She, being older, was positioned much further over in the funnel with far fewer choices left to make. She was living out the choices of her youth. The boy Steven took great pride in his position on the chart for the remainder of his childhood. The power of his youth was invigorating, and he participated in a wide array of activities in junior high and through high school. Though he lacked experience and wisdom, he always maintained the ability to become anyone or do anything, no matter what.

After a faint clicking, the noise of the front door opening and then closing reverberated through the house. A decibel more and the closing action might have been a slam. This thunderous racket, like the trumpets of antiquity, daily heralded the arrival of Steven's father.

Steven heard Mr. Frederickson climb directly up the stairs to his room. He evidently removed his work clothes and changed into an old pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt. After completing this necessary task, he entered the kitchen area.

"How was work today, honey?" Mrs. Frederickson asked.

"Well, I left a half hour early, but, of course, the traffic was worse than usual so it all evened out. Go figure. What're our big plans for the night?"

"I'm going to order some pizza. Maybe we can watch a movie. Do you have any pizza requests, honey?"

"Great. The usual for me, dear." Mr. Frederickson smiled and playfully slapped his son on the back. The son returned the greeting with a nod. The father then opened the fridge and seized a treasured bottle of Heineken. The sound of escaping

carbonation hissed from the bottle as he pried off the cap. A third of the beer traveled from the bottle to the man's stomach forthwith.

"Ahhhhh." Mr. Frederickson walked to the living room and sat in his usual spot on the couch. Steven followed him in and sat at the other end. Mrs. Frederickson joined them intermittently.

An hour of their lives burned away imperceptibly like the wax of a candle, never to be regained. The pizza arrived, sparking a brief hiatus, until they again burrowed their rears back into the cushy couches, securely bedding down at their usual positions with paper plates full of pizza in hand.

"I tell ya," said Mr. Frederickson, "the weekend gets better every time. Sometimes you can't take another hour in the office. I'm glad you're back here with us for a little while. I hope you're enjoyin' it. Sometimes I envy you," he said with wry grin and sidelong glance.

"Yeah, thank you for letting me uh ... letting me stay here."

"Oh you're more than welcome, Steven," said Mr. Frederickson. "We love havin' you here. How'd the interview go?"

"Uh ... it was okay. We'll see."

"I'm sure you did great, Steven. And if not, there's no rush. You've got a good job now. So how 'bout them Dragons?"

"They seem alright this year. Sukut's what, batting .640?"

"Yeah, ain't that somethin'? I remember when he was still in college. Nobody thought much of him then." For a few minutes they commented on a man whom neither had met nor would ever meet.

"Yeah, well, what really matters is that we'll beat the Cougars this year."

"Yeah, I think we will. We snagged way more yards than them in the preseason."

“Oh yeah. And uh ... and did you see that three pointer competition with Carey and Montes? Each of them were swishing like ninety percent, easy. It was ridiculous.”

“I saw something about that on the news. Pretty impressive. Let’s hope they can hold out in the end game scenarios. Not like last season. Hah, you remember. Let’s *hope* it’s not like last season. I think twelve of our fifteen losses were lost in the second half. I’ll tell you what I did see though: Wells and Prileszky playin’ D like mad men. Combined with Robertson and Hope: Those boys are really something on the ice.”

“Hmm, yeah. I don’t know. A lot of people seemed mad when we when we got Davies in the draft. But he and Knutson get birdies all the time. And sometimes eagles. I saw the stats. I uh ... think it was a great decision on Coach Ludwig’s part.”

“Yeah, definitely. I was actually wondering about Ludwig when he first came on. I mean, I really liked Evans’ style, but he’s working out alright. He doesn’t have quite the same chemistry with the guys, it seems like. I suppose he can build that over time. I like him now.”

“Yeah, I like him. Wagner’s good too, though. For um ... for the Cougars.”

“He sure is. Lots of experience. But we’ve got ‘em this year.”

