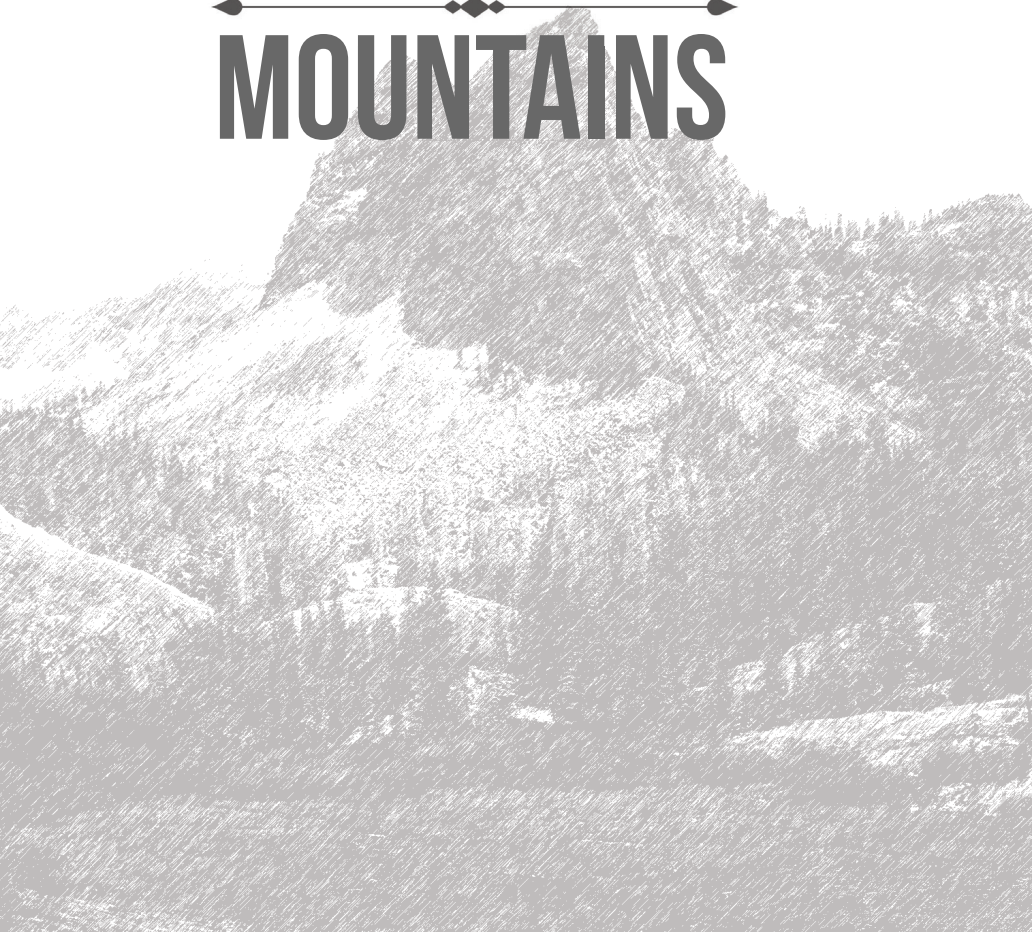

BRANDON KOWALLIS

CURSING *at*
—◆◆—
MOUNTAINS





This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this story are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Visit the author's website at: www.brandonkowallis.com

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And finally, for you dear reader. For your willingness to pick this book off the shelf and take a leap of faith to discover what it might have to offer you. May your journey through these pages be filled with beautiful insights.

This book is dedicated to everyone with a desire to improve their life during this short mortal journey as we travel along strange and exciting and sometimes painful roads.

PROLOGUE

Shadows

Chris hunched over to catch his breath as he broke into a small clearing within the jungle. Drenched in rancid sweat, he fumbled against the open air for a few steps, growled a few incoherent words, and felt his shin sink deep into something soft and warm. Another off-balanced step, and red-brown slime swallowed his knees. He tugged at his right foot, and his left sunk deeper. His heart reached his throat and crescendoed to a dull throbbing inside his head. The taste of metal filled his mouth, and the salty film that covered his entire body crept into his eyes distorting his visual reality.

He wiped the sweat from his eyes and stared up at the dark green canopy bowing ominously toward him. He couldn't remember how long he had been running through the choking heat of the rainforest underbelly; how long he had torn his way through the green, before the mud. He didn't even know why he was running, only that he had to run. Had to escape from something horrible.

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He inhaled a stabilizing breath and his heart slowed and he stopped sinking into the red mud. A dark cloud of mosquitos formed around his face and arms. He could feel their tiny proboscises sinking into his exposed skin as he contemplated his next move. Behind the wall of leaves, primates screamed on high alert and colorful birds cackled threatening songs, until Chris could no longer handle the relentless pandemonium. He closed his eyes hard and immediately the world fell silent.

He held his breath for a suffocating moment, hopeful that the hot air filling his lungs might lift him from his predicament. In the quiet, his heart knocked furiously against his chest betraying the silence, and he knew the *it* that had been chasing him would hear; knew it would come.

