

Chapter 7

Excerpt taken from “The Black Devil of Damavand”

Wednesday, August 1, 2012
Paris, France

They had been standing in line for more than fifty minutes waiting to get onto the elevator that would carry Harry Simpson, his wife Sonja, and his young son, Johnny, from the second level of the Eiffel Tower up to the third. Johnny was getting grumpy and complaining about the heat. It was eight PM on a typical Paris August day, warm and muggy. Being surrounded by a herd of pushy tourists in a confined space didn't make things easier.

“I can't wait to get up to the third level,” said Harry, grumbling mostly to himself. “At least way up at the top it should be a lot cooler.”

“I wanna go home,” little Johnny demanded in a loud voice. “I don't like it here.” His scrunched-up face radiated disdain.

The other nearby tourists turned to stare at the boy. Sonja's face turned red, as it always did when she was embarrassed. “Be quiet, Johnny,” she almost whispered, but with a strained voice. “We're almost there. Besides, there aren't many other boys your age that get to travel to France and see such wonderful scenery.”

“I’m still hungry, too.” Johnny couldn’t give a hoot about other boys. Or about France. Or about the scenery. Inside he was thinking *And what’s so special about going up an elevator inside a glorified chicken coop of wires like this. Worse yet, they had to eat at that fancy big-person’s restaurant. There isn’t even a MacDonald’s in this building.*

Harry, as usual, decided to let his wife handle the situation. Life, it seemed to Harry, was awfully simple for a nine year old child like his son. Just a lot of basic instincts, all black or white, no shades of gray, and his son always wanted everything his own way.

Secretly, even though the boy brought out the anger in him, Harry actually commiserated with the boy this time...maybe even envied him. With all the responsibilities and pressures of life squeezing in on Harry, he, too, would have liked to be able to run away and only have to think and care for himself.

This trip to Paris was a good example. Sonja wanted this trip, no matter what the costs, ever since her sister came back from a vacation to Europe and did nothing but talk of it for months. His wife was filled with envy and was determined not to be outdone. So, here they were, eating lobster dinners at expensive French restaurants like the Jules Verne here at the Tower, and touring the city in expensive taxi cabs, as though they were royalty.

The truth was that Harry worried a lot about his finances, but when he pointed this out to Sonja, she would laugh and chide him that ‘You only live once. Might as well enjoy it before you die.’ But this wasn’t his idea of ‘enjoyment’. On the contrary, touring Europe and following guides was itself like death for Harry. Like his

son, Harry would rather be at home in front of the TV, watching a football game, screaming for his favorite team, munching hot chicken wings, and guzzling beer with the guys. But sometimes, you just had to go with the wind and please the family, for the sake of a peaceful home life.

At last, the elevator was here and it was their turn to step inside. Harry grabbed Johnny's hand and pulled him along. Johnny hated elevators. All those big tall people gathered round him, much too close. He couldn't see anything, and there was no place to go to get away from them. They were like Gulliver, with himself as one of the little people. *Monsters*, he thought to himself. *I'll never be like that when I grow up.*

The doors closed, then shortly opened again, and they all rushed out like lemmings. Into the most wonderful panoramic views. Paris. All around them. You could see almost forty miles away. Below were magnificent streets and buildings, looking like toys, they seemed so small. In the center of it all, the center of what seemed to be the entire universe, was the Eiffel Tower, and they were at the very top of it! Instead of looking at and enjoying the view, Sonya whipped out her cell phone in synchrony with the other tourists, and began snapping photographs of everything around her. Typical American!

The top story was about nine hundred feet above the ground. There was a time when this tower was the tallest structure in the world. It had progressed from its early days when it was characterized as an ugly eyesore, an "odious column built up of riveted iron plates", to its current status as *the* iconic symbol of Paris and France, the model after which so many other buildings in the

world were patterned. Its 350 sodium vapor lights had already been turned on, bathing the whole Tower in an evening gown of bright gold.

