

AN EXERPT FROM:

**THE DEVIL'S
WORKSHOP**

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PROLOGUE

The only question remaining now, in the entire life of Mark Sands, was how long it would take him to hit the sidewalk twenty-seven floors below. Funny how your life could be reduced at the end to a single point, with no dimension but speed. After his first startled shout he almost seemed to be slightly removed from his own plummeting body—perhaps it was a way of not feeling the terror.

That Sands, at fifty-four, was a realist, partly accounted for his success as a money manager, not that it would save him in this situation. As his body accelerated, he felt his mouth twist into a grimace. The wind clawed his navy pinstriped suit jacket back over his arms, but he didn't cry out again. As he passed the Jacobsens on the twenty-fourth floor, neither of them looked up from their sofa. Sands' neatly trimmed silver hair stood up like a halo behind his head, every strand rigid.

Sands had come back from a long business lunch at 3:30. His wife, Megan, was not at home. After a couple of martinis, he didn't feel like going back to work, and the stock exchange was already closed. When he paused in the vestibule of his condo, he checked the phone messages and found nothing of interest. Walking into the dining room, he was about to set the mail on the table when he noticed the children, eight of them at least. Shocked, he stopped when he saw another one still emerging from the painting on the wall, one foot reaching outward over his antique buffet. But they weren't children, they were only small, and it seemed to Mark Sands, rather dirty. It was only a first impression, but he would never have another.

There was a moment of shocked silence. One tapped the shoulder of another who had not noticed Sands come into the room. Soon they were all watching him in silence,

their eyes narrowed, waiting for his next move. Mark Sands felt a sense of horror and insanity rush over him. His hair stood up on the back of his neck. This did not correspond to any reality he knew. Not sure how to react, with the mail still gripped in his hand, he took a step back. The nearest of the small people dipped his hand into his pocket and withdrew it palm upward. He blew across it with a knowing grin. Mark Sands was engulfed in a powdery cloud that glittered in the afternoon sun. What an odd effect, he thought. How could this be a weapon? He lost consciousness and fell face first to the parquet floor.

He regained consciousness after only two or three minutes, filled with terror and helplessness, but unable to move his limbs. Many tiny grubby hands lifted him over the parapet at the edge of his broad veranda, thrusting against his back, his arms, his buttocks. The fingers on his calves were sticky, lifting his skin as they moved. He knew exactly what they were doing, and he tried to struggle, but his eyes were just clearing and his limbs were still heavy and unresponsive. Then came the sudden shift of his weight on the parapet, and he went over the edge. His sense of horror was not muted by the fading effect of the drug in the powdery cloud he'd breathed.

Painters were working on ladders on nineteen, and Mark Sands was still accelerating. People on the sidewalk were growing larger, almost like real people now. A man stopped and pointed upward at him. His mouth was open as if he was shouting, but Sands heard no sound but the rushing wind.

A woman at her desk on the eleventh floor looked up and screamed silently as he passed. Mark Sands' jacket came free of his arms and drifted away above him at a gentler pace, moving out over the traffic on Fifth Street.

How had the little people emerged from the painting over his buffet? It was his Rafael Cantú masterpiece, *The Last Supper*, the prize of his collection. And they *were* the characters from the painting. He recognized the odd, ragged leather outfits. Had he been murdered by these nightmare versions of Christ and the Apostles? Mark Sands' fingers clutched wildly at the rushing air as he approached the sidewalk. It flew toward him like something that had been waiting there his entire life.

His final thought was that he would feel nothing when he hit the pavement. As usual, Mark Sands was right.

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