Nihil

By: Charle M. Brown

Book Teaser

Dedication:

The longest love letter a man can write to the most amazing woman in his life.  None of this would ever be possible without her.

Trigger Warning:

This book includes graphic scenes that may be disturbing to anyone who has worked Law Enforcement, EMS, or Fire.  We’ve all worked bad scenes.

Any relation or representation to anyone living or dead, or to any entity or business are entirely fictional. Some geographic areas are mentioned, but the situations and story surrounding these events are fictional as well.

**Prologue**

 Blue lights strobed into the cloud filled night. The wind was like icy fingers clawing at his spine seeking to rob him of every bit of warmth he had ever felt.  A Deputy Sheriff rolls up on a vehicle overturned on the recently paved black top of Highway 421.  A crumpled and mangled red minivan is upside down and had slid a good ways along the asphalt; leaving gouges in the black roadway for twenty feet. The van is still rocking slightly from its recent feat of automotive gymnastics.   As the deputy approaches, some part of his mind notices the rear half of the vehicle looks almost brand new. The red paint, still crisp in the bright lights from the cruiser.  The front half, however, is just gone.  There is no front end left, like an angry giant had ripped off the front axle and engine compartment and tossed it into the night.  As the Deputy exits his patrol car he can hear a man and woman screaming.  Though screaming was not a strong enough word for the gut-wrenching, soul tearing, sound being uttered by the occupants of the vehicle.  Howling like the lost souls of the damned forever banished from the light.  It caused the deputy to feel more than the icy cold running up his spine.  The cold of fear, of apprehension, at what he had stumbled upon filled his soul.  The deputy runs to the van to find a man and woman in the front seats and a teenage boy in the middle rear of the van.  All three are still held in place, upside down, by seat belts.  It’s a surreal site with their hair hanging straight down towards the roof of the cab. The complete perspective change from the deputies' own is disorienting.

The adults were screaming so much the deputy couldn’t actually hear what they were trying to say.  The teenager in the back was silent.  Unconscious or dead from the crash.  The deputy couldn’t tell.  The wails were unintelligible and somehow seemed both loud and just a little bit far away. Small and tiny like the telephone game children play with cans and a string.  The deputy yanks on the driver side door, fighting the warped and asphalt scraped metal to try to get to the family.  As the Deputy strains against the door, he sees a white shape flop to the ground.  Suddenly everything is red.  Everything is turning red and the deputy feels warm wetness strike his face.  He tastes a coppery liquid coat on his tongue.  The deputy somehow realizes that the driver’s arm has been severed in the accident.  It had fallen to the ground, limp dead meat, as the deputy tried to free the driver. The deputy scrambles as the taste of copper fills his mouth.  He was trained for this he keeps screaming inwardly.  The tourniquet goes around the stump and is then pulled tight.  As the deputy tightens the little stick on top of the tourniquet the driver blacks out from blood loss and pain. That was a blessing for both the driver and the deputy.  It tore the deputies soul to hurt someone who he was trying to save but tourniquets are not comfortable devices to have applied.  They cause a great deal of pain to the patient while trying to save the patient’s life.  The deputy knew that, but it was still a bad moment in a string of horrific ones.

The deputy looks around trying to understand where his help is.  Where was EMS and Fire?  He knew they were coming, they always came.  Where was his zone partner?  It was at that moment that the deputy saw her, or what was left of her.  Reality snaps into focus all at once.  The woman is screaming, “my daughter, my daughter”.  And he sees it, sees her.  Approximately 20 feet in front of the van is a small, huddled form all bundled in white.  A child’s form lay lax and lifeless, but not whole.  A few feet further along the icy black top rests a small head facing the deputy.  Just sitting there, not a scratch on the translucent skin, but appearing as though it was just waiting patiently for the deputy to notice.  Beautiful blond hair and clear striking blue eyes staring at the deputy.  Like the head was still alive and the girl was trying to tell him something.  It felt as though that gaze would convey the sadness of the entire world if he continued to look into her eyes.  The deputy felt a sudden sense of vertigo. His head swam and confusion raced through his mind.   He felt as though he were both in his body looking at the child’s severed head, and seeing himself from the ground from far away, as if he were looking at himself through the clear blue eyes of the baby girl who would never grow up.  Never grow older, never know sadness or joy.  Never see her prom or have her heart broke or watch her own children be born and grow up.  The deputy vomited profusely like a great angry volcano spewing in every direction.  It was with this intense vertigo and feeling his body void its entire contents at once that he watched the pavement rise to meet him as he passed out.  Blessed blackness claimed his mind and soul, hopefully to protect his psyche from any further mind destroying trauma.