Harry and Sonja had read all the brochures they could find about the Tower. It was quite impressive to learn that the Tower was put together using more than 18 thousand pieces of pure iron, using two-and-a-half million rivets, with the metal alone weighing 7,300 tonnes. At the top of the Tower, the wind could move the platform as much as six inches. Tonight, however, there was no wind. None at all. In fact, the heat was getting rather oppressive.

“I’m getting hotter,” complained Johnny, with a nasty, grumpy tone. Sometimes his raspy voice carried so loud that it sounded like he was using a megaphone. Sonja turned red again, as people stopped what they were doing and glared at Johnny, with officious grimaces on their faces.

Harry had hoped that here at the top of the Tower, it would be significantly cooler, especially with the approach of nighttime. But, he had to admit, his son Johnny had a point. It did seem like it was fast becoming warmer instead of cooler. Harry removed his red sweater, unbuttoned the top of his plaid shirt, and rolled up his sleeves. Sonja took a few more photographs with her cell phone camera, and finally caved in to the rising crescendo of whines coming from her son. “Alright, alright,” she acquiesced. “We’ll start back down to the bottom, now.”

As he stood there with his family waiting for the next elevator, Harry couldn’t keep himself from dwelling on what he had read about the elevators and their construction. The system of lifts had a fascinating

history, with the original design using hydraulically powered chains and rollers, eventually being replaced by modern electrically driven, computer controlled cars hoisted by wire cables that had to be frequently lubricated for safety purposes.

Damn, he thought. Harry was sweating profusely now. *Was it really that hot? Or is it just me?* he wondered to himself. Yet when he looked around, all the other tourists seemed to be suffering from the heat just as he was. The light in the sky seemed to be especially bright and intensely hot. Even with the sun glasses, Harry couldn't bear to look up toward the general direction of the solar source of life. "Funny," he said to Sonja, "you would think that the sun would have set by now." The top of his head felt like it was about to melt. Harry was wishing he had brought with him his baseball cap, but Sonja had objected to him wearing that 'dirty rag'. But it was his favorite, a crimson red – to match his sweater – with a 'P' sewn onto the front, for the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team.

Johnny began to cry. His skin was so warm that Sonja thought he might have a fever. Then one of the other women in the elevator line started to complain of dizziness. As Sonja turned toward her to help, the woman slumped to the floor. Harry rushed to the woman's side and discovered she was elderly and had stopped breathing. He felt her skin. It was as hot as a flame. She was covered with perspiration. Harry checked her wrist for a pulse, just like he had seen on the television medical soaps that Sonja liked to watch. It seemed awfully fast, and feeble. Just then a man pushed Harry aside, declaring that he knew how to give CPR, and began the process. Another spectator called

for help, in the loudest of voices. The whole group began then to panic, as the temperature seemed to increase beyond human tolerance.

The elevator was taking far too long to respond. Harry stretched out his arm to press the elevator call button once again. "Ouch! What in hell?" he exclaimed, as a spark jumped from the metal frame of the elevator door to his finger. He quickly pulled back his arm.

"Look," Johnny cried out, "all the hair on Dad's arm is standing up!" and as all the other tourists looked around at Harry, they noticed that his hair was, indeed, standing way up on end. At first, they thought it amusing, but then realized that it was happening to all of them. How bizarre and frightening it was. "My God," exclaimed Sonja, "it must be from static electricity!"

There was a sudden nearby strike of lightning, almost simultaneously accompanied by a terribly loud clapping of thunder. Shrieking, they all pulled back as close to the elevator doors as they could, jamming up against one another and aggravating the sensation of smothering heat. All around them, now, the sky was filled with an endless staccato of lightning strikes and deafening thunder. Harry tried to calm the others down by making a joke: "Hey," he shouted, "this reminds me of the Frankenstein movies!" But no one laughed. For the first time in years, Johnny was quiet. Terrified.

