

Crucible of Fear Excerpt:

CHAPTER 1

Spider

Dante Ellis gazed down, eyes narrowing as a harsh blade of light raked the office interior revealing desiccated corpses under the tattered remains of web.

How long had a spider been there? he thought.

Kneeling, Dante peered closer and spied the predator's remains dangling from a few dusty strands where the windows joined at his corner office. It surprised him. He'd been here many late nights as the cleaning crew made their sweep. They were very thorough, but somehow, they'd missed this.

In the dim light straining up from the city below, Dante saw the spider's legs were kinked inward, its final act before dying. Gossamer remnants of web clung to the glass, fluttering in micro currents above the twenty or so confirmed kills.

Dante smirked. *Little guy had been busy.*

He pictured it floating above the busy mail room on a strand of silk before being sucked into an elevator shaft. It continued sailing on the updraft, legs splayed as it swirled all the way to the thirty-second floor of the Monolith tower. How it had negotiated the busy studio floor all the way down to Dante's office he couldn't fathom, lying in wait to ambush unsuspecting prey.

Light swept the office again as a helicopter outside slowed to a hover, appearing no larger than one of the spider's kills. Its spotlight continued over the tops of low-slung buildings to reveal an overturned car on the 134 freeway. Flames licked at the underside as smoke boiled up in a black smudge. Brake lights bloomed in a crimson smear as Friday evening traffic slowed to crawl.

A muffled cheer rose up from the party in the studio kitchen and Dante checked his watch.

Almost time.

He rose to his feet and looked down at the elephant pendant in his right palm. It gleamed in the dull light like a drop of mercury. "For when you get scared," Abigail had told him. He closed his hand around it.

The inner office door opened with a snick and he turned, head swimming. The wine he'd drunk earlier lay tart on the back of his tongue. The doorway was a black void, but Dante knew who it was. Only one other person had that code.

“Naomi,” he said.

There was no sound, no movement. Dante peered into the darkness.

“Who’s there?”

A dark figure emerged from the doorway, one arm thrust forward. Dante stumbled back, slipping a hand into his suit jacket to grab his phone. The figure’s arm twitched. Sharp pain flared in Dante’s chest as his mouth went dry. A delirious thought occurred to him as the phone slipped through his fingers.

The spider bit me.

Blinding white pain radiated out to encapsulate his whole body in a spasm of agony. The room tilted and something hard crashed into his face. Stars skittered off like electric cockroaches as everything went black.

Blood displaced the taste of wine in his mouth.

Ragged jolts of pain rippled through him, making his limbs kick as his entire body went numb. His vision returned, distorted, the office etched in shifting streaks of gray and black. He lay on his right side, arm stretched out—hand clenched in a tight fist. Dante hoped Abigail’s pendant was still there because right now, he needed it.

A light flared near his shoulder and hummed three times, more felt than heard. His phone. Dante tried to squeeze his eyes shut but he could only manage a weak flutter. The light died and his vision sharpened for a moment. The dark

figure stood over him, the outline of the person's body razor-sharp against a starless sky. A ghost of its reflection shone in the glass behind.

The helicopter's light brushed past again, dimmer, revealing the figure to be a man dressed in black, face hidden behind a mask. A small object rose up over his shoulder, its delicate, greenish body reflecting brake lights from the traffic choked freeway far below. The orange wings flitted in a blur as it hovered.

It was a dragonfly.

A drone, much larger than the insect it had been built to mimic, its body at least eight inches long. The bulbous head bristled with miniature lenses and antennae that ticked with tiny movements as a red eye winked on its underside.

Dante's phone flared again and he heard the buzzing this time. A text appeared on the screen. The words smeared into dark streaks as he tried to read the small letters trapped inside the text bubble.

The man knelt beside Dante, gazing down at him for a moment, eyes glittering. Then he turned and hefted an object from a messenger bag slung over one shoulder. It was a rectangular black box with an elliptical hole at one end, about the size of a laptop but thicker by a few inches. He removed the top section and set it down, then slid the bottom of the box underneath Dante's clenched fist. His breath came out in a raspy hiss as he tried to protest. The dragonfly hovered closer, its flinty eyes adjusting with the faint hum of gears.

The dark figure sat back on his heels and pulled the mask up, head hung low. There was something strange about his face. Dante narrowed his eyes, face muscles twitching with the effort.

The man was crying.

“Sorry,” he said, wiping his face with the back of one arm. “They were just never going to stop.”

The dragonfly vibrated its wings with an impatient jitter and the man pulled the mask back down. He picked up the top of the box and placed it over Dante’s right hand. The two halves sealed shut with a series of harsh clicks. The low throb of distant music filled the silence.

Pain lanced deep into Dante’s wrist followed by a cold heaviness in his hand. He struggled to move, gasping as a wave of cramps rippled through him.

“Don’t fight it,” his attacker said, voice thick. “It’ll only make it worse.”

For a moment, Dante hoped this was a joke gone too far and everyone from the party would come pouring in, laughing, slapping him on the back.

From inside the box came a high metallic squeal, like screws being tightened down. The sound stopped and the room became silent again save for the whisper of the drone’s four wings.

The party had gone strangely quiet.

The masked man turned his face away and a muffled thump discharged from deep within the box, followed by a slight tug at Dante's wrist. His body went icy cold.

This was no joke.

With trembling fingers, the man reached down and picked up the box before rising unsteadily to his feet. The box slipped from his grasp and fell, one corner striking the carpet with a thud. The two halves split open and the contents of the box spilled out and spun to a stop.

"Oh, Jesus," the man said.

Dante peered at the pale thing that lay there, eyes straining to pierce the gloom. Whatever it was, it had legs.

The legs twitched.

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in Dante's throat. *It's the fucking spider.*

The hum of the dragonfly's wings pitched down as it dropped lower then hovered again, a few feet from the floor. A bright pinpoint of light speared out from its underside, the beam flicking across the floor before coming to a halt.

The legs of the spider twitched again. But it wasn't a spider. It was a hand.

His hand.

The sickly, sweet odor of cauterized flesh stung the air as dark fluids oozed from the blackened stump. Dante's stomach hitched and bile rose in his throat, the sour taste scorching his tongue.

The man picked up the severed hand with a thumb and forefinger. A bead of silver slipped out of the palm, dropping to the carpet. Dante's fear-poisoned brain tried to remember what it was.

The hand dropped into the messenger bag. The man shuddered as it disappeared inside. Then he scooped up both halves of the box and fled, disappearing back through the inner office door, the hum of the drone close behind.

The room fell silent again.

Spasms wracked his body as Dante rolled onto his stomach, right arm heavy and unresponsive. He winced as his phone lit up, the touch of his face bringing the screen to life.

Need to call somebody.

He tried to speak but all he could muster was a low groan. It was a struggle to lift his head, neck joints popping under the strain. As the screen came into focus, the text he'd received earlier resolved, tack sharp. The words struck him like a hammer blow.

*And if your right hand causes you to sin,
cut it off and cast it from you.*

His heart thudded as pain lanced up his arm. He clutched at the stump with his other hand, the seared flesh slick with warm blood. He tried to call out again but his throat closed up, the cords of his neck taut. With a grunt he rolled onto his back, the ceiling tiles spinning above him.

Dante Ellis was finally able to find his voice, and he screamed.

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https://www.amazon.com/Crucible-Fear-D-W-Whitlock-ebook/dp/B08SWNCPX9/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Crucible+of+Fear&qid=1610826776&sr=8-1

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