

**SPECIAL SNEAK PEEK**

# **Stone from HELL**

*An 'Apollo Illusion' Short Story*

By Shari Lopatin

BookBooks Publishing LLC

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Published by: BookBooks Publishing LLC, Phoenix, Arizona  
Edited by: Megan Yakovich

First Edition  
Produced in the United States

Visit the author's website at [www.ShariLopatin.com](http://www.ShariLopatin.com)

## Birth

I watch the brown-haired man fall into the ditch below, his hands bound behind his back, and I lower the smoking gun.

I just blew a crater into his skull, and I can feel the relief washing over me. Killing hasn't always had this effect on me. I vomited the first time. But now, after years of fighting to protect everything I've worked to build, I've come to realize this one, single truth:

It's them or me.

This man was trying to escape. He knew the rules when he joined. Once a member, always a member. Anyone who leaves threatens our security. I can't allow that to happen.

People call me a monster, but that's because they don't have what it takes to survive. The minions today think it's OK to just fall in line, to become little bitches for the Upper Class and its sickening agenda to force anyone who's not like them into *slavery*. The Upper Class don't call it slavery—I know—they say people like me *choose* to live like this; we're *lazy* for not trying harder.

Fuck them.

No one decides *my* fate. That's why I made the Upper Class *my* bitches, *my* slaves. That's why I created HELL.

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I was fifteen when Jaron was born midsummer 2131. It was monsoon season in Phoenix—a desert inferno in Sector 1 that suffocated from weekly sandstorms that consumed the city. I wanted out, but Mom's sixteen-hour workdays never earned us enough to leave. We could barely even afford to eat.

The moon was new that Tuesday night, as if it understood the darkness that would soon sweep away my life. I was fast asleep, my government-issued contacts resting next to my bed, when a piercing shriek slammed into my head, shooting adrenaline through my blood like heroin.

A second shriek, and I knew it was Mom.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, running into the shared space of our one-bedroom apartment. When I found her lying on our only couch, holding the balloon which swelled from her belly, the carpet below soaking wet, I knew.

“We gotta get to the hospital,” I said. “Let me grab my contacts.”

But Mom stopped me with the force of her voice. “No! I can’t afford the hospital.”

“You’ll die if we don’t go.”

She shrieked again, and a wave of panic crippled my muscles. I rushed to her side.

“Listen to me, Stone,” she said, grabbing my wrist. Her palms were slick with sweat. “If we go to the hospital, we’ll lose this apartment. They’ll take it away to pay for the visit.”

Her grip tightened around my malnourished bones like a tourniquet. I grimaced but stayed by her side.

“What should I do?” I asked.

“Get your contacts. Find instructions on delivering a baby.”

I protested, but she reached for my shirt to pull me closer, and I could smell the damp scent of sweat rolling off her temples. “If you don’t do it, I’ll die—and so will your brother.”

I wanted to snap at her, *half-brother. He’s my half-brother.* If she hadn’t been so damned irresponsible after Dad died, we wouldn’t even be in this situation. Now, it was my job to keep her alive.

I ran back to my room and grabbed my contacts, popping them into my eyes with the speed of a magician. Immediately, a three-dimensional screen appeared in the right-hand corner of my vision, hanging in the air like a kite, displaying the words, “What would you like to do?”

“How do you deliver a baby?” I asked, and the screen dissipated. In its place, lines and lines of links appeared before my eyes, and I scanned through the headlines by tapping my temple, highlighting a different option each time.

I found a set of directions from the United Council Medical Division and tapped my temple twice. For a moment, my sight turned black, and then a new world appeared around me. I was no longer in my bedroom, or even in my apartment, but standing in a hospital room with a middle-aged doctor dressed in blue scrubs.

“Hello,” he said. “My name is Dr. Hash. Today, I’m going to walk you through the steps of delivering a baby. If you have a loved one in labor now, you may follow along as you deliver.”

The instructions paused, giving me an option to combine reality with the video. I selected it, then raced around the corner back to Mom.

“I don’t have gloves,” I told her.

“Just do it,” she said, so I did ... the blood, the screaming, the crowning, the coaxing, the umbilical cord, the cleaning.

I held Jaron in my arms before Mom ever could; she’d fallen unconscious afterward. I wrapped him in towels and he screamed in my face. I had to admit, the kid was cute, even though I sensed that he was about to ruin my life.

## Ice-Cream

*You need to get a job, Stone, Mom told me just a few months after my half-brother burst into existence. Jaron needs diapers.*

I had been planning to start work anyway, but the money I made was supposed to be for *me*, for college. I knew if I couldn't pay for an education, I was doomed to a life of poverty. A degree didn't promise anything glamorous those days, but I could've at least afforded a roof over my head. Anything less basically ensured a life of homelessness and misery.

