



PRIMAL SCREAMS

(Book One)

Bart Dahmer



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Book One

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The characters and events in this novel are fictitious. Any resemblance they may have to persons living or dead or any similarity to past or present events is coincidental.

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Dedication:

To my family

Sharon, Patrick and Samantha,

without whose support this book, as with so
many other milestones in my life, would not
have been possible.

Acknowledgements:

I am indebted to Dr. Mark M. Moffett for inspiring many aspects of the antagonist in *Primal Screams*, Captain Rineshor (a.k.a. Crimson). Dr. Moffett is a Harvard-trained entomologist and photojournalist whose work I first encountered years ago in *National Geographic*.

As I began to formulate the storyline for *Primal Screams* and later the cover design, I drew inspiration from his breathtaking macro photography and articles on jumping spiders (family Salticidae), which revealed a captivating and often hidden world of stealth and strength. From the first time I saw these fascinating images, I began to envision Crimson, staring ominously out of the cover of *Primal Screams* with a reflection in her eyes of Zach Marshall, the protagonist, and his wife and son.

After corresponding with Dr. Moffett and Minden Pictures, I was able to arrange use of a photograph he had taken of a Northern Green Jumping Spider in Australia (*Mopsus mormon*). Remarkably, with the exception of the background images, reflections and a handful of digital adjustments, the formidable warrior staring out of the cover of *Primal Screams* is quite real—more so than many may want to consider, albeit a few orders of magnitude smaller (~12mm) and hopefully with a bit less ruthless ambition.

“The current problem cannot be solved with the same level of thinking used to create it.”

Albert Einstein

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CHAPTER ONE

(A New Beginning)

“**L**ast one on the ice is ‘it’,” squealed Angie Marshall excitedly, jumping out of the Jeep before it stopped. She left the door wide-open as she tromped through the knee-high snow toward the frozen lake. Zach Marshall stopped the Jeep a moment later. He reached for his skates and jumped out in pursuit of his wife. They were acting like kids, and he loved it.

The bright winter sun shone down on the two as they raced toward Ohio Lake, just north of their home in Northglenn, Colorado. The wind was calm, but Angie’s golden hair swayed back and forth over her scarlet jacket as she pushed through the powdery white blanket. She was in excellent shape, nearly five-ten, and her long muscular legs propelled her quickly through the snow.

Angie was holding her lead until her foot caught something, and she fell face-first into the snow.

“Last one on the lake’s ‘it’,” Zach said laughing as he pushed on by.

Still prone, Angie lifted her snow-dusted face and smiled a wicked grin. She grabbed Zach’s foot as he went past and watched with delight as her husband went down with a thud.

“Hey, woman!”

“Last one on the ice is ‘it’!” Angie said laughing, as she scrambled to her feet.

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Zach pushed himself up and was right on her heels.

They made it to the edge of the ice at the same time and plopped down in the snow. They were sitting only inches apart, trying to get their boots off and prodding each other with their elbows in fun. Laughter filled the air.

“You cheated!” Zach objected.

“Cry my hands full,” Angie quipped, as she pulled on her skates.

Zach was lacing his last skate when Angie stood. He grabbed her coat and pulled her back into the snow.

“Hey, that’s cheating!” Angie laughed.

“Cry my hands full,” Zach mocked.

Angie pried Zach’s hand from her coat and slid onto the ice. She moved with power and obvious expertise. She knew Zach wouldn’t be far behind, and she sped away yelling in triumph. “You’re ‘it’!”

A moment later Zach slid onto the lake. With his skates on, Zach stood over six-four. He was muscular, but not bulky, and moved adeptly on the frozen surface. After taking more time than Zach would have admitted, he managed to close most of the gap between Angie and himself.

“You might as well give up,” he shouted.

“Get real, mister!” Angie yelled back as her breath turned to foggy steam-like wisps.

She laughed an excited, nervous laugh. It was all in fun, she knew, but she wasn’t going to let this fighter-jock catch her if she could help it. Her adrenaline surged, and she skated ahead.

