

## Chapter 1

John Scarlotti threw the magazine down on the table in front of him and sighed impatiently, looking at his watch. He hated waiting. Normally other people waited for him, not the other way around. He stood up and scowled at the receptionist behind the sliding glass window. She opened the window and smiled pleasantly.

"May I help you?"

"Yeah," Scarlotti said. "How much longer am I supposed to be left waiting out here? I've got an appointment!"

"Let's see." The receptionist scanned her appointment book in front of her. "Mr. Scarlotti. Ah yes." She pushed a button in front of her and the door to Scarlotti's right opened.

"You may go in now Mr. Scarlotti. Please be seated. He'll be with you in just a moment."

Silently, Scarlotti went in through the door into a spacious and well-appointed office. He sat down in one of the chairs in front of the desk and looked around in irritation. There was no one else in the room.

"Where *is* that Doc?" Scarlotti grumbled to himself, but then he wasn't so sure that he was supposed to see a doctor after all. In fact – he struggled to remember – he didn't know exactly what he *was* doing there – or for that matter *where* there was.

The last thing he remembered. He blinked hard several times. He wasn't sure about that either. It had something to do with crack cocaine – lots of it – all hidden on the bottom of a lake – or something.

The door behind the large wooden desk opened and a man entered smiling broadly.

Scarlotti's mouth fell open.

There standing before him was a man who looked exactly like Scarlotti – even down to the Armani suit he was wearing. It was just like looking in the mirror, except for the smile. His exact double had a smile that was so warm and infectious that it was almost as startling as the exact likeness itself.

"Who the –" Was all Scarlotti could gasp.

"Who am I?" The man asked. "I think you already know that John." He reached out to shake Scarlotti's hand. Scarlotti leaned forward and shook it firmly.

Instantly, Scarlotti saw himself as a small boy playing in the yard, praying in church, going to school and washing up for supper. Then he saw himself as a teenager, getting in trouble with friends, stealing cars and fighting in the street with rival gangs. Then came adulthood when he reached the big-time Mafioso, setting up gambling schemes, shaking down the local merchants and protection rackets. Here, he made his way up to the very top of organized crime, running drugs and guns to the Sandinistas. Finally, he remembered the last few minutes of his life on a sailboat, shooting into the water and the sailboat erupting into flames.

He let go of the man's hand and sat back in the chair – stunned. In only a fraction of a second, he saw his whole life – in all of its sordid detail – right up to the end. Scarlotti swallowed hard and rubbed his face – right up to the end where he died.

He looked up at the man standing behind the desk, smiling pleasantly at him. Scarlotti's eyes went wide as he realized finally where he was.

"Kind of a rush isn't it, John?" God said as he sat down behind the desk.

"What?" Scarlotti stuttered. "What's happening here? What's going on?" He shook his head. "Are you a cop or something?" He demanded, trying desperately to recover some measure of the power and authority he was used to having in life.

"I guess you could call me that." God laughed. "But I think you already know what's going on here, John. Just like Father Clamente used to tell you. There'd be a day of reckoning someday for all the things you did in lifetime and well John – that day is simply here."

God opened up a manila folder there on his desk and leaned over it, studying the contents for a moment. Scarlotti swallowed hard again and looked around for a moment. This couldn't be! It had to be a dream!

God looked up from the file. "Oh, it's no dream," he said. "It's real. Your body right now is floating face down in Lake Michigan, just as dead as all of the victims you had killed in your lifetime as a Mafia boss in Tampa." He closed the file and stood up. He looked down at the speechless Scarlotti and shook his head sadly.

Johnny, Johnny, Johnny." He sighed. "I'm *very* disappointed in you. All of those talents and abilities and opportunities I gave you – wasted – just thrown away." God walked over to the large plate glass window and stared pensively down at something below with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Do you remember John what happened the first time you tried to kill somebody personally?"

Scarlotti cleared his throat.

"I-I never *have* killed anyone personally." He coughed and sat up, straightening his tie. This was more like what he was used to, dealing with cops. This bozo didn't have a thing on him.

"Exactly my point," God said, continuing to stare out the window. "You never could pull the trigger yourself. You could never overcome the compassion for your victim's lives if you looked into their eyes. You always had somebody else do it for you."

Scarlotti leaned back, his mouth open in surprise. How could *anyone* possibly know *that*?

God shrugged. "Not that it matters who did it. They were just as dead as if you actually did it yourself. The point of the matter is, that I'm the one who gave you that compassion in the first place. I gave it to you so you could use it to enrich and enhance the lives of others around you in life – not to give you the willies when you tried to kill somebody. And then there's your ability to organize and lead others. Those too were skills that I gave you to start life with."

