

THE SEARCHERS  
BOOK TWO

# EMPIRE OF DUST



CHET WILLIAMSON

AUTHOR OF *HUNTERS* AND *DEFENDERS OF THE FAITH*

**THE SEARCHERS, BOOK TWO:  
EMPIRE OF DUST**

Chet Williamson



MACABRE INK

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To my old pard,  
Joe R. Lansdale,  
his own mighty self

What is pomp, rule, reign, but earth and dust? And, live we how we can, yet die we must.

—SHAKESPEARE, *HENRY VI*  
PART III, V, ii, 27

Who then to frail mortality shall trust  
But limns on water, or but writes in dust?

—BACON, *THE WORLD*

## Chapter 1

Damon had never seen anything as huge as the desert sky. Driving on the level roads in the sunlight had been bad enough, but standing under the flat black of the night was worse. He felt as though all anyone in the world had to do was to turn, and they would see him.

The thought gave him a shiver, and the chilly night only made it worse. He had no idea that the desert could be so cold in July. But he walked on, toward the campfire, the liquid gleam in the eyes of the dozen people around it, and the three small tents pitched near it. Lucretia was muttering behind him, and he looked back and told her to shut up, then looked ahead at the ragtag crew waiting for him.

They didn't look like the type of people the Divine would want. They were a bunch of dirtbags, dressed in dusty jeans, sweatshirts, and jackets with holes in the elbows. Most of the men had beards and long hair, and the women were just as unkempt, with stringy and unwashed hair.

In contrast, Damon was dressed in his Lizard King look, spotless black from his leather vest to his boots. Lucretia was pretty impressive, too, in her tight red slacks and little black top under the satin jacket with the cabalistic designs stitched onto it.

The only response their wardrobe got from the motley throng was hostility. All of them were standing now, and the largest of the men turned toward the patched tent in the center. "Ezekiel? Company," he said, then looked at Damon with suspicion.

Damon wondered about the bad vibes. After all, they knew he was coming. He had connected with them through their website, had seen through the usual bullshit they had thrown up as a front, and figured out what they were *really* about.

The Divine. The one the Catholics were holding prisoner because they knew that once he got free, the joy and liberty and blood that he would spill would wash their religion off the earth. This was the Main Man, the most powerful human being—if that's what he was—on the face of the planet, and maybe in the whole damn galaxy.

Rumor had it that a bunch of cultists in New York had almost found the Divine, but got messed over by a small army of mercs hired by the Catholics, but rumors like that were cheap and plentiful. A rumor that Damon did believe, however, was that the leader of this bunch of desert rats had the *talent*, the wild Fortean brand, that let him link minds with the Divine.

But he was with a gang of real nobodies. Hell, they didn't even have a name, and their website was just text, as low profile as you could get without dropping off the cyber-radar. But the key words were there for those who knew, who wanted to search. Unfortunately, he and Lucretia were the only ones who thought the trek to Arizona worth the effort, and Damon wasn't all that sure about Lucretia.

Ezekiel Swain was sure as hell taking a long time to get out of that tent, and the dozen pairs of eyes regarding Damon were becoming no more friendly. Damon gave them back glare for glare, until Ezekiel Swain finally appeared.

From his name, Damon had pictured the leader of this group as someone tall, thin, and cadaverous, almost biblical, like a younger version of John Brown. But what staggered out of the tent was a fat, bloated man in his mid-thirties, sweat popping from every pore, even in the chilly night. His red-blond hair was plastered over his forehead, and the khaki shirt he wore showed dark, wet circles under the arms and in the center of his wide, almost womanly chest. Beard stubble grew wildly across the terraces of his chins, and crooked teeth darted behind a pair of bulbous lips.

At first he seemed as unimpressive a picture as could be imagined, and Damon nearly cursed aloud the fate that had brought him to this desolate place and this tub of a man. But then Ezekiel Swain looked directly at him, and his eyes, though hung over by moist folds of flesh, were as piercing and intent and *knowing* as any that Damon had ever seen, and he realized why people followed Ezekiel Swain.