Zach was surprised and even a bit proud when he saw Angie pull ahead; she never did anything halfway. He watched her shapely legs pump smoothly on the ice and wondered how he had ever managed to find such a wonderful woman. Still, he was ‘it’, and he didn’t like to lose. Besides, he would never hear the end of it if he didn’t

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catch her soon.

Despite the burning in his legs, he pushed ahead and made up the gap. He stretched out his arm to touch her, but she was just out of his reach. Before he could try again, Angie darted to the left.

Zach moved closer.

Angie cut to the right.

Zach edged in again.

Angie put on one last burst of speed.

This time Zach was too fast. He grabbed her coat and pulled himself to her. He put his arms around her waist and they glided together.

After catching his breath, Zach bent his head to her ear. “You’re ‘it’,” he whispered.

Angie swiveled around so that she was skating backward and put her arms around his waist. Her breathing was almost back to normal. “So now I have to catch you? Is that it?” she said softly, almost shyly.

Zach nodded as he stared into her eyes. “That’s how it works.”

Angie moved in closer, pressing her body to his. “I think I’ve already got you,” she whispered.

Zach smiled and pulled her closer. They kissed—a long, tender kiss.

Suddenly, a thunderous cracking exploded around them.

The ice surged.

Zach and Angie crashed down, sliding completely out of control. The ice was shaking, straining against itself, and groaning eerily from the effort. As if screaming out in rage, a huge sheet of ice beneath them roared and lurched free from the rest of the lake. One end of the mammoth ice sheet rose skyward, while the other plunged into the frigid water. The deafening thunder smothered their terrified screams.

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Both Zach and Angie slid toward the icy water, grasping frantically to stop their descent. Angie was just ahead of Zach, on her stomach, and barely twenty yards from the swirling water.

Zach was on his back, and he slammed both skates into the ice, trying to stop his slide.

Angie sped ahead and splashed with a scream into the freezing, churning water.

Realizing he couldn't stop, Zach stood and accelerated immediately. When he was just inches from the water, he jumped with all his might for the edge of the solid ice pack from which they had broken away.

Everything moved in slow motion. As Zach leaped into the air, he saw his wife struggling in the icy, unforgiving water. He stretched his body to its full six-foot-plus length and reached desperately for the edge of the main ice, which seemed impossibly far away. All the while, his mind was on his wife. *How long can she last in the freezing water?*

Zach hit the ice pack with his chest and snapped out of his slow-motion trance. The bottom half of his body splashed into the frigid water, and he gasped from the cold. He clawed at the ice to keep from sliding all the way in.

Even as he fought to survive, his mind was on Angie. He could hear her screaming his name. He somehow got a knee on the ledge and dragged himself out of the water.

Before he was entirely out, he began ripping his clothes from his body, attacking his coat and shirt. "Hold on, Angie!"

He was bare from his waist up, and he worked quickly to tie his clothes together. Would they be long enough? He yelled again, "Hold on, Angie!"

But even as he said the words, he saw she was losing ground to the icy water. He was beside himself for

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not being able to tie the knots quickly enough, but he couldn't even feel his fingers anymore.

"Come on, Zach," he pleaded to himself.

After what seemed an eternity, he was done. He scrambled to the edge and tossed one end of the makeshift tether toward his wife.

She had stopped calling his name. She had all but stopped struggling. The frigid water was leeching the life from her, and the weight of her skates and soaked clothes was dragging her under.

"Grab the end, Angie! Grab the end!"

Angie struggled to get her head out of the water, to take one more breath, but she couldn't. With one last effort, she reached for the surface and grabbed the lifeline.

Zach pulled the tether, praying she could hold on.

She did, barely.

When she was close enough, Zach grabbed her coat and desperately dragged her out of the water. She was blue, and she wasn't breathing.

"Don't die on me, Angie! Don't you die on me!"

Zach knelt beside her and cleared her airway. He tilted her head back, clamped her nose, and began breathing into her mouth.

Nothing.

He moved to her chest and began pumping.

Nothing.

"Oh, God! Don't you die on me, Angie! Don't give up!"