**Chapter One**

 I woke up drenched in sweat and gasping. A scream clawing at the back of my throat. My heart felt like it was about to break my sternum trying to escape my chest.  The dream of that night is always the same.  Reliving the tragedy that drove me out of law enforcement.  Reliving the moment that cost me my home and marriage.  In the dreams it’s worse.  Sometimes the little girl is screaming or begging for her mommy or demanding to know why I didn’t save her.  The guilt and grief of that night haunts my dreams.  Who am I kidding?  It haunts my dreams every night.  Sometimes I think her ghost haunts me because she blames me for not getting there in time.  Or maybe I just blame myself. I mean, there’s no such thing as ghosts, right?

Slowly, I started coming out of the dream and back to reality.  My parents named me Cygnus Magnus but I go by Cy.  My folks claimed it was a long held family tradition given only to children born every few generations.  They said it meant I was destined for greatness.  I thought it sounded like a Monty Python skit but I would have never told them that.  I mean I’m sure my parents felt very strongly about the name but I had to learn to fight way before I should have just to defend my school yard honor.  My folks were amazing parents who did the best they could; so it could have been worse.  My grandfather's name was Evelyn Cyril, so yeah, it could have been much worse.

I stared up at the yellowed ceiling trying to calm my breathing, my legs tangled in the plaid dime store sheets.  I’d lived alone since the divorce.  I missed my ex-wife but I understood why she had to leave.  She had to go on with her life.  We had fallen out of love a long time ago.  After leaving law enforcement I didn’t know which way was up.  I was lost in a world I didn’t understand.   That was just too much strain on a marriage already on the rocks.  Like so many, we had just become different people and were heading in different directions.  Not her fault at all, I truly wanted her to succeed and be happy and she couldn’t do that with me.

 I stumbled groggily to the bedroom, almost falling on my face.  It was a horrible little apartment.  The walls and ceiling were stained with old water damage and who knew what else.  Every wall was yellowed and dingy from years of hate and nicotine.  A black light and some luminol would probably give a forensic team a heart attack.  Better not to know.  The sink was chipped and stained, and the toilet probably had its own sentient colony of bacteria.  Looking into the cracked mirror was always a bit startling now.  Red hair, red beard and green eyes staring back at me.  Gold hoops in my left ear and full sleeves tattooed along my arms added to the sight of just how much I’d changed.  Standing six foot two and with the rib cage, shoulders and arms of someone six foot five, finding a dress shirt was challenging, but I was hell on the weight pile or in a street fight.  What no one noticed was that I could also read and even conjugate.

The sickly yellow light of the overhead glared angrily around the room which just added to the feeling that the entire apartment couldn’t be made clean with a flame thrower and holy water.  Maybe thermite or a small yield nuke?  I wasn’t even sure that would work honestly.  It was the kind of place where the cockroaches had street names and threw gang signs when you tried to kill them.

 After freshening up in the bathroom and hoping that I didn’t need a tetanus booster I made my way into the little kitchenette.  A dented stove and an even more worn dinette table filled most of the tiny area.  Blearily I worked my way to my beloved coffee pot.  If a dog is man’s best friend, coffee is proof that somewhere there is a divine intelligence that loves us.