He opened his eyes and scanned the impregnable wall of vegetation encircling the mud trap. Leafy demons drenched in their own perspiration swayed back and forth in his imagination waiting for him to disappear beneath the muck. The more he fixated on them the darker the forest became until the shadow of their twisted limbs rested over the entire landscape and reached into the heavens, snuffing out pinpoints of blue in the canopy above and eclipsing the world below in premature night.

He drew in a ragged breath and noticed the outline of a raw-boned tree resting diagonally across the surface of the mud pit. The tree's thin, gnarled trunk angled upward and then disappeared into a cluster of ferns lining the mud pool. Chris strained to examine the escape route and caught a shift in the jungle wall at the edge of his vision.

A sudden, deep thud from beyond the movement set off a shockwave that pulsed through the ground and into his body. Tremors gripped his legs and hands while another subterranean boom thinned the mud beneath him. He began sinking faster. Chris tightened his fists and swallowed hard. The sound was closer now. To his side, the wall of ferns and trees rippled unnaturally.

He panicked and lunged for the fallen tree against the pull of his hopelessly cemented legs.

The sudden movement caused Chris's chest to pivot into the mud with a loud smack. Pudding-like sludge splashed onto the tree's branches and the mud encased his collapsed body. He tried to claw his way toward the nearest branch, but the mud held him back. High-pitched, futile cries involuntarily issued from Chris's mouth, and the more he fought against the mud the more the branch retreated against the tar-like waves.

Behind the jungle wall, sticks and branches snapped with a new intensity. Thunder from beyond the tree-enshrouded horizon grumbled across the sky and funneled unnaturally into the air around Chris before passing into the now churning, pulsating vegetation at his side.

Chris's arms burned near exhaustion as he attempted to swim to the fallen tree against the mud dragging him into its depths. His hips, now hopelessly entombed beneath the brown slime surface, pulled like a deadweight against his torso. In a final desperate act of survival, Chris's entire body erupted into spasms. He opened his mouth to scream and a pathetic whimper trickled out, and the one forearm that had resisted entombment collapsed.

The jungle wall pulsed harder now—spinning into some fluid, green-black hole, from which emerged the horrid sound. Chris froze and his throat closed in. Mud slid up his neck and around his jaw as living darkness crawled from the hole, twitching and vibrating toward his sinking body.

The creature moved as though it hovered between a fragile state of death and life. Hunting. Determined. Wisps of darkness scaled off the organism in smoke-like trails as it thrashed through the air and then poised over Chris. A deep and unearthly drone issued from its core and into Chris, and smokey black particles scattered across his face. The flecks of darkness stung like venomous mosquitos.

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Almost beyond his awareness the mud rose to Chris's ears. He could feel the penetrating clay working its way into his inner ear, silencing the jungle with a tormenting tickle. The bitter clay continued to rise until it swallowed his mouth and nose. He breathed a non-breath and gagged a convulsive gag as the sludge-worm worked its way into his sinus, throat, and lungs. A single eye remained above the surface now; wide and watching. Taking in the horror as the unholy creature reeled frantically, lunged toward him, and the world went dark.

CHAPTER 1

Falling

Chris jolted awake, with the terrible, guttural scream of the creature echoing in his ears. His head throbbed. He opened his eyes and lifted his head from the desk. A light knock at his door drew his attention, and he glanced over as it slowly creaked open. A stout, gray-haired woman in a casual business dress timidly poked her head through the door.

“Are...you...okay...Chris?”

Chris wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth and sat up.

She opened the door a little wider and stepped in, scanning the office for signs of trouble. Behind her, a small crowd gathered, gawking awkwardly over her shoulder.

“Uh, yeah.” His head spun. “Why? What’s up?”

“Uh. We heard you making... noises. We were concerned.”

Chris blushed and tried to compose himself. He looked at the people gathered in the hall.

“What kind of noises?”

CHAPTER 2

Airplanes

When he finally came to, burning debris covered the ravaged cityscape. Fallen electric lines hummed and snapped around him. The masses of angry people had disappeared. To his surprise, it was night now, and the bench he sat on, like himself, had been completely untouched.

He glanced around at the devastation through dream-clouded eyes. The building in front of him had partially collapsed from the plane's impact. Surrounding buildings were charred, their windows blown out. Smoke billowed up into the night sky, illuminated by small, crackling fires scattered throughout the area.

He expected to see bodies or body parts lying around him, but he was alone. *Maybe they were obliterated. But how am I still alive?* He took in the scene, trying to make sense of what had happened. Everything felt surreal and strangely peaceful. He stood up and listened to the flames and the electricity.

"Is anyone there!" he yelled, looking around for any signs of movement. "Hello!"

A sickening thought slipped into his mind.

"Hello! Is anyone there?" he demanded. His voice felt different. The sound. It didn't carry like it should. Something wasn't right.

"Oh God," he moaned, looking toward the sky. "I can't be dead. Oh God, please don't let me be dead."