He breathed into her mouth again.

Nothing.

Zach continued to desperately administer CPR. Then suddenly, his chest was on fire. He gasped in pain and blinked in amazement.

What's happening?

The pain was terrible. Unbearable. He collapsed

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onto his back and frantically grasped his chest in an attempt to ease the pain, the torment.

He looked at his chest. It seemed alive! The flesh on his chest was moving, crawling. The pain!

What's happening to me?

He let out a groan. Something was under his skin. Something was crawling under his skin! He realized this had happened before.

They're eating into my bones. How can they be back?

He frantically slapped at his chest as the lumps spread out. Soon, they were everywhere. His face was a distorted, tortured image.

He cried out, "Angie!"

Still screaming his wife's name, Zach bolted upright in bed. Sweat dripped from his brow as he threw the covers aside and looked at his chest. He shut his eyes and smoothed his sweat-soaked hair.

Another nightmare. He thought he had worked through all that. Well, it shouldn't have been a surprise considering everything that was happening. Zach recalled the horrific times back on Earth. He could still see the mass graves when he shut his eyes. They called to him sometimes. Everyone praised him as the courageous hero who had beaten Crimson and made possible the mass inoculations that had saved billions. But what of the hundreds of millions who had died slowly and horribly? And what about Angie? Would a real hero have allowed his own wife to die, even to save the rest of humanity?

Zach had asked himself that question a thousand times. And each time the image of Angie's emaciated, frozen corpse filled his mind; a fetal ice sculpture buried in

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the snow at Ohio Lake. He loathed Crimson and her plague, and deep down inside he fought an anger that sometimes scared him. It had all been so senseless. Why had it happened?

And now, a year and a lifetime later, he still didn't know where things stood. That was the real problem. He didn't know if his personal tragedy had really ended or not. Yet, he couldn't do a thing about it except wait and pray, and he hadn't been able to bring himself to pray. Too many questions, too much resentment. No wonder he was having nightmares. Well, he just had to let the gen team do their job. Who else could he count on? A quiet voice gave him the answer, but he pushed it aside. He had waited a year, and he could wait another day or two. Maybe there was still a chance. He had to believe that, but he felt so alone.

Zach looked at his watch and shook his head in frustration. It was early morning, too early, but he decided he might as well get up. He certainly wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep after that nightmare. He went to the sonic shower and stepped inside, trying to relax and clear the images of the nightmare from his mind. Those lumps had seemed so real, even more so since they had once been real. He had nearly been eaten alive from the inside out. He felt a little queasy just thinking about the Krontor larvae crawling under his skin, searching for bone.

Zach took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. This wasn't quite the morning he had hoped for. He stretched his arms and his back, trying to push the morbid thoughts from his mind. Despite Crimson's larvae and her plague, he was still here, wasn't he? Did it really matter that he had been genned? He would give his life if Angie could be genned. So why did he have this nagging feeling in the back of his mind? He stepped out of the shower and put on a pair of shorts. When he finished combing his hair, he peered at his image in the mirror. He wasn't sure who he saw anymore.

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He was the same in every detail, of course, including his memories; he just wasn't the original. So why couldn't he quite get his mind around that? Nearly everyone agreed that it didn't matter. But it mattered to the original, didn't it? Or it would if he were still around.

Zach tried to clear his head and moved into the kitchen. It was way too early for a philosophical question, especially one that could consume him if he allowed it to. He tucked the thought away; there would be time for it later. Crimson had dealt him some serious blows, but he wouldn't let her control his thoughts, at least not when he was awake.

"Cheerios with milk, please," he said to nothing in particular. A small bowl moved into view through a nook to his right. The Ptains had taken his food samples, replicated them, and prepared the food dispensers with some of his favorites, often with mixed success. He hadn't tried the cereal before, but it looked okay. He took a spoonful and swallowed hard. The milk was warm and tasted like it had come from a goat or something; nothing was easy here. He made a mental note to specify temperature next time.