Unexpectedly, the elevator doors opened, and, with as much vigor as they could summon up under the circumstances, they jostled one another to cram inside. They were desperately seeking to get away from the morbid scene, the fiery heat, and what seemed like the beginning of an electrical Armageddon descending upon them from the heavens above. There were so many of

them pressed into the car that the elevator doors were barely able to close. As the two doors finally, grudgingly blinked shut, Harry and Sonja gave a sigh of relief to be on their way out of Hell. Even Johnny, who hated elevators, was glad to be inside.

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By now, the temperature had reached 450 degrees Fahrenheit in the iron structures of the Tower. It was climbing exponentially. The heat was softening the wire cables that were suspending the elevators, adversely affecting their strength and flexibility. The plastic cores inside the steel cables were disintegrating. More alarming was the affect of the heat upon the lubricating oil in and on the cables. The oil was smoldering, evaporating, and getting 'sticky', interfering with the movement of the wires against the pulleys. In another minute, the temperature had risen to an astounding 890 degrees. Some of the cables were actually stretching and getting out of synch with one another.

The temperature was especially rabid inside the elevator's computer control cabinet, hidden away in a metal console, and encased with aluminum. As it approached 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit, the aluminum cabinet began to melt away, and the soldered internal wiring came apart. The elevator computer control system simply disintegrated.

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Harry kept pushing the button for the second level. Nothing happened. The button was excruciating hot, enough to burn his finger tips. Sixteen passengers were packed into the elevator like sardines. People started to

whimper, then cry, and finally the screaming began. They clawed at the doors, trying desperately to open them, to no avail. They clutched at their throats, complaining of inability to breath. Trapped. They were trapped. And being baked alive, like the lobster of Harry's supper earlier this evening. Surely, God was punishing him for causing that poor lobster to die such a painful and horrible death. He was convinced of it, and prayed for forgiveness. Then the elevator light went out. And so did all sanity inside their metal coffin.

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The steel cables were approaching 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit, the melting point of steel. At that moment, the weight of the elevator, crammed full of bodies, caused the cables to snap. Harry, Sonja, and Johnny, along with the entire trapped group of terrified and screaming strangers, thought for a moment that the system had begun to function properly and the elevator was at last descending toward their escape from this purgatory. But, in reality, they were descending to their smashing death.

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7,300 tonnes of iron had reached the limit of their endurance. The Eiffel Tower began to bend and screech in loud, grinding noises as the whole structure started to give way and lean to the side, slowly collapsing toward the ground, in an agonizing *Danse Macabre*.

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Spencer and Tracy Carson were, at that moment, walking hand-in-hand down the Avenue Octave Greard,

half way between the Tower and the Hilton Hotel. As newlyweds, they were enthralled by the wonders of Paris on this, their first night in the city. Everything seemed especially bright and glorious this evening. Even the Tower, just ahead of them, took on a surreal appearance. It seemed to be radiating a yellow-orange color and literally dancing to-and-fro in front of them. How utterly romantic, they thought. They were so much in love, that they were fantasizing something that could only be seen in a Walt Disney movie!

But shortly, the scene began to take on a more frightening aspect. It looked like the Tower was coming right at them! The glowing iron beams were getting bigger and bigger. The newlyweds were mesmerized, unable to move, not understanding...and certainly not believing what they saw, as the structure moved close enough to envelope the whole area around them. The heat was becoming unbearable, until the groaning sounds of bending metal transitioned into the explosive crash of the Eiffel Tower into the Hilton Hotel. From that moment on, the air was dominated by the cries of the wounded and dying, and was obscured by the massive tsunami of dust and ashes. Spencer was hurled into one of the beams, radiating heat intense enough to set his clothing on fire. Tracy was trying to pull her burning skin off one of the sheets of metal. The Hilton Hotel was hardly to be seen in the aftermath. Even then, at that final moment, the rest of Paris and the world were unaware of the disaster taking place, oblivious as to the end of the symbol they loved so much. The Eiffel Tower was no more. Paris would never be the same. Indeed, the world would never be the same.