God turned around again and sat down in the chair opposite Scarlotti, who continued to stare at him speechless. There was something about this man – or God – or whoever this was that was unnerving.

"And then there's your very high IQ, your motivation and your tenacity to work hard at achieving your goals that has served you well in climbing ever higher and higher in a successful, hard-working career – a career of crime. A life full of theft, deceit, murder, terror, prostitution and racketeering."

God shook his head and closed the file on the desk in front of him.

"Do you have anything at all to say in your own defense, John before I pass sentence?"

"Sentence?" Scarlotti shrugged, glowering at God as if he were a young punk DA trying to make a name for himself. "Just like that, huh? Ain't I supposed to be innocent until proven guilty? Where's my attorney? Don't I even get a trial?"

"No." God said. "This is a theocracy here and as head deity my decisions are pretty much final."

"Hey! You can't *do* that!" Scarlotti said angrily. "I got rights! Remember? Father Clamente was always saying that your mercy was everlasting and you had infinite forgiveness. Don't that count? I didn't do nothing that everybody else wasn't doing. They got off. So how come I don't I get another chance?"

“So – you want another chance?” God sat back in his chair with his fingers to his mouth, considering.

“Yeah. Sure.” Scarlotti leaned back in his chair. “I’ll do better next time – I swear.”

God pushed a button on the intercom in front of him.

“Yes Sir?” The secretary’s voice answered.

“You can send in my next appointment now please,” he said. “Funny thing you should say that John.” God leaned forward on the desk. “I have somebody waiting out in the other office who has a proposition for you that you might like to consider.”

The door behind Scarlotti opened and once again a man walked in who looked just like Scarlotti in almost every respect – except for his eyes. Burning in this man’s eyes was a sinister, dark and brooding look that Scarlotti saw many times before in the eyes of his most ruthless and brutal colleagues.

“Allow me to introduce to you the Prince of Darkness, Satan,” God said. “But I believe you two have met already.”

“Sure, we have!” Satan grinned like a used-car-salesman closing in on an easy mark. He moved forward with his hand extended to Scarlotti and shook his hand eagerly. “Why John here and I have been pals for a long time! Ain’t we buddy?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Scarlotti shook his hand. There *was* something oddly familiar about this man, he thought.

“See?” Satan jerked his thumb over at Scarlotti. “He’s recognizing me already.” He took his seat in front of the big desk. “You ain’t going to even be close in this one,” he said.

“Close?” Scarlotti looked back and forth between God and Satan. This was getting really bizarre. “What do you mean? What’s going on here? Who *are* you two clowns anyway?”

“Don’t worry there, John.” Satan laughed as he clapped him on the shoulder like a best friend. “I’ll lay it all out for you. It’ll be the sweetest little deal you’ve ever had in your life – just like all the other deals we’ve done together. You’ll see. You’ll get a cut out of this whole thing right off the top. I’ll make sure you get a nice big fat slice of the pie just like I always do. All you got to do is stick with me and you’ll make out like Jake. It’ll be a snap. We’ll put one over on everybody and the sweetest part of it all is that you don’t have to do nothing. All you got to do is just keep on doing exactly what you been doing. Nothing to it. You can do it in your sleep.”

“So, what’s the scam?” Scarlotti asked.

“No scam about it John,” God said. “It’s a straight forward deal. You wanted another chance – so now you got it. You get the opportunity to go back to Earth again and turn your life around. All you have to do is one unselfish thing.” God raised his index finger. “In a week’s time.”

“One unselfish thing?” Scarlotti held his hands out. “Like what?”

“Well, that’ll be up to you to figure out. You’ll have lots of opportunities, don’t worry about that.”

“One unselfish thing?”

“That’s right.”

Scarlotti turned to Satan.

“So, what’s your cut in all this?”

“Well now, you remember Job?”

“Job?” Scarlotti wrinkled his brow, trying to remember. “You mean the guy back in the Bible? Yeah. I remember him.”

“Job. The favored of God.” Satan laughed. “What a sucker *he* was. Could have had the whole world if he’d played ball with me.”

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Well, what we got here John." God folded his hands on his desk. "Is the reverse of Job. Satan agreed way back in Job's time to continue with the other side of the bet at his convenience when the appropriate subject loyal to him came along."

"And that's me."

"That's right," God said. "Job was a good and righteous man who I loved and supported. Satan bet that if he were allowed to afflict poor, undeserving Job with enough misfortune that he'd curse me to my face."

"So, I'm the other side of the coin – the bad penny so to speak?"

