

Hold the Light

Excerpt

PART ONE

Mural

Chapter 1

MURAL'S reflection shone in the butcher knife and revealed more than his image. He saw, finally, what his brother had been trying to tell him for years. In the polished blade resting on the table before him was his boyhood face. Round, child-like features pushed past his adult visage and glared at him with big round eyes that harbored an innocence that Mural hadn't sensed for years. He had never thought of himself as pure, yet he had a few scattered memories that told him he once had a normal childhood. That there were once better times, back when he had a family untouched by the stain of violence.

But there was no time for these jumbled thoughts. Mural had finally found a focus, a purpose that built him a stable bridge between the past and present. He was ready to choose his first victim.

"Til death do you part..." Mural muttered into his ale as he slid the butcher's knife from the table and nestled it behind him. He leaned his massive weight back in his chair and it protested with creaks and moans. He had always liked this pub; everything was built solid and sure, and nothing broke underneath him. And the people stayed far away from him and that was far different from all else he encountered.

"...and I've come to hold you to your vows," Mural finished.

His favorite spot was a small table meant for two that was pushed into the corner, but his sprawling size negated any chance for company of even the smallest stature. It was perfect for solitude. Wood paneling brushed against his back, pulling on the fibers of his long black coat.

Mural leaned and stretched as he gazed out onto Boston through the pub's long rectangular window. The crooked light of night peered in. This was the place – the best spot to keep hidden while he heard all the women pass by with their escorts. Mural had been enduring their uninvited whispers for weeks, listening to the slews of their terrible and back-stabbing thoughts, all emanating from random, cheating women. Any and every woman that strolled the fire-lit cobblestone streets of Boston could be his target. This night was when he would act on their thoughts.

Dusk had settled beyond the dirty pane he peered through and the insidious whispers slowly came with the shadows, creeping up on him with the impending night. Yet they approached much more leisurely than usual. He shifted his weight in the chair and the thin wooden posts that served as its back jostled the knife that rested under his belt. He could almost hear the blade cry out to be used. He began to feel rushed. It is one thing to kill in haste, to react to a threat; Mural had done that plenty – it's another thing completely to plan and stalk a random person whose identity isn't known until a few seconds before the kill.

Mural brought the mug to his mouth again and the glass crashed against his teeth, beer and foam pouring down his chin and onto his lap. Wincing with pain, he wiped his chin and gently placed the glass down in a puddle of ale. The moment had arrived in a jolt. A whisper from the street jarred him into action. He licked his lips and stood, swallowing blood and beer as his chair joyfully moaned in relief to be rid of Mural.

Straightening his coat in an attempt to look presentable, he strolled past the couples, inevitably bumping shoulders with his elbows until he left the pub. Ducking outside, the clear night air leapt to his nostrils. He sucked in a deep breath and savored every aroma, committing them to memory. He would remember the charred wood from the lamps on the street, the horseflesh, the salty sea breeze, and the irresistible perfume from the adulterous woman no more than several strides ahead. She had no escort.

Long, blonde curly hair bounced off the back of her silk dress and hypnotized him with its rhythmic movements. She was the perfect first victim, a gorgeous upstanding wife who hid all her indiscretions behind fine manners and an innocent smile. Mural was almost fooled; she looked so pure, yet unmistakable sinful whispers flowed from her all the same. He shook off his doubt and continued his pursuit. The light retreated the more he followed, and she led him further from the city, to some unknown rendezvous.

Curiosity reigned while Mural envisioned the possible scenarios he was about to experience. He had confirmed the whispers so many times before, but only as a distant observer, watching women cheat on their husbands. But what if his first victim was his first error? He had to make sure that she would follow through on her thoughts. The feelings he received from this one woman were overwhelming and inimitable; it was just a matter of time before the desire in her head made it to her lips. He knew that in his bones.

She scurried like the insect he saw her as, down an alleyway and perched at a stoop, rapping on a door. Mural hid behind a corner, peered past the brick, and could smell the lust pouring off her. It was sickening. How could she do this? The door creaked open and a pale face with blonde hair and a snipe nose pushed into view, beckoning her in. Her head bobbed in agreement and they both smiled as she entered. The door slammed shut and so did Mural's eyes; he was ready to pounce. His pulse pounded with a surge of hatred that stemmed from the past. Flashes from his youth surfaced, carrying with it pangs of love laced with pain. His muscles tensed. Mural slid into the alley like a shadow and pressed his ear to the door. The whispers from her billowed from the building and told him she was already undressing. He could almost feel their breath and it sent shivers into his every vertebrae. The chill made him button his coat all the way to his neck.

Mural slipped his fingers under his coat to his beltline where the knife waited, anxious, nearly screaming to be brandished. He held it under the folds of his black coat; he wasn't going to take the chance of being caught. This had to be flawless. With his free hand, he pushed down the latch on the door. It wouldn't budge. He slid his hand up and across the wood and gave a slight thrust to test the strength needed to break in.

Mural smiled and kicked in the door, hoping the rest of the night was going to be as easy.