With the first warm bitterness renewing my flagging will to live I got dressed for the day.  Going from being a well-paid Sergeant in the local Sheriff’s Office to being an underpaid pizza boy was a rough transition.  Not mentally, though I missed my team and my friends, but more financially.  There were a lot of nights where my only sustenance was left over pizza the store was going to throw out.  There were lots of other jobs I could have had immediately.  Good money, benefits, travel.  But I’d have to put on the badge again.  Or at least some form of it.  I just wasn’t ready yet.  Since no one was hiring ex-cops and combat medics for jobs in the civilian world, I took a job delivering pizzas.  It’s not good work, but it’s an honest job and I’m not taking money from the government to survive.  My grandfather, the aforementioned Evylyn Cyril, had survived the Great Depression and I always remembered what he said, “pride don’t fill bellies, boy”.  He was exactly right.

 Jeans, tactical boots size fourteen extra wide thank you, and a hoodie were uniform of the day.  I always kept a Glock 43 I’d custom built in an inner pants holster; as well as my folding knife, flashlight and the gris gris my grandma had given me before she died.  A gris gris is a bag, usually red velvet, containing different herbs and charms.  They can be custom made for luck, money, love, protection, or other uses.  I’m not sure if it helps or not but it’s just something I’ve carried since I first started having fuzz on my chin, or other places.  Old habits are hard to break.  Besides, I could use good luck.  I’d been on a bad run for a long time. A really long time.

 The night seemed like any other.  Some good tips, some folks who should have gone and got their own food.  Always tip your delivery driver, folks, because they are completely alone with your food for long periods of time. And they have a knack for remembering who doesn’t tip.   Just saying.

At around one in the morning a delivery came through for a newer neighborhood in the suburbs of Winston.  Nothing new there, people were always ordering in the middle of the night.  I just had to watch out for robbers or punk kids wanting to play bash the pizza boy.  It’s funny how my new job paid a lot less than my old one and yet the risks of getting shot were pretty much the same.  I grabbed my pizza bag and headed out.  The entire drive didn’t take more than eight minutes, but I just couldn’t shake this nebulous feeling of doom.  Like I used to feel knowing I was walking into an ambush.  But it was a pizza not a warrant, so I turned up the music and drove on.

Turning down Baxter St. I kept looking for the address while jamming out to old school metal.  The night seemed darker the further I went down the road.  As I continued on I suddenly ran out of mailboxes. Generally, no mailbox at night means no address to easily find. The road kept going but the houses and street lights just stopped.  My imagination pictured an unholy DMZ between the rest of the neighborhood and whatever lay ahead.  The area was poorly lit to begin with but here, at what seemed like the end of the road, it was darker.  It wasn’t just a lack of streetlights, it was as if there was a thread of oppression and dread in the breathing darkness of the night.  I had the fleeting worry that the “end of the road”, so to speak, might be just that.

The paved road had turned to a gravel path.  I shook it off and started down the gravel drive.  When I began this delivery I was hoping the customer would tip but now I was just worried about staying safe.  There was a wrongness to this that I could not understand.

It’s funny but I didn’t remember Baxter St. going this far back.  I knew I’d delivered out here probably fifty times, but I didn’t remember ever going this far.  Just as I was about to say screw it and turn around, I saw an old dented gray mailbox half propped up on a thick pine tree.  Shining my flashlight on the side of the old dented metal mailbox I could just make out the address I was looking for.  It was painted on the metal like some dyslexic arachnid with pretentions had been set loose on the thing.  Hopping back in my car I proceeded down the worn rutted path of a driveway.  The trees were all overgrown going down the drive and the branches felt like they were reaching out and trying to claw at the car.  As if the trees were angry that I was invading their territory by driving down the gravel path.  The potholes in the worn gravel road made me think of greedy mouths lurking to devour any traveler foolish enough to pass this way. All in all, I did not have a happy feeling about this.