"Yes." God gestured to the file still on the desk. "We more or less established that fact already."

"So, let me get this straight. You're going to shower me with blessings so that I'll leave this guy and play ball with you?"

"No. All you get is a simple deal to save your own soul." God sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I want to make sure you understand this whole thing John. It's not about getting the best deal you can here between the two of us. It's about a second chance to turn your life around and do the right thing.

You're really being offered a marvelous opportunity that absolutely no one else in the entire history of mankind has ever had: a chance to go back for a second time and clear the entire slate with one unselfish act."

God paused for a moment, looking at Scarlotti intently.

"Let me tell you a little story once," he said. "That I think illustrates the whole thing quite well. It's a very old story that was told in the Middle Ages about a selfish, wealthy widow who lived alone and loved money more than anything else in the whole world."

"A sensible attitude." Satan interrupted.

"She treated her servants cruelly and was a mean miserly and unhappy woman her entire life. She died eventually and came before me in much the same way that you are at this very moment. She was found wanting and sent to hell for her greed and cruelty.

While she was suffering in hell, she looked up toward heaven and saw Michael the Archangel looking down at her with pity.

'Mercy! Please!' She called out. 'For I am suffering terribly in torment from these flames.'

"Vicious propaganda." Satan interrupted again. "Don't believe a word of it."

"So, Michael remembered that during her entire lifetime, this woman did just one unselfish thing: She gave an onion to a beggar one day. So, he took an onion and tied it to a long slender string and lowered it down to hell where she was. The woman seized the onion and Michael began to slowly pull her up out of hell."

"Go on." Satan sneered. "Tell him the rest of the story."

God leaned forward in his chair and folded his hands on the desk.

"Unfortunately, as the woman was being pulled up to heaven, the other miserable residents of hell began to jump up and grab for the onion too.

'Go away!' The woman kicked at the other people. 'It's *mine*!' Immediately the string broke."

"See?" Satan nodded toward God. "That's what happens when you trust him! Same thing's going to happen to you if you try anything stupid. Just remember the moral to that merry little tale and you'll stay on the gravy train with me."

"If you do this," God said. "Then your entire file is blotted out and both you and I win. It's not about a bet. It's about doing what's right."

“Aw – don't listen to that line of bull, John.” Satan sneered. “He's just playing you for a sucker. He doesn't really care about you at all. He's just saying that to get you to do what he wants. All that talk about saving souls is the same old malarkey you hear from all those phony-baloney preachers on TV. While they're picking your pocket, and acting holy for the cameras on Sunday, they're banging the secretary underneath the altar the rest of the week.”

“Bunch of hypocrites.” Satan made a nasal sound of disgust. “All of them. And *him*?” He pointed at God. “He's the worst of them *all*. Think for a moment. What has *he* ever done for you? Nothing. That's what. Look at all the stuff I've done. I made sure you were a success, John. I was there with every job that went your way and every drug deal you made. I even took care of the cops now and again just to make sure your career stayed on the right track.

But, just look at this little deal right here. He's offering you nothing. Not a thing you can put in your pocket. But me?” He pointed to himself. “I'm offering you the whole world. You play ball with me and just keep doing like you been doing for the next week and I'll give you power and riches like you never dreamt of. Why, you'll be my right-hand man down in hell when you make it.

I'll set you up on a throne right next to mine – just like a prince. You'll have more there than you ever could on Earth. All that talk about hellfire and brimstone – bunch of bull. You'll see. We got a party going on down there all the time – rivers of booze – women like you ain't never seen. It'll be a sweet time. Forget about what that jerk's offering you. It's nothing compared to what I'm just handing you on a silver platter.”

“But, if you cross me with this pal.” Satan paused and his eyes burned with malevolence. “Then the deal's off. You remember that. You're *mine*, no matter what you do! You'll be scrubbing latrines in hell with your tongue, I promise you. I got all kinds of special places down there for double-crossers. Believe me – they surpass by far anything ever created by the most imaginative hellfire and brimstone preacher in history. You'll play ball with me all right.” Satan glared at him. “Or I'll make you wish you'd never been born.”

Scarlotti turned for a moment and looked at God.

“As I see it John,” God said, holding up two fingers. “You have two questions you have to ask yourself. Who are you going to believe – him – or me? And what are you going to do about it?”

Suddenly, Scarlotti found himself on the shore of Lake Michigan, half in and half out of the water, coughing, choking and shivering violently, as an EMT bent over him shining a flashlight in his face.

“Hey!” The EMT called out. “We got a *live* one over here! Bring a stretcher!”