Chapter 2

The door swung open and Mural stretched forward to slow it, desperate to keep the element of surprise. He ducked through the doorway and slinked back against the wall, hoping to blend in. He stood out as a man of his great height should, yet there were no eyes to testify to it.

Excited thoughts still danced about his head and stole his concentration. He closed his eyes and breathed rhythmically, focusing on the whispers that were flowing to him. Through shaky and rippled impressions his focus returned. Thoughts that were distinctively not his own rushed in.

His eyelids crashed closed but he didn't need his eyes to see. In his mind he saw her long curly hair arch back with her head as she bounced up and down. She was nude and aglow, like a flashing target, while the man beneath her was shaded dark, barely seen. It almost looked comical as she grinded atop a pit of darkness in the throes of passion.

Mural opened his eyes and saw a short hallway that ended with a closed door. It beckoned and he followed the call slowly and carefully, tiptoeing along the creaky floorboards.

Under his hulking weight the floor had no choice but to moan, yet he knew no ears would catch the inane sounds.

The closer he drew to the door, the more he pondered about the fool of a man beneath her. Would this lustful man be prepared for an unwelcome guest? A pistol or a knife under his pillow or on his nightstand? Mural prayed for the element of surprise to remain on his side and to ensure that he simply had to work with speed. This was it.

Mural pushed the door open. The couples' naked bodies instantly twisted around and recoiled in shame and shock. Mural absorbed the room in one sweeping glance. A small bed with a nightstand adjacent. A draped window adjacent to that. A full length looking-glass standing near the foot of the bed in the far corner.

In near slow motion, the woman reached for bunched blankets for cover as she slid away while the man beneath her flailed about in anger, shaking his fists at the doorway. Once the initial anger stuck the man, he gasped and reached for the nightstand with his right arm. Mural, already moving forward, saw the pistol near the lit candle on the table and smiled as the man raised his fingers too high and burnt them on a flame as naked as he was. His legs kicked beneath the covers and shook his cowering lover off the bed. Her head lead her into the standing mirror right behind her. Mural stretched out and slammed the hilt of the knife squarely down onto her lover's forehead. He crashed into the nightstand, pushing the candle into the curtains brushing the floor. He went as limp as a bonefish.

The woman bounced off the mirror and was propelled headfirst into the thick mahogany footboard of the bed. She shook off the pain, flinging her head up, blonde curls jiggling about.

In that short second, she exposed her neck. Mural, already in mid slice, crashed the blade into her jugular and pushed it out the opposite side. Her face froze, mouth agape,

eyes wide open. The snapping of bone and the arterial spray caused Mural pause. He had to observe. He lingered over her with his huge head cocked, drinking in the sight. This was no longer a vision in his mind or envisioned potential scenarios. This was his plan, realized, solid and bleeding on the floorboards. Mural stood at the foot of the bed, tall and proud, his head nearly scraping the ceiling.

A pool of blood spread from her headless body like a shadow that had a mind of its own, and glinted in the firelight.

Flames were eating their way through the curtains and onto the floor, heading towards the blood. The already small room shrunk in size even more as the bleak darkness was quickly replaced by a warm and growing glow. Mural peered over the bed and saw the man stirring slowly. He looked familiar for some reason. Mural saw so little of him in his deeply shade form beyond his blonde hair and snipe nose, but he struck a chord in Mural's memory. No matter, though. This bastard wouldn't ruin this event, even as he fiddled with the latch on the window, trying his escape. He moved at such a so slow pace that the flames would happily swallow him in short order. Satisfaction crept across Mural's face in an ear-to-ear smile.

"This has gone perfectly," he chuckled, but he knew he wasn't in the clear yet.

Flames nipped and licked at the wood, curling like orange tongues, craving and consuming everything. He watched, addicted to the cadence of the fire, and was instantly petrified by a rush of familiar memories. His feet stuck to the floor and his mind sat below the heavy weight of the past, locked in a forced recollection. The fire warmed his face, blazing from the past and the present. He blinked, shaking off the sensation, and ran down the hallway and out the door. Bursting into the night air with the warm glow behind him, air began to seep into his lungs and he wondered how long he had been holding his breath. Mural scanned himself, looking for splotches of blood and other signs of his deeds that could have attached to his coat. After discovering a sweeping splatter of blood across the breast, he removed the garment and slung it over his arm, neat and folded. It covered the bloodied blade in his hand.

Strolling into the street, Mural mingled into the small crowd that had began to assemble. Like moths to the flame, others gathered, as he became just another face in the mob. He slipped away to the other side of the street, slinking into another alleyway. The shadows invited him into their hold again and he replaced his false look of astonishment, there only to play the part in the throng, with a wide toothy grin. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so complete, so free.

As the two-story building was engulfed in flames, Mural recalled one time, maybe the only time, when he felt this free. A time right before a fire just like the one in front of him. He looked down, his coat sliding down his forearm, as he studied his face in the blood-smear blade. The dancing light of the distant fire washed the features of his haunted years away until his soft teenaged face stared back. Behind his youthful likeness stood his mother, smiling and reaching out to him. Her arms wrapped around him with soothing warmth and all the memories that had threatened to distract and destroy that night's mission earlier rushed over and devoured him.