After off roading for about a quarter mile I could just see a faint porch light ahead.  It was dim and difficult to make out.  The darkness swarmed around the faint glow.  I had the thought that the darkness was trying to devour the light like it was a mortal enemy.  I realized I couldn’t even see the outline of the house.  All I could see was the front porch.  The porch was old, rotten and looked like something I would fall right through as soon as I stepped on it.  The porch light was about as effective as a guttering candle and barely illuminated a brown wood door I assumed to be as rotten as the porch.  This had to be a prank.  No way was anyone living in this dilapidated rat hole.  I mean, no offense to honest rats, but this place looked like it was condemned thirty years ago and someone was squatting in it.  My happy meter was pegging negative one thousand as I got out of my car and gently touched my Glock in case I suddenly needed it.  Yes, I know we’re not supposed to carry guns on deliveries.  Yes, I know it’s a violation of corporate policy.  And yes, you should know I’m not dying delivering some damn fool pizza. Two dollars an hour plus tips isn’t worth my life.

As I reached into the back seat to get my bag every single hair on my body suddenly stood up.  And let me tell you, when even your pubic hair stands at attention, it’s a trifle disconcerting.  Every cell in my body was awake with that quiet surety that I was about to be fired upon and return fire.  I knew as sure as I knew my name that something was about to happen.  But this was crazy.  I wasn’t in a war zone, and I wasn’t on a hot call.  I was delivering a pizza to a scary old house.  As this thought bumped through my mind, I noticed a putrid smell. Something so foul you knew you would be smelling it for days and wanting to vomit the entire time.  The smell reminded me of a suicide I had worked one August when I was a rookie.  A farmer had found a car in the middle of a field. He called us because he just didn’t feel right about it.  I had to bang on the window to knock the maggots off the inside of the glass so that I could see the body.  And when we opened the door?  Yeah, that smell.

I started to approach the door of the house when I noticed the air just felt heavy.  It was hard to breath with some unknown lurking pressure giving the air an anxiety inducing weight and substance.  As if it were alive and didn’t want me there.  Add to that the entire area was utterly silent.  No bats, no crickets, not even the wind moving through the clawing branches of the trees that were looming over me.  I felt like I was in a sinister cave formed by a canopy of ancient whispering pines and oaks that filled every part of the property.  I secured the pizza bag in my left hand and started walking to the door.  Weird optical illusions seemed to cause the shadows to writhe and play at the edges of the flashlight’s beam, making it look like the dark was a living thing.  And that living thing was, in turn, hungry to devour the light.  A demented yin and yang.

I gingerly stepped up onto the rotten, almost desiccated, front porch and prayed a silent prayer to The Great Lord Tipus, the god of all delivery drivers, that I would not fall through the porch.  The feeling of being watched played through me again, reigniting that certainty that something bad was about to happen. This whole situation was as weird as a three peckered billy-goat.

I knocked and the door echoed hollowly through the house. I wondered if this was what beating on the door to an ancient mausoleum might sound like.  I was in the process of seriously considering leaving the food on the doorstep and high tailing it back to my car but I knocked a second time.  Sometimes I’m not the smartest child my parents gifted to the world.

“Just a minute”, called a thin reedy female voice through the door.

“If the door creaks open and the crypt keeper answers I’m unloading my Glock in his nuts”, I whispered under my breath in disgust.

The door creaked inward until I could see an elderly pale female in one of those motorized scooters. The skin of her face was gray like old ash and she had wispy white hair.  High cheekbones with round eyes and a short pointed nose framed a thin lipped mouth. Her mouth seemed a little too wide for her face.  The old lady's eyes were dark orbs as she looked at me.  I couldn’t seem to focus on any one detail about her for very long.  My mind just seemed to skitter over the details while trying to accept the entirety of the scene.  She was wearing a nasty white blouse with a pale blue throw over her legs and had a black cane that was clutched in her left hand.  Her fingers seemed too long for her hands with dark yellow nails like small talons protruding from her fingertips.

“CJ’s Pizza ma’am, got your order hot and fresh right here”, I said, flashing my best customer service smile.  Smiling service and hot food and never you mind that I was seriously freaked by the whole encounter.  Nope, Captain Customer Service, that’s me.  Besides, I already knew I wasn’t getting a tip. At this point I just wanted to escape without being sacrificed in some pagan ritual.