He set the bowl down and decided to settle for coffee, but before he could manage it he felt a familiar sensation in his mind and recognized Kerska's personal dialogue request.

Kerska was Zach's intermediary with the officials on Ptain, but their relationship had grown into much more than that. Back on Earth they had been inseparable and had helped each other through some tough times during the initial recovery. They had both lost a great deal to the Crimson plague, but somehow that had created a bond that overcame their differences. They had grown quite close.

Telepathy still didn't come easy for Zach, especially on a morning like this one. But he was getting better with

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the help of the nano-implant, and he always had time for a little fun with Kerska. “*Kerska, is that you?*” he mentally questioned.

Kerska pulled back contact for a second, feeling a little hurt. To a society of telepaths, not recognizing a personal friend when one initiated contact was like a human not recognizing an old buddy when he stopped by to say hello. Just as she was about to get upset, Kerska realized what Zach was doing. His sense of humor was something she still had trouble with, although she was beginning to get the hang of it. Ever so slightly she changed her contact, she telepathed with a deeper tenor and in a serious tone. “Ambassador Marshall, this is Sansee OrLead. I have arrived for your psychological training.”

Zach wasn’t expecting Sansee until the afternoon. She was helping him refine his telepathic abilities. Zach felt his face flush as he realized how childish he must have seemed mistaking her, of all people, for Kerska. “Unbelievable,” he mumbled to himself and immediately hoped he hadn’t telepathed it. Although the Ptains had gone to great lengths to overlook his ignorance of their etiquette, he realized that this was a major blunder. After all, Sansee OrLead was his telepath teacher, and Zach was Earth’s ambassador to Ptain.

He tried to compose himself to ensure he didn’t broadcast his emotional baggage as well as his response. After a pause that was slightly too long, he responded, “*Ah, Ms. OrLead. I’m so sorry I didn’t recognize you. Please accept my—*”

Kerska could feel Zach’s embarrassment, though he was trying hard not to telepath it. She allowed her tenor to return to normal. “*Good morning, Zach,*” she telepathed smartly.

Zach let out an audible sigh. He was relieved and surprised.

“I guess I had that coming, didn’t I? Come in.”

A spherical opening appeared in the outside wall, and Kerska stepped in. She was dressed in a traditional, full-length, emerald green body suit. It clung to her petite, shapely frame like a second skin. Perhaps five feet tall and well proportioned by Ptain or human standards, she was quite attractive. Her light bronze-colored skin and shoulder-length brunette hair set off her eyes nicely.

Those eyes!

In all other appearances, she could have passed for a small, attractive Earth woman. But like all Ptains, her eyes were slightly larger than their human counterpart’s, and they almost seemed to be lit from behind. They were captivating. It had taken Zach some time to get used to those eyes, and he still had trouble looking away even now.

“I’m in the kitchen,” he said out loud.

Kerska joined him. She was holding Crackers, Zach’s calico cat; the only living connection Zach still had with Angie.

“Want some coffee?” Zach asked.

When Kerska and Zach were alone they usually spoke out loud. “Thank you, no. I have not grown so fond of your coffee,” she said in a raspy voice.

Ptains had the ability for verbal speech but had abandoned it long ago in favor of nano-implants that supported telepathy. Now only a few scholars and radical musicians practiced verbal language on any regular basis. But Kerska had thought it a good thing to learn when she was on Earth. It had taken a while to get her vocal cords in any kind of shape, but she had come to enjoy speaking. More than anything else, though, she knew Zach liked it.

Zach spoke to the food dispenser. “A cup of coffee, please, hot.”

A moment later, a steaming cup slid out of a nook in the wall. Zach picked it up and brought it to his nose.

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The aroma smelled delightful. He looked at Kerska, smiling.

Kerska waited as Zach put the steaming cup to his lips. He swallowed and nodded his head up and down. “A lot better than goat’s milk,” he said.

Kerska looked puzzled.

Zach looked up from his cup with his eyebrows raised. “It’s a long story. Anyway, you got me pretty good this morning.”