"Oh, you're not dead," a matter-of-fact voice commented from behind him.

Chris spun around as a prophetic looking man dressed in a stylish casual business suit stepped out from behind a large piece of wreckage. The man coughed and choked on the smoke that billowed up around him. He maneuvered his way through the debris piles, careful to avoid smudging his suit.

Chris stared curiously at the man who appeared to be a few inches shorter than he was. He carried a brown leather shoulder bag that he guarded carefully as he negotiated the debris. When he arrived at the bench Chris had been sitting on, he sat down with a sigh.

"Not a lot of time," he said as he brushed off dust and ash that had settled on his suit, and began fumbling through his bag.

Chris stared at the man, confused.

"Chris Alexander, right?"

"Excuse me?" Chris replied, his tone guarded.

The stranger thumbed through a folder he had pulled from his bag. "That's your name, right? Chris Alexander? Two first names, hah."

"Do I know you?" Chris asked suspiciously.

"No, you don't know me. You've never met me before. But I know you. Know everything about you." He flipped through the folder. "You have three children, your wife has major postpartum depression, which is just a flare up of her life-long struggle with chronic anxiety and depression."

He turned a couple more pages, scanning them with his

finger. "Looks like you were excited about your job when you started, what, nine months ago, but now you dread going to work and feel completely deflated by it." He turned a few more pages. "Huh. Says here that just today you heard your coworkers venting about how lame they think you are as a leader. Wow, and strange dreams, meltdowns with your wife. Sounds like you could use a therapist or something," he said nonchalantly.

"Where did you get that?" Chris demanded, on the verge of yanking the folder from his hand. He wasn't sure whether this was a sick practical joke or if someone was trying to defame him.

"No, Chris, this is not a practical joke. No one is spying on you or your family and no one is trying to drag you through the mud," the stranger replied. He looked up from the papers at a now wide-eyed Chris.

"Geez." Chris rubbed his head and studied the devastation surrounding them. "I'm going nuts." He paused for a moment and then turned back at the stranger. "So who exactly are you?"

"The answer to that question is a bit complicated, Chris. I supposed the easiest answer is to say I'm David. But that's not usually what folks like you are looking for when they ask that question. So what I like to tell them is that I'm sort of like a well-timed teacher. I help people see things they can't see, that they need to see, when they need to see them. Sometimes it's subtle, you know, but other times it requires a bit more—" he paused and stroked his beard, "*—intervention*, shall we say."

"So, what are you, like a guardian angel or something? Or is this some sort of weird, other dimensional, wormhole thing I stepped into?"

David chuckled. "I think you've spent a little too much time watching late-night television. The reality, Chris, is that people from different cultures and religions would likely call me, call *this*," he continued, gesturing to the scene before them, "something different based on their life experience, perceptions, and choices.

CHAPTER 6

Waking Up

In the ocean of sleep, he dreamt he was alone in a way that he had never been alone before, as though he had been dropped into the midst of a dark nebula, floating in deep space where even the light of the stars could not reach. He looked down and became aware of his body, illuminated from all sides, despite the absence of a light source.

How strange.

The instant the thought passed through his awareness, strange images formed around him like pulsations in the nebula's mist. He could feel the nebula flutter against his skin. Not quite water, not quite dust, not quite air: a strange material that seemed almost connected to him in some way. Images pulsed through the material and flowed through him and from him. He called out to see if anyone was there, but the sound traveled no more than a few inches from his mouth, as though he were floating inside a vacuum, surrounded by a thin atmosphere of air.

I'm dreaming. The nebula pulsed again. He attempted to force himself awake. He thought about Troy, about his family, the nurse, and the surges of pain he'd felt in the hospital. Pain that was no more.

With each thought, more random images flashed through the cloud, accompanied by bursts of sound like lightning moving along neural networks, crackling through the haze and into him. The sounds mixed together, creating a dreadful cacophony of noise: thousands of people trying to speak, machines grinding, music playing, nature singing. The more his thoughts raced, the more spiraling and unstoppable this dream felt.

In the space between thoughts, the clutter faded, and the noise died—ebbing and flowing like erratic ocean waves. He began to recognize the connection between the images, the sounds, and his own thoughts. He closed his eyes hard and attempted to calm his mind, but even with his eyes closed, he could still see. With his ears covered, he could still hear. The harder he tried, the worse it became.

"Is anyone there?" he screamed through the endless projections of blurred images and jumbled sound.

Smells worked their way into the chaos, overwhelming his olfactory senses: sweet and foul, stale and lurid, putrid and salty. Sandpaper passed over his skin, followed by bubbles, then jagged shapes, then silk.

"Oh God!" he groaned into the expanse.

His heart beat so fast that he could feel an electric hum radiating through his entire body, penetrating outward. Burning. He could feel himself hyperventilating and looked downward. His arms and legs began to tremble, then shuddered violently. Chris curled into himself, trying to regain some imagined level of control. Trying to stop the corporeal volcano from reaching its explosive end in three, then two, then one.