“Oh, thank you, young man”, the old lady said, reminding me of about a thousand horror movies with that breathy high-pitched voice.  “Can you bring it in the kitchen”, she asked. “My legs don’t work so well anymore”, she said and chortled. Her laugh was of the kind that you knew there was a joke and you really didn’t want to know what it was.

Without thinking I started into the house.  I entered a long dirt strewn hallway with scarred wooden floors and gray wallpaper along the walls.  There were cobwebs all along the ceiling and the air smelled of dust and decay.  That smell of stale air when a place has been empty for a long time.  I could see the kitchen straight ahead at the end of the hall. The kitchen had a single overhead light glowing weakly in the gloom of the house. It barely lit the baby puke green walls and the damaged wooden cabinets with their doors hanging crooked in the weak light.

Three steps into the house the word, “Stop”, screamed through my mind. It went through every atom of my being like lightning. My entire soul was silent and my breathing paused as though it were afraid to leave my lungs.  I knew, in that moment, that if I took one more step into that house I was going to die!

It was silent, the entire house was silent.  Not a whirring fan, a tv, a cat scuttling through the house.  It wasn’t an absence of sound but rather that there was absolutely no sound at all.  I looked to my right and into the living room.  I’m not sure why but I suffered a compulsion to look that way.  On the couch was a mountain of old dolls. Baby dolls, Barbies, stuffed dolls all mounded around a single Raggedy Ann doll sitting on the couch.  It occurred to me that the Raggedy Ann doll was holding court over all the other dolls on the couch.

Just as my eyes made sense of what I was seeing the Raggedy Ann doll moved.  It friggin’ moved all on its own.  It turned its head to stare directly at me and what I thought were black button eyes were actually black burning sentient orbs in the stained white cloth face. Its red curly hair crackled around its face and its small sewn hands clutched at the wrinkled white apron.  I felt like the doll was peering through my flesh and judging the weight of my soul.  I wanted to weep at the wave of sorrow and misery that seemed to emanate from the gaze of that lonely doll.

“Is something wrong dear”, the old lady asked.  I snapped my gaze back to her as she spoke.  She had been backing her motorized wheelchair down the hall towards the kitchen but had stopped when I had.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry, I forgot that a new policy came out that drivers aren’t supposed to go into people's homes anymore.  I really do apologize”, I stammered while trying to sound suave and unintimidated.

I couldn’t make out her face.  I thought I saw it clearly when she first came to the door but now, I wasn’t sure of anything.  It was still just so quiet.  The crippled old lady slowly began to stand up from her chair.

“You’re going to come in dear”, she said.  Her voice was getting deeper and resonated off the walls as she rose from the chair.  Dust and cobwebs began shaking from the ceiling down on both of us. “I’m so hungry”, she roared in a voice gone so deep I felt it rattling in my chest.

As her voice bounced and hissed, shadows wormed and crawled down the walls, coalescing at her feet like thick ropey maggots.  The walls which had seemed normal at first, were now rotted with wallpaper hanging in ribbons from the ancient plaster.  The shadows coiled and writhed in a putrid feast of worship around the old lady’s lower legs as she stood and continued to grow.  Looking into her face I could see that her eyes had grown to the size of golf balls and were as pitch black as those of the Raggedy Ann doll.  Her wispy white hair was suddenly just strands hanging loosely from her putrefied scalp.  Her eyes continued to grow and her nose seemed to have rotted off, leaving her sinus cavity exposed like a leper.

Seeing her teeth reminded me of stories of old mutant cannibals.  They were all gleaming yellow sharpened points in what was now a black slash of a mouth which stretched from ear to ear. Her blouse was ripped and her breasts were large and gray hanging past her navel.  As she raised both arms to point at me, pustules exploded from around her right nipple. Black ooze squirted into the writhing shadows on the floor.

“Come here”, she bellowed as she pointed those razor-like claws in my direction.