“I have had an excellent teacher in such things,” Kerska said as she turned, moving back into the seating area, rather pleased with herself.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Zach said, smiling and feeling a little more like himself. “I’m going to have to be more careful.”

He followed Kerska to an adjacent room and they sat down. Crackers settled into Kerska’s lap, purring. Zach was still bare from the waist up, wearing only his shorts. He had strong, broad shoulders, and a slim waist. Neither of them thought anything about his attire. They had both seen each other in similar dress before. It had been difficult not to in the year that they had spent together during the recovery on Earth. They had essentially lived in Pbsi, a part biological sentient Ptain spaceship, traveling all over Earth delivering the antidote to remote areas. Occasionally they had seen more of each other than intended, but the situation had been anything but romantic. Death and disease faced them at every stop and reminded them both of their personal tragedies. Through time and shared struggles they had become very comfortable with each other.

Zach leaned back in his chair. “So what brings you over so early?”

“I have news in which you will be interested,” she said.

Zach lowered his cup.

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“The first shipment of the planetary shield technology was received by Earth this morning. Shiron knew that you would be pleased and asked that I inform you as soon as possible.”

Shiron was the ruling Administrator of Ptain and had been instrumental in setting up the alliance with Earth.

Zach’s eyes widened with excitement. It was the first shipment of nanotechs that would evaluate Earth and eventually build a planetary shield, if Earth could supply them with enough raw materials that is. Earth’s space programs were gearing up for the challenge. The process was estimated to take six years; a long time with Crimson out there still searching for Earth. This was a big first step in securing humanity’s future.

“Great!” Zach said. He stood up a little too quickly in celebration and spilled coffee in his lap. Kerska stood to help, but she couldn’t hold back her laughter. Zach Soon joined in.

It feels good to laugh, he thought. Really good.

He could feel his tension peeling away. Without thinking, Zach pulled Kerska to him in a warm hug. Kerska lay her head on his chest; it felt natural there for both of them. After only a second, their laughter quieted and almost simultaneously they seemed to realize what they were doing. Zach loosened his arms and they stepped apart—awkwardly. It was too easy to get close to Kerska. Under other circumstances... no, Zach pushed the thought away, feeling guilty.

He cleared his throat. “Uh, that’s great news, Kerska. It’s the first real step in making Earth secure.”

Kerska stepped back and sat down, still feeling the warmth of Zach’s skin. She nodded. “Yes, it is a milestone we shall all remember.” She paused for a moment, gathering herself to share the other news she held. “I have other information from the gen team.”

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Zach slowly sat down in his chair. He blinked in concentration, knowing the news would be about his wife, about the only hope that had sustained him over the past year. He couldn't have said anything verbally that his facial expression didn't convey perfectly. His wife was his true love.

Kerska had seen the look before. Zach's devotion to his wife was just one more quality she admired. "Oce has been supervising the gen team," she said solemnly. "He asked me to inform you they will be able to examine Angie's tissue this afternoon."

Zach closed his eyes. A year ago he had put Angie's body into stasis, right along with his faith, while he and Kerska and the others worked to initiate the massive recovery from the plague. After nearly a year of putting everyone's needs before his own, Zach had returned to Ptain as Earth's ambassador, bringing with him Angie's body. Now, today, Zach would know whether his personal nightmare was over, or if it was just beginning.

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This is the end of the Primal Screams

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Bart Dahmer was born in West Virginia, USA and spent his formative years in Louisiana near the Gulf Coast/Texas border. While pursuing his graduate education, he spent time in Kentucky, Colorado, Tennessee and Missouri.

Bart has earned a number of professional honors and is widely published in industry. He has enjoyed traveling within the US, Europe, India, and Asia and is an avid lifelong learner.

Bart holds a certificate in employee relations law from the Institute of Applied Management and Law, a master's degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, a master's degree in Computer Information Systems and a doctorate in Human Resource Development from Vanderbilt. His dissertation research focused on key factors influencing the successful implementations of large, technology-based projects.

Bart is a born-again Christian. He is a deacon at his local church and supports evangelical activities. He lives with his wife and two children near Memphis, TN.