His father emitted a long sigh. He reclined to the greatest angle that would still allow a comfortable view of the television. In his right hand he raised the remote, clicker, changer. He wielded his mace, scepter, sword. The old man, the master of his domain, the one ultimately responsible for what his family would absorb that evening, fiddled with the deceptively small device in his hand. The remote, which doubled as a small tablet, contained power much beyond its size. It was action at a distance. From the thrown rock to the firearm, from the shouting voice to the remote control—through it, without a word, Mr. Frederickson

commanded the bright, centerpiece screen that so entranced his household.

The varied but remarkably similar sounds of channel surfing filled the room—teleprompted pontification, explosions, stadium crowds, and laughs. The humans in the room spoke no words and willingly supplanted their right to expression with this noise. After a time the channel surfing slowed. Even when confronted with 170 channel choices and an exhaustive list of streaming movies, entertainment can elude a man. More out of the desire to end the search than any real interest, the remote commander ceased his surfing on a crime investigation program.

“We found the body like this.”

“My God, what do you think happened?”

“After our tests, it appears that the killer raped her first. He then took a knife and cut off her ears, her nose, her fingers, and her toes.”

“Ears, nose, fingers, and toes. The Nursery Killer is at it again.”

“That’s not all. After he cut off the charms for his necklace, he doused her in gasoline and lit her on fire. And I think she was still alive.”

Steven and his father marveled at the fantastic reproduction of a raped, mutilated, burned corpse. The camera dwelt on the young, dead woman for several moments so that the viewer could soak up the image. The detectives encountered similarly mangled corpses over the next fifteen minutes. The television program guided Steven and his father through a whirlwind of crime and human corruption, transforming them into voyeurs of barbarism. In the last two minutes of the show, the detectives found and shot the killer.

“Wow, that was intense,” said Mr. Frederickson. “This guy might even be worse than the one we saw last week,” he said,

referring to a previous episode of the same program. “Remember that? The guy who chopped 'em up and ran 'em through the meat grinder?”

“Yeah,” replied Steven, semi-attentively. “Pretty crazy.”

Presently, Mrs. Frederickson entered the room. She had been Skype-ing in the kitchen. One of the family tablets was wirelessly charging on the side table. Steven lifted it up and logged in to Facebook. A virtual friend had posted a link to a snowboarding video. Steven watched. In the video a young man dropped from a helicopter and flew down the face of a mountain. A wake of snow followed him. *This is awesome*, Steven thought. I'd better repost. He pinned the video on his own Facebook page. Steven had never snowboarded.

Mr. Frederickson switched the channel to a news station. An attractive blonde read to them.

“Three Peace Corps volunteers were killed in Tajikistan today.”

Steven's mother handed new plates of pizza and bubbly soda drinks to him and to his father. They ate.

“The names will be released and the families notified as soon as the bodies can be confirmed.”

“Isn't that um ... isn't that what Scott did?” asked Steven.

“What's that, honey?”

“Wasn't cousin Scott in the Peace Corps?” Steven had remembered incorrectly. His cousin Scott served four years in the Marines. After his final deployment, he had returned to the United States for only three months. He couldn't stay. The itch pulled him abroad again. He had committed to a long-term mission trip in Africa where he now worked at an AIDS hospital.

“I thought he was in the Marine Corps,” Steven's mother replied.

“No, he wasn't in the Marines,” Mr. Frederickson interjected. “I know he went to Europe for a while with some nonprofit.” None of this was true. “Maybe that's what you're thinking of, Steven.”

“Um ... maybe. I thought he was in some kind of corps. But maybe not.”

“We can ask Bonnie the next time we see her,” his mother concluded.

Steven had last seen his aunt three years before. He predicted another three years might pass until he would see her again.

Outside, the sun arced downward and passed under the horizon. Darkness fell. Almost nothing changed in the living room. The temperature and the humidity never fluctuated for a moment. Their positions remained constant. The glow from the flat screen on the wall seemed to increase in luminance, and the light danced on their faces. Cushioned seats formed a semicircle around the family altar. Their god seemed to require so little from them: Only time. In return it helped them to forget their failures, to laugh, and to let go. Every day, they piled their minutes on the altar and burned them in obedient worship—hundreds of minutes each day. The smell of the incense pleased their god.