I couldn’t process this.  What was I seeing?  What was happening?  I froze.  I’ve never frozen but this situation was outside any training or experience I had ever had.  My conscious mind demanded to make sense of this but my caveman brain wanted to run for the hills.   Strangely I could feel a burning in my left-hand pocket.  Suddenly, my thigh and groin were cooking like meat on a grill at a July Fourth barbeque.  Blue green flames were shooting out of my pocket.  Slapping at my leg and yelping in outrage I tried to save my testicles from becoming roasted nuts.

I reached into my pocket and yanked out the burning item to discover that it was my gris gris.  It was engulfing my hand in blue flame but wasn’t burning me now that I held it out in the open.  The flames seemed to be coalescing into patterns around my hand before collapsing and reforming into new ones.  I fell to my knees, my whole body weak with shock, and my mind reeling from the sudden failure of reality.

Looking up I saw the shadows slithering along the floor towards me.  As the old lady took her first thundering step towards me, the ropey shadow maggots began to surround me. Desperately searching for any kind of weapon I felt something round on the floor hidden by the  foul shadows.  Grasping it as the creature lumbered towards me, I realized that the round object was a broken wooden mop handle.  The monster wrapped her pustulent fingers around my skull and I gagged from the gangrenous smell of her flesh.  Its left breast smacked me in the face leaving a stain of black ichor dripping down my chin.  I wanted to wretch from the smell but I knew if I opened my mouth that rot would invade my body.  I wrapped the hand that held the gris gris around the mop handle and brought the sharpened stake up into the creature’s chest just under the sternum and through where its black slimy heart should have been.   The improvised stake was burning through the creature, the fire surrounding the stake flashing green and blue. I could smell the creature's rotten flesh cooking in a bitter choking miasma of dead corpses and rotting intestines.

“I’ll kill you, you bastard, I’ll kill you and eat your soul”, the creature shrieked.

The thunder of the creature’s voice made my whole body vibrate from its bass.  Black puss and coagulated blood spewed forth from the creature and covered my face and neck making my eyes water and my stomach churn with the need to vomit everything I had ever eaten up in that moment.  The stench was so horrific it felt like my soul was tainted with it.  Have you ever smelled something so bad you thought maggots would run from it?  I wasn’t just smelling it, I was tasting it.

The snaking shadows writhed and climbed up our entwined bodies as though they would devour us both.  The creature was clawing and bellowing, and I was driving that stake up and through with muscles I didn’t know my body had.  My arms were spasming, the braided muscles of my forearms clenching under my tattooed skin as I pushed the stake through the creature's back.  The flames surrounding the improvised weapon went from bluish green to a harsh deep red.  If you gave hate a color it would be that shade of red.  The flames felt intelligent in that moment and, moreover, they were pissed off like a drill instructor whose boots just got scuffed.  The flames consumed the hideous beast and, with an intense popping sound, the beast imploded. It sprayed thick chunks of meat and rotten juices throughout the hallway.  All that remained was a gentle vacuum sucking fetid air for a moment before fading away.

I collapsed onto the floor retching and gasping for air.  My entire body felt like I had just tried to lift an elephant and my vision was graying out.  I laid on the ground feeling like a guppy out of water for a few minutes before I started to regain my senses.  Vision slowly returning, I dug around on the floor for my flashlight.  The creature and the writhing maggot shadows were gone.  And so were the lights on the porch and in the kitchen.  I was in a rotten abandoned house.  The air had that deep funk of mold that you could feel invading your lungs on every breath.  The plaster on the walls was mostly busted out with a few pieces held together by bits of rotting wall paper.  The house suddenly had the vibe of a place long disused and abandoned but without the soul crushing evil stain which had marred it just a moment before.

Sensing movement I turned towards the living room archway to see a shambling Raggedy Ann doll approaching me.  In the weak beam of my flashlight it seemed as though the doll's stitches were unraveling.  Holding out one small white cloth hand in an imploring gesture I clearly heard the soft words, “thank you”, before the doll dissolved into a pile of rags.  And the strangest thing?  The doll's eyes, in that last moment, had been a vibrant green.  A child’s eyes in a doll's face.