Unable to defy Mom, I dutifully dropped out of high school and started my job as a tour guide for the Museum of Musical Instruments—the only place on Earth where *real* instruments still existed. I took a night shift, working from nine o'clock until four in the morning, all from Mom's desk in the apartment. Every paycheck I made went to Jaron.

Six years later, at twenty-one years old, there I was, still stuck behind a screen, narrating useless facts into visitors' ears as they strolled along the endless, glass-ridden hallways via the screen of a mobile droid.

"Tone," Jaron said from behind me, because he couldn't pronounce the "s" at the beginning of my name, "why's Mom sleeping?"

I was preparing to begin my nightly shift. "Cause she's tired. She worked all day," I said.

"I wanna tell her something."

I rolled my eyes. "Where are your contacts?"

"They hurt."

"Well, wear them anyway. The government requires it and you can't just keep talking. You'll get arrested if you talk in public. Use the messaging feature."

Jaron stepped back and wiped his hand over his head of black, greasy hair that resembled the coat of a skunk. Not that I'd ever seen a skunk, except through holograms, but I knew enough.

"I want ice-cream."

"It's almost nine o'clock. I have to work."

"I want ice-cream!" Jaron's voice escalated, so I said, "Yeah, OK. Can we wait until four in the morning?" He protested at first, but after some more coaxing, he calmed down and accepted my offer.

Jaron left me alone for the next seven hours as I worked from Mom's desk, the crescent moon my only companion. I often watched the moon as I repeated the same script over and over again, thinking about the men who escaped this awful planet to walk on the lunar surface almost one-hundred-and-seventy years ago. Since then, no one returned. Society left no room for dreams or ideals anymore.

After my shift finished at four o'clock, I walked into our only bedroom and gently shook Jaron's tiny body. He was snuggled next to Mom. He groaned, then opened an eye.

"Ice-cream?" I asked.

He smiled, then hopped out of bed. Within ten minutes, he was dressed, and we left the apartment—a rare occasion—and walked down the street to the ice-cream parlor. I hated going outside. The advertisements swarmed from towering billboards every thirty seconds, assaulting anyone who passed: seductive women charming men into the latest pornographic program (*it feels as good as the real thing*), young, handsome men coaxing us to try their energy drinks (*the ladies can't resist a six-pack*).

All products now come from the Upper Class—the world's only employers, since they took over after the Virtual Revolution of 2075. For those born into money and power, the universe was their fantasy. Everyone else, like me, was left begging for a bone.

As was usual in our society now, no one manned the ice-cream parlor. The city was silent twenty-four hours a day, every resident existing in a cyber-realm instead. That's what the world wanted, as technology's power grew. And this was the result.

We entered the ice-cream store, where scanners and screens monitored the building, and a printer the size of a toddler rested in the room's corner. I kneeled, then looked into the device's scanner, and it read the contacts in my eyes, recording my information and pulling three units from my bank account. The contraption then printed Jaron his ice-cream, and we sat in silence as he licked the cone clean.

Thirty minutes later, just after five o'clock in the morning, we walked back to our apartment. We entered the elevator, which creaked from lack of use, and sped through the air until we reached the tenth floor. We trudged off, walked to our apartment, and stopped short: the door was ajar.

I furrowed my eyebrows, perplexed, and waved Jaron back. Cautiously, I took one step forward, then another, approaching the door like a nervous cat from the street. I reached out, tapping it open.

“Mom?” I called.

No answer.

A bowling ball dropped in my stomach. Something was wrong. I pushed past the threshold, calling her name again. Still no answer. I yelled for Jaron to stay outside, then ran past our couch and turned the corner into the bedroom.

That’s where I found her. On the bed. Bound, gagged, and naked—and soaked in blood.

“Mom!” I cried, fury exploding from my core like the pin pulled from a grenade. I lunged toward her, ripping the ropes from her hands and searching her body for any sign of life, my eyes bleeding desperation. Her skin was cold.

“Jaron,” I said, choking on agony. “Stay outside and call the police!”

I wrapped her in blankets, ashamed to have seen my mother naked, enraged that someone had done that to her. I wanted to know who, and I wanted to know why. And I wanted to know *now*.

###

## **Thanks for Reading the Sneak Peek!**

These are the first two chapters of “Stone from HELL: An Apollo Illusion Short Story.” Stay tuned for the release of the full story, which will be available on Amazon. I will be announcing the release FIRST to my “Readers Club” subscribers, so if you’re not a member, [sign up now!](#)