Then the fat man spoke, and Damon was repulsed all over again. "Don't tell me—you're Demon Damon. And this lovely lady must be Lucretia Borgia, right?" The words bubbled thickly, like a boiling pot of greasy stew in which the cook had tossed slimy meat and soft vegetables that should have been thrown away.

"I'm Damon, yeah. And this is Lucretia." He took the girl's hand and pulled her up next to him.

She held back at first, as if dreading to come any closer to the repellent Ezekiel. "My name's not Borgia," she said softly but firmly.

"Apologies, milady," Ezekiel said. Right.

Then from out of the tent stepped a woman the physical opposite of Swain. She was tall and slender, and though her hair was prematurely gray, Damon guessed that she was only a year or so older than Ezekiel.

"Jezebel," Ezekiel said, with a touch of affection, putting his hand on her shoulder in a proprietary way. "This is Damon and Lucretia not-Borgia. Damon? Lucretia not-Borgia? This is my sweet Jezebel." He rubbed her shoulder, and his sausage fingers stroked her swan neck as he grinned. "My only sister. Our parents had a biblical thing when it came to names. But the connections meant nothing to them—it was just the names they liked. 'Jezebel' felt so good in my father's mouth that it didn't matter to him that she was an evil queen devoured by the dogs of the street. Not that that will ever happen to my sweet sister."

Jezebel Swain smiled at her brother and kissed him full on the lips. The sight brought a whisper of bile to Damon's throat.

"Tell me," Ezekiel said, turning back to Damon, "why have you come to join us? What do you expect to find?"

"You know what," Damon said, slightly annoyed, but not wanting to seem so. "The Divine."

"Of course. Come to find God, haven't we? Or the Devil? Or something in between?"

"You said in your e-mail that he communicates with you," Damon said.

"Oh yes. *'He walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own.'* Well, come into our humble abode." Ezekiel swept a massive arm toward the small tent.

Inside the tent there were two sleeping bags zipped together to create one large one, exactly what Damon was hoping not to see. The eight-by-eight-foot square tent was brightly lit by a Coleman lantern. The ceiling was five feet high in the center, and the four of them sat on camp stools in a circle.

"There we are," said Ezekiel, whose buttocks draped over and hid his stool. "Boy-girl-boy-girl, how civilized." In the bright light Ezekiel looked all the more repugnant. As if the weight wasn't bad enough, he seemed to have once been cursed with a virulent case of acne, which had left its tracks all too plainly.

Ezekiel opened a cooler, revealing a few cans of Hamm's beer and an assortment of cheap supermarket-brand soda. He opened a can of cream soda with a hiss. "Help yourself," he told them. "Have beer if you want—I can't drink it, dulls the contact."

"With the Divine," Damon said.

"No," Ezekiel replied, after draining half of the can's contents. "With all the spaceships hidden behind Uranus."

"You got any Diet Pepsi?" Lucretia said in a whiny voice.

Ezekiel glared down into the cooler and shoved aside a few cans of the generic soda as though he were looking for diamonds among a nest of rattlers. "Gee whiz, missy," he said, "we seem to be fresh out. Can I offer you a Valu-Shop brand cola instead, in the ever so simple black-and-white can?"

"Is it diet?" Lucretia asked.

"No, it's not diet. I hate diet. Diet's got that shit that kills rats. This stuff's packed with real cane sugar, twelve teaspoons a serving—good, and good for ya, too."

Lucretia took the can from Ezekiel's outstretched mitt as though she were picking a slug off a rose, then sat holding the unopened can. "You gotta pull the tab," Ezekiel said. "Diet Pepsi's the only one that opens by mind control."

Damon took a birch beer. If Ezekiel wasn't drinking beer, he was damned if he was. All this time, Jezebel had not spoken a word, but now she looked at Damon. "I thought there would be more of you," she said, and he heard accusation in her tone. "You said in your phone call that there would be six."

"I . . . overestimated."

Ezekiel pointed a finger at Damon. "One . . ." Then he pointed at Lucretia. ". . . Two. So you overestimated by, um, two hundred percent, is that right? So what was the problem?"